

Hillary Pitches a Benghazi Shutout (Wall Street Journal Editorial)

'What difference, at this point, does it make?'

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

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In five hours of Congressional testimony Wednesday, Hillary Clinton took "responsibility" for the mishandling of the terrorist attacks on U.S. diplomats in Benghazi without ever saying she was responsible for much of anything. If nothing else, it was bravura blame-avoidance.

Though hailed as a tireless Secretary of State, Mrs. Clinton blamed the "failure" to ensure security at the diplomatic mission on "the assistant secretary level or below." She said she wasn't aware of the cables from the late Ambassador Chris Stevens about deteriorating security. Nor about her department's refusal for security reinforcements: "It was not brought to my attention."

Mrs. Clinton did stay at State that evening to oversee the response to the anti-American protests in Cairo and later in Benghazi and stayed in phone contact with other officials. But she phoned President Obama only "later in the evening," she said. The attack in Libya began after 3 p.m. Washington time and the standoff there and at a nearby CIA annex lasted another seven hours. No military help came. Mr. Stevens and three other Americans were murdered.

Mrs. Clinton also said she wasn't responsible for the "talking points" about Benghazi given to White House briefers. She didn't walk point for the Administration on the TV shows that September Sunday because it is not her "favorite thing to do." The hearing's dramatic high point came when Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson wouldn't take this know-nothing line for an answer and pressed why it took the Administration so long to say it was a terrorist strike. "What difference, at this point, does it make?" she shot back.

Sorry, Ma'am. At this point, or at any point, it matters when Administrations mislead Americans.

Back on message, Mrs. Clinton said she wasn't responsible for the security vacuum in Libya after Gadhafi's fall that was filled by Islamists. She blamed Congress for not providing enough aid.

Mrs. Clinton is a short-timer at State, so her main goal is to escape the Benghazi debacle without permanent wounds. Her adoring press will make sure of that. But she does have a political future to think about, so it was fascinating to see her sound like Dick Cheney as she called on Congress and the Administration to get "our act together" and face up to the "spreading jihadist threat" from "an expanding safe haven" in Mali to Algeria to Libya.

"We cannot afford to retreat now," she averred. "When America is absent, especially from unstable environments, there are consequences. Extremism takes root; our interests suffer; our security at home is threatened."

That's nice to hear, and even true, but too bad it bears no resemblance to the actual North African policy this Administration was and still is pursuing. The Obama policy was to be "absent" from Libya after the fall of Gadhafi, which led to the inattention to Benghazi security, which led to "extremism" taking root, which led to the attack that killed four Americans. For that, she is responsible.

EDITORIAL: Republican Myopia (New York Times)

January 23, 2013

Congressional Republicans like nothing more than beating a dead horse if it might embarrass the Obama administration — like their unceasing attempt to accuse the administration of lying to the American people about the attack in Benghazi, Libya, that killed four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens.

The allegations are specious, but that didn't stop some Republicans from repeating them on Wednesday during Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's Congressional testimony. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky was particularly out of control, rather absurdly comparing the scope of the Benghazi attack to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

It's not clear what drives this obsession after the Republicans' failed attempt to derail President Obama's re-election over Benghazi. Is it the prospect, however vague it now is, that Mrs. Clinton might run for president in 2016?

Mrs. Clinton was professional and authoritative for hours in the witness chair before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, later, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. But she understandably reached her limit when Senator Ron Johnson pummeled her with the same questions Republicans have hammered at repeatedly since Mr. Stevens and his colleagues were killed in September. These have nothing to do with what happened, why and how to prevent a recurrence, but whether various statements — especially by Susan Rice, the United States ambassador to the United Nations — proved to be perfectly accurate.

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," Mrs. Clinton said, her voice rising in anger. "Was it because of a protest? Or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go and kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?"

She said, rightly, that in the days after the attack, officials were struggling in real time, under crisis conditions, to get the best information they could. What is essential now is to improve security, not keep rehashing the C.I.A.-authorized talking points that Ms. Rice delivered on the Sunday talk shows, she said.

There were, of course, serious questions raised, including how Democrats and Republicans need to approve sufficient funds to protect embassies and diplomats overseas. But there was also a fair amount of surreal behavior.

Mr. Paul asked about Mrs. Clinton's recent ill health in one breath and then in the next declared that, if he had been president, he would have fired her for Benghazi. Calling the killings the "worst tragedy" since Sept. 11 was insulting to the nearly 8,000 soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan or the many hundreds of Americans killed in senseless gun violence each year. We know politicians are short on perspective, but some is required.

Obama promised to 'avenge' Benghazi victims' deaths (CNN)

Posted by CNN Chief Washington Correspondent Jake Tapper
January 23rd, 2013

Washington (CNN) - President Barack Obama called the widow of Sean Smith the day following the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, promising to "avenge" the deaths of her husband and the three other Americans killed, according to a new book by reporter Michael Hastings.

Communications specialist Smith was among four killed in an attack on a diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012, including U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

Obama spoke with Heather Smith on September 12th as he flew to a campaign rally in Las Vegas on Air Force One. The White House confirms to CNN the call took place and notes the president said similar things about avenging the deaths of the four murdered Americans publicly in his statements following the attack.

"We will not waver in our commitment to see that justice is done for this terrible act," Obama said at that campaign rally. "And make no mistake, justice will be done."

"Obama told her he was going to avenge the deaths of Sean and the others. He offered her his condolences," Hastings writes in his book 'Panic 2012.'

"I don't feel like he said the wrong things," Heather Smith said, according to Hastings.

Hastings reports that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also called Heather Smith that day.

The information comes as Clinton provides testimony to the U.S. Senate and House Foreign Relations Committees Wednesday about the State Department's handling of the attack. She told the Senate Foreign Affairs committee that there were "very promising leads" and cases were being put together.

The investigation into the Benghazi killings continues and has made "significant progress," a law enforcement official told CNN Justice Producer Carol Cratty last week. The official suggested charges were expected but did not provide a timetable. FBI Director Robert Mueller traveled to Tripoli last week to meet with Libyan officials.

The U.S. is focused on "more than a dozen people," another U.S. official told CNN's Susan Candiotti recently. But one suspect, a Tunisian named Ali Harzi, has been the source of frustration for the U.S. investigators. Harzi was arrested in Tunisia but was recently released.

Clinton told the Senate Foreign Affairs committee she has been assured by the Tunisian government that Harzi is being monitored.

"Upon his release, I called the Tunisian prime minister. A few days later Director Mueller met with the Tunisian prime minister. We have been assured that he is under the monitoring of the court. He was released, because at that time - and Director Mueller and I spoke about this at some length - there was not an ability for evidence to be presented yet that was capable of being presented in an open court," Clinton said Wednesday.

Clinton said the president will hold true to his word that justice will be served.

"I don't think anybody should doubt this president at his word," Clinton told the committee. "We have some very good examples of that. It may take time, but he does not in any way divert attention from the goal of bringing them to justice."

Clinton lays out daunting security challenges in North Africa (CNN)

By Tim Lister
January 23rd, 2013

Much of the focus of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's appearance on Capitol Hill Wednesday was on whether her department failed to appreciate and respond to the risks that led to the Benghazi attack - and whether it had the resources to confront such risks.

And, of course, on whether in the immediate aftermath, the administration characterized the attack candidly and accurately.

But the hearings also illustrated how the United States is scrambling to catch up with new realities in North Africa - and how it faces a long struggle in a new arena of instability.

Clinton acknowledged that "the Arab revolutions have scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region."

Looking back to her confirmation as secretary of state four years ago, Clinton said, "I don't think anybody thought [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak would be gone, [Libya's Moammar] Gadhafi would be gone, [Tunisian leader Zine El Abidine] Ben Ali would be gone."

The Arab uprisings had coincided with the decimation of "core al Qaeda" - with the result that jihadists who had spent years in Pakistan's tribal territories were returning home.

"We have driven a lot of the [al Qaeda] operatives out of the FATA [Pakistan's tribal territories], out of Afghanistan, Pakistan....but we have to recognize this is a global movement," she said.

"We now face a spreading jihadist threat," Clinton said. "We do have to contend with the wannabes and affiliates going forward."

On that at least, Senator Bob Corker, R-Tennessee, agreed.

He said the United States faces a new and fractured threat environment.

"The Arab Spring has ushered in a time when al Qaeda is on the rise. The world in many ways is even more dangerous because we lack a central command [in al Qaeda] and have instead these nodes that are scattered throughout North Africa and other places."

And Corker added that the United States was "woefully unprepared" for what had happened in the region.

Pandora's Box of Arms

Clinton laid out both Washington's short-term response after the Benghazi attack on September 11, 2012, and how it should deal with the longer-term risks.

"After Benghazi, we accelerated a diplomatic campaign to increase pressure on al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and other terrorist groups across the region," she said in her opening remarks.

"In near-constant contacts at every level, we have focused on targeting al Qaeda's syndicate of terror - closing safe havens, cutting off finances, countering extremist ideology and slowing the flow of new recruits," she said.

But there was a mountain to climb.

Clinton expressed particular concern at events in Mali. Well-armed Tuareg militia who had been working for Gadhafi had come home just as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had also gravitated toward the area.

And only Algeria among Mali's neighbors had the capacity to aid security in Mali, she said. The rest were simply not strong enough.

The size and topography of northern Mali, with its endless desert and caves, made for a long struggle, she said.

"But it is a necessary struggle. We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven."

Clinton said the availability of weapons was a major problem, describing it as a Pandora's Box that was the "source of one of our biggest threats."

She asserted there was "no doubt that the Algerian terrorists [who attacked the gas facility in In Amenas last week] had weapons from Libya. There's no doubt that the Malian remnants of AQIM have weapons from Libya."

She also singled out the threat from Islamist militants of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, which according to some counterterrorism officials has begun to establish informal links with AQIM.

Who did Benghazi?

Four months after the Benghazi attack, the official refrain on the search for those responsible was the same.

"We continue to hunt the terrorists responsible for the attacks in Benghazi and are determined to bring them to justice," Clinton said.

Clinton was also cautious in the way she described the attack, citing the unclassified version of the administrative review board she appointed to investigate the attack.

"There's evidence that the attacks were deliberate, opportunistic and pre-coordinated but not necessarily indicative of extensive planning," she said.

Clinton was also asked about a New York Times report Wednesday quoting an Algerian official that some of the attackers on the gas plant last week had also been involved in the Benghazi attack, according to interrogations of the surviving attackers.

Clinton was noncommittal, saying "that would be a new thread." There was no way to confirm the information, and the administration would do everything possible to find out more, she pledged.

Building security

Clinton stressed repeatedly that the United States has to lead the way in providing security assistance in vulnerable nations.

"It's not going to be easy," she said, "because these new countries have no experience with democracy, they don't have any real experience among the leaders in running countries, in doing security."

In Libya, for example, there was willingness to improve security, but no capacity.

"We sent teams out – both civilian and military – experts to try to help them. Until recently, while they were going through their transition it was a very difficult conversation, because they didn't have the authority."

