

BENGHAZI: A POSTER CHILD FOR COVERT OPS BLOWBACK

You've no doubt heard that, last Friday (a pre-holiday Friday, as some people are already on their way to Thanksgiving), the Benghazi scandal ended with a fizzle.

The House Intelligence Committee released its report on the Benghazi attack, which basically says all the scandal mongering has been wrong, that Susan Rice's talking points came from the CIA, that no one held up any rescue attempts, and so on and so on. This post will attempt to lay out why that might have happened. The short version, however, is that the report reveals (but does not dwell on) a number of failures on the part of the CIA that should raise real concerns about Syria.

Note that not all Republicans were as polite as the ultimate report. Mike Rogers, Jeff Miller, Jack Conaway, and Peter King released an additional views report, making precisely the points you'd expect them to – though it takes them until the 4th summary bullet to claim that Administration officials “perpetuated an inaccurate story that matched the Administration's misguided view that the United States was nearing victory over al-Qa'ida.” Democrats released their own report noting that “there was no AQ mastermind” and that “extremists who were already well-armed and well-trained took advantage of regional violence” to launch the attack. Among the Republicans who presumably supported the middle ground were firebrands like Michele Bachmann and Mike Pompeo, as well as rising Chair Devin Nunes (as you'll see, Nunes was a lot more interested in what the hell CIA was doing in Benghazi than Rogers). The day after the initial release Rogers released a second statement defending – and pointing to the limits of and Additional Views on – his report.

Now consider what this report is and is not.

The report boasts about the 1000s of hours of work and 1000s of pages of intelligence review, as well as 20 committee events, interviews with “senior intelligence officials” and 8 security personnel (whom elsewhere the report calls “the eight surviving U.S. personnel”) who were among the eyewitnesses in Benghazi. But the bulk of the report is sourced to 10 interviews (the 8 security guys, plus the Benghazi and Tripoli CIA Chiefs), and a November 15, 2012 presentation by James Clapper, Mike Morell, Matt Olsen, and Patrick Kennedy. (Here are the slides from that briefing: part one, part two.) As I’ll show, this means some of the claims in this report are not sourced to the people who directly witnessed the events. And the reports sources almost nothing to David Petraeus, who was CIA Director at the time.

The FBI analyzed the intelligence better than CIA did

One of the best explanations for why this is such a tempered report may be that FBI performed better analysis of the cause of the attack than CIA did. This is somewhat clear from the summary (though buried as the 4th bullet):

There was no protest. The CIA only changed its initial assessment about a protest on September 24, 2012, when closed caption television footage became available on September 18, 2012 (two days after Ambassador Susan Rice spoke), and after the FBI began publishing its interviews with U.S. officials on the ground on September 22, 2012.

That is, one reason Susan Rice’s talking points said what they did is because CIA’s analytical reports still backed the claim there had been a protest outside State’s Temporary Mission Facility.

Moreover, in sustaining its judgment there had been a protest as long as it did, CIA was actually ignoring both a report from Tripoli dated September 14, and the assessment of the Chief of Station in Tripoli, who wrote the following to Mike Morell on September 15.

We lack any ground-truth information that protest actually occurred, specifically in the vicinity of the consulate and leading up to the attack. We therefore judge events unfolded in a much different manner than in Tunis, Cairo, Khartoum, and Sanaa, which appear to be the result of escalating mob violence.

In a statement for the record issued in April 2014, Mike Morell explained that Chiefs of Station “do not/not make analytic calls for the Agency.” But it’s not clear whether Morell explained why CIA appears to have ignored their own officer.

While the report doesn’t dwell on this fact, the implication is that the FBI was more successful at interviewing people on the ground – including CIA officers!! – to rebut a common assumption arising from public reporting. That’s a condemnation of CIA’s analytical process, not to mention a suggestion FBI is better at collecting information from humans than CIA is. But HPSCI doesn’t seem all that worried about these CIA failures in its core missions.

Or maybe CIA failed for some other reason. The delay in CIA’s changed judgment until CIA got surveillance footage and FBI started interviewing people is all the more curious given the fight CIA and FBI had about sharing both items at the time. CIA didn’t want anyone seeing the footage that showed there was no protest, and they wanted to know what FBI witnesses were saying. Why?

Those weren't our MANPADS! They were the Qataris' MANPADS!

Then there's the possibility that this moderate report came out because of the implications behind CIA's role in watching Qatar and Saudi Arabia obtain weapons in Libya to send to Syria.

The report concludes that, "The CIA was not collecting and shipping arms from Libya to Syria." It then explains how it proved this, noting that all witnesses (it sourced its reports only to security personnel and the Benghazi base chief, not the officers at the Annex) said they had not seen any non-CIA weapons at the Annex. But then it said:

From the Annex in Benghazi, the CIA was collecting intelligence about foreign entities that were themselves collecting weapons in Libya and facilitating their passage to Syria.

Here's what the transcript of the committee's interview with Mike Morell and the other intel bosses actually shows (page 15):

Mr. [Devin] Nunes: Are we aware of any arms that are leaving that area and going into Syria?

