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## ***The Benghazi Witch Hunt: The Political Polarization of a Diplomatic Crisis***

On September 11, 2012, a compound housing US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and a secret CIA annex were attacked by Libyan assailants. Stevens was killed, along with three other Americans, in an incident that lasted only through the night. He is one of only five other Ambassadors to be killed overseas.<sup>1</sup>

This incident was thought to have been started in protest to a video released in the United States that produced anti-Muslim content. Crowds across North Africa and the Middle East attacked US diplomatic stations in response to the video's grotesque depiction of the Islamic prophet Mohammed.<sup>2</sup> Several committees in Congress and in the policy community produced close to a dozen reports, all finding the same thing: the attack cost American lives not because of this seemingly easy answer, but because of failed attention to the lack of security. The daunting task of protecting two American strongholds in Benghazi in 2012 could only be precipitated by the situation in the region and the political strife that occurred there.

### **“The Innocence of Muslims”<sup>3</sup>**

While having been posted earlier in the year in the United States, a provocative anti-Islamic video was released in Arabic and began gaining attention in the week before the September 11 attack. The attention was most especially potent in the Egyptian news media that

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<sup>1</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. “Libya Attack Brings Challenges for U.S.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/world/middleeast/us-envoy-to-libya-is-reported-killed.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/13/world/middleeast/us-envoy-to-libya-is-reported-killed.html).

<sup>2</sup> Sengupta, Kim. “Review of the Middle East in 2012: The Uproar after the Uprising.” The Independent, Independent Digital News and Media, 22 Dec. 2012, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/review-of-the-middle-east-in-2012-the-uproar-after-the-uprising-8424659.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/review-of-the-middle-east-in-2012-the-uproar-after-the-uprising-8424659.html).

<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew, and Sangar Rahimi. “Police Contain Afghan Rage Over Film, as Protests Spread Elsewhere.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 17 Sept. 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/09/18/world/asia/unrest-protests-over-mohammed-film.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/18/world/asia/unrest-protests-over-mohammed-film.html).

carried significance in Libya. On the day of the attack in Benghazi, hundreds of protestors peacefully gathered outside the US Embassy in Cairo. By 6 P.M., the crowd began to swell as the workday ended and television news coverage broadcasted the protest.

The gathering ended its peace when around twenty protestors brought a ladder to the wall of the compound and jumped inside the grounds.<sup>4</sup> It took five hours to remove them, after they had run around the grounds, defacing American flags and replacing them with their own. Regardless of the time it took, it was imperative to embassy officials to remove these protestors without force. Media coverage on individuals being beaten or shot at would have sparked greater controversy in the region. The peace was already too far shaken.

The American Embassy in Cairo was not the only place to receive protest in the wake of the shocking video. Diplomatic buildings were severely damaged in Tunis, Tunisia, Khartoum, Sudan, and Sanaa, Yemen.<sup>5</sup> Large protests were reported in at least twenty countries in the Middle East and beyond, spreading as far as Sydney and Jakarta. In Jakarta, police fired tear gas and water cannons into crowds of hundreds outside the Embassy because the protestors had burned American flags, threw rocks and gasoline bombs, and burned tires.<sup>6</sup> In Tunis, the situation was particularly brutal. The American school was completely ransacked, robbed of 700 computers, musical instruments, and the safe. The building was then set on fire, along with several other buildings in the city. The protests ended in a deadly incident that killed at least 3 and injured 28 others. Police opened fire on over 500 student protestors in the Upper Dir district of northwest Pakistan, an incident that left at least one student dead. Protestors outside the Consulates in Lahore and Karachi clashed with police, and dozens were reported injured. In Afghanistan, protestors burned an effigy of President Obama. Even in parts of Libya beyond

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<sup>4</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012.

<sup>5</sup> "Spread of Protests Sparked by Anti-Muslim Video." The New York Times, The New York Times, 13 Sept. 2012, [archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/09/13/world/middleeast/spread-of-protests-sparked-by-anti-muslim-video.html](http://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/09/13/world/middleeast/spread-of-protests-sparked-by-anti-muslim-video.html).

<sup>6</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew, and Sangar Rahimi. The New York Times, 17 Sept. 2012.

Benghazi, militias fired rockets from Qaddafi's stockpiles at what they thought were American drones<sup>7</sup>; in response, the government closed the airport.

