

Hillary “Wins” Benghazi Bipartisan Bad Faith Boogaloo

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What is “Benghazi,” [Washington’s long-running kabuki circus](#), really about?

Is it about [dead diplomats and CIA mercenaries](#)? Foreign service security? Terrorist attacks and Islamophobic movies? Emails and Sidney Blumenthal? Whether Hillary Clinton cares, or whether she spends the night alone? Does the Benghazi committee, or anyone else, [really know what “Benghazi” is about](#)?

On [September 11, 2012](#), as Libya fell deeper into chaos, one of the organized and well-armed jihadi groups used outrage at an Islamophobic movie as a cover for attacking the “special mission compound” (not the embassy in Tripoli, not a consulate) that served as a cover for the nearby CIA mission station. The jihadis in that attack killed Ambassador Chris Stevens and his information officer Sean Smith. One of the missions Stevens was working on was retrieving weapons in Libya before they fell into the hands of jihadi groups like the one that killed him. So far, for three years, no one has seemed to wonder whether the jihadis were aware of Stevens’ mission and his presence in Benghazi that night.

[What gave “Benghazi” legs from the start](#) was not any [curiosity about why things happened as they did](#), but why the Obama administration started obfuscating immediately. One obvious reason was [the 2012 presidential campaign](#), which might be hurt by admitting a “terrorist” attack. Republicans and mainstream media [greeted the event with accusations and blame](#) for the president. So the administration bobbed and weaved and sent UN ambassador Susan Rice out to TV land, where she told a long line of talking heads an [unforthcoming and variable story that was essentially inaccurate](#). Rice’s talking points were vetted by the CIA, which had things to keep hidden. At the Benghazi hearing Republican congressman [Jim Jordan of Ohio](#) cited evidence that Clinton had spread the same false story [while knowing it was false](#):

“You can’t be square with the American people. You tell your family it’s a terrorist attack but not the American people. You tell the Libyan president it’s a terrorist attack but not the American people. You tell the Egyptian prime minister it’s a terrorist attack but not the American people.”

[Clinton denied Jordan’s interpretation of the evidence](#), but offered no alternative. No one mentioned the CIA. When the committee chair invited Clinton to respond at greater length, she ducked and plugged her book instead: “I wrote a whole chapter about this in my book, Hard Choices. I’d be glad to send it to you, congressman.”

Hillary Clinton’s performance was well prepared and impressive

From [her opening statement](#) on, Clinton made it clear what her talking points were and she maintained them with remarkable composure and occasional good nature. She began slickly, acknowledging the “terrorist attacks” and then taking the high ground of honoring the fallen:

“The terrorist attacks at our diplomatic compound and later, at the CIA post in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012, took the lives of four brave Americans.... I’m here to honor the service of those four men. The courage of the Diplomatic Security Agency and the CIA officers who risked their lives that night. And the work their colleagues do every single day all over the world.”

Then she spent some time on Chris Stevens, whom she knew and admired as “one of our nation’s most accomplished diplomats.” In 2012, Stevens had been in the Foreign Service 21 years and was named to his first ambassadorship that May. By then he was well known for his sometimes unorthodox ingenuity and effectiveness, as Clinton said:

“When the revolution broke out in Libya, we named Chris as our envoy to the opposition. There was no easy way to get him into Benghazi to begin gathering information and meeting those Libyans who were rising up against the murderous dictator Gadhafi. But he found a way to get himself there on a Greek cargo ship, just like a 19th-century American envoy. But his work was very much 21st-century, hard-nosed diplomacy....

“I was the one who asked Chris to go to Libya as our envoy. I was the one who recommended him to be our ambassador to the president....

“Chris Stevens understood that diplomats must operate in many places where our soldiers do not, where there are no other boots on the ground and safety is far from guaranteed. In fact, he volunteered for just those assignments.”

A lawyer who never practiced law, Stevens had a resume that included stints as an embassy [political officer in Jerusalem, Damascus, Cairo, and Riyadh](#). He had served with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and with Senator Richard Lugar. At the State Department, he was special assistant to the Under Secretary for Political Affairs and was in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs as the Iran desk officer. And he had worked in Libya twice before, in 2007-2009 and in 2011, as envoy to the opposition during the Libyan revolution.

One of Stevens’ jobs in Libya was running guns to Syrian rebels

Since Chris Stevens was a smart, savvy, alert operative who was surely aware of the significance of the 9/11 date, the obvious question is: why did he decide to be in Benghazi, with limited security, on that date? What seemed important enough to him to take such an obvious risk? Hillary Clinton answered the question this way:

“Nobody knew the dangers of Libya better. A weak government, extremist groups, rampant instability. But Chris chose to go to Benghazi because he understood America had to be represented there at that pivotal time. He knew that eastern Libya was where the revolution had begun and that unrest there could derail the country’s fragile transition to democracy. And if extremists gained a foothold, they would have the chance to destabilize the entire region, including Egypt and Tunisia. He also knew how urgent it was to ensure that the weapons Gadhafi had left strewn across the country, including shoulder-fired

missiles that could knock an airplane out of the sky, did not fall into the wrong hands. The nearest Israeli airport is just a day's drive from the Libyan border."

