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Officials on Benghazi: "We made mistakes, but without malice"

By SHARYL ATTKISSON /

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Obama administration officials who were in key positions on Sept. 11, 2012 acknowledge that a range of mistakes were made the night of the attacks on the U.S. missions in Benghazi, and in messaging to Congress and the public in the aftermath.

The officials spoke to CBS News in a series of interviews and communications under the condition of anonymity so that they could be more frank in their assessments. They do not all agree on the list of mistakes and it's important to note that they universally claim that any errors or missteps did not cost lives and reflect "incompetence rather than malice or cover up." Nonetheless, in the eight months since the attacks, this is the most sweeping and detailed discussion by key players of what might have been done differently.

"We're portrayed by Republicans as either being lying or idiots," said one Obama administration official who was part of the Benghazi response. "It's actually closer to us being idiots."

The Obama administration's chief critics on Benghazi, such as Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., remain skeptical. They see a pattern, even a conspiracy, to deflect attention from the idea that four Americans

had been killed by al Qaeda-linked attackers, on the president's watch. "There is no conclusion a reasonable person could reach other than that for a couple of weeks after the attack, [the Obama administration was] trying to push a narrative that was politically beneficial to the president's re-election," Graham told CBS News.

The list of mea culpas by Obama administration officials involved in the Benghazi response and aftermath include: standing down the counterterrorism Foreign Emergency Support Team, failing to convene the Counterterrorism Security Group, failing to release the disputed Benghazi "talking points" when Congress asked for them, and using the word "spontaneous" while avoiding the word "terrorism."

The emergency response: "I wish we'd sent FEST"

The Foreign Emergency Support Team known as "FEST" is described as "the US Government's only interagency, on-call, short-notice team poised to respond to terrorist incidents worldwide." It even boasts hostage-negotiating expertise. With U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens reported missing shortly after the Benghazi attacks began, Washington officials were operating under a possible hostage scenario at the outset. Yet deployment of the counterterrorism experts on the FEST was ruled out from the start. That decision became a source of great internal dissent and the cause of puzzlement to some outsiders.

Thursday, an administration official who was part of the Benghazi response told CBS News: "I wish we'd sent it."

The official said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's deputy, [redacted]

[redacted] Patrick Kennedy, quickly dispensed with the idea [redacted]

[redacted] A senior State Department official Thursday told CBS News, "Under Secretary Kennedy is not in the decision chain on FEST deployment" but would not directly confirm whether Kennedy or somebody else dismissed the FEST.

Whoever made the decision, it came amid sharp disagreement over the FEST's true capabilities.

[redacted] Kennedy and others at the State Department view the team as one that primarily restores communications at besieged embassies. However, the FEST's own mission statement describes a seasoned team of counterterrorism professionals who can respond "quickly and effectively to terrorist attacks... providing the fastest assistance possible" including "hostage negotiating expertise" and "time-sensitive information and intelligence." In fact, FEST leader Mark Thompson says Benghazi was precisely the sort of crisis to which his team is trained to respond.

[[While it was the State Department that's said to have taken FEST off the table [redacted]

[redacted] the team is directed by the White House National Security Council. Those officials expressed the same limited view of FEST's capabilities when CBS News asked on Nov. 1, 2012 why FEST hadn't deployed. The officials argued that FEST teams were "used in the past to re-establish infrastructure, communications, etc. after a devastating attack... That wasn't the need here."

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As soon as word of the Benghazi attack reached Washington, FEST members "instinctively started packing," said an official involved in the response. "They were told they were not deploying by Patrick Kennedy's front office... In hindsight... I probably would've pushed the button."

It's unclear what assistance FEST might have provided on site in the hours and days after the Benghazi attacks. In the end, Obama administration officials argue [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] that its quick deployment would not have saved lives [REDACTED] because, while the U.S.-based team might have made it to Tripoli, Libya, before the attacks ended, they most certainly wouldn't have made it to Benghazi in time. [REDACTED]

Still, nobody knew at the outset how long the crisis was going to last [REDACTED]. And officials familiar with FEST say it could have helped pave the way for the FBI to get into Benghazi much faster than the three weeks it ultimately took. Said one source, "I don't see a downside to sending FEST...if for no other reason than so no one could ask why we didn't."