The violence was not what Afghan officials had envisioned. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran spoke out that the Americans "should acquit themselves of such a heavy crime not in words but in deed."<sup>8</sup> Others made official statements to the effect that it was acceptable to speak out against the horrendous film, but protestors needed to stay calm. It was the hope that such efforts by religious and tribal leaders could go a long way in helping decrease the violent nature of the protests. Even still, access to Google, and therefore Gmail and YouTube, was shut down across the region. Marines were sent to protect embassies in Yemen and Sudan.<sup>9</sup> All these attempts did not stop the violence, that was most especially spurred by a rare public appearance in Beirut by Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah. His message was simple: "America, which uses the pretext of freedom of expression, should understand that airing the entire movie will have repercussions in the world that are dangerous, dangerous, very dangerous!"<sup>10</sup>

The video being protested depicted the Prophet Muhammad as villainous, homosexual, and a child-molester. The 13-minute video is American-made; the producer is a Coptic Christian, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, unknown during the protests. The prologue depicts Egyptian Muslims abusing Egyptian Coptic Christians while police officers stood by. Thus, Morris Sadek, an American Coptic Christian activist, as well as Terry Jones, known for burning the Koran and promoting "International Judge Muhammed Day" on September 11, were among those who supported its publication.

Most of the protestors were young men. Rob Malley, the Middle East North African program director for the International Crisis Group, indicated, "We have, throughout the Arab world, a young, employed, alienated, and radicalized group of people, mainly men, who have

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<sup>7</sup> Gladstone, Rick. "Anti-American Protests Flare Beyond the Mideast." The New York Times, The New York Times, 14 Sept. 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/09/15/world/middleeast/anti-american-protests-over-film-enter-4th-day.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/15/world/middleeast/anti-american-protests-over-film-enter-4th-day.html).

<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew, and Sangar Rahimi. The New York Times, 17 Sept. 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, Marines are only stationed at large diplomatic posts where a significant number of Americans or classified information resides.

<sup>10</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew, and Sangar Rahimi. The New York Times, 17 Sept. 2012.

found a vehicle to express themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Unintended consequences of American-supported attempts to overthrow autocrats gave these individuals a purpose and a sense of pride in protesting this video.

While this incident proved there was outrage in the Arab world, seeing as 65 embassies or consulates across the globe issued messages about the threat of violence<sup>12</sup>, it is not entirely known whether it was the direct trigger for the attack in Benghazi. Colonel Wolfgang Pusztai, a Libya expert, believed that the attack was, “deliberately planned and executed,”<sup>13</sup> and Libyan President Mohammed el-Megarif furthered that, “the idea that this criminal and cowardly act was a spontaneous protest that just spun out of control is completely unfounded and preposterous.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, when interviewed on the scene in Benghazi, some attackers claimed they were fighting to defend their faith from the way it was portrayed in the American video.

### **The Situation in Libya**

In February of 2011, Libya followed suit with the Arab Spring revolutions of its neighbors Egypt and Tunisia by ending the 42-year reign of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. The general atmosphere for the region in the early 2010s was political unrest and internal conflict, after Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia. Libya was considered a success story, even after NATO’s intervention to end the campaign against their authoritarian leader resulted in a 9-month long armed conflict. However, Libya struggled to implement American-tested democracy, even as the Islamist parties were fully funded by sponsors in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> It is unsurprising to most what would unfold in the months to come between 2011 and 2012, given the division and doubt of the Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>11</sup> Gladstone, Rick. The New York Times, 14 Sept. 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Gladstone, Rick. The New York Times, 14 Sept. 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Ryan, Erica. “Chronology: The Benghazi Attack And The Fallout.” NPR, NPR, 19 Dec. 2012, [www.npr.org/2012/11/30/166243318/chronology-the-benghazi-attack-and-the-fallout](http://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/166243318/chronology-the-benghazi-attack-and-the-fallout).

<sup>15</sup> Sengupta, Kim. The Independent, 22 Dec. 2012.

The political injustices caused by the repressive government run by Qaddafi sparked an urgency behind demonstrations that quickly turned from peaceful to violent. February 15 marked the first day of protests in Benghazi, but by the 17<sup>th</sup> security forces had fled to Tripoli after being overwhelmed by the protests, an event now called the “Day of Rage.” The protests in Benghazi were only the beginning for the country. “The center of the revolution was in Benghazi,” says Ambassador Gene A. Cretz. “It was the place that the opposition [...] had centered around as its, in effect, ‘capital.’”<sup>16</sup> The cry of the people in Benghazi was to overthrow the Qaddafi government of Tripoli, and by the end of the year they would have their way.

