

Why America Will Never Hear the Entire Benghazi Story. A Covert CIA Operation

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The underlying story of Benghazi is one that cannot and will not be talked about in any open session of Congress. This means that Thursday's hearing featuring former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was nothing but an exercise in futility.

It is the story of a covert CIA operation that was operating from a separate facility in the Benghazi compound that was simply known as the "Annex." Some two dozen CIA case officers, analysts, translators and special staff were a part of this operation and its security was provided by CIA Global Response Staff (GRS), who had [entered the country](#) under diplomatic cover.

The [CIA's mission](#) included arms interdiction — attempting to stop the flow of Soviet-era weapons to Central Africa — and very possibly the organization of Libyan arms shipments to vetted insurgent groups on the ground in Syria.



Montage including images of President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and others walking towards the podium during the transfer of remains ceremony at Joint Base Andrews, Maryland. CIA Director David Petraeus testifying before the US Senate. Ambassador Chris Stevens. Photo credit: Adapted by WhoWhatWhy from [Pete Souza / Official White House](#), [State Department / Peace Corps](#), [Medill DC / Flickr](#)

There is also evidence that the mission was working in concert with military personnel from the Joint Special Operations Group Trans-Sahara. At the time of the attack, an unarmed American surveillance drone was in flight over the territory east of Benghazi and Trans-Sahara military personnel were stationed in [the Libyan capital of Tripoli](#).

In contrast, the [State Department's](#) special diplomatic mission facility, classified as "temporary," was minimally staffed with a rotating series of State Department officers sent to and from Tripoli.

US Ambassador Christopher Stevens had not been in Benghazi for a year. When he arrived for a short stay in September 2012, only a single diplomatic officer was present there, and that officer rotated back to Tripoli upon the ambassador's arrival. Stevens was accompanied by a communications officer and a handful of Diplomatic Service Security staff. The security personnel provided protection for the ambassador during his travels and meetings in the

city. His presence was intended to be extremely low key, but it was exposed in the local media shortly after his arrival.

FRUITLESS, MEANINGLESS, POINTLESS QUESTIONING

Asking Clinton to justify maintaining the State Department temporary mission in the face of a worsening security situation is fruitless, given its actual function as a clandestine national security mission cover.

Questioning Clinton about that role would be as meaningless as questioning senior CIA personnel about operational information. Such missions cannot be publicly acknowledged or discussed, and revealing anything about them is strictly prohibited.

The same national security laws constraining State Department and CIA personnel also prevent lawmakers, other than those on select intelligence committees, from being briefed on such missions. And even those privileged individuals could not raise related questions in public — or even in closed sessions that include committee members or staff without the appropriate clearances.

In addition, querying Clinton about her involvement in the immediate response to the attacks is also pointless. The Secretary of State has no legal or operational role in a military response to a diplomatic facility attack. Only National Command Authority (president/secretary of defense) can order a foreign military intervention. The State Department does have Foreign Emergency Support Teams (FEST), composed of personnel from multiple agencies and maintained on alert to respond to crisis. But the FEST teams have no military elements and are dispatched only in the aftermath of a crisis, when the security situation allows. Following an attack their role is [damage assessment and recovery](#).

Earlier investigations have already documented that President Obama ordered a military response immediately upon word reaching Washington. They showed as well that the AFRICOM commander responded to that order right away, [directing deployment](#) of the closest military quick reaction units — units which were on station in Spain, training in Eastern Europe, or back in the United States.

There were no armed American aircraft or naval units [close enough to respond during the attack](#), those assets were in operation in Afghanistan, Iraq and around the Horn of Africa in Somalia and Yemen.

MAINTAINING A COVERT PROFILE

As for the well-equipped paramilitary operatives at the CIA station, according to their own statements, they were initially held back by the CIA station chief — as they had been in other incidents. And the station chief was, in turn, acting under his directive to let local militia groups respond. That practice was intended to maintain the station's covert profile. Unfortunately, it was not consistent with providing any real time defense for the State Department compound.

Given all of the above, it is clear why the hearing quickly turned into a game of “pin the tail on the donkey.” As Democrats have claimed all along — and some Republicans have recently admitted — the committee's work is mostly about beating up a political adversary and not at all about advancing the security of American diplomats abroad.

Larry Hancock conducts investigative and historical research in the areas of intelligence and national security. He has studied Benghazi in regard to both its covert aspects and the issues it raises for diplomatic security. That work is published in [Shadow Warfare, A History of America's Undeclared Wars](#) (Counterpoint, 2014) and his most recently published book, [Surprise Attack, from Pearl Harbor to 9/11 to Benghazi](#) (Counterpoint, Sept. 2015).

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