Mr. Morell: Yes, sir.

Mr. Nunes: And who is coordinating that?

Mr. Morell: I believe largely the [redacted—right length for Saudis] are coordinating that.

Mr. Nunes: They are leaving Benghazi ports and going to Syria?

Mr. Morell: I don't know how they are getting the weapons from Libya to Syria. But there are weapons going from Libya to Syria. And there are probably a number of actors involved in that. One

of the biggest are the [redacted—could be Qataris]

Mr. Nunes: And were the CIA folks that were there, were they helping to coordinate that, or were they watching it, were they gathering information about it?

Mr. Morell: Sir, the focus of my officers in Benghazi was [redacted], to try to penetrate the terrorist groups that were there so we could learn their plans, intentions and capabilities

Mike Rogers then interrupts because not everyone in the room is cleared to hear about what the CIA was doing in Benghazi. (Note, Fox's Catherine Herridge also covered this here.)

Four months later, in a follow-up interview of Morell (file one, file two, at the break), Nunes picked up that line of questioning again. Having gotten Morell to state that there were weapons for security folks at the annex, he tries to clarify that none of these were being sent on. Mike Rogers again interrupts to offer "clarification," though it becomes clear that on at least one occasion the CIA facility was used to transfer weapons.

The Chairman: There may be an exception, but that was not the rule.

So at the very least CIA was watching its allies send weapons from Libya to Syria, which given the clusterfuck in Syria – most notably the possibility that these weapons are now in the hands of ISIL – may be one reason to moderate the report.

In a related detail, in the earlier session Nunes also elicited a non-denial denial about detainees (and accusation first leveled by David Petraeus' mistress Paula Broadwell), the other alleged reason for the attack on US entities in Benghazi.

Mr. Nunes: Okay. To the detainees, were there ever any detainees at either of these locations in the last year of any kind?

Mr. Morell: Not with regard to the CIA facility, sir.

Mr. Kennedy: And the State Department does not engage in detentions overseas.

Rather than just answering no, between them Morell and Kennedy carved out a space where it might be possible the CIA (or someone else, possibly JSOC) were holding detainees at the TMF or elsewhere in Benghazi.

We've known this for some time. But the CIA's role in (or close observation of) its allies arming Syrian rebels, some of whom are now fighting Americans in Iraq, is one underlying tension in this report. And Nunes' interest in the weapons – and his imminent authority to learn more – may be why Mike Rogers wanted to release this report before Nunes takes over.

The rebels you love most will grow to abandon you

The role of the militias we had helped overthrow Qaddafi is another source of tension in the report.

As I've covered before, the Americans were relying on several friendly militia to augment their security in Benghazi, most significantly the February 17th Brigade, but also the Libyan Shield. The Libyan Shield did provide some assistance at the Annex (but only one member actually fought to defend it – the others went away during the big attack and only came back after the attack was over), though may have abandoned the perimeter of TMF when the attack started, purportedly out of fear. The only place where February 17th Brigade men are described as helping is at State's TMF. And there are 3 times when the Americans asked for equipment but did

not receive it – when CIA security personnel at the Annex decided to go help at TMF, on the way there, and when the Tripoli team arrived at the airport.

The latter is particularly damning: the DOD members of the team had arranged ahead for a General Hasani – “the commander of Libya’s then-fledgling special forces cadre in Benghazi” – to provide pickups and weapons when they arrived in Benghazi. When they arrived, he wasn’t there and had turned off his phone. That set off the 3.5 hour negotiation process with other, unknown militia members. While Stevens had probably already died, the team still believed he was alive and at the hospital for most of this 3.5 hour period.

And while that process at the airport is sourced to an eyewitness (Officer 8), several confrontations that took place between the Annex and the TMF are not; they are sourced instead to the November 15 James Clapper and Mike Morell presentation. While would it be utterly bizarre, that suggests it is possible that none of the officers who were actually involved (Officers 1-5 should have been involved in one or both of these exchanges) were asked about it, or potentially (3 other officers who weren’t sourced in this report are coming out with a book) HPSCI knows there may be inconsistencies in the stories of these confrontations.

There are many questions about the CIA’s (and Chris Stevens’, given that he had been the one pushing to rely on them before the attack, perhaps because he had such a key role in working with them during the revolution) relationships with the militias they had just helped to liberate their country (and probably, in the case of Hasani, helping to train), questions that ought to be asked, given all the discussion about arming rebels in Syria and Iraq. But they aren’t really asked and, to a significant extent, the importance of their betrayals is downplayed in the report. The report does conclude that there is no evidence

that the Libyan Shield militia who brought the Tripoli team to the Annex, shortly after which the really intense attack started, lured them there for the attack, though that seems remarkable.

One potentially related detail. The timeline shows attackers leaving in a vehicle no more than 4 minutes after the attack on the TMF started; that may be what the presentation alludes to when it says “attackers are moving in multiple directions” (page 11), but may also indicate someone was positioned on the inside at the start of the attack. It shows there was no effort to breach each building (page 20) – suggesting more organized looters have had a plan of where they wanted to go.