As a special envoy for Libya, United States Ambassador Christopher Stevens arrived in Benghazi by cargo ship on April 5, 2011. The urgency behind these protests spread fear all the way to the Tripoli Embassy, which had been evacuated on February 22, 2011 to pull Americans out of the civil war. Stevens arrived at a country that was tipping toward the status of failed state, a nation that continued to bring brutal military force and human rights injustices. Not long after Stevens had arrived, Tripoli fell on August 21 and Qaddafi was assassinated on October 20<sup>17</sup> after attempting to flee the country for safety from the violent protestors.

The situation for the United States in Benghazi before the attacks of September 11 was quite dismal. Libya was known to harbor terrorist organizations including al-Qaeda, al-Sharia, and ISIS. However, it was not until 2014 that the State Department designated Ansar al-Sharia as a terrorist group. The CIA was in the country as early as the February protests in order to monitor the movement and sale of weapons from Qaddafi’s military stockpiles. They also monitored the terrorist organizations and trained Libyan operatives during the revolution. While the motives of the CIA in Benghazi at the time of the attack was put in question, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence says definitively that, “All CIA activities in

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<sup>16</sup> Alvarez, Priscilla. “What Happened the Night of the Benghazi Attack.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 28 June 2016, [www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/house-republicans-benghazi-report-hillary-clinton/489125/](http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/06/house-republicans-benghazi-report-hillary-clinton/489125/).

<sup>17</sup> Report of the Select Committee on the Events Surrounding the 2012 Terrorist Attack in Benghazi, Appendix D

Benghazi were legal and authorized. On-the-record testimony establishes that the CIA was not sending weapons.”<sup>18</sup>

The CIA was not monitoring the only problems of the time. Attacks against Americans and their allies began to ramp up.<sup>19</sup> In April of 2012, an IED was thrown over the consulate fence. In May, an al-Qaeda attack was carried out on the International Red Cross offices in the country. In June, a bomb exploded near the United States mission in Benghazi. Responsibility for the bombing was claimed by an Islamist group, claiming terrorist ties and American lives.

Again, Stevens arrives in Benghazi on September 10, this time with an assassinated head of state and now as an Ambassador of the United States, to attend the opening of an American cultural center. By his arrival, he had already made a name for himself. He was fluent in both Arabic and French and was sponsored as a local hero for his work with rebel groups. In the Congressional hearings regarding the September 11 attack, Gregory N. Hicks, considered a whistleblower for Benghazi<sup>20</sup>, says that “Chris [Stevens] wanted to make a symbolic gesture to the people of Benghazi that the United States stood behind their dream of establishing a new democracy.”<sup>21</sup>

## **The Attacks**

As the sun was rising on September 11, 2012, the Americans in Libya, numb from the 2001 devastation in New York, did not foresee the potential of a new tragedy to be born in Benghazi. Before the attack, Ambassador Stevens enjoyed breakfast with a local, Fathi Baja, at the compound. Baja was amazed by the lack of security Stevens employed. He recognized that

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<sup>18</sup> “2012 Benghazi Attack.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Nov. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Benghazi\\_attack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Benghazi_attack).

<sup>19</sup> These incidents are similar in scope to those of the embassy bombings in Africa during the Clinton administration. In August 1998, truck bombs went off simultaneously at the embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya, killing 224 people.

<sup>20</sup> Zornick, George. “The Troubling Case of Gregory Hicks.” *The Nation*, The Nation, 10 May 2013, [www.thenation.com/article/troubling-case-gregory-hicks/](http://www.thenation.com/article/troubling-case-gregory-hicks/).

<sup>21</sup> “2012 Benghazi Attack.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Nov. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Benghazi\\_attack](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Benghazi_attack).

“this country is still in transition, and everybody knows the extremists are out there,”<sup>22</sup> while it seems that Stevens did not take this seriously. He would walk the streets and visit local restaurants without a security detail. While this slated him to be a local hero, it left him vulnerable; a vulnerability that ultimately led to his death.

At around 9:40 P.M.<sup>23</sup> on September 11, armed assailants gathered at the mission and launched rocket-propelled grenades at the gate of the main building. Within an hour, the attackers had easily reached the main building. Scott Stewart, Vice President of Analysis at Stratfor and a special agent with the State Department from 1988 and 1998, tells PBS later that “It was not made to withstand rocket or bomb attacks. So, it was not a very secure facility at all.”<sup>24</sup>

The assailants were part of an Islamist brigade formed during the 2011 uprising against Qaddafi. They were well trained and organized; too organized for the plot to be simply an afterthought of protests. They were heavily suited with anti-aircraft weapons and rocket launchers. “They expected that there would be more American commandos in there. They went in with guns blazing,” recalls Mohamed Ali, a relative of the landlord that rented out the compound to the Americans.<sup>25</sup>

About an hour later, American and Libyan forces had recaptured the main building and evacuated the minimal staff to a nearby CIA annex, about a mile away through enemy territory. What they hadn’t accomplished was finding the body of the Ambassador, who went missing almost immediately after the attack began. His recovery would not come until Wednesday morning at dawn when he was found dead in a Benghazi hospital. He was ultimately killed by asphyxiation from smoke inhalation. This was the first time since 1979 that an ambassador had been killed in a violent attack.