The Counterterrorism Security Group: Not convened [REDACTED]

Under presidential directive, an interagency task force called the Counterterrorism Security Group (CSG) is to be convened when emergency terrorist events are suspected. According to a public military document, it's part of a plan to "synchronize the efforts of all the government agencies that have a role to play in the Global War on Terrorism." But on Sept. 11, 2012, the Obama administration did not convene this body of terrorism expert advisers.

One official associated with the State Department now acknowledges that the CSG would probably have advised decision makers that FEST "was not just backup generator and radios." Said the official: "the CSG could have made the argument, they were upset that they weren't heard." Another former Defense Department official says he finds no merit to using the CSG. "I'd like to hear them say what they could have done."

Last October, National Security Council (NSC) Spokesman Tommy Vietor told CBS News that the CSG wasn't needed because consultations were quickly underway at the highest levels. He indicated that, under the Obama administration, the function of the CSG has become a "lower level group" that "does different tasks" than under the Bush administration. "From the moment [President Obama] was briefed on the Benghazi attack, the response effort was handled by the most senior national security officials in government. Members of the CSG were of course involved in these meetings and discussions to support their bosses," said Vietor.

However, absent the CSG's collective advice, there's evidence that some high-level decision makers were unaware of all available resources. In October, on a phone call that included then-Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough (now White House Chief of Staff), Vietor initially told CBS News: "I don't know what [FEST] is... it sounds antiquated."

In-extremis Force: On a training mission

In an unfortunate turn of events, on Sept. 11, a special U.S. military force based in Europe, designed specifically for quick reaction to unforeseen emergencies, was off on a training mission in Croatia. By the time the so-called Commander's In-extremis Force was diverted to an airfield at Sigonella, Italy, an hour's flight from Benghazi, the attacks were over.

"They didn't get there in time to have an impact, which is unfortunate," said a Defense Department source who was involved in the Benghazi response.

Another administration source says, with the benefit of hindsight, everyone wishes U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), the combatant command responsible for Libya on Sept. 11, had its own In-extremis Force.

That's already been accomplished. In what turns out to be a stroke of terrible timing, AFRICOM was just a few weeks away from getting an In-extremis Force when the Benghazi attacks happened. The Force was in the U.S. finishing training on Sept. 11 and is now in place.

The political response: "Dream Team"

A former Obama administration official says they were so confident in, and pleased with, the team of experts they pulled together to brief Congress on Benghazi, they were nicknamed the "Dream Team." The "Dream Team" consisted of: Maj. Gen. Darryl Roberson, Vice Director of Operations, Joint Staff; Matt Olson, Director of the National Counterterrorism Center; Andy McCabe, Assistant Director of Counterterrorism for the FBI; and Linda Weissgold from CIA.

But some Obama administration sources now concede that, outside the "Dream Team," their post-attack communications and spin were riddled with missteps. Yet they insist that was the result of incompetence or confusion, and that no conspiracy was in play.

The talking points

The infamous Benghazi "talking points" were born out of a request on Sept. 14 from Rep. Dutch Ruppersberger, D-Md., the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee. CIA chief David Petraeus had just given a classified briefing to Ruppersberger and other Intelligence Committee members. A source who was present said that following the briefing, "Ruppersberger wanted to know 'what can I say on TV?'"

The day before, on Sept. 13, the White House had asked the office of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton if she would appear on the upcoming Sunday morning political talk shows. "She'd rather chew tin foil," said someone who's close to Mrs. Clinton. Instead, it was decided U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice would make the appearances. Ultimately, the talking points would serve two purposes: provide guidance as to what Congress could tell the public, and guide Rice for the talk shows.

One Obama administration official present for congressional briefings says the idea that the talking points were intended to hide the terrorist ties from Congress is absurd because Petraeus had already given House Intelligence Committee members full information on the suspected terrorist links.