That's a nice bit of hide-in-plain sight deflection. Stevens was in Benghazi for two days. He wasn't "representing" America there, his post was Tripoli. But it sounds good to have him in Benghazi to protect Egypt and Tunisia (even though Tunisia was blessed to avoid American "help" and is perhaps the most stable country in the region now). Clinton even throws in Israel to further blur her listeners' minds with an imaginary and rather dangerous "day's drive from the Libyan border." That's chutzpah! And well done, with a straight face.

The nugget of reality embedded in largely fatuous rhetoric is the urgency to secure "the weapons Gadhafi had left strewn across the country, including shoulder-fired missiles...." That seems one of the most likely reasons Stevens was in Benghazi, to secure those weapons somehow. Storing them at the special mission compound was not a good option, and even the CIA annex was only temporarily safe. These weapons had to go somewhere safe, or useful, and there was an operational stream already in place, from Benghazi through Turkey, to some of the Syrian rebels the US thought might be worth supporting there. Syrian rebels, with no air force of their own, were at the mercy of the government air force, and [surface-to-air missiles would be helpful](#) (we knew the technique worked, having supplied surface-to-air missiles to the mujahedeen to shoot down Russian aircraft in Afghanistan some 35 years ago).

In his last official action on September 11, 2012, Chris [Stevens met with a Turkish diplomat](#) thought to be involved with shipping Libyan weapons through Turkey to Syrian rebels.

Weapons flowed along a CIA rat line established in early 2012

Officially denied, but credibly reported by Seymour Hersh and others, the idea of [US shipping arms to Syrian rebels](#) without Congressional authorization is hardly radical or shocking. It's a condition best assumed to be true, since means, motive, and opportunity are all aligned. In the London Review of Books of April 17, Hersh wrote:

"The full extent of US co-operation with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in assisting the rebel opposition in Syria has yet to come to light. The Obama administration has never publicly admitted to its role in creating what the CIA calls a 'rat line', a back channel highway into Syria. The rat line, authorised in early 2012, was used to funnel weapons and ammunition from Libya via southern Turkey and across the Syrian border to the opposition. Many of those in Syria who ultimately received the weapons were jihadists, some of them affiliated with al-Qaida."

In early 2012 President Obama signed [a secret order authorizing support for Syrian rebels](#). In early 2011, President Obama had signed [a secret order authorizing support for Libyan rebels](#). Some of the [subsequent covert action](#) was known as Operation Zero Footprint. It was widely known within the intelligence community, the administration (including Clinton), and Congress. There's no credible explanation of where the Libyan weapons went, and almost no one asks. When Republican congressman [Mike Pompeo of Kansas](#) brought these covert operations up at the Benghazi hearing, his three questions to Clinton were all framed as "awareness" questions. His second question was about weapons to Syria (the other two were about weapons to Libyan rebels):

“Were you aware or are you aware of any U.S. efforts by the U.S. government in Libya to provide any weapons, directly or indirectly, or through a cutout, to any Syrian rebels or militias or opposition to Syrian forces?”

That’s a softball question with so many moving parts (and bad grammar) that any decent lawyer would have no trouble evading. The repetition in “U.S. efforts by the U.S. government” is a huge loophole, since the Libyan operation was run by NATO. Clinton answered the Syrian question and the other two with a single word: “No.” There were no follow-up questions. Clinton no doubt has credible deniability on Stevens’ involvements in gun-running, but that doesn’t explain why a Kansas Republican went out of his way to ask her cover-your-butt questions.

Living in denial means not having to explain what’s real

The official story, the consensus narrative for most of Washington and the mainstream media, is that gun-running out of Benghazi is “bogus” or a “fantasy” or a “myth.” Using all these words in Newsweek on October 21, Kurt [Eichenwald goes on at some length to defend the official story](#). Late in his piece he gets to the gun-running and explains it away with a counter-myth of his own:

“No one advancing this fantasy ever explains how a secretary of state could be directing an intelligence operation that would be handled by the CIA.”

As if Clinton and almost anyone else in a position of intelligence authority in any administration wouldn’t know better than to make secret operations obscure. This is a classic strawman argument with Clinton as the strawman. The Newsweek story also cites a Republican report from the House Permanent Select Committee that said in part:

“All CIA activities in Benghazi were legal and authorized. On-the-record testimony establishes that CIA was not sending weapons (including MANPADS) from Libya to Syria, or facilitating other organizations or states that were transferring weapons from Libya to Syria.”

Yes, perhaps all CIA activities were legal and authorized by secret presidential findings. That doesn’t mean they didn’t exist. “On-the-record testimony” is pretty weak evidence for anything in the intelligence world. And even if the testimony is technically accurate, it’s hardly relevant to an operation run by NATO. The best evidence that we’re being lied to is the amazing amount of smoke and mirrors deployed to assure us we’re being told the truth. And that smoke and mirrors includes the Benghazi committee’s reluctance (as well as previous investigations’ failure) to look at the core issues with integrity – which is understandable, since that might well lead to a constitutional crisis. But while failure of integrity is quieter and calmer than confrontation, that failure is itself a constitutional crisis that we have lived with for decades now.