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<sup>22</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Epatko, Larisa. “What Makes Embassies Secure?” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 13 Sept. 2012, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/securing-embassies>.

<sup>25</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012.

Fighting continued at the CIA annex down the road until Libyan security reinforcements had arrived around 2:30 A.M. “No military asset was ever deployed to Benghazi despite the order of the secretary of defense at 7 that night,” states US Representative Trey Gowdy. The security at the compound and the annex was mentioned in weeks leading up to the attack, but nothing was ever addressed. There were as few as four Libyan guards and a few security cameras on site at the US mission.<sup>26</sup> It was essentially up to military contractors and Stevens’ minimal security team to protect the compound and annex from an Islamist militant group with definite connections to al-Sharia. It was understood later that Ahmed Abu Khattala, a Libyan national, led the brigade of the Ansar al-Sharia militia that was responsible for the attacks, and he was prosecuted for conspiracy to support terrorism, among other charges.<sup>27</sup>

It was only in the aftermath that the United States responded to the security threat. Two warships were sent to the Libyan coast as a precaution. President Barack Obama denounced the terrorist organization in a televised statement from the White House Rose Garden: “make no mistake, we will work with the Libyan government to bring justice to the killers who attacked our people.”<sup>28</sup> This devastation was only widely felt in the United States, and peace in regard to the video was not accomplished.

## **What Went Wrong**

Representative Peter Roskam (R-IL) said it best: “The military could not have arrived in time to save lives because no forces were ever moving toward Benghazi.”<sup>29</sup> There were no military assets in the region that could be placed on alert or be repositioned. The actions of Washington seem to make this less clear. Ignoring direct orders to deploy troops, the Defense

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<sup>26</sup> After the 1983 embassy bombing in Beirut and suicide bombing of Multinational Force barracks killed hundreds, Navy Admiral Bobby Inman chaired a commission that significantly expanded the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Diplomatic Security. This included fortified structures and increased personnel.

<sup>27</sup> Hsu, Spencer S. “CIA Officers Detail Part of Bloody Benghazi Attack at Terrorism Trial.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 11 Oct. 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/cia-officers-detail-part-of-bloody-benghazi-attack-at-terrorism-trial/2017/10/10/e1c9bf28-ae25-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/cia-officers-detail-part-of-bloody-benghazi-attack-at-terrorism-trial/2017/10/10/e1c9bf28-ae25-11e7-9e58-e6288544af98_story.html).

<sup>28</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012.

<sup>29</sup> “Rep. Roskam Unveils the Select Committee’s #BenghaziReport”, YouTube, 28 June 2016.

Department chose to be cautious regarding an administration policy of no boots on the ground. Anyone deployed would have to wear civilian clothes so as not to offend the Libyans.<sup>30</sup>

Before the attack, there were clear messages that the administration and intelligence community chose to disregard. In one of many cries for help, the Embassy requested security for the Benghazi mission compound in June, 3 months before the attack. No one ever responded. Even more serious was a post on Facebook that the Benghazi mission could be comprised in the future.<sup>31</sup> No response. Even Libya's deputy interior minister, Wanis al-Sharif, was surprised with the inaction of security: "What is weird is that they refrained from this procedure, depending instead on the simple protection that they had."<sup>32</sup> His reaction mimicked his advice that the United States should either pull its personnel or beef up its security, most especially after the video surfaced.

When news of the attacks arrived in the Oval around 5:00 p.m., President Obama immediately ordered for the Secretary of Defense to send troops to the site. He spoke candidly: "Do everything possible to save Americans."<sup>33</sup> It was not until five hours after the assault had begun that Leon Panetta personally received Obama's order to deploy. Nothing was on route to Libya in the time that the last two Americans were killed, the time of the third attack on the compound in the span of merely 12 hours.

