

Mysteries of Benghazi

Tuesday, November 6, is an important date. Yes, there's an election. By the time most WEEKLY STANDARD subscribers read this, we'll know whether the country has elected a new president or chosen to keep the one we've had for the last four years.

But November 6 also marks the eight-week anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Regardless of which candidate wins, the American people deserve answers to the many unanswered questions about the attack—and the events that preceded and followed it. The Benghazi debacle is a drama in three parts: the lack of security before the attacks, the flaccid response during the attacks, and the misleading narrative after the attacks. There are unanswered questions about each part. Here are some of the most important.

PART ONE

Before the attack, a wide array of U.S. officials provided stark warnings about inadequate security in Benghazi. They include Eric Nordstrom, former regional security officer for the State Department in Libya; Lt. Col. Andrew Wood, a site security commander in Libya from February to August 2012; the unknown author of letters dated the day of the attack and found on the consulate floor; and, of course, the late Ambassador Christopher Stevens himself. Why didn't they receive the assistance they requested?

During the vice presidential debate, Joe Biden claimed: "We weren't told they wanted more security there." National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor later clarified that Biden was speaking "for himself and the president." In fact, an August 16 State Department cable summarizing an emergency meeting at the U.S. mission in Benghazi was circulated to White House and NSC officials just three weeks before the attack. It reported that the regional security officer "expressed concerns with the ability to defend Post in the event of a coordinated attack due to limited manpower, security measures, weapons capabilities, host nation support and the overall size of the compound." Does the administration maintain that no one at the

White House or NSC was aware of these urgent requests?

Several officials with responsibility for security in Benghazi spoke of a "normalization" directive that included a conscious effort to reduce the security posture at the consulate. Who proposed "normalization" and who issued the directive to reduce security?

PART TWO

Citing sources on the ground in Benghazi, Fox News reported that Tyrone Woods was "painting" mortar sites with a laser from his rooftop position shortly before he was killed. A subsequent CIA timeline provided to *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius contradicts this, saying that "the rooftop defenders never 'laser the mortars,' as has been reported." Can the CIA make this claim with certainty? If Woods was painting the mortar sites as eyewitnesses claim, presumably at considerable personal risk, why was he doing so? Did he have reason to believe that



Where was the cavalry?

reinforcements were coming?

President Obama says that he gave "three very clear directives." They were: "Number one, make sure that we are securing our personnel and doing whatever we need to. Number two, we're going to investigate exactly what happened so that it doesn't happen again. Number three, find out who did this so we can bring them to justice." To whom was the first of those directives transmitted and when?

A CIA statement claims that no one in the CIA chain of command denied requests for help. A statement from NSC spokesman Tommy Vietor claims no one at the White House denied requests for assistance. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta said that the military did not have "real-time information" to act on. Did military officials not communicate with top State Department officials such as Charlene Lamb, who testified under oath that she and others were following the attack in real time from their post at the State Department? Was President Obama aware of requests for assistance from the men under attack in Benghazi? Panetta also said: "You don't deploy forces into harm's way without

knowing what's going on." Does this statement imply that there were requests for help from the field that senior defense officials judged it imprudent to act on? In any case, isn't going into harm's way without complete information precisely the job of our most highly trained military personnel? Does the president agree with Panetta? Doesn't announcing that the U.S. military needs perfect intelligence before engaging an enemy encourage similar attacks in the future?

PART THREE

State Department officials in Washington followed the attacks as they happened and knew instantly, in the words of Undersecretary of State Patrick Kennedy, that the assault in Benghazi was "an unprecedented attack by dozens of heavily armed men." A CIA timeline provided to reporters late last week notes that at 1:15 A.M. on the night of the attack, less than five hours after it began, CIA officials attempting to rescue Ambassador Stevens reported that terrorists from Ansar al Sharia had surrounded the hospital in Benghazi. On September 12, the day after the attack, the CIA station chief in Libya cabled Washington to report that the assault had been a terrorist attack. By September 13, the FBI was interviewing CIA officials who were on the ground in Benghazi, several of whom described a sophisticated terrorist attack on the compound.

Yet when CIA director David Petraeus briefed members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence on September 14, he suggested that the attack was triggered by a YouTube video. Two days later, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice made the same claim about the video on political talk shows. Two days after that, President Obama blamed the video in an interview with David Letterman. And a week after that, the president cited the video six times in his speech at the U.N. General Assembly. Why all the misleading information from senior administration officials?

While President Obama and other administration officials misleadingly tied the attack in Benghazi to an anti-Islam film, they have been reluctant to discuss al Qaeda's very real ties to the assault. We know that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a terrorist organization that has sworn loyalty to al Qaeda's senior leadership, was involved. So was Ansar al Sharia, which has al Qaeda ties. CNN has reported that members of Al Qaeda in Iraq, another terrorist organization that has sworn loyalty to Ayman al Zawahiri, are suspected of taking part in the attack. And then there is a terrorist named Mohammed Jamal, an Egyptian with longstanding ties to Zawahiri, whose fighters, according to multiple reports, assaulted the compound. Instead of a "spontaneous" attack that grew out of a protest, the assault on the U.S. consulate was carried out by a consortium of al Qaeda allies. To date, the administration has not identified the terrorists responsible for killing four Americans. When will the administration present the American people with an accurate description

of the terrorists responsible, including their al Qaeda ties?

Whether Barack Obama remains president or not, he owes the American people a full accounting of the Benghazi fiasco.

—Stephen F. Hayes

FEMA—Too Big to Succeed

As people in New York were suffering and hospitals were being evacuated, the *New York Times* editorial page seized the occasion to score political points: "Disaster coordination is one of the most vital functions of 'big government,' which is why Mitt Romney wants to eliminate it." This was dishonest partisan spin. In a GOP primary debate last year, Romney had been asked by CNN's John King about the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and whether the "states should take on more of this role." Romney replied, "Every time you have an occasion to take something from the federal government and send it back to the states—that's the right direction."

The idea that anyone on the political spectrum this side of a doctrinaire libertarian believes the federal government has no role in coordinating disaster relief is a fantasy of the *Times*. Conservatives believe in a strong but limited central government, not no federal government. If there's anything that would pass a conservative litmus test for the legitimate exercise of federal power, coordinating the response to a super-storm that wreaks havoc across the Eastern seaboard has to be near the top of the list.

As for the contention that some of FEMA's responsibilities should be returned to the states, anyone who believes this to be a radical notion knows nothing about the history of FEMA. Created in 1979, FEMA was originally intended to help citizens in the event of a nuclear attack. In 1988, the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act clarified that federal emergency declarations—and the FEMA money accompanying such requests—should be based on a finding that events are "of such severity and magnitude that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments." Since then, Congress has never given specific guidance for what qualifies as a federal emergency.

For all the Bill Clinton nostalgia this election season, discussing FEMA is a sobering reminder that one of his real gifts was convincing people he was a good president rather than being one. As chronicled in *Feeling Your Pain*, James Bovard's book on federal bureaucracy in the Clinton years, the former president exploited FEMA's lack of a clear mis-