She pointed to the example of Colombia, where U.S. assistance over a 10-year period had reduced the threat of terrorist and paramilitary groups.

She also pointed to progress in Somalia, where U.S. funding and training for African troops in the capital and support for the intervention by Kenyan forces had helped push back al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab.

But "it took time. There were no short cuts," she said.

"We are in for a long-term struggle here and that means we've got to pay attention to places that historically we have chosen not to or had to."

One important platform for delivering security assistance would be the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). Ten years ago, Clinton said, people had wondered why the U.S. needed a new military command. Now there should be more attention on how and where it was resourced.

"We don't have assets of any significance right now on the African continent. We're only building that up," Clinton said.

Clinton: Benghazi Attack Part of Broader Challenge in Africa (VOA)

by Scott Stearns
January 23, 2013

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last September's attack on the U.S. consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi was part of wider terrorist insecurity across North Africa. Clinton testified before Congress Wednesday about what she is doing to prevent such an attack in the future.

Clinton said the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi that killed four Americans, including the ambassador, is part of a broader strategic challenge in the fight against terrorism.

"The Arab revolutions have scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region," she said. "And instability in Mali has created an expanding safe haven for terrorists who look to extend their influence and plot further attacks of the kind we saw just last week in Algeria."

Clinton told lawmakers she has accepted all of the recommendations of an independent review board, 85 percent of which will be completed by the end of March.

"We are taking a top-to-bottom look, and rethinking how we make decisions on where, when, and how our people operate in high threat areas, and how we respond to threats and crises," she said.

Political fall-out over the response to the Benghazi violence focused on U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, who gave a series of television interviews shortly after the attack - linking it to Islamist protests, not a terrorist attack.

Senator John McCain called that "unacceptable." He said, "The American people deserve to know answers. And they certainly don't deserve false answers. And the answers that were given the American people on September 15th by the ambassador to the United Nations were false."

And McCain said Clinton must be more forthcoming about what really happened in Benghazi.

"There are many questions that are unanswered. And the answers frankly that you have given this morning are not satisfactory to me," he said.

Clinton said bringing to justice those responsible is more important than determining their motives.

"The fact is we had four dead Americans," she said. "Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they would go kill some Americans. What difference at this point does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again."

Clinton said she needs Congress' help to see Libya's democratic transition through to a successful conclusion.

"Right now, Libya is still dangerous," she said. "It is still in a very unstable status. And whatever we can do for them we at least ought to agree we need to do and get out there and start delivering."

Cato Institute analyst Malou Innocent said U.S. challenges in Libya are substantial.

"Moving forward, we are still going to see a degree of chaos within Libya even as it has a veneer of a Western democracy," he said.

At the start of his second term, Innocent said President Obama is moving to put the Benghazi violence behind him.

"The Obama administration is going to try to salvage whatever it can from the Libya operation but not intervene too forcefully with ground forces or any sort of nation-building operations," he said.

Whatever can be done to reduce threats to U.S. diplomats abroad, Clinton said they accept a level of risk in their work and cannot do their jobs from bunkers.

What Benghazi hearing could say about 2016 White House race (CNN)

Posted by CNN Political Editor Paul Steinhauser

January 23rd, 2013

03:11 PM ET

Washington (CNN) - It was a sideshow, but a compelling sideshow nonetheless.

The main act was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's at times angry, at times emotional testimony on Wednesday at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's hearing on the September terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya, that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans.

But presidential politics was another storyline, thanks to three of the participants who might be harboring 2016 ambitions.

Clinton, the outgoing secretary of state, faces constant pressure from fellow Democrats to make another bid for her party's presidential nomination, even though she's said over and over that another run for the White House is not in the cards for her.

The other two were Republican Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida and Rand Paul of Kentucky. Both were elected in 2010 with strong support from the tea party. Paul has publicly stated that he's considering a bid for the 2016 GOP nomination. Rubio has not been as expressive, but is considered someone who also has White House ambitions.

The two senators were polar opposites in their questioning of Clinton during the hearing, which may say something about both men's possible strategies towards 2016.

Rubio went first, stating, "We all wish that this had never happened so this hearing would never have to happen. But we're glad to see you here and wish you all the best," before asking, "One of the things that I'm interested in exploring with you is how information flows within the State Department and in particular in hindsight looking forward how we can prevent some of this happening."

Clinton was gracious in her answer, saying up front that, "I appreciate your kind words. And I reiterate my taking responsibility."

While understated, Rubio's three questions probed whether Clinton had inquired into security for U.S. diplomats in Libya in the year leading up to the attacks.

Paul didn't so much question Clinton as confront her.

"I'm glad that you're accepting responsibility. I think ultimately with your leaving you accept the culpability for the worst tragedy since 9/11. And I really mean that," declared Paul, adding that, "Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you from your post. I think it's inexcusable."

While Republican Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Ron Johnson of Wisconsin asked tough questions, Paul's comments stood out.

But when he finally asked a question, it was whether the U.S. was involved in the transfer of weapons from Libya to Turkey.

Clinton appeared almost bemused by the question, saying: "To Turkey? I'll have to take the question to the record. No one ever raised that with me."

So which strategy was more effective?

"Rand Paul will never have to worry about winning a general election for president of the United States," said Republican strategist and CNN contributor Alex Castellanos. "Even though it might make the entire party look unreasonable, he can attack Democrats until the libertarians in the GOP base foam at the mouth and it is all to his advantage."

"Marco Rubio has a different and more serious hand of cards to play. He may not only compete in a general election, he may lead the nation someday. He has to demonstrate that he is a potential president and not a partisan politician. If you want to be president, you have to act like someone who could represent the entire nation," added Castellanos, who served as a media strategist for seven presidential campaigns and who co-founded Purple Strategies, a bipartisan public affairs firm.

Another GOP strategist, who asked to remain anonymous so he could speak more freely, said that each senator had a different mission: "This is a classic case of the tortoise and the hare, with Marco Rubio more concerned about gaining traction than garnering headlines, as Paul's questioning is sure to do."

Republican strategist Ron Bonjean says that Clinton's poll numbers may be behind Rubio's strategy.

"Senator Rubio understands that Hillary Clinton has very high ratings and the Benghazi crisis has not damaged her image or credibility among American voters. For a 2016 general election, Rubio must get back the lost share of female voters from the last election, so why not let other Senators such as Rand Paul and John McCain go after her?" asks Bonjean, who served as a top adviser to Republican leaders in the House and Senate before co-founding a public affairs firm.

Clinton did come to the hearing equipped with some very high public opinion numbers.

According to a new ABC News/Washington Post poll released Wednesday morning, just a few hours before the outgoing secretary of state testified in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the morning and before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the afternoon, two-thirds of Americans said they have a favorable impression of Clinton, while just over one in four saying they have a unfavorable impression.

An NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey released last week indicated that nearly seven in ten approved of the job Clinton was doing as America's top diplomat, with just a quarter of the public saying they disapproved.

But both surveys pointed to a partisan divide, with nearly all Democrats and two thirds of independents, but only a minority of Republicans, giving Clinton a thumbs up. But that partisan divide is not nearly as wide as it is in polling of President Barack Obama.

In the end, all three possible 2016 candidates got something out of this hearing.

Could this 2013 hearing about a terrorist attack in 2012 be one of the opening acts in the 2016 election? And will we see clips from the hearing in 2016 campaign commercials?

CNN's Ashley Killough contributed to this report

Rand Paul at the Benghazi Hearing (New York Times)

By JULIET LAPIDOS

The Opinion Pages

Taking Note

January 23, 2013, 3:04 pm

Prior to this morning's hearing on Benghazi, Senator Rand Paul swore he'd press Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the attack that left four Americans dead. He said she would have to accept full responsibility, and went so far as to compare Mrs. Clinton's alleged failings with those of government itself: "That's the problem with government — government is anonymous and so no one is accountable."

That Mrs. Clinton had previously accepted responsibility for the attack, and did so again in her prepared remarks this morning, didn't faze him. He just upped the ante. "I'm glad that you're accepting responsibility," he said. "I think that ultimately, with your leaving, you accept the culpability for the worst tragedy since 9/11." Casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan apparently don't count.

He also brought up a terrifying counterfactual. If he'd "been president at the time" of the attack, he said, he would have fired Mrs. Clinton.

Mr. Paul's chief complaint was that the State Department failed to provide adequate security for its personnel in Libya: "They should have never been sent in there without a military guard. This should have been an embassy like in Baghdad, in a war zone, and it should have been under military guard, significant military guard, Defense Department command." He didn't mention the fact that, in February 2011, he proposed cutting the State Department budget by 71 percent.

At least Mr. Paul kept his attention on the attack itself. Senator Ron Johnson instead dredged up the conspiracy theory — popular prior to the election — that the Obama administration tried to orchestrate a cover up. "I'm going back to then Ambassador Rice five days later going on Sunday shows and what I would say purposefully misleading the American public." Why did Ms. Rice mention a street protest? Couldn't the administration have "easily ascertained" that there was no protest, and that the assault did not spring out of a protest?

Eventually an exasperated Mrs. Clinton put Mr. Johnson in his place: "Was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from every happening again."

Preventing another Benghazi was never the Republicans' priority. Or if it was, they had a strange way of showing it. Ever since the attack took place in September, up through today's hearing, Republicans have kept their focus on laying blame and endlessly litigating the administration's public response, not on avoiding future missteps.

Clinton Faces Hard Questions on 2012 Benghazi Attack (Bloomberg Updated)

By David Lerman and Indira A.R. Lakshmanan on January 23, 2013

Republicans confronted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton today over the deadly attack on a U.S. mission in Libya, saying that she failed to bolster security before the assault and shared blame for the Obama administration's initial, erroneous account of what happened.

"I would have relieved you of your post" for failure of leadership and "culpability" in the loss of four American lives, Republican Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky told Clinton during her testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"I believe in taking responsibility, and I have done so," Clinton responded, saying she is moving quickly to correct security shortcomings.

Clinton's two and a half hours of testimony before the Senate panel were followed by a three-hour afternoon appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The two sessions gave lawmakers their first opportunity to question the top U.S. diplomat in public on her department's response to the Sept. 11 attack in Benghazi in which Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Florida Republican, said Clinton has allowed a "false narrative" that State Department employees were dismissed for failures related to Benghazi security.

Staff Disciplined

Clinton responded that four individuals were removed from their jobs and put on administrative leave based on the report from an independent review panel. Federal statutes don't permit firing them for the types of failures identified, she said.

While Democrats on the Senate panel praised Clinton's performance as secretary of state and her efforts to remedy security weaknesses, Republicans didn't shy away from taking on one of the most popular figures in Washington and a potential 2016 Democratic presidential candidate.

Senator John McCain of Arizona told Clinton her responses to the panel were "not satisfactory to me."

"We just have a disagreement," Clinton said.

'Good Excuse'

Clinton's most heated response came after Republican Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin described as "a good excuse" the administration's position that information about the circumstances of the attack took time to pin down while avoiding interference with an investigation.

"The fact is, we had four dead Americans," Clinton said. "Was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?"