In reaction to the inaction and as an attempt to gain more information, Hillary Clinton held a conference call at 7:05 p.m. with State Department Chief of Staff Cheryl Mills, State Department Under Secretary for Management Patrick F. Kennedy, Deputy Chief of Mission Libya Gregory Hicks, State Department Executive Secretariat Stephen Mull, Deputy Secretary for Management and Resources Thomas Nides, and Office of Policy Planning Deputy Chief of

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<sup>30</sup> "Select Committee on Benghazi Releases Proposed Report." Select Committee on Benghazi, U.S. House of Representatives, 7 Dec. 2016, [archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo](https://archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo).

<sup>31</sup> Report of the Select Committee on the Events Surrounding the 2012 Terrorist Attack in Benghazi, Appendix D

<sup>32</sup> Kirkpatrick, David D, and Steven Lee Myers. The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2012.

<sup>33</sup> "Rep. Roskam Unveils the Select Committee's #BenghaziReport", YouTube, 28 June 2016.

Staff for Policy and Director Jake Sullivan.<sup>34</sup> This call transitioned into a two-hour long, multi-agency meeting from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.<sup>35</sup>

This meeting decided the fate of the Americans. A significant amount of time was spent diving into the video that sparked recent protests in the area. Five of the ten action items were focused on the video, yet no solid evidence on it was found that could prove beneficial to figuring out how to solve the eminent crisis. Also, there was no definitive evidence that al-Qaeda, the United States' major foe, was involved in the attack. Ansar al-Sharia would eventually claim responsibility. Decided in this meeting was that troops would be deployed to Tripoli, rather than Benghazi. Jake Sullivan would later argue that his, along with the others in the room's, first goal was "avoiding a failed state, particularly one in which al-Qaeda and other extremists might take safe haven."<sup>36</sup>

Tripoli is more than 600 miles away from Benghazi. However, the options for deployment were significantly limited. There were no special operations forces in Europe or in any area closer than the United States that were even remotely prepared to engage in any defense strategy. Important jets were disassembled for routine inspection and repair. A team from Germany, that would be a first choice option, was engaged in a training session in Croatia. The team from Rota, Spain did not have their own transportation and would need to wait for a lift from forces in the United Kingdom.<sup>37</sup> The closest AC-130 was in Afghanistan, and there was no marine expeditionary unit in the Mediterranean.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Report of the Select Committee on the Events Surrounding the 2012 Terrorist Attack in Benghazi, Appendix G

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that while she was sent to the Sunday talk shows to represent the administration, Ambassador Susan Rice was not involved in these senior-level meetings nor provided the intelligence produced in them.

<sup>36</sup> "Select Committee on Benghazi Releases Proposed Report." Select Committee on Benghazi, U.S. House of Representatives, 7 Dec. 2016, [archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo](https://archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo).

<sup>37</sup> "Rep. Roskam Unveils the Select Committee's #BenghaziReport", YouTube, 28 June 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon, Michael R., and Eric Schmitt. "4 Are Out at State Dept. After Scathing Report on Benghazi Attack." The New York Times, The New York Times, 19 Dec. 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/us/politics/3-state-dept-officials-resign-following-benghazi-report.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/us/politics/3-state-dept-officials-resign-following-benghazi-report.html).

Glaring failures by the State Department and the Obama administration credit those who believe the United States did not take this seriously. State Department senior officials had access to eyewitness accounts of what was happening on the ground in Benghazi. In later testimonies, there was no mention of the video in the time of the attack from the agents on the ground. There was no signal of protest. The Vice Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Paul J. Selva was not even present for the two-hour critical meeting because he instead went home to host a dinner party for foreign dignitaries.<sup>39</sup>

In the end, the team from Rota and the CIA's secret contract security force, Global Response Staff, were the ones that deployed to Libya. The Rota team arrived in Tripoli 24 hours after the attack had begun. The Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team (FAST) sat on a plane in Spain for 3 hours and changed into their uniforms 4 times.<sup>40</sup> The CIA group was led by two agents who used \$30,000 in cash to get six American security operatives from Tripoli to Benghazi on a charter flight. They then were stranded at the airport as they waited for an armed escort of Libyan special forces to take them to the annex. Eventually, they bribed local ambulance drivers to get them out of there after having received news that there was a wounded Westerner at a nearby hospital. The wounded Westerner would soon be discovered as Ambassador Stevens. When they were in route, they discovered he was already dead, and they directed the drivers to the annex.<sup>41</sup>

Even still, neither team saved the Americans. Libyans evacuated everyone who was stationed in the Annex and brought them to the airport. They flew them to Tripoli where they would meet up with the Rota team. It was excruciatingly difficult for American forces on the ground to determine who was a friend or a foe among rival militia groups.<sup>42</sup> As it turns out, the

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<sup>39</sup> "Select Committee on Benghazi Releases Proposed Report." Select Committee on Benghazi, U.S. House of Representatives, 7 Dec. 2016, [archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo](https://archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo).

