

## OPERATION SEVENTH VEIL

### MALIGN OFFICIALS AND THE RULE OF LAW

*In an interview with Kimberly Kagan of the Institute for the Study of War, Colonel J.B. Burton discusses his time as the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, which had responsibility for northwest Baghdad in 2007. In this abstract, Colonel Burton talks about Operation Seventh Veil, an operation conducted to hold corrupt officials responsible for their crimes and to enforce the rule of law in northwest Baghdad. The interview was recorded in September 2008 for the Institute for the Study of War's documentary, *The Surge*, represented by Brainstorm Media and released in the fall of 2009.*

“The links to the Iraqi security force and government apparatus on the part of the Shi’a militias are important. And I believe it was a critical point of understanding in the Dagger Brigade’s successes in 2007. Remember the storyline. The government is Shi’a. The security forces are all Jaish al Mahdi. The coalition is leaving. And Al Qaeda is the only one that can protect you. The security forces are all complicit with illegal Shi’a militias. ...What we had continuously heard is, ‘Don’t trust the Iraqi police because they’re all JAM. And don’t trust the national police because they’re all JAM. Now the Iraqi army is all JAM. The only people we trusted were the coalition.’

“But we would have bombs would go off next to Iraqi security force checkpoints that would hurt or kill American soldiers. We would have reports of Iraqi soldiers in the middle of the night going to people’s homes and robbing and...and conducting all sorts of heinous acts against family members. And I got to the point where I said, ‘This is nonsense, we can’t do this.’ Because you’d go to the Iraqis and you’d say, ‘Hey, you know, this is the information we’ve got.’ And he says, ‘Oh of course this never happens, these people were stupid; they make up anything just to get at us.’

“And so we did what any responsible organization would do. I told the commanders that from

that point forward, every allegation against Iraqi security forces or Iraqi political figures rendered to coalition forces would be fully investigated. Just like we would investigate any inappropriate acts on the part of American soldiers. It’s easy to do, it’s cost effective, and it gets the Iraqi security force leadership involved. Sometimes they didn’t want to be involved, but it got them involved anyway.

“And what it allowed us to do is to formalize an investigation process. We called this Operation Seventh Veil. The idea [behind] Seventh Veil is that we would remove all protective coverings from Iraqi governmental officials, Iraqi military leaders, deny them the protection afforded them by their position or their duties, and then hold them accountable for anything that they had done wrong. It was to defeat complicity inside the ranks of the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi political leadership.

“This was a very bold move and one that was fraught with risk and we understood that. But what it allowed us to do is a couple of important things.

“The formal investigation of allegations against Iraqi security force leaders, Iraqi security force members and political leaders and clerical leaders. Investigations conducted in partnership with the Iraqis and sometimes just with the coalition forces revealed great amounts of information. It allowed us to understand weapons trafficking systems. It allowed us to understand who were the key players

within the networks that were operating in our area of responsibility that we needed to go after. And it gave us legitimate cause to go after some of these players.

“But I think the most important thing that it did for us, it allowed me as a brigade commander to take these books which had the results of the investigations inside of them and sit down with some of these players and say, ‘Look here, this is what I understand you to be involved in. And you can either knock this stuff off or you’re going to go spend a little time in Camp Cropper.’ Or, ‘I’m going to tell your buddies what you’ve been doing and I’m going to let them deal with you.’ And, ‘You know, we went to a brigade commander and asked him for his support and he was all for it.’ And then I opened up the book and said, ‘You know...you’re the guy we’re looking for.’ And there was a big lump in the throat and the big white ashen-faced response. And he soon let me know that he was in fact not in charge of this illegal weapons trafficking ring and within 24 hours had turned over an entire weapons trafficking network that was providing RPGs and Iraqi military weapons systems to illegal Shi’a militia to assist them in the expansion of the Shi’a base from the northeast.

“We went after a police chief in northwest Baghdad up in the northern portion of Ghazaliya. They’d been trying to get this guy for two years. We started a formal investigation, asking questions, making phone calls, piecing things together. ... This hierarchical structure of...of networks was interesting. In one case we found a Jaish al Mahdi battalion commander inside the illegal militia, who was actually a private in the Iraqi army, but as a Jaish al Mahdi guy, he was superior to his Iraqi army superiors. So it was all convoluted and twisted...But once you understood it and you went after it, you start taking them off the battlefield. And by taking them off the battlefield, you communicated to that moderate population that ‘Hey, we’re serious about this. We’re serious about enforcing the rule of law. We’re serious about protecting you. We’re serious about the professionalization of the Iraqi security forces. And oh by the way, we’re not going anywhere. And

these guys aren’t going to get away with it.’

“There was a great concern over one of our targets. He was a very senior Iraqi national police general, who was heavily involved in kidnapping, extortion -- and I believe murder -- and sharia court. Not that there’s anything wrong with the sharia court; sharia law is what the Iraqis do. But this guy was involved in some pretty heinous activities. And we didn’t understand who he was. ...This guy existed as a phantom menace across northwest Baghdad. The mention of his name would cause fear in the eyes, in the faces of the Sunni population. It would cause senior Iraqi generals to sit on their hands because they were scared of this guy.

“We built a packet. We got the approval. And I got to tell you, we had great backing on the efforts of Seventh Veil by General Petraeus and General Odierno and General Fil, because they saw the effectiveness very early on and they said, ‘You just keep on going. Keep us informed about who you’re going to get... You may want to ask our permission for some of these guys, especially if you get too close to a flagpole, but keep on going.’ When we pulled this general off the battlefield about two o’clock in the morning, we went into his headquarters, let his guards know why we were there. His guards stood aside and pointed us to his bedroom. These are the guys that have sworn their lives to protect him; they were not going to go down with this guy. And we pulled him off the battlefield, and there was this great swelling of exuberance across both the Shi’a and Sunni sides when when we pulled Abu Taraab off the battlefield. It was absolutely phenomenal. That clear-text-communication that the rule of law was enforceable through a deliberate effort on the part of the Iraqis and on the part of the coalition forces in support of the Iraqi efforts gained us great credibility across northwest Baghdad. It gained my Task Force commanders great accountability in their ability to sit down and articulate rule of law questions. And it didn’t mean that everybody that was in our book was going to go to jail, because sometimes, kind of like catching your kid with his hands in the cookie jar, [you] say, ‘I know what you’re doing, knock it off.’ [And he says...] ‘Well now I know you’re watching me and I’ll...I’ll

behave now.' And we got a lot of traction just in that vein by demonstrating that we knew what they were doing, and they couldn't hide.

“And I think there was some great liberation on the part of the Iraqis who are involved in these situations to say, ‘Oh gig’s up, I can’t do that anymore and I will help you get along.’

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