In opening remarks, Clinton said, "I take responsibility, and nobody is more committed to getting this right. I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger and more secure."

Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, the senior Republican on the committee, criticized what he said were "systemic failures" in security decision-making at the State Department.

Clinton said she didn't review diplomatic cables in advance of the attack that requested heightened security measures in Libya.

'Didn't See'

"I didn't see those requests, they didn't come to me," Clinton said. "I didn't approve them, I didn't deny them."

"These requests don't ordinarily come to the Secretary of State," she said.

Clinton said that security measures in general have been constrained by the "consistent shortfalls" in congressional funding for embassy construction and security.

For Clinton, whose initial plans to testify were delayed by a monthlong illness, the hearings resolve a piece of unfinished business that lawmakers said must be completed before her successor is confirmed. Tomorrow, the Senate committee will consider President Barack Obama's nominee to succeed her, Democratic Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts.

While Kerry is the panel's chairman, he ceded his role at today's hearing to Democratic Senator Bob Menendez of New Jersey.

Until today, Clinton had stayed mostly silent on the Benghazi attack, saying she awaited a report from an independent review board she appointed.

Board's Findings

The board's findings raised questions about the State Department's leadership under Clinton. The review board found the department showed "a lack of proactive leadership and management ability," although no government employees were found to have violated their duties.

The report, released last month, faulted the State Department for producing a "security posture that was inadequate for Benghazi and grossly inadequate to deal with the attack that took place."

Clinton today said she has begun implementing all 29 of the review board's recommendations to correct security deficiencies. About 85 percent of 64 "action items" will be completed by the end of March, she said.

The State Department has begun rethinking how it operates in high-threat areas and the secretary of state will lead an annual "high threat post review" to better assess risks, Clinton said.

Saved Lives

Clinton defended the response of State Department personnel in the early hours and days of the Benghazi attack, saying their actions "saved American lives in real time."

Pointing to a long list of terrorist attacks on Americans overseas in recent decades, Clinton said there will always be risks inherent in the work of the State Department and that U.S. diplomats must stay engaged.

"They cannot work in bunkers and do their jobs," she said.

While Republicans have accused the Obama administration of moving too slowly in the hours after the attack, Clinton said there were "no delays in decision-making" and "no denials of support from Washington or from the military."

The chairman of the review board, former Ambassador Thomas Pickering, said last month that responsibility for the security failings went up to the assistant secretary's level, "where, if you like, the rubber hits the road."

Less than 24 hours after the release of the board's report, an assistant secretary of state had resigned and three other officials had been placed on administrative leave.

Correcting Failures

Vowing to correct the department's failures in a letter to Congress last month, Clinton said her department has begun working to hire additional diplomatic security for U.S. missions and was working with the Pentagon to dispatch hundreds of additional Marine Corps security guards to diplomatic posts.

The Benghazi attack became a flash point in last year's presidential election campaign. Republicans said the Obama administration failed to provide adequate diplomatic security before the attack, made inadequate efforts to rescue Americans under siege, and misled the public afterward about what happened.

Questions from Republican lawmakers over the handling of the attack in its immediate aftermath helped spur the withdrawal of Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, as a potential successor to Clinton. Rice was criticized for saying on television talk shows five days after the attack that the incident began as a spontaneous protest over an anti-Islamic video that was later "hijacked" by militants.

Clinton defended Rice as presenting the information as it was known at that point by the intelligence community. Clinton said the Obama administration didn't try to mislead the public.

"Nothing could be further from the truth," Clinton said.

'No Protest'

The review board "concluded that no protest took place" at either the Benghazi mission or the nearby CIA annex that also came under attack, the report said.

Lawmakers and State Department officials have debated for months whether the security was adequate, given threat assessments in the region at the time, and whether requests for additional security at the Benghazi mission had been denied.

The review board found no intelligence provided a warning of the attack, in which armed men breached the Benghazi compound's walls, and there wasn't enough time for U.S. military forces to have made a difference in responding after the assault began.

Regional Protests

On the night of Sept. 11, as protests over an anti-Islamic video erupted in Cairo and other Arab cities, militants stormed the diplomatic compound in Benghazi and set it on fire, leading to the deaths of Stevens and information specialist Sean Smith. The militants later fired mortars at the CIA compound where some people from the diplomatic mission had sought refuge.

As the CIA annex took mortar fire, some rounds landed on the roof, killing Americans Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty, two former Navy SEALs who were working as security personnel.

A separate report by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee found the State Department failed to fill a "security gap" at the Benghazi mission before the attack, even though it knew the Libyan government was incapable of protecting the compound.

That report said the department failed to meet staffing requests from its own security personnel and made the "grievous mistake" of not closing the Benghazi mission at least temporarily because of growing threats in the area.

Clinton was ranked by Americans as the most-admired woman in the world for the 11th consecutive year in a Gallup poll released Dec. 31.

Rand Paul tells Clinton: I would have fired you (Washington Post)

By Rachel Weiner , Updated: January 23, 2013

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) bluntly told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Wednesday morning that if he were president, he would have demanded her resignation over the attack on the U.S. diplomatic post in Benghazi, Libya.

"One of the things that disappointed me most about the original 9/11 is that no one was fired," Paul said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the deadly assault. "The people who make judgment errors need to be replaced, fired and no longer in a position to make judgment calls."

"Had I been president at the time" and known that Clinton had not read cables from Libya asking for more security, "I would have relieved you of your post," Paul said. "I think it's inexcusable." Paul has said he is interested in running for president in 2016.

The senator added that as she leaves office, Clinton deserves "culpability in the worst tragedy since 9/11." The secretary of state has long planned to serve only one term.

Paul went on to ask if the United States is shipping weapons from Libya to Turkey. Some news outlets have suggested that arms are going from Libya to Syrian rebels through Turkey with American knowledge. "I will have to take that question for the record. No one's ever raised that with me," she responded.

Hillary Clinton Says Iran, Afghanistan Diverted Embassy Resources (ABC)

By SARAH PARNASS

Jan. 23, 2013

abcnews.go.com

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told a House Foreign Affairs Committee today that an emphasis on security in Iraq and Afghanistan in the past decade diverted resources from other outposts around the world.

Clinton told Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., that legislation he championed reorganizing the State Department in the 1990s had "been very important in protecting our people around the world," but that the need for funding was ongoing and unmet.

Clinton reprised her role as defender of the State Department this afternoon in the second half of congressional testimony on the security failures that led to the deaths of four Americans, including Ambassador Chris Stevens, in Benghazi, Libya, during an attack last year.

Stevens understood the significance of the mission, she told the committee several hours after a morning Senate appearance.

"That's why Chris Stevens went to Benghazi in the first place," she said. "Nobody knew the dangers better than Chris, first during the revolution and then during the transition. A weak Libyan government, marauding militias, even terrorist groups ... a bomb exploded in the parking lot of his hotel. He never wavered. He never asked to come home. He never said let's shut it down, quit, go somewhere else."

The afternoon appearance followed morning testimony from an energized Clinton, who stood her ground and told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that she has overseen plans to secure diplomatic outposts around the world while cuts in State Department funding undermine those efforts.

Citing a report by the department's Accountability Review Board on the security failures that led to the deaths of four Americans in Benghazi, Libya, during an attack last year, Clinton said the board is pushing for an increase in funding to facilities of more than \$2 billion per year.

"Consistent shortfalls have required the department to prioritize available funding out of security accounts," Clinton told the Senate this morning, while again taking responsibility for the Benghazi attack. "And I will be the first to say that the prioritization process was at times imperfect, but as the ARB said, the funds provided were inadequate. So we need to work together to overcome that."

Clinton, showing little effect from her recent illnesses, choked up earlier in discussing the Benghazi attack.

"I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews," Clinton said this morning, her voice growing hoarse with emotion. "I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters."

The outgoing secretary of state was the only witness to giving long-awaited testimony before the Foreign Relations Committee this morning, and appeared before the House Foreign Affairs Committee at 2 p.m.

The secretary, who postponed her testimony in December, started today by giving context to the terrorist attack. "Any clear-eyed examination of this matter must begin with this sobering fact," Clinton began. "Since 1988, there have been 19 Accountability Review Boards investigating attacks on American diplomats and their facilities."

But the secretary did not deny her role in the failures, saying that as secretary of state, she has "no higher priority and no greater responsibility" than protecting American diplomats abroad like those killed in Benghazi.

"As I have said many times, I take responsibility, and nobody is more committed to getting this right," Clinton said. "I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger and more secure."

Among the steps Clinton has taken, she said, is to "elevate the discussion and the decision-making to make sure there's not any" suggestions that get missed, as there were in this case.

Clinton testified that the United States needs to be able to "chew gum and walk at the same time," working to shore up its fiscal situation while also strengthening security, and she refuted the idea that across-the-board cuts slated to take place in March, commonly referred to as sequestration, were the way to do that.

"Now sequestration will be very damaging to the State Department and USAID if it does come to pass, because it throws the baby out with the bath," Clinton said, referring to the United States Agency for International Development, which administers civilian foreign aid.

While the State Department does need to make cuts in certain areas, "there are also a lot of very essential programs ... that we can't afford to cut more of," she added.

More than four months have passed since the attack killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in Libya. These meetings, during which Clinton discussed the report on State Department security failures by the Accountability Review Board, were postponed because of her recent illness.

Clinton told the Senate that the State Department is on track to have 85 percent of action items based on the recommendations in the Accountability Review Board report accomplished by March, with some already implemented.

The report led the State Department to relieve three employees of their posts -- while a fourth resigned -- because of "systemic failures and leadership deficiencies at senior levels in securing the compound."

The departing staffers are still on administrative leave, however, meaning they are still State department employees.

While most senators took time out of the two-and-half-hour-long hearing to praise Clinton's tenure at the State Department, others came down hard on her.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Texas, did not shy away from placing full responsibility on Clinton's shoulders.

"I think that ultimately with your leaving you accepted culpability for the worst tragedy since 9/11," Paul told the secretary. "Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post. I think it's inexcusable."

Clinton said that was the reason her department turned to the Accountability Review Board.

"The reason we put into effect an accountability review board is to take it out of the heat of politics and partisanship and accusation, and to put it in the hands of people who have no stake in the outcome," Clinton told the committee.

The secretary herself remained energized throughout the hearing. Indeed, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz. called her "as combative as ever" before launching into his own attack on Clinton, who had testified that the motivation for the attack in Benghazi shouldn't matter at this point.

"Why do we care?" McCain asked. "Because if the classified information had been included, it gives an entirely different version of events to the American people."

"So here we are, four months later, and we still don't have the basic information."

Clinton ripped into Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., for asking a similar question.

"With all due respect, we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk who decided they'd go kill Americans," she said, gesturing sharply with her hands to emphasize each sentence. "What difference at this point does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened."

Clinton testified briefly before the Senate less than two weeks after the attack, an appearance that received considerable criticism from conservatives.

McCain said Clinton told the Senate "nothing" at that hearing.

