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The Benghazi Talking Points

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Even as the White House strove last week to move beyond questions about the Benghazi attacks of Tuesday, September 11, 2012, fresh evidence emerged that senior Obama administration officials knowingly misled the country about what had happened in the days following the assaults. The Weekly Standard has obtained a timeline briefed by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence detailing the heavy substantive revisions made to the CIA's talking points, just six weeks before the 2012 presidential election, and additional information about why the changes were made and by whom.

As intelligence officials pieced together the puzzle of events unfolding in Libya, they concluded even before the assaults had ended that al Qaeda-linked terrorists were involved. Senior administration officials, however, sought to obscure the emerging picture and downplay the significance of attacks that killed a U.S. ambassador and three other Americans. The frantic process that produced the changes to the talking points took place over a 24-hour period just one day before Susan Rice, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, made her now-famous appearances on the Sunday television talk shows. The discussions involved senior officials from the State Department, the National Security Council, the CIA, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the White House.

The exchange of emails is laid out in a 43-page report from the chairmen of five committees in the House of Representatives. Although the investigation was conducted by Republicans, leading some reporters and commentators to dismiss it, the report quotes directly from emails between top administration and intelligence officials, and it includes footnotes indicating the times the messages were sent. In some cases, the report did not provide the names of the senders, but The Weekly Standard has confirmed the identities of the authors of two critical emails—one indicating the main reason for the changes and the other announcing that the talking points would receive their final substantive rewrite at a meeting of top administration officials on Saturday, September 15.

The White House provided the emails to members of the House and Senate intelligence committees for a limited time and with the stipulation that the documents were available for review only and would not be turned over to the committees. The White House and committee leadership agreed to that arrangement as part of a deal that would keep Republican senators from blocking the confirmation of John Brennan, the president's choice to run the CIA. If the House report provides an accurate and complete depiction of the emails, it is clear that senior administration officials engaged in a wholesale rewriting of intelligence assessments about Benghazi in order to mislead the public. The Weekly Standard sought comment from officials at the White House, the State Department, and the CIA, but received none by press time. Within hours of the initial attack on the U.S. facility, the State Department Operations Center sent out two alerts. The first, at 4:05 p.m. (all times are Eastern Daylight Time), indicated that the compound was under attack; the second, at 6:08 p.m., indicated that Ansar al Sharia, an al Qaeda-linked terrorist group operating in Libya, had claimed credit for the attack. According to the House report, these alerts were circulated widely inside the government, including at the highest levels. The fighting in Benghazi continued for another several hours, so top Obama administration officials were told even as the fighting was taking place that U.S. diplomats and intelligence operatives were likely being attacked by al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists. A cable sent the following day, September 12, by the CIA station chief in Libya, reported that eyewitnesses confirmed the participation of Islamic militants and made clear that U.S. facilities in Benghazi had come under terrorist attack. It was this fact, along with several others, that top Obama officials would work so hard to obscure.

After a briefing on Capitol Hill by CIA director David Petraeus, Democrat Dutch Ruppersburger, the ranking member of the

House Intelligence Committee, asked the intelligence community for unclassified guidance on what members of Congress could say in their public comments on the attacks. The CIA's Office of Terrorism Analysis prepared the first draft of a response to the congressman, which was distributed internally for comment at 11:15 a.m. on Friday, September 14 (Version 1 at right). This initial CIA draft included the assertion that the U.S. government "know[s] that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda participated in the attack." That draft also noted that press reports "linked the attack to Ansar al Sharia. The group has since released a statement that its leadership did not order the attacks, but did not deny that some of its members were involved." Ansar al Sharia, the CIA draft continued, aims to spread sharia law in Libya and "emphasizes the need for jihad." The agency draft also raised the prospect that the facilities had been the subject of jihadist surveillance and offered a reminder that in the previous six months there had been "at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy."

After the internal distribution, CIA officials amended that draft to include more information about the jihadist threat in both Egypt and Libya. "On 10 September we warned of social media reports calling for a demonstration in front of the [Cairo] Embassy and that jihadists were threatening to break into the Embassy," the agency had added by late afternoon. And: "The Agency has produced numerous pieces on the threat of extremists linked to al Qaeda in Benghazi and Libya." But elsewhere, CIA officials pulled back. The reference to "Islamic extremists" no longer specified "Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda," and the initial reference to "attacks" in Benghazi was changed to "demonstrations."

The talking points were first distributed to officials in the interagency vetting process at 6:52 p.m. on Friday. Less than an hour later, at 7:39 p.m., an individual identified in the House report only as a "senior State Department official" responded to raise "serious concerns" about the draft. That official, whom The Weekly Standard has confirmed was State Department spokesman Victoria Nuland, worried that members of Congress would use the talking points to criticize the State Department for "not paying attention to Agency warnings."

In an attempt to address those concerns, CIA officials cut all references to Ansar al Sharia and made minor tweaks. But in a follow-up email at 9:24 p.m., Nuland wrote that the problem remained and that her superiors—she did not say which ones—were unhappy. The changes, she wrote, did not "resolve all my issues or those of my building leadership," and State Department leadership was contacting National Security Council officials directly. Moments later, according to the House report, "White House officials responded by stating that the State Department's concerns would have to be taken into account." One official—Ben Rhodes, The Weekly Standard is told, a top adviser to President Obama on national security and foreign policy—further advised the group that the issues would be resolved in a meeting of top administration officials the following morning at the White House.