<sup>40</sup> "Select Committee on Benghazi Releases Proposed Report." Select Committee on Benghazi, U.S. House of Representatives, 7 Dec. 2016, [archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo](https://archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo).

<sup>41</sup> Hsu, Spencer S. The Washington Post, 11 Oct. 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Hsu, Spencer S. The Washington Post, 11 Oct. 2017.

Libyans that helped them evacuate were former Qaddafi loyalists, individuals who the United States helped remove from power.<sup>43</sup>

### **What Did the News Have to Say?**

“We reject all efforts to denigrate the religious beliefs of others. But there is absolutely no justification to this type of senseless violence.”<sup>44</sup> President Barack Obama stands in the White House Rose Garden with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on September 12<sup>th</sup> to give remarks about the attack. “No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation, alter that character, or eclipse the light of the values we stand for.”<sup>45</sup> His initial response includes indications that the attack was both an act of terror as well as spurred by the anti-Islamic video. He would continue to use the “act of terror” line in his campaign events in Las Vegas, in the short time after the attack.<sup>46</sup> It is in the first few days after the devastating attack in Benghazi that information is getting thrown around to the American people.

The news coverage in the aftermath attack produced stories that varied on intelligence information.<sup>47</sup> The very beginning, hours after the ends of the attack, produced news that this was a terrorist attack produced by anger toward the anti-Islamic video, a combination of both inflammatory elements in Benghazi. Secretary of State Clinton approaches the issue this way: “Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior, along with the protest that took place at our embassy in Cairo yesterday, as a response to inflammatory material posted on the Internet.”<sup>48</sup> However, in the reports to follow the incident, a State Department briefing from later in the same

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<sup>43</sup> “Select Committee on Benghazi Releases Proposed Report.” Select Committee on Benghazi, U.S. House of Representatives, 7 Dec. 2016, [archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo](http://archives-benghazi-republicans-oversight.house.gov/NewInfo).

<sup>44</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Flashing Red: A Special Report On The Terrorist Attack At Benghazi by Joseph I. Lieberman and Susan M. Collins, United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. 30 December 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Pearson, Michael. “What the Obama Administration Has Said about the Libya Attack - CNNPolitics.” CNN, Cable News Network, 8 May 2013, [www.cnn.com/2012/10/10/world/libya-attack-statements/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/10/world/libya-attack-statements/index.html).

<sup>47</sup> Fox News alone ran 1,000 segments on Benghazi in the 20 months following the attacks.

<sup>48</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

day found no information about whether there were any protests related to the video in Benghazi at the compound or annex at the time of the attack.<sup>49</sup>

In the wake of an emotionally charged event, it was difficult to determine how to frame this attack. Initial reports from journalists in Libya linked the attack to the video, while other witnesses say there was no protest before the attack.<sup>50</sup> U.S. personnel at the scene of the attack were interviewed days later in Germany by the FBI. They indicated there had been no protest. However, with scenes of mass protests across the globe, the two were commonly linked together.

This phenomenon continued for days, even weeks after the attack, until the press backed off and the Congressional hearings began. On September 12<sup>th</sup>, the same day as the Rose Garden appearance, President Obama says on *60 Minutes*, “Well, it’s too early to know exactly how this came about, what group was involved, but obviously it was an attack on Americans ...”<sup>51</sup> He completely changed his pace. Yet, the next day a U.S. official tells CNN that the Benghazi violence was a “clearly planned attack.”<sup>52</sup> One day later at the White House Briefing, Press Secretary Jay Carney states: “And my point was that we don’t have and did not have concrete evidence to suggest that this was not in reaction to the film.”<sup>53</sup>

The events all came to a head with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice’s infamous Sunday talk show appearances. Ambassador Rice, a known humanitarian hawk, was chosen to appear on behalf of the administration on five talk shows as third choice.<sup>54</sup> Secretary Clinton and National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon refused the task. The talking points that were given to her explicitly decided that the attack was started because of the video. She was merely handed the information by intelligence officials moments before her appearances to say:

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<sup>49</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>50</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Flashing Red: A Special Report On The Terrorist Attack At Benghazi. 30 December 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Pearson, Michael. CNN, 8 May 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Flashing Red: A Special Report On The Terrorist Attack At Benghazi. 30 December 2012.

<sup>54</sup> Lake, Eli. “Why Susan Rice, Not Hillary Clinton, Took the Fall for Benghazi.” *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago Tribune, 29 June 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-benghazi-susan-rice-hillary-clinton-video-20160629-story.html>.