"We were told absolutely nothing, all because it's an investigation going on," McCain said on the Senate floor Sept. 21, 2012.

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., is presiding over the hearing on the Senate side, in place of out-going committee chair Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., whom President Obama has nominated to take over Clinton's position as secretary of State.

Ed Royce, R-Calif., chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, is presiding over the afternoon hearing.

This won't be Clinton's last trip to Capitol Hill. At the end of the Senate hearing, Menendez said that Clinton would be one of the people introducing Sen. Kerry at his confirmation hearing before the Foreign Relations Committee Thursday.

ABC News' Dana Hughes contributed to this report.

Benghazi blame game is useless (CNN)

By Anthony H. Cordesman, Special to CNN
updated 3:46 PM EST, Wed January 23, 2013
CNN.com

Editor's note: Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Follow CSIS on Twitter.

(CNN) -- Politics are politics, and partisan congressional challenges over the death of Ambassador Chris Stevens and other Americans in Benghazi, Libya, last September were inevitable.

But while some of the questions Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was asked in her appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee bordered on politics at their worst, some represented democracy at its best: A legitimate challenge of how the government works. The fact is, we do need to ask serious questions about the way our diplomats function, how they are deployed and protected.

In her responses, Clinton took responsibility, as the top official in every department always must. The question now, however, is what, if anything, will we really learn from the events that led to the deaths of Stevens and his colleagues?

Do we actually learn something from their courage and sacrifice, and the similar experience of other American diplomats and officers that have faced similar attacks in the past? Or do we go on playing a pointless blame game, creating a climate that discourages our diplomats, U.S. military advisory teams and intelligence officers from taking necessary risks -- and relies even more on fortifying our embassies.

Three lessons here. The first: Virtually every post mortem that relies on the blame game has the same result. There is always someone who asked for more resources and warned of the risk before the event. There are always enough intelligence indicators so that once you go back -- knowing the pattern of actual events -- it becomes possible to predict the past with 20-20 hindsight.

The problem is that the post mortems and hearings tend to be useless. Every prudent security officer has always asked for more; the indicators that could provide warning with 20-20 hindsight will still be buried in a flood of other reporting that warns of crises that don't take place; U.S. officials will still have to deal with what intelligence experts call "noise" -- the vast amount of reporting and other data that make it impossible to sort out the right information until the event actually occurs and the patterns are known. All of this makes it hard to know what request or warning ever matters.

Yes, intelligence and warning can always be improved if the post mortem is realistic and objective. But the resulting improvements will never be enough. No one will ever assess all the risks correctly, U.S. diplomats and other Americans will be vulnerable when they operate in a hostile environment, and risk-taking will remain inevitable.

The second lesson is that we cannot deal with crises like the political upheavals in the Arab world, or the more direct threats that countries like Iran and North Korea can pose, unless our diplomats and military advisers take risks -- and more casualties -- in the process.

Stevens and those around him did what had to be done. These are the teams that can help lead unstable countries towards democracy and stability. They are the crucial to our counterterrorism efforts in the field and to building up the military security capabilities of developing states. They are key to uniting given factions, creating effective governance, and persuading states to move toward development and greater concern for human rights.

They can only be effective if they are on the scene, work with the leaders and factions involved, and often go into harms way where there are terrorist and military threats. Like Stevens, they cannot wait for perfect security, stay in a safe area, or minimize risks and deal with the realities of Libya, filled with local power struggles, extremist elements and potential threats.

We need risk-takers. We need them in any country that is going through the kind of upheavals taking place in Libya, as well as in countries where our enemies operate, and semi-war zones like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. We need diplomats, U.S. military advisory teams, and intelligence officers that reach far beyond our embassies and go into high risk zones. We need to reward and honor those risk-takers, not those who shelter in safety and avoid the risks they should take or fear their career will be damaged if anyone is killed or hurt.

The third lesson is that we do need to steadily strengthen our ability to provide secure mobility, better intelligence, better communications, and better protection for those diplomats, U.S. military advisory teams and intelligence officers. We need to be able to better provide emergency help to those American NGO personnel and businessmen who take similar risks.

We need both an administration and a Congress that look beyond the blame game and understand that some things are worth spending money on. We need them to understand that what we once called the Arab Spring is clearly going to be the Arab Decade, and we face different but equally real risks in the field in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

It is far better -- and cheaper even, in the medium term -- to fund strong U.S. country teams, military advisers, counterterrorism teams and development efforts than to let nations collapse, to let extremists take over, to lose allies, and see American NGOs and businesses unable to operate.

We need to see what new methods and investments can protect our people in the field and reduce the risks they should be taking. The answer may be special communications, intelligence system, helicopters and armored vehicles, emergency response teams and new career security personnel to replace contractors and foreign nationals.

What the answer is not is partisan blame, risk avoidance, punishing those who do take risks for the result, and failing to make the improvements in security for risk takers -- while building larger fortress embassies. If you want to honor the Americans lost in the line of duty, focus on the future and not the past.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Anthony Cordesman

Sec. Clinton: 'Going on the Sunday shows is not my favorite thing to do' (Politico)

By DYLAN BYERS | 1/23/13 3:45 PM EST

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton today told the House Foreign Affairs Committee that she does not like going on the Sunday shows.

"I have to confess, here in public, going on the Sunday shows is not my favorite thing to do," she said during today's hearings on the Sept. 11, 2012, attacks in Benghazi, Libya. "There are other things I'd prefer to do on Sunday mornings. I haven't been on a Sunday show in way over a year. It just isn't something I normally jump to do."

"I did feel strongly that we had a lot that we had to manage, that I had to respond to, and I thought that should be my priority," she added.

Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) had asked Sec. Clinton why she had not appeared on the Sunday political affairs programs in the aftermath of the attack, a responsibility that fell to UN Ambassador Susan Rice. In response to Sec. Clinton's answer, Wilson said one of her priorities should have been "telling correct informaiton" to the public.

In the wake of the attack, the Obama administration sent Amb. Rice on a tour of the Sunday shows, where she said the deaths in Benghazi may have been due to spontaneous protests. The controversy over those statements would become so heated that Amb. Rice would later withdraw her name from consideration as Sec. Clinton's successor at the State Dept.

Hillary Clinton torpedoed Hannity: ‘There was no real time’ video (Washington Post)

By Erik Wemple

Opinions

Updated: January 23, 2013

He said it on Dec. 19. He said it on Nov. 27. He said it on Nov. 26. He said it on Nov. 16. He said it on Nov. 7, Nov. 2, Oct. 31, Oct. 30, and probably plenty of other times as well.

We’re talking about famous Fox News host Sean Hannity and the notion that the State Department was watching the Sept. 11 attack on the Benghazi diplomatic compound in “real time.” A sampling from the Nov. 16 edition of “Hannity,” featuring guests Rep. Mike Conaway and Oliver North:

HANNITY: And if the State Department is now saying they never believed that this attack on the 11th of September against the U.S. consulate was a film protest gone awry, think about it — then, it’s nearly impossible to believe that President Obama didn’t know. Oh, and did I mention the State Department was watching this unfold in Real Time?

The Erik Wemple Blog wrote on Nov. 9 that the claim appeared to be bunk: A State Department official denied that anyone in the department saw any part of the evening on “real-time” video. Nor was there even the technical capability of beaming the video of the initial attack to other parts of the world, per this explanation from an administration official:

The Benghazi compound had a CCTV [closed-circuit television] system. Meaning, a system of cameras on the compound. Those cameras could be monitored from the [Tactical Operations Center, TOC], which is one of the structures on the compound. . . . Those images could not be seen anywhere outside the TOC, let alone outside Benghazi. The footage from those cameras is recorded and stored for a period. The footage from the attack was not in USG [U.S. government] hands until later in September.

In today’s testimony before a House committee, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was asked point-blank about all of this video business. She said, “There was no monitor, there was no real time.”

That’s not to say that the State Department wasn’t getting real-time updates on the situation at the Benghazi compound. Indeed, it was. But they were coming via telephone, not “real-time video.”

Clinton’s disavowal of real-time video was strong, airtight and in no way sufficient to ever supplant the notion that top State officials grabbed a bag of popcorn and kicked back with some Benghazi TV.

Benghazi hearings: Will Hillary Clinton's testimony impact her future? (Christian Science Monitor)

In a much anticipated appearance before Congress, Hillary Clinton testified Wednesday on the deadly attack on US diplomats in Benghazi, Libya. Sen. Rand Paul said he would have fired her.

By Howard LaFranchi, Staff writer / January 23, 2013 at 3:56 pm EST

Washington

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton made a much-anticipated appearance on Capitol Hill Wednesday, offering testimony on the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the US diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya, in which she put her focus on the diplomatic security upgrades and other changes she has ordered since the tragedy.

In morning testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Clinton tried to keep her emphasis on how the US can improve diplomatic security in the future, while Republican senators wanted answers on Benghazi – why it was allowed to happen, what the Obama administration knew when, and why administration officials persisted so long in calling the terrorist attack the tragic outcome of a spontaneous demonstration.

The result was a sometimes testy, even fiery interchange in which Clinton at one point threw up her hands and questioned the relevance of the Republican hammering on how the administration characterized the attack. At another point Sen. Rand Paul (R) of Kentucky told Clinton that, were he president, he would have fired her over the attack.

Clinton was also appearing before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Wednesday afternoon.

Clinton's testimony was closely watched in part because some Republican senators have said they would not be prepared to vote on the nomination of Sen. John Kerry (D) of Massachusetts to replace Clinton until they received satisfactory answers from the Obama administration on Benghazi. Beyond that, perceptions of how Clinton handles the hearings are expected to follow her as she exits the State Department – influencing her record as secretary of state and certainly resurfacing if she decides to make another run for president in 2016.

On the Senate side, Clinton repeated her earlier acceptance of full responsibility for the Benghazi tragedy that resulted in the deaths of four Americans, including the US ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens.

"As I have said many times since Sept. 11, I take responsibility," she said in her opening statement. "I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger, and more secure."

The important task now, she added, was to move forward and make the changes – including granting the secretary of state the authority to shift existing State Department funding to needs, like increased security, that may arise – that she said could help head off similar tragedies in the future.

Clinton offered a broad assessment of instability and terrorism risks likely to exist across North and West Africa for years to come, and said the US would continue to grapple with balancing security challenges with the need to remain engaged in the world's riskiest environments.

"This is going to be a very serious, ongoing threat," she said. "We are in for a struggle, but it is a necessary struggle."

Republicans seemed less interested in such lofty notions for the future than in revisiting the shortcomings revealed by Benghazi.

Sen. John McCain (R) of Arizona, who worked closely with Clinton when she was a senator, told her "the answers you've given today are not satisfactory to me," before later saying "I categorically reject your answer" as to why the State

Department did not immediately debrief officials who survived the attack to get a clear idea more quickly as to what had happened.

The State Department "should have at least interviewed the people who were there," Senator McCain said, suggesting that could have prevented the US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, from going on Sunday news shows on Sept. 15 and giving answers that were "false."

