

Benghazi Select Committee Hearing: “Why Were We There?”

by Jerry Gordon (December 2014)



Rep. Gowdy, Chairman at Benghazi Select Committee Hearing, December 10, 2014

The Second Benghazi Select Committee Hearing on “Reviewing Efforts to Secure U.S. Diplomatic Facilities and Personnel” endeavored to see whether the Accountability Review Board’s (ARB) 29 recommendations had been implemented to secure High Threat Posts following the 9/11-12/14 Benghazi terrorist attacks. The short answer to those who viewed the proceedings was major gaps and many unanswered questions remain. Suggesting that the Department of State hasn’t remedied the situation that led to the terrorist attacks that took the lives of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, Foreign Service Information Management Aide Sean Smith and CIA security contractors, Tyrone Power and Glen Doherty.

Gowdy and Republican Members of the Select Benghazi Committee made a point of asking why were we there at all. This brought no answers from the panel of State Department representatives, Gregory B. Starr, Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security and Steve A. Linick, Inspector General. It raises the question of what former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and others in the Administration knew. Ken Timmerman, author of *Dark Forces: The Truth Behind what Happened in Benghazi* in a *Daily Caller* [op-ed](#) on this question noted Chairman Trey Gowdy’s request and response by Ranking Committee Member Elijah Cummings (D-MD):

“She [Hillary Clinton] is a witness we would like to talk to. I cannot tell you when,” said Rep. Trey Gowdy.

But Maryland Democrat Elijah Cummings poured cold water on that idea, saying “Mr. Schiff said today he could not see why she would be called, and I would agree with that,” referring to fellow Democrat, Adam Schiff.

The AP [reported](#) that the State Department has failed to release Hillary Clinton’s official papers:

The State Department has failed to turn over government documents covering Hillary Rodham Clinton’s tenure as Secretary of State that The Associated Press and others

requested under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act ahead of her presumptive presidential campaign. They include one request AP made four years ago and others pending for more than one year.

The agency already has missed deadlines it set for itself to turn over the material.

The State Department denied the AP's requests, and rejected the AP's subsequent appeals, to release the records sought quickly under a provision in the law reserved for journalists requesting federal records about especially newsworthy topics.

In mid-September, former *CBS 60 Minutes* journalist, Sharyl Attkisson [reported](#) in a *Daily Signal* article that aides had allegedly been vetting emails and documents related to Benghazi under the direction of former Near East Bureau aide, Ray Maxwell in a basement office in the State Department. Thus could the AP report and the Attkisson report be connected?

The opaque testimony of [Gregory B. Starr](#), Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomatic Security doesn't indicate that the culture at State has changed regarding shared responsibility for the more than 285 embassies, consulates, legations and the remaining 10 special facilities like Benghazi. Ken Timmerman [tweeted](#): "Greg Starr throws Chris Stevens under the bus, 'we had a little too much confidence in the chief of mission' to determine security." Further, Timmerman noted the response of Starr to a question from Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) on the trend since the Al Qaeda Attacks on the Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 that triggered an earlier ARB report, "More posts today categorized as high risk than ever" in past 35 yrs.



Gregory B. Starr
Assistant Secretary of State
Diplomatic Security

Starr is a veteran diplomatic security expert having served in multiple functions at State over a 30 year career, including a prior stint in his current post before his retirement in 2010. Subsequently, he was appointed the Under Secretary for Security at the United Nations by Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon until he was asked to return from retirement in 2013 to bolster security in the wake of the Benghazi attacks. Curiously, one of the ARB recommendations was to upgrade his position at State to that of Under Secretary to highlight commitment to enhanced security of diplomatic facilities, which we will see later, emerged in questioning by Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH). This was the second appearance by Starr before the Select Benghazi Committee.



Steve A. Linick
Inspector General
Department of State

The other panel witness was [Steve A. Linick](#), Inspector General (OIG) at State, appointed by President Obama after confirmation by a bi-partisan vote of the Senate in June 2013. State IG Linick was Inspector General at the troubled Federal Housing Administration during the 2009 financial crisis and previously was a US Department of Justice official who successfully prosecuted Contractor Procurement Fraud during the Afghanistan War for which he received an award.

You may [view](#) the Select Benghazi Hearing C-Span video and transcript:

The OIG Report Framed Issues for the Special Benghazi Committee Hearing

Linick's submitted [statement](#) drew attention to issues addressed in the Committee questions to the State Department panelists. Linick's responses were often at variances with Starr's remarks. Linick's statement noted:

OIG has issued a variety of reports covering significant security matters. I take this opportunity to highlight four areas of concern: (1) physical security deficiencies; (2) exceptions and waivers; (3) "stovepiping" of security issues within the Department; and (4) vetting of local guard forces protecting overseas facilities and personnel.

