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From: Mills, Cheryl D [mailto:MillsCD@state.gov]
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From: Caitlin Klevorick [mailto:[REDACTED]]
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To: Reines, Philippe I; Sullivan, Jacob J; Mills, Cheryl D; Rich Verma-personal [REDACTED]
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Hillary and Libya

November 16, 2012

Wall Street Journal

David Petraeus told Congress Friday in closed hearings that the CIA believed from the start that the September 11 attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi were by terrorists. That leaves one VIP who's still missing from Congressional scrutiny: Hillary Clinton.

GOP Congressman Peter King said Mr. Petraeus's testimony differed from what the former CIA director told Congress immediately after the attacks. Mr. King also said Mr. Petraeus said that the CIA's original talking points on the attacks were edited. The altered version became the basis for U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice's misleading and now infamous comments blaming the attacks on a YouTube video. Both that discrepancy and the issue of the altered talking points need further digging, especially if Ms. Rice is nominated to be the next Secretary of State.

But Mr. Petraeus wasn't responsible for lax consulate security or the U.S. policy that led to the Libya debacle. That's Mrs. Clinton's bailiwick. Last month in interviews from deepest Peru, the Secretary of State said "I take responsibility" for Benghazi.

Except she hasn't. She was conveniently out of the country for this week's House Foreign Affairs hearing, and Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry refuses to hold any hearings on Benghazi. His loyalty may get him a cabinet job, while Carl Levin's Armed Services Committee also pretends nothing much happened in Libya.

The targets of the attacks and its first victims were diplomats. Chris Stevens died of smoke inhalation in the blaze, becoming the first American ambassador killed in the line of duty in over 30 years. A junior colleague also died. These men were Mrs. Clinton's "responsibility." Several hours after the assault on the consulate, members of the jihadist militia Ansar al-Shariah turned on the CIA compound about a mile away, killing two of Mr. Petraeus's men.

In Congressional hearings last month, career State officials admitted that threat warnings from Benghazi were overlooked and requests for better security turned down. They said Foggy Bottom misjudged the ability of a weak Libyan state to protect them. It's not clear how high up the chain these concerns went, but over to you, Mrs. Clinton.

For over a week after the attacks, the Administration blamed the YouTube video. Mrs. Clinton didn't push this misleading narrative in public as enthusiastically as Ms. Rice. Still, she bought into it. The father of Tyrone Woods, a CIA contractor who was killed in Benghazi, told media outlets last month that Mrs. Clinton tried to comfort him by promising that the U.S.-based maker of the video would be "prosecuted and arrested"—though terrorists killed his son.

Beyond the Benghazi attacks is the larger issue of the Administration's Libya policy, a failure that Mrs. Clinton should also answer for. At the start of the Libya uprising, Washington hid behind the U.N. Security Council to resist calls for intervention. Mrs. Clinton's department then made the mistake of agreeing to a U.N. arms embargo on both the Gadhafi regime and the rebels. This blunder forced the rebels to look elsewhere for weapons and cash, particularly Gulf states like Qatar that favored Islamist militias.

As Gadhafi's forces were about to overrun Benghazi in March, the Arab League, Britain and France called for military intervention. Only after the Security Council gave the green light—when Russia abstained—did NATO launch air strikes. American cruise missiles and bombers led the way, but ~~on April 7~~ President Obama pulled the U.S. out of a leadership combat role.

The U.S. also waited until July to recognize the Benghazi rebel opposition as "the legitimate governing authority," after Luxembourg and 25 other countries had already done so. The war lasted until October, much longer than necessary.

American disengagement continued after Gadhafi fell. Though rich in oil, Libya's well-intentioned new leaders needed advice and encouragement to build a functioning state. The most pressing need was to rein in the anti-Gadhafi militias and stand up a national army. But the U.S. was reluctant to follow up with aid or know-how. (See our December 24, 2011 editorial, "MIA on the Shores of Tripoli.") Qatar and the United Arab Emirates stepped in with money and weapons, again favoring Islamist groups.

The Libyan people nonetheless voted in elections this summer for secular, pro-Western leaders. Yet the government has limited powers and lacks a proper army. The militias have stepped into the vacuum, while al Qaeda-style training camps proliferate in the hills around Benghazi.

This abdication is the backdrop to what happened on September 11. The large CIA outpost in Benghazi was supposed to monitor jihadists and work with State to round up thousands of mobile surface-to-air missiles in Libya. Yet it turns out that it's hard to fight terrorists on the ground with drones from remote bases. Without a functioning government or broader U.S. aid, a small Islamist militia was able to target foreign diplomats and eventually lay siege to the U.S. compound. The CIA closed its entire Benghazi shop that very morning—an abject retreat.

For weeks, the Administration has tried to shift blame for Benghazi to the "intelligence community." Mr. Petraeus's fall makes him an easy scapegoat, even as Mrs. Clinton takes a valedictory lap at State and sets her sights on a 2016 Presidential run.

But U.S. Libya policy has been her handiwork, and with the exception of the fall of Gadhafi it is a notable failure. Mrs. Clinton is also a main architect of U.S. policy in Syria, which continues to descend into disorder that may engulf the region. She shouldn't get a free pass from Congress.