McCain did, however, expand his criticism beyond the specific failures in Benghazi, underscoring his view that it was the Obama administration's insistence on a "soft footprint" – no US military on the ground – in Libya after the fall of strongman Muammar Qaddafi that was "potentially responsible for the [Benghazi] tragedy."

Clinton responded to her old friend "we just have a disagreement" over both "what happened and when it happened" in Benghazi and the administration's actions in Libya post-Qaddafi. She did remind the senators that a number of congressional "holds" had been put on administration requests for funding for stepped-up involvement in Libya.

A common refrain from some members of Congress, she said, was, "Why are we doing anything for Libya, it's a wealthy country" because of its oil.

Suggesting that the disconnect between Congress and the administration on issues like resources for a country like Libya or spending on diplomatic security also shares in the blame for the Benghazi tragedy, Clinton said, "We have to get our act together."

The testiest exchange in the Senate testimony came when Sen. Ron Johnson (R) of Wisconsin told Clinton that had it wanted to, the administration could have "easily, easily" ascertained within hours that Benghazi was not the result of a demonstration. Instead, he said, "we were misled that there were supposedly protests and something sprang out of that."

Clinton raised her hands – and her voice – responding angrily that four Americans were dead, adding, "Was it because of a protest or is it because of guys out for a walk one night and they decide they go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?"

The committee's Democratic senators had their own refrain to cite in response to their Republican colleagues' repeated assertion that the American people were "misled" on Benghazi. For every reference to "false information" on Benghazi, the Democrats responded with reminders of the Bush administration's insistence on the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein's Iraq – weapons that turned out not to exist – as a pretext for going to war.

Sen. Dick Durban (D) of Illinois, citing the Iraq WMD claims and asking rhetorically if "the American people [are always] told correct information right away," added, "We could have a hearing on that."

Analysis: Could Clinton's Benghazi comments live on? (USA Today)

Aamer Madhani, USA TODAY
4:10p.m. EST January 23, 2013

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Clinton explains, then explodes during Congressional hearings
Her "What difference does it make" response may help -- or hurt -- her legacy
She leaves her post as arguably the most popular politician in the country

WASHINGTON — In a couple of years, if Hillary Rodham Clinton decides to make another run for the White House, both her supporters and detractors may look back at comments she made at Wednesday's hearings on Benghazi as evidence of what she's made of.

More than an hour into Wednesday morning's hearing — after facing some tough but polite question from Republicans and praise from her fellow Democrats for her four years of service — Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., dispensed with the niceties and pressed the outgoing secretary of State on why diplomats who were evacuated safely after the attack on Benghazi weren't interviewed immediately.

He also charged that U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice was "purposefully misleading" the American public with her erroneous statements that the incident, in which Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed, was a "spontaneous" event.

At first, Clinton stayed even-keeled and explained that State Department officials didn't think it was appropriate to interview those who were evacuated before the FBI, which was conducting an investigation into the attack. She defended Rice and the Obama administration.

And then she exploded.

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," said Clinton, pounding her fist on the table she sat behind as she spoke. "Was it because of a protest or because of guys out on a walk one night who decided they'd go kill Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator."

When Clinton departs from her post later this week, she will leave as perhaps the most popular politician in America and as the prohibitive favorite for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination. (Her favorability rating stands at a whopping 67%, according to a Washington Post/ABC News poll published Wednesday.)

Clinton, President Obama's onetime rival, logged more than 950,000 miles and visited 112 countries on her way to becoming arguably the president's most effective emissary over the past four years. The man Obama picked to succeed her, Sen. John Kerry, has even asked Clinton to formally introduce him to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when he appears before it on Thursday.

But could Clinton's "What difference does it make" comment have a lasting effect on her legacy?

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday afternoon, White House spokesman Jay Carney said Clinton's comments reiterated what the White House has long been saying. Rice's inaccurate statements bear "no relevance on what happened in Benghazi, who was responsible, and what we must do to ensure it never happens again."

"History will have shown her to be one of the great secretaries of State," said Carney, who in a slip of tongue on Wednesday referred to the outgoing secretary of State as "President Clinton."

Republicans, however, haven't given up on Benghazi and see it as a millstone weighing down Obama and a blemish on Clinton's legacy.

At the first of two Congressional hearings on Wednesday, Clinton confirmed that she had not read a diplomatic cable to the State Department from Stevens prior to the incident in which he raised concerns about security at the U.S. outpost in Libya.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., said that fact made her culpable for the deaths. Paul, who has said that he may be interested in making a future for the White House, said if he were sitting in the Oval Office he would have fired Clinton over Benghazi

"I would have relieved you of your post," Paul said. "I think it's inexcusable."

Clinton didn't take the bait with Paul. Notably, Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., another potential 2016 aspirant, was more measured in his questioning of Clinton, asking about some specific meetings on Libyan security that may or may not have been held.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who took exception to Clinton's tart "What difference does it make" reply to Johnson, was combative.

"I categorically reject your answer to Sen. Johnson," McCain said. He added, "If you're going to the American people to tell them what happened, you ought to have your facts straight."

Clinton, who showed emotions at times during the hearing, responded to McCain that she knew too well what was lost at Benghazi.

"For me, this is not just a matter of policy... it's personal," she said. "I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews (Air Force Base). I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters."

It's important to note that through Clinton's eight years in the Senate and most of her tenure at State, she had warm relations with Republicans, including party stalwarts such as McCain. Even as GOP lawmakers took her the woodshed during Wednesday's hearing, most of them first thanked her for her service and admired her tirelessness on the job.

But now that she returns to private life and another potential run, the assessment, at least in the near term, of her performance will undoubtedly be viewed through a political prism.

'What Difference Does It Make?' (Wall Street Journal)

Mrs. Clinton finds herself in a familiar, if ironic, role.

By JAMES TARANTO

Opinion

BEST OF THE WEB TODAY

January 23, 2013

Hillary Clinton is ending her tenure as secretary of state in fiery fashion. "You really get the sense that [Mrs.] Clinton barely managed to restrain herself from dropping an F-bomb there," remarks New York magazine's Dan Amira. He refers to an exchange between the secretary and Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin at a Foreign Relations Committee hearing this morning.

Johnson pressed her about the administration's conflicting explanations for the Sept. 11 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya, which killed the ambassador and three other Americans. "With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," said the secretary snappishly to the senator. "Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night decided to go kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator."

So it's "our job to figure out what happened" but it doesn't make a difference what happened? Huh? What would we do without rhetorical questions? We suppose we'd answer them, as Commentary's Jonathan Tobin does:

The answer to her question is clear. An administration that sought, for political purposes, to give the American people the idea that al-Qaeda had been "decimated" and was effectively out of commission had a clear motive during a presidential campaign to mislead the public about Benghazi. The fact that questions are still unanswered about this crime and that Clinton and President Obama seem more interested in burying this story along with the four Americans that died is an outrage that won't be forgotten.

Especially if she runs for president in 2016. As we watched this exchange, it occurred to us that Mrs. Clinton was back in a familiar role, and an ironic one for someone who is supposed to be a feminist icon. Once again, she was helping the most powerful man in the world dodge accountability for scandalous behavior.

Almost exactly 15 years ago, on Jan. 27, 1998, then-First Lady Clinton went on NBC's "Today" show amid rumors that her husband had carried on a sexual affair with a lowly subordinate in the Oval Office: "The great story here, for anybody willing to find it and write about it and explain it, is this vast right-wing conspiracy that has been conspiring against my husband since the day he announced for president."

How vast was the right-wing conspiracy really? With all due respect, what difference does it make? Mr. Clinton had in fact carried on the affair in the Oval Office and lied under oath about it in a sexual harassment lawsuit; he subsequently lied in a criminal investigation as well. As a result, history remembers Mrs. Clinton and Eliza McCordle Johnson (no relation to Ron, as far as we know) as the only women ever married to impeached presidents.

Then again, it's not as if Mrs. Clinton hasn't had any successes at Foggy Bottom. Why just yesterday, according to a press release, the department "launched its first Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports Initiative program of the year. . . . The Empowering Women and Girls Through Sports Initiative builds on Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's vision of 'smart power,' which embraces the full range of diplomatic tools--in this case, sports--to empower women and girls and foster greater understanding."

And a State Department blog brings this exciting news from Ruth Bennett, deputy information officer at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin:

Many Germans spent their dinner hour [Monday] night watching or listening to President Obama deliver his second inaugural address. We don't yet have the numbers, but precedent would suggest it was a very large crowd. When then-Senator Obama delivered a speech in 2008 against the dramatic backdrop of Berlin's golden Victory Column, he was himself the golden candidate--more than 200,000 admiring fans turned out to see him, and, after election, his German approval ratings hovered around 93 percent. By the June 2012 Pew Research poll, that approval level had "plummeted" . . . to 87 percent.

Bennett gives an account from inside the embassy, where Ambassador Philip Murphy held an "informal gathering":

A few guests got into a lively discussion about what they liked about the Obama Administration--its policy focus on issues like women's rights and the environment. One guest, a talk-show host, noted that focus on social issues resonated well with Germans, whose policy orientation was similarly inclined. Small good-natured debates about these sentiments broke out among the attendees. But then, suddenly, the President began speaking, and a rapt, happy silence fell over the crowded room.

We didn't see Obama's speech--it was on a lot earlier in the day where we live than in Berlin--but we wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be better in the original German.

Carney: GOP obsessed with Benghazi (UPI)

Published: Jan. 23, 2013 at 4:31 PM

WASHINGTON, Jan. 23 (UPI) -- White House spokesman Jay Carney Wednesday agreed it makes little difference if the U.S. consulate attack in Libya was the result of a protest or terrorism.

Carney made the comment in defense of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who testified about the Sept. 11 Benghazi consulate attack on Capitol Hill.

"The fact is we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest? Or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?" Clinton said in response to a question by Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis.

Carney said hammering at the terminology in a set of talking points used in the immediate aftermath of the attack by U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice on the Sunday talk show circuit by Republicans amounted to "political obsession" that has no bearing "on the central issues."

Republicans have accused the administration of purposely misleading the public on what happened by saying the attack grew out of a demonstration against an anti-Islam film produced in California.

"No one took more seriously the fact that we lost four American lives in Benghazi than the president of the United States and the Secretary of State of the United States," Carney told the daily press briefing. "And whatever was said, based on information provided by the intelligence community on a series of Sunday shows, bears no relevance on the ultimate questions of what happened in Benghazi, who was responsible and what we must do to ensure that it never happens again and that we bring to justice those who killed our diplomats and other Americans."

Dems and GOP members joke about Clinton and 2016 (AP)

By Donna Cassata on January 23, 2013

WASHINGTON (AP) — The possibility of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton seeking the presidency in 2016 was the political elephant in the room — or the Democratic donkey — during her congressional hearing on Libya.

Republican Rep. Steve Chabot wished Clinton, as he put it, "the best in your future endeavors — mostly." Democratic Rep. Eni F.H. Faleomavaega said he was looking ahead to 2016.

They made the comments as Clinton testified Wednesday before the House Foreign Affairs Committee about the September attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya.