“The currently available information suggests that the demonstrations in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. diplomatic post on Benghazi and subsequently its annex.”<sup>55</sup> In her interview with David Gregory on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, Rice used her talking points and interpreted this event to be “almost a copycat of—of the demonstrations against our facility in Cairo, which were prompted, of course, by the video.”<sup>56</sup> This was all decided upon by senior officials, even though the CIA’s September 13 and many other intelligence assessments were deemed incorrect. This would be a huge sticking point for the committees in Congress to debate.

## **Investigations**

In total, there were at least a dozen investigations conducted in varying levels of government, six of which were conducted by Republican-controlled Congressional committees. No investigation found that any senior Obama administration official was to be blamed for what happened.<sup>57</sup> There was no significant evidence that could be used to tarnish their names. Yet, there was plenty of evidence to be found in hours of hearings that the State Department failed in their job to protect Americans on that day.

The process to find justice began within just a few days of the incident and with attacks on the information shared to the press by senior officials. On September 27, a U.S. official announced that within about one day after the attack that it had been decided that the attack could only be the work of terrorists. On October 24, CNN receives evidence that the White House knew of these claims through emails. Former CIA Director David Petraeus testified on the Hill in a closed-door hearing that he had always thought the attack was a terrorist strike committed by al-Qaeda linked militants.<sup>58</sup> This would only be the beginning of new observations and evidence.

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<sup>55</sup> “Text: The Benghazi Talking Points.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 28 Nov. 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/world/text-describing-an-attack.html?searchResultPosition=8](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/world/text-describing-an-attack.html?searchResultPosition=8).

<sup>56</sup> Flashing Red: A Special Report On The Terrorist Attack At Benghazi. 30 December 2012.

<sup>57</sup> “2012 Benghazi Attack.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Nov. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012\\_Benghazi\\_attack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Benghazi_attack).

<sup>58</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

As this information began to surface, there were calls for Ambassador Rice to step down from her role. In the end, the Ambassador withdrew herself from consideration to be Obama's new Secretary of State on December 13.

The Independent Accountability Review Board, released on December 18, 2012, found systemic failures and management deficiencies with ignored requests for additional staffing.<sup>59</sup> Hearings were held between agencies to investigate what went wrong and what could be done in the future. On October 2, Republicans sent a letter to Clinton with information on previous threats and security. In an October 10<sup>th</sup> hearing, a security team leader testified that attacks against Americans and other Westerners were intensifying before the attack, while another mentions he recommended additional guards for Libya. Clinton took responsibility for the attack, even after Charlene Lamb, the Deputy Assistant Secretary responsible for Embassy security testified, "We had the correct number of assets in Benghazi at the time of 9/11, for what had been agreed upon."<sup>60</sup> In the end, the board found that there was no protest prior to the attacks and that certain State Department officials showed a lack of leadership necessary to assess the deteriorating environment and reliability of Libya.<sup>61</sup>

The Board was a five-member panel led by former Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering.<sup>62</sup> The group agreed on 29 recommendations, which included sending Marine guards to embassies and consulates to increase security and to change the way in which threat warnings are used. Another key recommendation was to penalize at least four major players from the State Department. Eric Boswell, Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security, resigned. Charlene Lamb and Raymond Maxwell, a Deputy Assistant Secretary who had responsibility for North Africa, were relieved of their duties.<sup>63</sup> State was found too heavily relying on untested

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<sup>59</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Ryan, Erica. NPR, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Independent Accountability Review Board Report.

<sup>62</sup> In earning his rank as Career Ambassador, Thomas Pickering served as an Ambassador to the United Nations, the Russian Federation, Israel, India, and Jordan.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon, Michael R., and Eric Schmitt. The New York Times, 19 Dec. 2012.

local militants to safeguard an American compound. Sloppiness was the best word they could use to describe it.

In a news conference, Pickering announced that the blame should fall on officials in the Bureau for Diplomatic Security and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, and he did not criticize Patrick F. Kennedy or any other senior Obama officials. A new position was created, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for High Threat Posts, to make up for their future wrongdoings. In an interview on *Meet the Press*, Obama follows up with: “We are not going to be defensive about it; we’re not going to pretend this was not a problem – this was a huge problem.”<sup>64</sup>

The most important aspects of the report came in deciding why this happened the way it did. The biggest conclusion was the culture of “husbanding resources.” The internal function “had the effect of conditioning a few State Department managers to favor restricting the use of resources as a general orientation.”<sup>65</sup> The Pentagon, with such notice, had no forces to be readily sent to Benghazi. “There simply was not enough time given the speed of the attacks for armed U.S. military assets.”

