

## P.C. Sacrifice

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**By:** Diana West

Recently, I opened an e-mail and read: "I am Sgt. Evan Vela's father. I do not know if you have followed my son's case but some people have drawn similarities between the Luttrell situation and Evan's."

The father was referring to Marcus Luttrell, whose bestseller "Lone Survivor" tells of four Navy SEALs, Mr. Luttrell among them, whose secret mission in Afghanistan was compromised when two Afghan goat herders discovered them hiding deep in Taliban territory. I've written before about the perverse but likely prospect of legal prosecution back home that weighed heavily on the Americans' decision not to save their own lives and their mission by killing the two unarmed Afghans — a "crime" in P.C. la-la-land, even when "unarmed" still means deadly. After releasing the Afghans, the SEALs were overwhelmed by the Taliban. In the ensuing carnage, not only were three of the four Americans killed, but so were 16 more U.S. Special Forces shot down in their helicopter by the Taliban during a rescue attempt. In his book, Mr. Luttrell has immortalized the battle, which I think of as "Death by Rules of Engagement."

The Luttrell story certainly opens like that of Sgt. Evan Vela. As part of an elite sniper squad, Sgt. Vela was in insurgent-controlled territory south of Baghdad last year when the team's "hide" was discovered by an unarmed Iraqi man who made noise and thrashed about after being captured. Did I mention the American soldiers were heat exhausted and sleep-deprived after three days operating in 120-degree heat?

Instead of letting the man go and, à la the "Lone Survivor" team, getting killed by nearby Sunni terrorists, Sgt. Vela's squad leader made the decision Mr. Luttrell and his comrades didn't. He determined that the Iraqi man threatened his team's safety. So he ordered Sgt. Vela to kill the man. Sgt. Vela complied. The Americans returned to base alive. And Sgt. Vela is now serving 10 years in prison for murder.

A recent New York Daily News Op-Ed on the case was called: "American Sniper Hung Out to Dry." That sums up what happened. But why?

This is where pounding outrage over an injustice to an American soldier — who at least deserves the benefit of the doubt — turns to a sickening sense that what has gone wrong here is even bigger than Sgt. Vela's personal tragedy. It may well be as big as the entire U.S. effort to prevail in Iraq. Let's go back to the scene of the so-called crime: an area outside Iskandariya, which as recently as last May was Sunni "Triangle of Death" Central.

And let's go back to the victim of the "crime": Nesir Khudair al-Jenabi, a member of Babil province's pre-eminent tribe. Come the U.S.-led invasion, the Jenabi, like other Sunnis, joined the Sunni insurgency.

And come the "surge," or shortly thereafter (just revving up around the Vela incident), the Jenabi, like other Sunnis, began, via "Awakening" councils, to join the United States. At least they started getting paid to stop shooting Americans and start shooting Al Qaeda. Not that it was always easy to make the transition. Lt. Col. Robert Balcavage —who just happens to be the commander of Evan Vela's battalion, and is said by Sgt. Vela's team leader to have pushed for higher kill rates from snipers — explained it this way last August to the Washington Post: "The Jenabi tribe, the problem they're having is that the al-Qaeda is them."

So let's review. Evan Vela in May 2007 kills a member of "the al Qaeda is them" tribe who has compromised his squad. He gets convicted of murder in February 2008 in Baghdad.

Baghdad? It was when I heard the court martial was in Baghdad — not stateside, like other such trials — that my initial outrage became the queasy feeling mentioned above, which only intensified on learning that Sgt. Vela's division had actually been ordered back to the United States before the trial began. And the smell of a rat grew stronger still when I read that Iraqi Minister for Human Rights Wijdan Salim attended the trial. "I want to be sure that any American soldier who wrongs an Iraqi will go on trial," Miss Salim told Time magazine. "[Evan Vela] killed an Iraqi man, an unarmed man. He must be punished."

Well, he was. To the question "why," I can only offer more questions: Is it possible that Evan Vela's Baghdad court martial was all for show? And can his punishment be seen as a sacrificial offering to any of our Iraqi "allies"?