Clinton, who is stepping down, hasn't silenced the chatter of White House ambitions. The former first lady, one-time New York senator and 2008 presidential candidate is frequently mentioned as a possible candidate.

GOP, Clinton wrestle on Libya (UPI)

Published: Jan. 23, 2013 at 5:53 PM

WASHINGTON, Jan. 23 (UPI) -- Republicans at congressional hearings pummeled U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton related to her handling of the Sept. 11 Libyan consulate attack.

During House and Senate hearings on Capitol Hill Wednesday, Clinton conceded reforms are needed, but pushed back against GOP accusations the Obama administration misled the public about the attacks for political reasons.

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif., told Clinton, "Security was not a high priority" at the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi where Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

"Security requests were denied," Royce charged.

Democrats have said congressional Republicans cut funding requested by the State Department for embassy security but Royce said the tragedy of Benghazi "was rooted in poor security," not in a lack of funding.

He questioned why security assets were pulled from the region before the attack. Clinton said those assets were focused on the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli, not the consulate in Benghazi.

Rep. Jeff Duncan, R-S.C., accused Clinton of allowing the Benghazi consulate to "become a death trap" and said that was "malpractice."

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., pointed out news stories that department officials responsible for not passing on requests for more security to the highest levels were disciplined, and charged the stories were, "Not true!"

Clinton said all four individuals "have been removed from their jobs ... [and] placed on administrative leave." She said federal regulations forbid removing someone because of "unsatisfactory leadership" and urged Congress to change those regulations.

Democrats were more supportive. Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., the ranking member, said instead of engaging in "gotcha" politics the committee should be working on solutions.

"Clearly mistakes were made, but let's make one thing perfectly clear, Barack Obama was not responsible for the Benghazi attack, just as George Bush was not responsible for the Sept. 11 [2001] attacks and Ronald Reagan was not responsible for the [1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Lebanon]," Engel said.

He also raked Congress on funding.

"In the past two years alone, the administration's request for [security funding] has been cut by half-a-billion dollars," he said.

Earlier Wednesday, during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., blasted the administration and Clinton for what he called a failure to help Libya fight terror. McCain said there were plenty of warnings leading up to the attack on the anniversary of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but "with all these warnings, we didn't have a single Defense Department" force to come to the aid of the consulate in the event of an attack.

"I categorically reject your answers [about the events leading up to the Benghazi attack and the U.S. response]. ... The American people deserve answers and they certainly don't deserve false answers," McCain said.

Clinton told McCain they would have to disagree on the facts, but, "Since March 11 congressional holds have been placed for many months on aid to Libya. ... We've got to get our act together between the administration and the Congress."

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., called the Benghazi attack "the greatest tragedy" since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and told Clinton he would have fired her if he had been president.

Clinton told the panel every crisis should not be turned into a political football, but everyone should "be smart about this" and seek to prevent such tragedies in the future.

Clinton said U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice did not mislead the public about the Libyan terror attack.

Rice told interviewers shortly after the Sept. 11 attack, the assault in Benghazi arose from a demonstration against an anti-Islamic film made in California. She has said she was using "talking points" provided by the intelligence community.

The administration has since said the attack was a planned act of terror.

Responding to Republican questions, Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "People have accused Ambassador Rice and the administration of misleading Americans. ... Nothing could be further from the truth."

When Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., accused Clinton and the administration of misleading the public on what motivated the attack, Clinton answered with a raised voice: "With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk last night who decided to kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, senator."

She said State Department officials in Washington held off interviewing U.S. evacuees from Benghazi to avoid interfering with the FBI, which was talking to the evacuees as part of an investigation. She said the FBI was "following some very important leads" about who participated in the Benghazi attack.

Clinton told the panel the administration did not know "until days after the attack" that there had been no demonstration. Investigators are still trying to pin down the exact events, she said.

Clinton also told the panel she could not confirm terrorists killed in Algeria were involved in the Libyan attack.

"This information is coming from the Algerian government related to their questioning of certain of the terrorists that they took alive," she said. "We don't have any way to confirm it as yet, but I can certainly assure you, we will do everything we can to determine that."

"You may know that [FBI] Director [Robert] Mueller was just in the region meeting with leaders. He's very well aware that we have to track every one of these connections. And this will be a new thread that will be followed."

The attack on an Algerian gas plant last week left at least 37 foreign hostages dead, Algerian officials said. Algerian forces killed at least 29 of the 32 kidnappers to end the hostage crisis.

Clinton told the Senate panel she did not see requests for extra security in Libya prior to the Sept. 11 attack. She said she did not deny any requests, and procedures were being put in place that any future secretary would see such security messages.

Clinton's voice broke with emotion as she talked about the families of the victims of the Benghazi consulate attack.

"I directed our response from the State Department," she told the panel.

Citing an administrative review board report, she said there were "no delays in decision-making, no denials of support from the Pentagon or the administration ... the board said our response saved lives and it did."

She also stressed that on the day of the attack, "In that same period, we were seeing violent attacks on our embassies" across North Africa. She cited a demonstration in Cairo in which protesters were trying to climb over the U.S. Embassy walls.

Clinton said the United States must still be represented in dangerous places.

"Let me underscore the importance of the United States continuing to lead in North Africa and around the world," she said. "That is why I sent Chris Stevens to Libya. ... He knew the risks ... [but] they cannot work in bunkers and do their jobs. That's why we must do everything possible" to give them security.

Clinton also said the attack didn't happen in a vacuum, citing the problems created within the security apparatus of the region caused by the various government revolutions.

Clinton, her voice breaking, said to her the attack was personal, noting she stood beside President Barack Obama as the caskets of the four people killed in the attack, including Stevens, were returned to the United States.

What's Behind the GOP's Fixation on Benghazi?

(Atlantic)

ELSPETH REEVE 5:45 PM ET

As Republicans grilled Hillary Clinton on the Obama administration's response to Benghazi in congressional hearings Wednesday, they repeatedly hit on a talking point that doesn't seem like it'd do them a lot of good: It's been four months. "Here we are, four months later, and we still don't have the basic information," Sen. John McCain told Clinton Wednesday. "I'm not trying to be obnoxious here, I'm just trying to get the answers I believe the American people deserve to hear. It's been four months," Sen. Ron Johnson told a Milwaukee radio show after he and Clinton had a testy exchange. "More than four months later its unacceptable that the State Department has made it so difficult" to conduct oversight, Ohio Rep. Steve Chabot told Clinton. Clinton will have to respond later in writing, because Chabot used up all of his time with his statement. But they all raise a good question: What have we been debating for four months?

"The media has moved on," Virginia Rep. Frank Wolf lamented on the House floor, separately from the hearing, on Wednesday. Despite the frenzy of coverage of the Clinton hearings, he's mostly right. But that has at least something to do with the confused case Republicans have made in arguing that the Obama administration did something wrong in Benghazi. Initially, it was that President Obama supposedly apologized to the terrorists. This was the thrust of Mitt Romney's statement, issued hours after the attack, that Romney himself came to regret. This charge was mostly discarded. Then the focus was that Obama didn't call the attacks terrorism until two weeks later, a complaint Obama deflected during a presidential debate, when Obama demanded moderator Candy Crowley "check the transcript" of his Rose Garden speech the day after the attacks and he did use the word "terror," although rather obliquely: "No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation..."

So, take three: Republicans moved on to U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice who said on five different Sunday shows that the attacks were inspired by protests in Cairo over an anti-Islam video. This charge was stickier, and cost Rice the Secretary of State nomination. But Rice's scalp did not end the Benghazi debate. In Wednesday's hearings, Republicans had tough questions for Clinton, even if they didn't always allot enough time for her to answer them. Benghazi is still a rallying call for conservatives. But what do they think is the scandal?

How come no one was punished?

"To my knowledge, no one was held accountable" for the insufficient security, Sen. Bob Corker said. But four state department officials have been placed on administrative leave. Clinton said she did not read the cables related to the security situation at the Benghazi consulate. "I am the secretary of state and the [Accountability Review Board] made very clear that the level of responsibility for the failures that they outlined was set at the assistant secretary level and below," she said.

How come no one got fired?

"People who make judgement errors should be fired and replaced," Sen. Rand Paul said. "Had I been president... I would have relieved you from your post." But Clinton explained that federal statute prohibits the state department from firing people for failure of leadership. (It's actually very difficult to fire civil servants.)

We circled back to, Wait, but the Sunday shows?

"I'm going back to then Ambassador Rice five days later going on Sunday shows and what I would say purposefully misleading the American public," Johnson said. Clinton said she had no role in preparing Rice's talking points. The Atlantic Wire has speculated that the obsession with Sunday talk show appearances might have something to do with how much senators love going on Sunday shows. He mentioned that in the hearings -- especially Rice's chief antagonist, John McCain. McCain mentioned his Sunday show cred in the hearings, saying, "By the way, as I said at the time -- I just

happened to be on one of those talk shows -- people don't bring RPGs and mortars to spontaneous demonstrations. That's a fundamental."

Given that Rice was punished for her Sunday show performance, what does that mean the hearing is really about? For a clue, look at the statement of Rep. Matt Salmon, who referenced another incident that no level of congressional Republican obsession could turn into a major issue. "From Operation Fast and Furious, where Attorney General Eric Holder repeatedly misled the American people and Congress...to U.N. Secretary Susan Rice who on five separate occasions went before the American people days after the attacks on Benghazi talking about a demonstration at the facility that never happened," Salmon said.

Perhaps the fixation on Benghazi has something to do with the fact that Republicans have been attacking Obama on Benghazi for four months and it hasn't damaged him. Let's review the incident: It was a terror attack, in which four Americans died. In Libya, a country whose dictator Obama controversially decided to help overthrow despite the advice of many staffers. On the anniversary of 9/11. As big anti-American protests spread across the Middle East. It's should have sunk Obama, but Romney, in his own words, "screwed up." Could you blame the GOP for wanting a do-over?

Hillary Clinton's last trip to the Hill? (Politico)

By: Lois Romano

January 23, 2013 03:18 PM EST

It was probably not the way she would have chosen to go out.

Wednesday's combative Senate hearing on the Benghazi attacks was one of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's last, most high-profile public appearances of her time at Foggy Bottom.

In a few days, one of the most famous women on the planet will step off the public stage for the first time in 30 years — and she's not going quietly.

She choked up, she raised her voice, she took full responsibility for the death of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others, and she was defiant.

When Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) pressed her on who knew what when, she slapped him down with a raised voice: "With all due respect, four Americans were dead. What difference at this point does it make?"

This was no gauzy farewell tour, no clubby appearance before her former Senate colleagues, although most thanked her for her service.

Left unsaid: it's likely not her ultimate act. Already, the question — will she run for president? — follows her around relentlessly.

And if there were any consolation for Clinton Wednesday, it doesn't seem that the American public is holding the former first lady responsible for the death of four Americans in Libya, even as some Republican senators tried their level best to pin it on her.