The Newsweek story castigates Republicans for refusing to “accept facts over fantasies,” which is fair enough as far as it goes. But when the alternative is a set of facts equally fantastical, that’s really no help. But Eichenwald piles on, virtually accusing Republicans of being terrorists:

“No doubt, the terrorists set on attacking America are cheering them on. Nothing could delight some terrorist sitting in a Syrian or Libyan or Iraqi hovel while hearing a top Republican congressman brag on television that a relatively small attack on a U.S. compound continues to threaten to transform a presidential election in the most powerful country in the world.”

That is shameless fearmongering. That is an intimidation tactic designed to enforce silence and reinforce denial. He could call for honest questions designed to get honest answers. That would be new. But the official answers have already been decreed, so everyone just needs to move on. And to add shamelessness to shamelessness, Eichenwald’s final, irrelevant, blatantly manipulative emotional appeal is to “allow the dead to finally rest in peace.” That offends the living and the dead.

Does anyone really want a serious exploration of the deeper issues?

Democrats on the Benghazi committee have [outlined the omissions in the investigation](#) (such as key witnesses from the defense and intelligence hierarchies) that demonstrate its lack of seriousness to date. It’s not that the Democrats were unduly concerned about the lack of a serious investigation, it took them months even to mention it, and their letter of July 15, 2015, was far from a call for integrity of process. What motivated the Democrats, understandably, was the appearance that the Republican majority had shifted its focus to make Hillary Clinton the primary target of the Benghazi committee.

The received wisdom on Benghazi is that, as [The New Yorker dutifully put it](#): “There have now been seven full investigations of the circumstances surrounding the Benghazi attack, five in the House and two in the Senate.” This formulation omits other investigations by the State Dept.’s Accountability Review Board and news media, etc. Each previous investigation seems to have reached a conclusion that the events in Benghazi were somewhere between “untidy” and “a mess,” but none recommended any indictments. However the assumption that any investigation has been “full” is a false assumption. None of them have yet explored the shared assumptions that made Benghazi possible, if not inevitable.

In her opening statement, Hillary Clinton referred to the current shared assumptions that shape American behavior in the world. No one on the committee contradicted her.

“America must lead in a dangerous world....

“We have learned the hard way when America is absent, especially from unstable places, there are consequences. Extremism take root, aggressors seek to fill the vacuum and security everywhere is threatened, including here at home. That’s why Chris [Stevens] was in Benghazi. It’s why he had served previously in Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jerusalem during the second intifada....

“Retreat from the world is not an option. America cannot shrink from our responsibility to lead.... ”

This mantra is a variation on the creed of American exceptionalism, but it is only a belief system. This is not an analytical assessment of anything. “America must lead” is not a clearly self-evident proposition, it is only an article of faith. Others believe otherwise. Some surely believe the world would be a less dangerous place without American leadership, certainly without the kind of leadership America has provided for the past 35 years.

Clinton herself points to the contradiction inherent in her doctrine of American goodness. To defend her belief, she resorts to fearmongering. She is objectively wrong to assert, as a universal truth, that “when America is absent,” bad things happen. Tunisia is only the most obvious example of places where America’s absence is a blessing. Her list of places where Chris Stevens served is a list of horrors and failures – Syria is a failed state, Jerusalem continues to suffer, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are brutal dictatorships that we have helped sustain for decades.

“Retreat from the world” is, in fact, an option. But it is an option with a range of meanings from reduced engagement to isolationism. What we’ve been doing for decades has not helped make the world a better place. Our most engaged interventions have made the world a much worse place, especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. When Hillary Clinton claims, as she did, that “America is the greatest force for peace and progress the world has ever known,” she must know that’s not true. And she must also know it’s especially not true for Libya, where she was the prime architect for the “peace and progress” that has produced yet another failed state.

Opposition to rampant American militarism is rare, but not unknown. At a hearing little more than a month after the Benghazi attacks, at an October 16, 2012, hearing, Democratic congressman [Dennis Kucinich of Ohio](#) spoke eloquently to the wider context in which Chris Stevens died, in [an intervention taken without constitutional authority](#):

“We bombed Libya. We destroyed their army. We obliterated their police stations. Lacking any civil authority, armed brigades control security. Al-Qaeda expanded its presence. Weapons are everywhere. Thousands of shoulder-to-air missiles are on the loose. Our military intervention led to greater instability in Libya....

“We want to stop the attacks on our embassies? Let’s stop trying to overthrow governments. This should not be a partisan issue. Let’s avoid the hype. Let’s look at the real situation here. Interventions do not make us safer. They do not protect our nation. They are themselves a threat to America.

Pity the poor Republicans. They want to pillory Hillary Clinton without denigrating her rash rush to war in Libya. They want to blame Democrats for casualties without abandoning their policies designed to shed more blood. That’s a tricky tightrope, and it’s entertaining, at first, to watch them cling to it. The fun stops when you realize what the real stakes are for our nation, that USA that everyone at the hearing purports to love, even as they do it varying forms of grievous harm. Honest answers about “Benghazi” won’t be had until someone asks honest questions.

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