On November 14, Senators John McCain (R-AZ), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), and Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) sought a Watergate-style panel to investigate, even beyond the scope of this review and before knowing what it would find.<sup>66</sup> Several years later, they would have what they wanted; a new report would be produced to this effect.

### **Republicans in the House Select Committee on Benghazi**

“I thought it was over after the first five investigations. This was the eighth.” A sly comment from Josh Earnest, the White House Press Secretary. After a \$7 million investigation and an 800-page report, the United States is again accused of being slow to respond to the events of 9/11 in Benghazi. The inquiry lasted longer than investigations into the Kennedy

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<sup>64</sup> Schmitt, Eric. “Obama Vows to Fix Flaws Discovered in Benghazi Inquiry.” *The New York Times*, *The New York Times*, 30 Dec. 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/12/31/world/africa/obama-blames-sloppiness-for-benghazi-attack.html?searchResultPosition=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/31/world/africa/obama-blames-sloppiness-for-benghazi-attack.html?searchResultPosition=1).

<sup>65</sup> Gordon, Michael R., and Eric Schmitt. *The New York Times*, 19 Dec. 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Ryan, Erica. *NPR*, 19 Dec. 2012.

assassination, Pearl Harbor, and 9/11.<sup>67</sup> The investigation of the House Select Committee on Benghazi was led by Representative Trey Gowdy (R-SC), who claimed with the report release that: “The information should fundamentally change the way you view what happened in Benghazi, and there are recommendations made to make sure it does not happen again.”<sup>68</sup>

Released in July of 2016, the witch hunt for wrongdoing by Hillary Clinton fell precisely into an election year in which she was the democratic nominee. However, there was no new evidence to conclude that she was solely to blame for the death of the four Americans after she served eleven hours of questioning. However, she continued to be called out, including by Reince Priebus, Chairman of the Republican National Committee: “Hillary Clinton new the night of the attack it had nothing to do with an internet video, and yet she shamefully peddled this false narrative to the American public and to the victims’ families.”<sup>69</sup>

The main takeaways from the report include similar recommendations and observations as the review board. Benghazi was becoming increasingly unstable, and American security should have been added. The Libyan militia that helped save the Americans and evacuate them to Tripoli were not affiliated with anyone the CIA knew.

Yet after interviews with more than 80 witnesses, new information surfaced that was widely understood, but just needed to be confirmed.<sup>70</sup> Obama administration officials were inconsistent with their stories in the press about whether it was a terrorist attack or a protest. The State Department knew it could not protect its Diplomats in Libya, but they were worried about the reaction of Libyans if US forces entered their country and the threat this could pose to diplomacy. The administration failed to see the possibility of this occurring.

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<sup>67</sup> Chollet, Derek, and Ben Fishman. “Pompeo Has Been Undermining the State Department Since the Benghazi Investigation.” *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 11 Apr. 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/11/pompeo-has-been-undermining-the-state-department-since-the-benghazi-investigation/>.

<sup>68</sup> Alvarez, Priscilla. *The Atlantic*, 28 June 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Gambino, Lauren, and David Smith. “House Benghazi Report Faults Military Response, Not Clinton, for Deaths.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 28 June 2016, [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/28/house-benghazi-report-clinton-attack-military](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/28/house-benghazi-report-clinton-attack-military).

<sup>70</sup> Gambino, Lauren, and David Smith. *The Guardian*, 28 June 2016.

A standout on the committee, Kansas Republican Representative Mike Pompeo took it upon himself to provide 50 more pages of “additional views.” He insisted that the President had misled Americans by pushing the protest narrative and that a two year investigation was still incomplete. “We’ve got families of four dead Americans and the American people that deserve these answers.”<sup>71</sup>

The House Democrats gave their own 339-page report, contradicting several points made by the Republicans. They deemed it impossible for the administration to have saved the lives of the four Americans.<sup>72</sup> This was all just a goose chase for “wild conspiracy theories.” Regardless of what the reports say there was an imminent threat that was not recognized, and lives were lost. All recommendations are put in place to make sure this never happens again.

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<sup>71</sup> “Republican Rep. Mike Pompeo Weighs In On House Benghazi Committee.” *NPR*, NPR, 16 Oct. 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/10/16/449090591/republican-rep-mike-pompeo-weighs-in-on-house-benghazi-committee>.

<sup>72</sup> Alvarez, Priscilla. *The Atlantic*, 28 June 2016.