On Physical Security Deficiencies:

Recent OIG reports demonstrate that the Department is at increased risk because it lacks sufficient processes, planning, and procedures to ensure that the Department understands the security needs at posts around the world. For example, in March 2014 OIG reported in its audit on requesting and prioritizing physical security activities that the Department lacked a comprehensive list of physical security deficiencies and funding requests at overseas posts.

[...]

[A 2012 OIG report] cited security deficiencies common among the posts included the failure to meet minimum compound perimeter requirements; to properly conduct inspections of vehicles before entering posts; to maintain functioning anti-ram barriers, as required; and to install and/or maintain functioning forced entry/ballistic-resistant

doors, as required.

On Exceptions and waivers:

Exceptions and waivers granted from compliance requirements of the Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act (SECCA) or the security standards established by the Overseas Security Policy Board (OSPB) also contribute to increased security risks at posts.

OIG has found conditions of non-compliance with security standards for which posts had not sought exceptions or waivers. A common example is the use of warehouse space for offices.

Under the Department's security rules, office space must meet more stringent physical security standards than warehouse space. Department employees who work in warehouse spaces, which do not meet required physical security standards for offices are at risk. OIG also found that a number of overseas posts had not maintained accurate exception and waiver records.

On Stovepiping on Security Issues:

The Department also is at increased risk regarding security because it stovepipes or segregates relevant DS responsibilities. DS is the entity responsible for establishing standards and for keeping staff and facilities safe. A different Department bureau, the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO), is responsible for construction and maintenance of Department facilities overseas. Although DS and OBO share responsibility for ensuring that posts' physical security needs are addressed, adequate coordination between the bureaus is lacking.

In OIG's 2014 inspection of DS' HTP Directorate, OIG found that OBO's lack of a formal mechanism to expeditiously address urgent needs of high-threat posts served as an obstacle to the Directorate's work of supporting those needs.

On Issues with Vetting Local Guard Forces:

DS oversees local guard forces that are a critical part of security at Department missions overseas. They typically are outside, or just inside, the perimeter of embassy compounds and are often responsible for searching individuals and vehicles entering posts. OIG conducted an audit of the DS local guard program to determine whether security contractors had complied with contract requirements for vetting the suitability of local

guards at posts overseas and whether RSOs had performed adequate oversight of the local guard vetting process.

OIG found in its June 2014 report that none of the six security contractors reviewed by OIG fully performed the vetting procedures specified. Inadequate oversight of local guard vetting processes places missions and personnel at heightened risk. One bad actor—with the right position and access—can seriously endanger the safety and security of our personnel overseas.

The Hearing Testimony Revelations

A Twitter Rally using hashtag [# Benghazi Truth Matters](#) was organized by the National Security Task Force of the Lisa Benson Show to parallel the testimony broadcast live on C-SPAN Channel 3. Upwards of 50 members of the NSTF were involved on a conference call hookup to provide a running commentary from the Select Benghazi Committee Hearing on the proceedings to aid in developing tweets and retweets. The Lisa Benson Show had produced five programs on the Benghazi terror attacks with guests, Ken Timmerman, Col. Dick Brauer of Special Operations Speaks and Kris “Tanto” Paronto one of the CIA security contractor team that fought terrorists in Benghazi on 9/11-12/2012. Paronto and Global Regional Staff team members were featured in the Fox News Special Report and book, [13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened in Benghazi](#). Listen to this [interview](#) with Paronto on The Lisa Benson Show.

Both Majority and Minority Committee members were afforded the opportunity to question the Department of State panel on these issues. Noteworthy by their pursuit of tough questions were Republican Members Jim Jordan (OH), Martha Roby (AL) and Peter Roskam (IL). Minority Members Adam Smith (WA) and Adam Schiff (CA) tended to express support of State and Administration positions. Ranking Minority Member Elijah Cummings (MD) posed pointed questions. However, both he and Democratic minority colleague Schiff objected to possible calls for former Secretary Hillary Clinton to testify. It was left to Chairman Gowdy at the conclusion to pose the broader question of who was responsible for setting policies that led to loss of four Americans in the Benghazi terrorist attacks.

