

A NEW SECURITY REALITY CHALLENGES OUR ABILITY TO PRACTICE DIPLOMACY IN DANGEROUS PLACES

The second witness at the Oversight Hearing on Benghazi, the former Regional Security Officer for Libya, Eric Nordstrom, addressed a topic that has gotten lost in discussions of the attack: the Benghazi attack may well be something new.

Let me say a word about the evening of September 11th. The ferocity and intensity of the attack was nothing that we had seen in Libya, or that I had seen in my time in the Diplomatic Security Service. Having an extra foot of wall, or an extra-half dozen guards or agents would not have enabled us to respond to that kind of assault. I'm concerned that this attack will signal a new security-reality, just as the 1984 Beirut attack did for the Marines; the 1998 East Africa bombings did for the State Department, and 9/11 for the whole country. It is critical that we balance the risk-mitigation with the needs of our diplomats to do their job, in dangerous and uncertain places. The answer cannot be to operate from a bunker.

I've been wondering whether the attack gives terrorists, gangs, and others wanting to target or disrupt diplomatic have have a new roadmap for attacking a lightly secured diplomatic buildings.

But they don't even need to succeed with such attacks: we're likely to see further militarization of our diplomatic locations,

making our efforts to help countries strengthen their governance look more and more like empire-building.

Under Secretary for Management Patrick Kennedy addressed this issue as well.

I would like to take a moment to address a broader question that may be on your minds: Why is it necessary for representatives of the United States to be in Benghazi despite the very real dangers there? This question cuts to the core of what we do at the State Department and to the role of America in the world.

Ambassador Stevens first arrived in Benghazi during the height of the revolution, disembarking from a chartered boat, when the city was the heart of the opposition to Colonel Qadhafi and the rebels there were fighting for their lives. There was no doubt that it was dangerous. A bomb exploded in the parking lot of his hotel. The transitional authorities struggled to provide basic security. Extremists sought to exploit any opening to advance their own agenda. Yet Ambassador Stevens understood that the State Department must operate in many places where the U.S. military cannot or does not, where there are no other boots on the ground, where there are serious threats to our security. And he understood that the new Libya was being born in Benghazi and that it was critical that the United States have an active presence there.

That is why Ambassador Stevens stayed in Benghazi during those difficult days. And it's why he kept returning as the Libyan people began their difficult transition to democracy. He knew his mission was vital to U.S. interests and values, and was an investment that would

pay off in a strong partnership with a free Libya.

[snip]

Diplomacy, by its very nature, often must be practiced in dangerous places. We send people to more than 275 diplomatic posts in 170 countries around the world. No other part of our government is asked to stretch so far or reach so deep. We do this because we have learned again and again that when America is absent – especially from the dangerous places – there are consequences: extremism takes root, our interests suffer, and our national security is threatened. As the Secretary says, leadership means showing up. So that's what we do. And that's how we protect this country and sustain its global leadership.

[snip]

We must continue deploying our diplomats and development professionals to dangerous places like Benghazi. There is no other alternative. As the Secretary said, "We will not retreat. We will keep leading, and we will stay engaged everywhere in the world, including in those hard places where America's interests and security are at stake. That is the best way to honor those whom we have lost."

We'll see whether the efforts to politicize this prevent efforts to find the appropriate middle ground here.