

SILENT TALKING POINTS: DON'T TELL THE TERRORISTS WE KNOW THEY EXIST

Between the extensive leaking from the so-called closed hearings on Thursday and Friday (Spencer's got a good wrap-up here) and the Sunday shows (LAT has a good wrap-up here), we've got a little better understanding of the Administration's current understanding of the Benghazi attack.

That said, I've got a different set of questions about what those show than most of the pundits commenting on it.

How strongly did Petraeus initially blame al Qaeda-related attackers?

My first question pertains to an apparent discrepancy, not about the testimony last week, but about Petraeus' initial testimony shortly after the attack.

We know that in his testimony Friday, Petraeus said he knew fairly quickly that Ansar al-Sharia was behind the attack.

He knew "almost immediately" that Ansar al-Sharia, a loosely connected radical Islamist group, was responsible for the attack, as suggested by multiple sources and video from the scene, said the source. At the same time, a stream of intelligence – including about 20 distinct reports – also emerged indicating that a brewing furor over the anti-Islamic video preceded the attack.

The CIA eventually disproved the reports that film-related protests had anything to do with the attack. But this didn't happen until after Petraeus' initial briefings to lawmakers, in which he discussed all the possibilities, the

source said.

Petraeus blamed some other unnamed intelligence agency for taking out the reference to Ansar al-Sharia (though the talking points came from CIA).

Petraeus testified that the CIA draft written in response to the raid referred to militant groups Ansar al-Shariah and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb but those names were replaced with the word "extremist" in the final draft, according to a congressional staffer. The staffer said Petraeus testified that he allowed other agencies to alter the talking points as they saw fit without asking for final review, to get them out quickly.

But different lawmakers have differing recollections about what Petraeus originally testified, just days after the attack. Peter King suggested that Petraeus hid the role of terrorists in his September 14 briefing to the House Intelligence Committee.

King said Petraeus had briefed the House committee on Sept. 14 and he does not recall Petraeus being so positive at that time that it was a terrorist attack. "He thought all along that he made it clear there was terrorist involvement," King said. "That was not my recollection."

That's not how Dianne Feinstein (who elsewhere expressed concern about the "suffering" related to the sexy time scandal) remembers a briefing on September 12.

Feinstein, appearing on NBC's "Meet the Press," said that the now-former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, David H. Petraeus, had "very clearly said that it was a terrorist

attack” in a meeting with lawmakers the day after the attack in Benghazi.

Mind you, those were different briefings—it’s possible just the Gang of Four got briefed on September 12. If that’s the case (and if King is telling the truth), it would mean Petraeus was less forthcoming about terrorist involvement with the full House Committee than with a more select group of lawmakers.

And note this seems to be the reverse of the politics you’d expect. While both DiFi and King vow to get to the bottom of how the talking points were made, King seems to attribute some deceit to Petraeus whereas DiFi seems to believe the suffering Petraeus was forthright—and clear-headed—from the start.

Were we really afraid to let Ansar al-Sharia know we were onto them?

Now consider the excuse Petraeus gave for taking mention of Ansar al-Sharia and AQIM out of the unclassified talking points: we didn’t want the terrorists to know we knew about them.

Testifying out of sight, ex-CIA Director David Petraeus told Congress Friday that classified intelligence showed the deadly raid on the U.S. Consulate in Libya was a terrorist attack but the administration withheld the suspected role of al-Qaida affiliates to avoid tipping them off.

I wonder if that’s the entire story.

I’m not saying the Administration deliberately used inaccurate talking points; if they had, then why did Obama name terrorism even before Susan Rice appeared on the Sunday shows? It’d be a colossal fuckup of a cover-up.

And there are certainly reasons to believe that’s why they withheld this detail. It is true that the conclusions about Ansar al-Sharia and AQIM rely in significant part on—presumably—NSA

intercepts of voice communications. Here's what Eli Lake wrote about them back on September 28 (just as Republicans rolled out their Jimmy Carter strategy).

In the hours following the 9/11 anniversary attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, U.S. intelligence agencies monitored communications from jihadists affiliated with the group that led the attack and members of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the group's North African affiliate.

[snip]

That said, the intelligence community did not offer Congress or senior Obama administration officials any consensus analysis on the perpetrator of the attack in those early days after it occurred.

The communications between members of AQIM and AAS were important. One U.S. intelligence official who has read the raw intercepts said the conversations showed that AAS operatives were subordinate to the mid-level AQIM members. In one conversation, the AQIM manager was referred to with the kinds of honorifics usually reserved in Arab society for a more powerful man. A retired senior U.S. counterterrorism official who also was familiar with the intelligence confirmed this account.

Not all U.S. officials contacted for this story piece agreed with this assessment

"Those individuals—whoever they may be—who took part in the attack all swim in the same, relatively small, extremist pond," one U.S. official told The Daily Beast. "So there could be a number of individual or ad hoc ties with AQIM or other extremist groups. These connections alone do not mean AQIM was

behind or planned the attack. This is why there's an ongoing investigation, to identify the attackers and determine motives and relationships to extremist groups."

And in fact, tipping off the suspected culprit that we were onto him presumably did endanger the investigation. Within days after Lake published his story, the braggart in question, Ali Ani al-Harzi, fled to Turkey in an effort to get to Syria. He was captured in Turkey—so it's not like he escaped because of this leak. But if al-Harzi fled in response to the story, then presumably the intercepts in question have gone dark since the story, too.

So it is very credible that the Intelligence Community didn't want to announce on the Sunday shows they had intercepts tying Ansar al-Sharia to AQIM for fear it would tip them off because that is precisely what happened two weeks later. Indeed, this scenario would suggest that NSA is the entity that withdrew the specific mention of AAS and AQIM from the talking points. If I'm not mistaken, NSA didn't testify on Thursday with the rest of the IC.

Though of course, it's one thing to blame extremists and another to say you blame them because you've been listening to their conversations.

That said, I wonder whether the IC had other motives to withhold this piece of information, like a failure to track these communications closely enough before the attack.

What happened to the other pressing questions about Benghazi?

All that said, one thing I haven't seen in the torrent of leaks about supposedly closed sessions is any discussion of the other, more pressing questions about Benghazi, questions that should guide our security approach at other locations and hopefully would save lives.

For example, I've seen no discussion of,

- Whether CIA or DOD decided against a military response
- What the CIA was really doing at their location in Benghazi to lead the terrorists to target them
- Why CIA didn't have HUMINT to prevent this attack
- Discrepancies between State and CIA versions of the attack

We these subjects—which are ultimately far more important than Susan Rice's damn talking points—even discussed at these hearings?