Rep. Jordan cited 200 incidents and the assassination attempt on the British Ambassador in Benghazi as evidence of the serious threat to the temporary mission facility. He asked Starr pointedly in light of that why his post wasn’t upgraded in line with the other six Under Secretary positions such as Public Diplomacy to have access to Secretary Kerry. Starr replied that notwithstanding the ARB recommendation that he had access to Kerry. Benson of the NSTF texted, “such a minimal appointment for such an important job.” Jordan noted that both Linick

and former State and Department Homeland Security official Todd Keil had approved of the upgrade in prior Select Benghazi Committee testimony.

Ranking Member Cummings questioned Starr on staffing and dual waiver exemptions. Starr outlined some changes including fire rescue equipment. When asked if the Department culture had changed, Starr responded that he believed the Department had bought into the shared responsibility for 30 high threat risk posts. Cummings later returned to query Starr about vetting of local perimeter security such as the Benghazi Eclipse subcontractor to Blue Mountain in Benghazi. Starr indicated that some host countries objected to such vetting, and that DS Security endeavored to find work-arounds. Linick when asked demurred that the vetting issue had been resolved.

Roby of Alabama questioned Starr about the upgrading of Marine Security Detachments at diplomatic posts under ARB recommendation 11. Starr noted that only 40 percent of Marine Security Guard teams had been assigned to high risk posts. Starr noted that 9 posts did not have Marine Guards because of host country objections. State had to rely on Department Security and contractors. Four posts were still in danger without Marine Guards. Starr said they were trying to augment with mobile teams. Timmerman in his *Daily Caller* op-ed [noted](#) that Starr got his facts wrong about the Site Security Team (SST) assigned to Ambassador Stevens in Libya being "static." Ambassador Stevens had frequenting gone jogging with the Tripoli Embassy 16 man US Army Special Forces SST members who "normally accompanied him everywhere." Linick reinforced the OIG audits finding there was no adequate vetting of local security contractors. Allowing guards without vetting he said constituted a security threat.

Minority member Adam Schiff then rose the matter of the whether the trend of terrorism threats had worsened, to which Starr responded that it had in high risk posts. He cited a litany of multiple attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan including bombings, RPG and IED attacks against motorcades. He indicated it had gone up significantly since the Al Qaeda attacks on the East African Embassies in 1998. Starr acknowledged that many temporary posts were manned at high risk and not without costs. That led to the discussion of how State was filling those posts from the ranks of existing Foreign Service personnel and even retirees. A twitter comment from Timmerman, said, "AQ defeated? State dept now asks more & more [diplomats] to do 2 year tours without families at high risk posts, says asst/sec Greg Starr." Schiff also rose to defense of former Secretary Hillary Clinton, suggesting that there was no need for her to testify.

Rep. Peter Roskam vigorously pursued the matter of waiver/exceptions from national security requirements under ARB recommendations 13. He noted that the State Department criticized the ARB position. He asked Starr if the risks were high "why were we there in Benghazi?" To which

Starr said we have to assume reasonable risks. Roskam rebutted that it doesn't square with mitigation of high threat risks and the alleged inability to establish physical setbacks as a deterrent in the case of attacks.

Chairman Gowdy hammered at the Committee majority mantra, "why we were there in Benghazi?" He cited an email written by Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes a few days following the attack in which Rhodes says that "the US was doing everything to protect diplomatic posts under a broad policy." Gowdy asked who within State should answer those questions, to which Starr said [Anne W. Patterson](#), Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs. The irony is striking because Patterson was Ambassador to Egypt at the time of the Benghazi attack, when Muslim Brotherhood jihadists had penetrated the compound in Cairo in a protest [organized](#) by the brother of AQ leader Ayman al Zawahiri. Gowdy then noted that the 1999 ARB following the deadly attacks on the East African Embassies proposed shutting down high risk unprotected posts. He illustrated that in the Benghazi case Ambassador Stevens had filed several "pleadingly plaintive" requests for additional security, including one in August 2012 for a machine gun to be placed on the roof of the temporary mission facility. He queried Starr as to who denied the request, a rhetorical question noting that Assistant Secretary Charlene Lamb rejected that request and others for additional DSS team support. Starr was then asked what DS support the Ambassador had that night. Starr responded saying that Ambassador Stevens usually traveled with at least two DS personnel and that there may have been five aides with him on the night of 9/11/2012. Starr alleged that the Army Special Forces SST had been replaced by a mobile team of DS officers. Gowdy then asked did Stevens go over Lamb's head to the Secretary. Starr said there was a dissent channel that the Ambassador might have availed himself of to seek resolution of the security requests. Gowdy concluded with a question of "what weighing and balancing" took place at the highest echelons of State and perhaps at the White House that countenanced putting the Ambassador at risk.

Stay tuned for further developments.

Also see Jerry Gordon's collection of interviews,