She's leaving with the highest approval ratings of her political career — 67 percent of people, and 91 percent of Democrats approve of her, according to a new Washington Post/ABC News poll, while only 26 percent disapprove. Despite a health scare last month, she showed up and came out swinging for a pair of Hill hearings this week.

"The world is at her doorstep. She can ride into the sunset, write books, broker international events and certainly run for president in 2016 if she chooses," said former Democratic campaign operative Steve Jarding, a lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard's Center for Public Leadership.

"The world is at her doorstep. She can ride into the sunset, write books, broker international events and certainly run for president in 2016 if she chooses," said former Democratic campaign operative Steve Jarding, a lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard's Center for Public Leadership.

For most of Clinton's adult life, there has always been another mountain to climb: Yale lawyer, first lady, U.S. senator, first serious female presidential candidate and secretary of state. But as she leaves her secretary of state post, her path is not at all clear.

As Vice President Joe Biden ricochets around town this week like a roadrunner on Red Bull, leaving little doubt he's eyeing 2016, Clinton is approaching her future with caution and equanimity — and if we take her at face value — without a real plan.

"I just want to sleep and exercise and travel for fun. And relax. It sounds so ordinary, but I haven't done it for 20 years," she told New York Times columnist Gail Collins last month. "I would like to see whether I can get untired."

Rarely has a public official left office with the popularity and opportunities that embrace Clinton. Four years ago, the world was sure her moment had come and gone, stolen by a movement no one could have foreseen.

But today, the majority of Americans are rooting for her to run for president again, according to the Washington Post/ABC poll. Public Policy Polling reported that if the Iowa caucuses were held today Clinton would win 58 percent of Democrats, followed by Biden with an anemic 17 percent. In Florida, she'd do even better against others in a primary, and go on to trounce favorite Republican sons Jeb Bush and Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.). Even the snarling Donald Trump has called her a "great lady."

Clinton has finally tackled the huge debt from the 2008 campaign hanging over her head. In a Federal Election Commission report filed just Tuesday, the Clinton campaign showed it had retired \$25 million debt, and has a surplus.

It's remarkable turnaround for Clinton, who before she became secretary of state, was considered one of the most controversial and craven politicians of her generation.

As first lady, she was reviled for being too ambitious, too cold, too loyal to her philandering husband, too involved in policy. When she took on the New York Senate campaign in 2000, she was criticized for riding her husband's coattails. As a presidential candidate, she was assailed for running an outdated, imperial, insular campaign. In April of 2008, her approval ratings sunk to 44 percent.

But in the last four years, she has risen above the fray and been viewed as a grown-up and a leader amid the chaos surrounding an inexperienced president. Foreign service officers praise her for reaching out and expanding her inner circle. And she is highly regarded around the world.

"We are proud of you," McCain said on Wednesday (before he called her answers on Benghazi "unsatisfactory"). "All over the world you are viewed with admiration and respect."

"She's really outdone herself," said Jarding. "There were high expectations and a lot doubters and she made the transition almost seamlessly. Our standing around the world was at an all-time low, and it's greatly improved — and she gets much of the credit for that."

Republican Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso noted at the hearing: "I have seen you work yourself to exhaustion...And the country is grateful."

Indeed, today her favorable ratings are higher than the man who defeated her for president. But in one of life's unpredictable ironies, she clearly is not ready to seize her moment.

She returned to work on Jan. 7, after being out for a month because of the flu and a bad fall, which caused a concussion and a blood clot lodged between her skull and her brain. She has appeared exhausted, and as the nation's chief diplomat, traveling one million miles since her appointment.

There is little question the 2016 Democratic race is at standstill until she makes a decision. Any number of Democrats would opt out if she chose to run because of her celebrity, her popularity, her ability to raise money and the global appeal of Bill Clinton.

The Clinton network is alive and well. But it's far from certain she will run, despite pleas from her party.

Her friends want her to essentially go to the spa for six months before she decides anything. And her allies suspect she may be looking for another, less political, chapter in her life, which is what she has indicated.

"Right now, I have no intention of running," Hillary has said.

Noted a close personal friend: "She can do anything she chooses. People are clamoring for her. The big question is what door she will choose."

"Part of her calculation will be to see how it feels not to be an institutional power," says Dee Dee Meyers, who work for Bill Clinton in the White House. "To make big changes she will want to make, to have impact she will want to have on real lives and real people — will she be able to do that without being in government?"

"She is the most popular woman in the world," says Democratic operative Hilary Rosen. "I think she knows that she can continue her commitment to the public good without being president. Her husband's work today shows that to be true.

"While she knows that the query of whether she will run or not will dog her wherever she goes for the next two years, she has gotten quite good at tuning out chatter."

Most operatives and experts on both sides of the aisle believe the drama and baggage carried through Bill Clinton's presidency is long behind them. Bill Clinton emerged from his presidency as a powerful global player, and she has put to rest any thoughts that her success was only related to his. She is viewed as smart, disciplined, and a hard-worker.

"She will be a major player in impacting public policy and American life overall," said Phil Singer, a top official in her 2008 campaign. "Even if she tries to hide, the spotlight finds her. She will examine which platform affords her the best ability to influence the issues she really cares about. And I have to say, despite all the hype, I think there's a very real chance she will not run."

Rand Paul's Clinton attack enrages Boxer (Politico)

By: Breanna Edwards

January 23, 2013 07:08 PM EST

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) didn't like Sen. Rand Paul's comments about firing Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at all.

"When I heard him say those words, I walked out of the hearing room and listened to him from behind the stage because I was so infuriated at what that man said," Boxer told Rev. Al Sharpton on MSNBC's Politics Nation on Wednesday. Boxer sits on the the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was hosting one of Clinton's hearings on the Hill. "To suggest that she's retiring from this post after traveling a million miles and being one of the greatest Secretaries of State because of Benghazi is unbelievable."

The Kentucky Republican called Clinton's lack of reading State Department cables "inexcusable."

"Had I been president at the time, and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post," Paul said at the Senate hearing.

In her support of Clinton, the California lawmaker did not hide the fact that she hoped to see the veteran politician back in the game.

"You will be sorely missed, but I for one hope not for too long," Boxer told Clinton during the Senate hearing.

Sharpton asked Boxer if she was talking about Clinton running for president.

"Absolutely. Yes," Boxer said.

Rand Paul says Clinton's outburst a 'valid point' (CNN)

Posted by CNN's Kevin Liptak
January 23rd, 2013
07:23 PM ET

Washington (CNN) – Sen. Rand Paul - the Kentucky conservative who told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Wednesday he would have fired her for her response to the Benghazi attacks if he was president - acknowledged later the top diplomat had made a valid point when she angrily denounced Republicans focused on the administration's response to the attack.

Clinton was responding to Sen. Ron Johnson, a tea party backed Wisconsin Republican, who questioned Clinton about what he described as members of the administration "purposely misleading" the American people

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," Clinton shot back. "Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night decided they'd go kill some Americans?"

Her fists shaking, she continued: "What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, senator."

Paul, who like Johnson was backed by the tea party during his bid for Senate in 2010, said after the hearings concluded that Clinton made a legitimate case.

"I think she has a little bit of a valid point," he said on CNN's "The Situation Room." "It's not so important whether or not it was a movie or what it was. I think what's important, though, in going forward is it not happen again."

The way to ensure that is to give the Defense Department responsibility for protecting American embassy staff in dangerous zones, Paul said, arguing places like Libya were too hazardous for standard diplomatic security personnel.

"I don't think we can treat it like an embassy in Paris," he said, adding that his proposed budget increased funding for U.S. marines who provide embassy security.

Paul, who like Clinton is a potential candidate for president in 2016, also explained his statement that the September 11, 2012 attack at the diplomatic post in Benghazi was "the worst tragedy since 9/11," making clear on CNN that he was referring to "diplomatic and security and intelligence" tragedies. He said his statement excluded the intelligence failure that led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

"You can't compare the beginning of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the tragedy of those wars is of a different scale and I guess we're talking more about a diplomatic mission than we are talking about the beginning of the war," Paul said, adding he opposed the war in Iraq in 2003.

Hume: Clinton 'dominated' Benghazi hearings (Fox)

Written by Brit Hume / Published Wednesday, January 23, 2013 / Special Report

Today's meandering and unfocused hearings on the events in Benghazi and the fictitious stories told about it afterwards were, unfortunately, utterly typical of congressional hearings. There are a many reasons.

One is that witnesses, by virtue of their jobs, almost always know more about the subject than their congressional interrogators. And most members, though they may be lawyers, are not experienced cross-examiners.

The questioning ping pongs back and forth between the two parties, meaning that no one can get very far with a line of questioning before it's time to change to a member of the other party, who can be expected to rush to the witness's defense.

And it was most helpful to Secretary Clinton's cause today to appear before both Houses. That shortened both hearings and the resulting five minute turns each member had made developing a line of inquiry all the more difficult. Add to that the Congressional penchant for speechmaking.

Consider even Senator McCain, who had been pointing toward this day for months. He laid out, as you've heard part of, a harsh indictment of the whole affair, said Clinton's explanations had been unacceptable, but never settled on a question. In the House, Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen listed a series of good questions, but never settled on one, allowing the witness to pick which one to answer.

A smart and tough witness can dominate such hearings. Secretary Clinton did today.

Hillary Clinton's Benghazi Testimony: What Difference Will It Make? (New Yorker)

Posted by Amy Davidson
January 23, 2013

It was a given that Hillary Clinton's appearances Wednesday to talk about Benghazi in front of House and Senate committees would be some sort of prelude to the 2016 campaign, as well as wrapping up some of the business of the last one. To start with, Clinton was there, and so were a clutch of other potential contenders. Senator Rand Paul, of Kentucky, took the approach of impeaching her leadership, strongly suggesting that she was a well-meaning showboater who hadn't done the work she needed to do to keep her staff safe, contributing to the death of four American diplomats in an attack on the consulate last September. ("Had I been President at the time, and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens—I would have relieved you of your post. I think it's inexcusable.") Marco Rubio made her sound like a retiree who had nowhere to look but back, thanking her for her service, asking straightforward questions, and more or less letting her talk. John McCain, who has run and lost, told her that "frankly, the answers that you've given this morning are not satisfying to me."

But there was, less expectedly, a scene that will surely be replayed in attack ads and echoed (and possibly distorted) in the Republican primary campaign, assuming that Clinton does run. It came in an exchange with Senator Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin. Like many of his colleagues, he goaded. ("I realize that's a good excuse," he said when Clinton talked about not interfering with investigations.) She lost her patience when he said, not for the first time, that she could have found out what was going on at the consulate easily enough if she wanted to.

Clinton: With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans.

Johnson: I understand.

Clinton: Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?

It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator. Now, honestly, I will do my best to answer your questions about this. But the fact is that people were trying in real time to get the best information....But, you know, to be clear, it is, from my perspective, less important today looking backwards as to why these militants decided they did it than to find them and bring them to justice, and then maybe we'll figure out what was going on in the meantime.