Disappearing Petraeus

Given David Petraeus’ noted enthusiasm for the covert war in Libya – and that, as Morell testified, he watched the event unfolding via the Predator’s camera from the SCIF in his house (see PDF 12) – you’d think he’d show up in this report. All the more so given his fact-finding trip to Libya just weeks before his reluctant second appearance before HPSCI, which produced a report that he was reluctant to give to the Intelligence Committees (it is not cited anywhere in either Committees’ unclassified reports).

He appears in just three spots. Dutch Ruppertsberger’s request to him for unclassified talking points is noted.

Petraeus’ thoughts about the role of al-Qaeda related forces are described.

On September 14, CIA Director Petraeus spoke extensively to the Committee about AAS and AQIM’s participation in the attacks. However, he did not say that they conducted or orchestrated the attacks. In November 2012, he testified that the CIA still “cannot yet establish responsibility, but there are several

data points we are continuing to follow.”

More interestingly, there’s Petraeus’ comments about what led to the attack.

As former CIA Director General David Petraeus explained, these groups retained their weapons and therefore did not need a lot of lead time to prepare attacks.

Back in November 2012, when Petraeus was still trying to avoid testifying again before HPSCI, David Ignatius wrote this column criticizing Petraeus’ refocus of the CIA on paramilitary actions. He recalled how Petraeus had gotten his job because people thought his involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan would make CIA into a great fighting force.

Petraeus was picked for the job, and eager to take it, partly because the White House believed that in an era of counterterrorism, the CIA’s traditional mission of stealing secrets was morphing into a wider role that increasingly stressed paramilitary covert action.

He then described the base in Benghazi, noting its role in collecting arms, as well as suggesting they may have been training militia.

The CIA had a substantial base in Benghazi, with at least a half-dozen former military special forces assigned there as part of the “Global Response Staff.” These were the muscle-bound security guys known to flippant earlier generations of CIA case officers as “knuckle-draggers.” They were in Benghazi in such numbers in part because the CIA was supporting the State Department’s program to collect the shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles that had gone loose after the

fall of Col. Moammar Gaddafi. Agency officers may also have been working with Libyan militias to help them become effective security forces.

Was Petraeus' CIA training General Hasani's forces?

The Tripoli rescue: Reinforcements or hostage rescue mission?

Another really ambiguous – and at times contradictory part – of the report pertains to whether the Tripoli reinforcements were sent to reinforce the Annex or rescue Chris Stevens. The introduction says they were sent to “aid in the security of the remaining facility in Benghazi and to rescue the then-missing Ambassador,” but “upon learning that Ambassador Stevens was dead, the Tripoli Team traveled to the Annex.” As the narrative describes the outset of the mission, it describes “planning a rescue mission” in light of reports that the building Stevens was in had been set fire, but the section discussing this topic states the team “departed as a CIA quick reaction force to support CIA officers.” (8, 22) Then, after describing the arrival and vetting problems at the Benghazi airport the report notes (sourced to Officer 8), that the militias who showed up did not want to take them to the hospital where, the team had heard, a wounded American was. After 3.5 hours, the Tripoli Team got a report that the Westerner at the hospital was dead, which is when it decided to go to the Annex (where the militia wanted to/was willing to take them). The report describes that decision this way as a return to the original mission, even though it appears to be a third mission.

The Chief of Station in Tripoli then ordered the team to return to its original mission, which was to move to the Benghazi Annex to collect non-security personnel and transport them to

the airport for evacuation to Tripoli.

Basically, the whole thing reads like the Tripoli team was sent to rescue Stevens. (Note, according to the Senate Intelligence Benghazi report the Benghazi chief of base testified he concluded that Stevens had been kidnapped from the TMF, and it also says the Tripoli team was concerned about the security situation at the hospital, believing they were being lured into an ambush.) But instead they were held up by a group of 30 militia members (and lack of transportation) until Stevens died.

As soon as they agreed to go to the Annex, the militia members found some Hiluxes, which took them to the Annex; the really intensive assault started just after they arrived.

The potentially different mission may be behind the assurances that CIA remained in control of the mission, even while transferring tactical control of the mission to the military officers "at appropriate time, depending on the specific action." (8) For the period at the airport when the team was considering going after Stevens, "tactical control of the team was handed to the U.S. military personnel who were part of the Tripoli Team." (22) That suggests the 2 DOD guys may have been SEAL hostage specialists.

Summary

In the end, the unclassified report raises as many questions as it answers (perhaps the classified report answers them). But the key questions all come down to what degree the attack on Chris Stevens and two former SEALs who might have been training the Special Forces that didn't come through when it mattered was blowback, a horrible but perhaps unsurprising outcome when you arm a range of militias to overthrow someone you want gone.

The report is very moderate. But what's shocking is not that it isn't more damning of Administration figures, but that it's not more

critical of CIA's failures both in its core functions and in its covert op gone awry in Libya. I'm actually intrigued that Nunes was asking some of the right questions. Maybe he plans on exercising real oversight in the new Congress?