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From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
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To: H
Subject: FW: Make Up Turned Break Up

From: Nora Toiv [mailto:]
Sent: Wednesday, November 28, 2012 9:06 AM
To: Mills, Cheryl D
Subject: Make Up Turned Break Up



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Make Up Turned Break Up

By MAUREEN DOWD

WASHINGTON

Are the Republican senators unreasonable? Or is the secretary of state-manqué undiplomatic? Did the senators sandbag Susan Rice? Or did Rice further inflame a tense situation? Is it a case of shooting the messenger and playing politics? Or is national security dangerously infected with politics?

It seems as if it would have been simple enough for Rice to quickly admit that the administration talking points she used on the Sept. 16 Sunday shows about the slaughter in Benghazi were misleading. But she went silent. She has no wartime consigliere and, aside from the president's angry postelection defense of Rice, the White House — perhaps relieved that she was taking the heat rather than the president — wasn't running a strong damage control operation that clarified matters.

Still, on last Sunday's talk shows, John McCain and Lindsey Graham softened their tone a bit. "She's not the problem," McCain said. "The problem is the president of the United States," for failing to swiftly tell Americans what his intelligence agencies had confirmed: that Benghazi was a terrorist attack involving Al Qaeda affiliates.

When Rice asked to come to the Hill to meet with some of her Republican critics, it seemed détente was nigh. But somehow the hour-and-a-half powwow caused an escalation, with McCain, Graham and Senator Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire emerging to say they had more reservations than before. Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, who's scheduled to meet with Rice on Wednesday, suggested that she would be better suited to run the Democratic National Committee than State. If Rice can't soothe the egos of some cranky G.O.P. pols, how would she negotiate with China?

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Senator Susan Collins of Maine, the soft-spoken ranking member on the homeland security committee, hasn't been part of this shrill debate. Though they had met only once or twice, Collins agreed to introduce Rice to the Foreign Relations Committee in 2009 when Rice was nominated as the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Rice's grandparents immigrated from Jamaica to Portland, Maine.

"I don't bear any animus to her at all," the senator said. "In fact, to the contrary."

But she said she is "troubled" by Rice's role. "If I wanted to be secretary of state," Collins observed, "I would not go on television and perform what was essentially a political role."

Collins drew up a list of questions to ask Rice at their one-on-one hourlong meeting slated for Wednesday. She wants Rice to explain how she could promote a story "with such certitude" about a spontaneous demonstration over the anti-Muslim video that was so at odds with the classified information to which the ambassador had access. (It was also at odds with common sense, given that there were Al Qaeda sympathizers among the rebel army members that overthrew Muammar el-Qaddafi with help from the U.S. — an intervention advocated by Rice — and Islamic extremist training camps in the Benghazi area.)

The F.B.I. interviewed survivors of the attack in Germany and, according to some senators, had done most of the interviews of those on site by Sept. 15, the day before Rice went on TV, and established that there was no protest. Collins wants to learn if the F.B.I. had failed to communicate that, or if they had communicated it and Rice went ahead anyway?

When Rice heard the president of the Libyan National Congress tell Bob Schieffer on "Face the Nation," right before her appearance, that 50 people had been arrested who were either foreign or affiliated with or sympathized with Al Qaeda, why did she push back with the video story? "Why wouldn't she think what the Libyan president said mattered?" Collins wondered.

Why did Rice say on ABC News's "This Week," that "two of the four Americans who were killed were there providing security"? Rice was referring to the two ex-Navy SEAL team members who were C.I.A. security officers working on a base about a mile away. "They weren't there to protect Ambassador Stevens," Collins said. "That wasn't their job."

Rice also said that "we had a substantial security presence with our personnel" — which was clearly not the case. Collins wants to know Rice's basis for saying on ABC that the attacks were "a direct result of a heinous and offensive video." And why did she say "a small number of people" came to the consulate to protest, when that phrase is not in her talking points? Collins is curious why Rice is not angrier, if, as she insists, she was repeating what she was told. "I'd be furious at the White House and F.B.I. and intelligence community for destroying my credibility," the senator said.

Collins said that before she would support Rice for secretary of state, she needs to ascertain what was really going on. "Did they think admitting that it was an Al Qaeda attack would destroy the narrative of Libya being a big success story?" Collins asked. As one of the administration champions of intervening in Libya, Rice was surely rooting for that success story herself.



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