

Statement of Congressman Gerald E. Connolly (VA-11)
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Reviews of the Benghazi Attack and Unanswered Questions
September 19, 2013

Today's hearing is the culmination of this Committee's regrettable evolution from a bipartisan panel once committed to conducting serious oversight and developing effective reforms, into a partisan body, shameless in its cynical obsession with scoring points against the Administration; no matter the facts, no matter the consequences.

The majority has been relentless in their commitment to wasting taxpayer dollars on yet another round of Benghazi political theater. Despite this being the ninth congressional hearing on Benghazi, the only notable information to emerge in recent days has been the striking level of disinterest exhibited by the majority with respect to posing substantive questions that would actually inform efforts to enhance the security of American personnel abroad.

Instead, Republicans on this Committee remain obsessed with recycling tired and worn talking points in a futile attempt to damage the credibility of two dedicated and patriotic civil servants testifying before us today, Ambassador Pickering and Admiral Mullen. The majority has gone so far as to use the trappings of this Committee to produce a deeply dishonest "report" that slanders the independent Accountability Review Board (ARB) process and by extension, the dedicated men and women who carried out this important work.

When the majority provides a "report" first to Fox News, well before the Ranking Member or any Democratic member of the Committee has a chance to review it, one can be certain it bears the hallmarks of a partisan hit job masquerading as an official committee publication. Forcing Democratic members to resort to Fox News for status updates on the Chairman's so-called "investigation" is a strangely fitting, yet disgraceful, symbol of how the majority has injected partisanship into every aspect of this Committee's proceedings.

It certainly puts to rest any lingering doubts over the true purpose and motivations driving the Chairman's work on Benghazi. It has become abundantly clear that this Committee's majority was never interested in conducting vigorous oversight of the U.S. Department of State's ("State") Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS), let alone actually pursuing serious reforms in a measured, substantive, and bipartisan fashion.

Allowing this Committee's oversight efforts to devolve into crass demagoguery masks a very simple, yet critical, issue – namely, that striking the right balance between sufficient security and effective diplomacy is an inherently complex and daunting challenge facing our foreign service. As Ambassador Pickering and Admiral Mullen accurately stated:

*"No diplomatic presence is without risk ... And **the total elimination of risk is a non-starter for U.S. diplomacy**, given the need for the U.S. government to be present in places where stability and security are often most profoundly lacking and host government support is sometimes minimal to non-existent."*

We must never forget there is a reason that State's slogan is "Diplomacy in Action."

To effectively represent our Nation, American personnel overseas and their families make significant sacrifices and must occasionally accept dangerous risks under challenging circumstances. Ambassador Stevens certainly understood these risks. As the Family of Chris Stevens has eloquently noted:

"Chris was not willing to be the kind of diplomat who would strut around in fortified compounds. He amazed and impressed the Libyans by walking the streets with the lightest of escorts, sitting in sidewalk cafes, chatting with passers-by. There was a risk to being accessible. He knew it, and he accepted it.

What Chris never would have accepted was the idea that his death would be used for political purposes. There were security shortcomings, no doubt. Both internal and outside investigations have identified and publicly disclosed them. Steps are being taken to prevent their reoccurrence.

Chris would not have wanted to be remembered as a victim. Chris knew, and accepted, that he was working under dangerous circumstances. He did so -- just as so many of our diplomatic and development professionals do every day -- because he believed the work was vitally important. He would have wanted the critical work he was doing to build bridges of mutual understanding and respect -- the kind of work that made him literally thousands of friends and admirers across the broader Middle East -- to continue."

I deeply understand the demands we place on our foreign service and know the stakes are high. As a staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I vividly recall that shortly after I returned home from a trip to the U.S. barracks in Beirut in 1983, a horrific truck bomb was detonated there, killing 241 U.S. service members, including friends of mine. This attack was as traumatizing as the Benghazi terrorist attack, and it has been disheartening to observe the stark difference in tone and tenor between the bipartisan congressional response in 1983, and the hyperbolic, partisan attacks of today.

Comparing the treatment of the Reagan Administration, which I recall responded to substantive questions about the security of our Foreign Service personnel, and the political attacks on President Obama and former Secretary Clinton, it is clear that politics no longer stops at the water's edge. It should also be clear that securing facilities in unstable regions abroad has long been an incredibly difficult task that multiple Administrations, and even our military, have struggled to address with varying degrees of success.

Consider that, a mere three days after the Benghazi attack of 2012, 15 heavily armed Taliban insurgents attacked Camp Bastion, home to 28,000 U.S. and British service personnel in Afghanistan. These insurgents infiltrated the base and killed two U.S. Marines, including a Lieutenant Colonel, while destroying or damaging eight aircraft worth \$200 million. This

appalling attack has been described as the worst loss of U.S. air-power in a single incident since the Vietnam War.

Yet curiously, my colleagues on the other side of the aisle have chosen to criticize former Secretary Clinton and the ARB process, while saying nary a word about the Camp Bastion attack – let alone holding a single hearing to investigate the matter. This is an odd, seemingly inexplicable double standard from a group that claims to be focused solely on improving diplomatic security, and not simply tarnishing the reputation of former Secretary Clinton.

The bottom line is that the most vital and pressing issue to me is whether State has truly learned the appropriate lessons from the Benghazi tragedy and fully implemented the ARB's recommendations to better protect our foreign service moving forward.

Recent events indicate DS is improving its security performance. Several days ago, on September 13, 2013, Taliban insurgents launched a major attack on our U.S. consulate in Afghanistan's Herat province. The attackers were armed with assault rifles and a truck bomb. American personnel at the consulate sought secure shelter while security forces under the leadership of Diplomatic Security repelled the attack, resulting in no U.S. casualties.

In closing, I note with deep regret that it did not have to be this way. As a member of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs (CFA), I have experienced firsthand how a serious, engaged, and careful oversight approach results in solutions that would actually strengthen embassy security.

For example, in July CFA favorably reported out the Embassy Security and Enhancement Act of 2013. This bill, which I was proud to cosponsor, would require State enhance the security of high threat diplomatic posts by ensuring these posts are provided the necessary security measures and funding; accelerating the construction of new, more secure embassies and consulates; mandating security training for all personnel serving in the highest risk posts; and enhancing benefits for the family members of U.S. employees who die abroad, including those killed in a terrorist attack.

If my colleagues are truly interested in honoring the heroism and bravery of Ambassador Stevens, Sean Smith, Glen Doherty, and Tyrone Woods, they will join me in advancing this measure through the House, and in conducting true oversight that ensures State fully implements every ARB recommendation.

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