Version 1:**Friday, September 14, 2012****11:15 a.m.**

- We believe based on currently available information that the attacks in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. Consulate and subsequently its annex.
- The crowd almost certainly was a mix of individuals from across many sectors of Libyan society. That being said, we do know that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qa'ida participated in the attack.
- Initial press reporting linked the attack to Ansar al-Sharia. The group has since released a statement that its leadership did not order the attacks, but did not deny that some of its members were involved. Ansar al Sharia's Facebook page aims to spread Sharia in Libya and emphasizes the need for jihad to counter what it views as false interpretations of Islam, according to an open source study.
- The wide availability of weapons and experienced fighters in Libya almost certainly contributed to the lethality of the attacks.
- Since April, there have been at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy. We cannot rule out the individuals has [sic] previously surveilled the U.S. facilities, also contributing to the efficacy of the attacks.
- We are working w/Libyan authorities and intelligence partners in an effort to help bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of US citizens.

Version 2:**Saturday, September 15, 2012****9:45 a.m.**

- The currently available information suggests that the demonstrations in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. Consulate and subsequently its annex. This assessment may change as additional information is collected and analyzed and currently available information continues to be evaluated. ~~On 10 September the Agency notified Embassy Cairo of social media reports calling for a demonstration and encouraging jihadists to break into the Embassy.~~
- ~~The investigation is ongoing as to who is responsible for the violence, although the crowd almost certainly was a mix of individuals. That being said, there are indications that Islamic extremists participated in the violent demonstrations.~~
- ~~The wide availability of weapons and experienced fighters in Libya almost certainly contributed to the lethality of the attacks.~~
- ~~The Agency has produced numerous pieces on the threat of extremists linked to al Qa'ida in Benghazi and eastern Libya. Since April, there have been at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy. We~~

There is little information about what happened at that meeting of the Deputies Committee. But according to two officials with knowledge of the process, Mike Morrell, deputy director of the CIA, made broad changes to the draft afterwards. Morrell cut all or parts of four paragraphs of the six-paragraph talking points—148 of its 248 words (see Version 2 above). Gone were the reference to “Islamic extremists,” the reminders of agency warnings about al Qaeda in Libya, the reference to “jihadists” in Cairo, the mention of possible surveillance of the facility in Benghazi, and the report of five previous attacks on foreign interests.

What remained—and would be included in the final version of the talking points—was mostly boilerplate about ongoing investigations and working with the Libyan government, together with bland language suggesting that the “violent demonstrations”—no longer “attacks”—were spontaneous responses to protests in Egypt and may have included generic “extremists” (see Version 3 above).

If the story of what happened in Benghazi was dramatically stripped down from the first draft of the CIA’s talking points to the version that emerged after the Deputies Committee meeting, the narrative would soon be built up again. In ensuing days, administration officials emphasized a “demonstration” in front of the U.S. facility in Benghazi and claimed that the demonstrators were provoked by a YouTube video. The CIA had softened “attack” to “demonstration.” But as soon became clear, there had been no demonstration in Benghazi.

More troubling was the YouTube video. Rice would spend much time on the Sunday talk shows pointing to this video as the trigger of the chaos in Benghazi. “What sparked the violence was a very hateful video on the Internet. It was a reaction to a video that had nothing to do with the United States.” There is no mention of any “video” in any of the many drafts of the talking points.

Still, top Obama officials would point to the video to explain Benghazi. President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton even denounced the video in a sort of diplomatic public service announcement in Pakistan. In a speech at the United Nations on September 25, the president mentioned the video several times in connection with Benghazi.

On September 17, the day after Rice appeared on the Sunday shows, Nuland defended Rice’s performance during the daily briefing at the State Department. “What I will say, though, is that Ambassador Rice, in her comments on every network over the weekend, was very clear, very precise, about what our initial assessment of what happened is. And this was not just her assessment, it was also an assessment you’ve heard in comments coming from the intelligence community, in comments coming from the White House.”

It was a preview of the administration’s defense of its claims on Benghazi. After pushing the intelligence community to revise its talking points to fit the administration’s preferred narrative, administration officials would point fingers at the intelligence community when parts of that narrative were shown to be misleading or simply untrue.

And at times, members of the intelligence community appeared eager to help. On September 28, a statement from ODNI seemed designed to quiet the growing furor over the administration’s explanations of Benghazi. “In the immediate aftermath, there was information that led us to assess that the attack began spontaneously following protests earlier that day at our embassy in Cairo. We provided that initial assessment to Executive Branch officials and members of Congress, who used that information to discuss the attack publicly and provide updates as they became available.”

The statement continued: “As we learned more about the attack, we revised our initial assessment to reflect new information indicating that it was a deliberate and organized attack carried out by extremists. It remains unclear if any group or person exercised overall command and control of the attack, and if extremist group leaders directed their members to participate. However, we do assess that some of those involved were linked to groups affiliated with, or sympathetic to al Qaeda.”

The statement strongly implies that the information about al Qaeda-linked terrorists was new, a revision of the initial assessment. But it wasn’t. Indeed, the original assessment stated, without qualification, “we do know that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda participated in the attack.”

The statement from the ODNI came not from James Clapper, the director of national intelligence, but from his spokesman, Shawn Turner. When the statement was released, current and former intelligence officials told The Weekly Standard that they found the statement itself odd and the fact that it didn’t come from Clapper stranger still. Clapper was traveling when he was first shown a draft of the statement to go out under his name. It is not an accident that it didn’t.

The revelations about exactly how the talking points were written, revised, and then embellished come amid renewed scrutiny of the administration’s handling of Benghazi. Fox News spoke to a Special Ops soldier last week who raised new questions about what happened during the attack, and the State Department’s inspector general acknowledged that the office would be investigating the production of the Administrative Review Board report on the attacks because of concerns that investigators did not speak to a broad spectrum of individuals with knowledge of the attack and its aftermath. On May 8, the House Oversight and Government Reform committee will hold another hearing on the matter. And Republicans in Congress have asked the administration to release all of the emails, something that would further clarify how the changes came about.

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