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Susan Rice Did Her Job – and Repeated What Intelligence Community Told Her

By Lanny J. Davis

<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/11/19/susan-rice-did-her-job-and-repeated-what-intelligence-community-told-her/>

<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/lanny-davis/268795-susan-rice-repeated-what-intelligence-community-told-her>

When U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice appeared on the morning talk shows on Sunday, Sept. 16, she did so because the White House asked her to — to discuss not only the tragic events of Sept. 11 in Benghazi, Libya, leading to the loss of four American lives, but also the topic of Israel’s concerns about Iran’s nearness to nuclear capability and the spread of violent protests in the Muslim world triggered by the infamous anti-Islam video.

She has been accused of intentionally misleading the American people on these programs. The facts prove otherwise: The ambassador faithfully repeated the “talking points” drafted by the intelligence community and given to her prior to her TV appearances. These same talking points on which she relied had been approved by then-CIA Director David Petraeus and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper.

Here is the text of the talking points made public last Friday by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.):

“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. diplomatic post in Benghazi and subsequently its annex. There are indications that extremists participated in the violent demonstrations.”

Despite all the speculative and somewhat overheated chatter over the weekend about the White House “changing” the CIA-written talking points, in fact the only change was technical and non-substantive — the word “consulate” was replaced by the words “U.S. diplomatic post,” since there was no formal “consulate” (an official State Department office) established in Benghazi at that time.

Now let’s compare the keywords highlighted here to what Ambassador Rice said on the Sunday shows on Sept. 16.

— Ambassador Rice used the same caveats regarding uncertainty of information at that time: “our current best assessment, based on the information that we have at present” (ABC “This Week”); “the best information we

have at present ... our current assessment ... there's an FBI investigation which is ongoing" (NBC's "Meet the Press");

— the same reference to Cairo-linked "spontaneous" protests: "a spontaneous ... response to what had transpired in Cairo" ("This Week");

— the "evolution" into a violent assault by "extremists": "that [protest] ... seems to have been hijacked, let us say, by some individual clusters of extremists who came with heavier weapons ... and it evolved from there." ("This Week"); "what we think then transpired ... is that opportunistic extremist elements came to the consulate as this was unfolding ... And that spun from there into something much more violent." ("Meet the Press");

— the possibility of al Qaeda's involvement: "Well, we'll have to find out ... it's clear that there were extremist elements that joined in and escalated the violence. Whether they were al Qaeda affiliates, whether they were Libyan-based extremists or al Qaeda itself I think is one of the things we'll have to determine";

— whether the incident leading to the loss of four American lives was "preplanned": Ambassador Rice never denied that the incident was planned. All she said was that "we do not have information at present that leads us to conclude that this was premeditated or preplanned." This was entirely consistent with a memo from the National Counterterrorist Center on Sept. 14, two days before her TV appearances: "[W]e are not aware of any actionable intelligence that this attack was planned or imminent."

Was the incident an act of terror? Ambassador Rice never denied that what had occurred in Benghazi was an act of terror. The suggestion that the ambassador, during her TV appearances, had made a distinction between "violence using heavy weapons," which she specifically said might have involved al Qaeda, and the attack being an "act of terror" is false.

I have the greatest respect for Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) and Rep. Pete King (R-N.Y.), chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee. They have doubts about whether Rice intentionally misled the country as part of some political agenda during the presidential campaign. They are, respectfully, simply wrong, based on the facts.

In sum, there are two facts that are clear and indisputable: 1) Ambassador Rice spoke accurately on these Sunday shows from talking points provided to her by the CIA; and therefore, 2) she did not intentionally mislead anyone.

That is the truth — and whatever else comes out of this terrible tragedy, the importance of facts and truth should not be another casualty.

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Davis, the principal in the Washington law firm of Lanny J. Davis & Associates, which specializes in legal crisis management, served as President Clinton's special counsel (1996-98) and as a member of President George W. Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board (2006-07). He currently serves as special counsel to Dilworth Paxson and is a partner with former Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele in Purple Nation Solutions, a public affairs-strategic communications company. He is the author of the forthcoming book Crisis Tales – Five Rules for Handling Scandal in Business, Politics and Life, to be published by Simon & Schuster. He can be followed on Twitter @LannyDavis.