On Sept. 14, the CIA's early version of the talking points credited the CIA with providing warnings on Sept. 10, 2012 that the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt, could come under attack and that Benghazi was in a precarious state. Others in the Obama administration saw this talking point comment as an

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., stormed out of the room and Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., says he uttered an expletive to a colleague sitting next to him. From the view of one Obama administration official who was present, "Something just snapped. [Senators] started yelling and screaming 'Why did Susan [Rice] lie?'"

"It was a turning point," said the Obama administration official. "It was just a stark shift from Sunday with no groundwork laid. [Senators] just snapped... Susan was done."

Talking points "should have been released"

In an effort to sort out who-knew-what-when, Congress asked for the talking point drafts and e-mails last November, but the Obama administration withheld them on grounds of national security and the idea that they're deliberative materials not subject to public release. Congress continued to press and Republican senators even held up administration nominations. Finally, the administration allowed limited reviews of some of the materials but did not let members of Congress, or their staff, take documents from the room or make copies.

An Obama administration source familiar with the process now says the talking points should have been handed over much sooner. "We should have released them six months ago," said the source, adding that the various federal agencies had agreed to do so but the White House counsel's office was against it. In response, a White House official told CBS News that the agencies were in agreement on not releasing the materials in November, and in later providing the limited review. "The relevant Agencies and Departments concurred with that accommodation," said the official.

Avoiding the word "terrorism"?

White House spokesman Jay Carney did not refer to the Benghazi attacks as suspected terrorism when he briefed reporters on Sept. 12, 2012. An administration official who was familiar with the messaging now says Carney should have.

Obama suspects Libya attack targeted Americans

A White House official responded saying: "It is easy to criticize and second-guess words nine months after the fact and with many more facts under our belt but the 100 pages of e-mails we released make abundantly clear that it in the immediate aftermath of the Benghazi attacks, the administration, including the CIA, was still working through understanding what happened in Benghazi, whether there were indeed protests, and who was responsible."

It wasn't just the White House spokesman who seemed to be avoiding the word "terror." Mr. Obama used the phrase "acts of terror" when speaking in the Rose Garden on Sept. 12, but not in direct reference to Benghazi. Instead, he referred to it as "an outrageous and shocking attack," "senseless violence" and "brutal attacks." He called the assailants "killers," and "attackers," but never "terrorists."

After that event in an interview with Steve Kroft of "60 Minutes," Kroft asked Mr. Obama about the verbiage.

KROFT: Mr. President, this morning you went out of your way to avoid the use of the word "terrorism" in connection with the Libya attack.

OBAMA: Right.

KROFT: Do you believe that this was a terrorist attack?

OBAMA: Well, it's too early to know exactly how this came about, what group was involved, but obviously it was an attack on Americans.

Likewise, Secretary Clinton did not call Benghazi a "terrorist act" in her speech at the ceremonial return of the bodies of Stevens and the three other victims on Sept. 12.

Clinton: Ambassador's death a "senseless act of violence"

She did quote a foreign official who called it "an ugly act of terror" but Clinton termed the event an "attack", "assault," "rage and violence... over an awful Internet video.." and referenced the terrorist attackers as "thugs," "killers," and a "mob."

A White House official said this week, "It should be surprising to no one that in a place like Benghazi and in a situation like this, perfect information was simply not available to us in the days and weeks after the attack. What matters now is not talking points - what matters is how we can prevent an incident like this from happening again."

Mistakes but not malice?

Several Obama administration officials said not using the word "terrorism" early on was not part of a conspiracy, but an "abundance of caution." They reiterate that any misjudgments or mistakes in the Benghazi response and aftermath would not have changed the outcome.

Critics nonetheless see a pattern that points to a cover up. "Incompetence and malice are not mutually exclusive," said Graham. "The storyline they chose to convey for a couple of weeks was politically the most beneficial one that could be told about Benghazi, and it's no accident that story line was chosen."

Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, said, "If not for Congress, they would still lead us to believe it was a video gone awry." [redacted]

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