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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

In Libya and Elsewhere, Our Diplomats Deserve Better

By PRUDENCE BUSHNELL

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Falls Church, Va.

THERE is a black wall in a State Department lobby inscribed with the names of those who died while serving overseas. Every time I passed that wall after Al Qaeda blew up two American Embassies in East Africa in 1998, I thought of the 12 American and 32 Kenyan friends and colleagues who died on my watch as ambassador. I thought of my own journey that day down flights of stairs in the building next door to the embassy, after having been knocked out by the blast, of the people who risked their lives to save others, and of how we carried on under horrendous circumstances.

Now every time I pass the black marble wall, I will think of Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and his colleagues who died after an attack on our consulate in Benghazi, Libya, this week.

Diplomats don't often make headlines until something horrible happens. Even then, it is policy and politics that get the attention. We had barely learned of the attack before talking heads began to expound on Middle East policies and the words administration officials used, or should have used, to uphold our national dignity. Where were the conversations about the diplomats who were actually carrying out those policies in faraway, often dangerous places, the people who take care of us despite the hardship and risk? Imagine what it must have been like trying to escape the raging fire in the Benghazi consulate or enduring hours of assault in the nearby annex waiting for relief from the Libyan government.

Diplomacy is a dangerous profession. You cannot exert influence by whispering in diplomatic code to your government counterparts behind closed doors. You do not spread American values - especially in places where passions are high, governments fragile and guns plentiful - by remote control from Washington. You have to get out from behind the walls and engage with people. We know this can put us in harm's way; our people in the Benghazi consulate knew it. And they did their jobs anyway.

That is because, hokey as it sounds, the people who represent us overseas really do believe they can make a difference. They confront violent behavior and strong passions with American leadership, smart power and peaceful means. We must make that work safer. The reasons for violence change with time and place but the human effects are the same. For two years before we were blown up in Nairobi, Kenya, my team and I fought ("nagged" was the word State Department colleagues used) to have security threats and vulnerabilities addressed. We were too close to the street, an easy target. Washington's assessment was that things were O.K. Anyway, I was told, there was no money for a more secure embassy. What was Washington's assessment of our consulate in Benghazi? We may not like the image of American diplomats working out of fortified boxes, but we cannot let them work in buildings that can be overrun by attackers. This is a lesson our government still hasn't learned since 1979 in Tehran.

If the Benghazi tragedy traces the same journey we made from the rubble in Nairobi, heartfelt pronouncements will be made; the dead will be given due homage and then they will be buried. The press will alight on other stories. A Congressionally mandated accountability review board will determine what happened and what needs to be done to

avoid such tragedies in the future. Easy fixes - changes to emergency action plans, minor security upgrades - will be made; expensive and hard ones will not.

The Foreign Service is short on people, and those people are rushed into the field short on training. We build concrete fortresses when we have to, but we don't invest in the mobile communications and security technology that would protect diplomats when they leave the embassy, as they must. What kinds of technology, systems, training and deployment do we need to get results through diplomacy in the 21st century? These are the difficult questions that will remain unanswered, while diplomats disappear from public view once again. Until the next time someone dies - then we see the same sorry response all over again.

But we can give meaning to this tragedy. What if President Obama and Mitt Romney exercised true leadership by explaining to Americans, including the families and friends of those who died in Benghazi, what diplomacy is all about? Why using words and deeds for peace is as important as using weapons. Why we value our diplomats and what we will do to make their jobs easier, if we cannot guarantee their absolute security.

It is a stretch, I know. Far easier to add some more concrete, declare our responsibilities to diplomats complete and move back to the fun stuff of making and debating policy, most of it domestic. The black wall will continue to accumulate names, diplomats will continue to represent our country on the cheap and nothing much will change. Like that scenario? If not, start demanding leadership. That is what Chris Stevens and his team were providing. Let's think about them and reciprocate.

Prudence Bushnell is a former United States ambassador to Kenya and Guatemala