"What difference, at this point, does it make?" In regard to the Republican obsession with Susan Rice's "Meet the Press" appearance, that is a reasonable question. Perhaps frustration was also driving Clinton, but that's not how she framed it. What she went on to say is not so controversial: Chase them down first, keep this from happening again. Don't get caught up in the mystery of hate. The reply would be that knowing why people do things helps to prevent them from happening again. (Ironically, it is more often Republicans who are impatient with discussions about what's going on in the hearts and minds of men with guns.) The line alone, though, sounds painfully dismissive. The Times' Lede blog points out that #WhatDifferenceDoesItMake is already a hashtag, and not one used by Hillary fans. Her unfortunate defense might be that the reading of the line depends on what the meaning of "it" is.

There will be plenty of people who applaud Hillary's performance—the fight she brought to her confrontations with Republicans. In that sense, it is one more reflection of the deeply divergent emotions she evokes. If she had not gotten into the fight with Johnson, the memorable moment might have been when she choked up talking about the four diplomats. But by the end she looked like a woman who thought that she was stooping to appear in this venue. The question now is whether that approach suits a 2016 candidate well, or badly.

What it's like for one Middle East reporter to watch the Benghazi hearings (Washington Post)

By Max Fisher,
WorldViews

Updated: January 23, 2013
4:42 pm

Today's congressional hearings with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on the September 2012 attack on a U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya, are a tense and highly politicized confrontation between skeptical Republican lawmakers and a prominent member of the Obama administration.

They also offer an opportunity for a national discussion about some of the most difficult issues facing U.S. policymakers in the Middle East today: post-authoritarian political fragmentation, the rising power of militias, small-arms proliferation, the push-pull between security and diplomacy in conflict zones and even the legacy of the U.S.-backed Libya intervention.

But anyone hoping for the latter rather than the former might be disappointed. One of them is Joshua Hersh, a Middle East correspondent for the Huffington Post who is currently reporting on the hearings. As someone more accustomed to Beirut, where he was formerly based, than to the U.S. Congress, Hersh had perhaps not properly calibrated his expectations of the level of political discourse. But the now-lengthy hearings are clearly wearing on him.

Hersh's Twitter feed since the hearings began, and his clear slide from bemusement to bafflement, provide something of a microcosm of the way some foreign correspondents, in my anecdotal experience, react when they first hear how the District talks about the foreign policy that so matters for the world. Hersh writes at one point, in obvious frustration, "These hearings are a sorry coda to an actually very important situation: trivial questions abound while substantive ones go unasked."

Joshua Hersh
@joshuahersh

Clinton mentions calling families of Stevens and Smith (only). Maybe closest she can come to reminding cmte that, hey, there was CIA there!

7 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh
@joshuahersh

I will never get over how in Congress, five minutes for questions means three minutes to lecture, two minutes to query.

7 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh
@joshuahersh

Clinton on post-Bengh haze: it's possible to be both a terrorist attack and have varied motivations (incl, unsaid, a video)

7 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh
@joshuahersh

Casey: We don't have time to list all your achievements, but I'll go through two or three (or four or five)

7 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh
@joshuahersh

"Our other friends" is now my favorite euphemism for CIA.

7 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Clinton is probably going to regret losing her cool but you can see how infuriating this line of attack has been to people inside.

6 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Clinton can expect a lot more questions on talking points at the House this afternoon. Bet she doesn't yell again.

6 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Clinton is relying heavily on finding of (apparently classified) ARB that there is *still* uncertainty about causes of attack.

6 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

McCain, still got it. Making up for everyone else's non-questions with a litany of 'em.

6 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Rand Paul is raising a right-wing conspiracy theory that Stevens was involved with shuttling weapons to Syria via Turkey.

6 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

At Clinton hearing, an interesting q/a from @ChrisMurphyCT about the limits of American influence [youtube.com/watch?v=Q7XaBIU...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7XaBIU...)

3 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Ok, big question: did any members of HFAC watch the Senate hearing?

3 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

-30mins for opening stmts MT @jaketapper House Foreign Affairs Committee has 46 members. Hearing is supposed to last only 90 minutes.

3 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Clinton's opening remarks on House side much longer than Senate. Wonder if she's trying to cut into questions.

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Or am I wrong? Seems longer.

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Or great, given that they don't really want to hear the answers RT @blakehounshell Kind of amazing how bad Congress is at holding hearings.

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Especially galling given how many people have clamored for "answers" on Benghazi.

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

why do i keep falling for this?

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Interesting that House GOP is citing as evidence that funding did not matter the word of Charlene Lamb, who resigned after Benghazi.

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Also, fwiw, Charlene Lamb did NOT say there was live video in her testimony. She said she monitored events, but via indirect audio mainly.

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Why are members allowed to request answers in writing after they use all their time to ask the questions?

2 HOURS AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

These hearings are a sorry coda to an actually very important situation: trivial questions abound while substantive ones go unasked.

AN HOUR AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

What if in a trial every juror got five minutes to question every witness, instead of one lawyer on each side?

AN HOUR AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Oh great, now we're talking about Fast and Furious. Can we go back to the Challenger instead?

AN HOUR AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

Joshua Hersh

@joshuahersh

Whyyyyyyyyy wasn't there more security in Tripoli during the attack?

31 MINUTES AGO • ORIGINAL LINKREPLYRETWEETFAVORITE

The 8 memorable moments from Hillary Clinton's Benghazi testimony (Washington Post)

By Sean Sullivan

The Fix

Updated: January 23, 2013

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's long-awaited testimony about the Sept. 11 attack on a U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya, began Wednesday morning in an appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and continued in the afternoon with the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The two-and-a-half-hour morning session and three-hour afternoon hearing were not short on drama. Below we take a look at the most memorable moments from the proceedings.

1. An emotional Clinton's voice cracked as she spoke about the safety of American diplomats.
2. Clinton had a heated exchange with Sen. Ron Johnson (W-Wis.) over his assertion that U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice had "intentionally misled" people over the circumstances surrounding the attack.
3. Kentucky Republican Senator — and likely 2016 presidential candidate — Rand Paul said he would have relieved Clinton of her post had he been president.
4. Arizona Sen. John McCain laid out the Republican argument — in blunt terms — against the Obama administration's approach in the aftermath of the Benghazi attacks.
5. Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) asked Clinton why she didn't appear on the Sunday news shows following the attack. "Going on the Sunday shows is not my favorite thing to do," Clinton replied.
6. In an exchange that grew heated, Clinton told Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) that she did not watch the attack in real time.
7. Rep. Ted Deutch (D-Fla.) said he hoped Clinton would one day consider a return to public service, and perhaps hinting at hopes for a future presidential run, added, "should that return bring you to Florida, I will look forward to welcoming you there."
8. Rep. Tom Marino (R-Pa.) held up several photos of an al-Qaeda affiliated flag that appeared in several protests, when it was his turn to question Clinton.

In Benghazi hearings, Hillary Clinton storms Capitol Hill (Washington Post)

By Dana Milbank

Opinion Writer

Wednesday, January 23, 6:46 PM

They blamed her mismanagement for the death of four Americans at a diplomatic outpost in Benghazi, Libya. They accused her of a cover-up. Some even suggested that she faked an illness to avoid testifying about the attack.

On Wednesday, Hillary Rodham Clinton finally had her chance to respond to critics, and the outgoing secretary of state served up a potent brew of righteous outrage.

She began her appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee with restraint, and even remorse. She choked up as she described receiving flag-draped caskets at Andrews Air Force Base and hugging relatives of those killed.

But her anger boiled over when rookie Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) demanded to know why she and her aides didn't immediately call those evacuated from Benghazi to find out whether a protest had preceded the attack. Clinton replied that she didn't want to interfere with the FBI's investigation — which is almost certainly what Republicans would have accused her of doing.

"That's a good excuse," Johnson said, scornfully.

"Well, no, it's a fact," Clinton retorted, growing irritated. Waving her index finger, she pointed out that much of what happened in Libya on Sept. 11 remains unknown.

"No, no, no, no," Johnson rejoined. "We were misled that there were supposedly protests and then something sprang out of that, an assault . . . and the American people could have known that within days."

Clinton raised her voice. "With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," she shouted at the lawmaker. Waving her arms and then pounding the witness table with her fist, she continued: "Was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?"

Johnson stopped interrupting as Clinton continued. "It is, from my perspective, less important today looking backward as to why these militants decided they did it than to find them and bring them to justice," she said.

Johnson didn't attempt a rebuttal. "Okay, thank you, Madam Secretary."

It never made sense that Republicans focused less on the serious security lapses that allowed the debacle in Libya than on the supposed cover-up surrounding U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice's initial claim, since disproved, that the attack had spun out of a protest.

But Clinton's appearance on the Hill, expected to be her last before she is succeeded by John Kerry, provided a broader vindication of the one-time (and probably future) presidential candidate. There had been concern among Democrats that the Benghazi episode would mar her otherwise successful tenure at State — but in fact she is leaving the post more popular than ever.

A new Washington Post-ABC News poll finds that 67 percent of Americans view her favorably, a career high and roughly double the popularity congressional Republicans have. So when Clinton clashed with GOP lawmakers Wednesday, it had the feeling of a Hummer colliding with a Smart Car.

Senators, even Republicans, prefaced remarks with obligatory good wishes.

"You probably traveled more than any secretary of state in history and came at your job in the way we all thought you would, with hard work and diligence," said Sen. Bob Corker (Tenn.), the panel's ranking Republican.

Added Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.): "As a doctor, I will tell you, I have seen you work yourself to exhaustion, not for your own benefit but for the benefit of the people of this country, and the country is grateful."

Clinton, in heavy green jacket, dark pants and thick glasses, disarmed her critics, who sat uncomfortably through the tearful moment in her opening statement. She further preempted their criticism by readily accepting responsibility for the lapse, which occurred at lower levels.

After her dressing-down of Johnson, the questioning became less aggressive. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), although making clear his displeasure with the handling of Libya generally, was relatively subdued. "We are proud of you," he told Clinton. "All over the world where I travel, you are viewed with admiration and respect."

Only gadfly Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) still had the stomach to fight with Clinton. "Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi . . . I would have relieved you of your post," he charged.

"Ohhh!" exclaimed one of Clinton's aides, appalled.

But Paul, a man of exotic opinions, is never going to be president, and Clinton deflected his provocation with a mild reply: "I believe in taking responsibility, and I have done so."

That may have been Clinton's most cutting response to a critic: Letting him know he's not worth wasting her breath.

Inside the Ring: CIA in Benghazi (Washington Times)

By Bill Gertz-The Washington Times Wednesday, January 23, 2013

Congressional testimony from Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Wednesday provided no new information about the CIA's covert operation in Benghazi involving weapons shipments.

Appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during a hearing on the deadly Sept. 11 Benghazi terrorist attack, she sidestepped questions about a CIA operation to send arms from Libya to Turkey or other countries in the region.

The CIA was operating a compound with more than a dozen operatives about a mile from the diplomatic outpost that was attacked by al Qaeda-linked terrorists, who killed four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stephens. Two contractors from the CIA compound who tried to rescue the ambassador were among the dead.

Sen. Rand Paul, Kentucky Republican, asked Mrs. Clinton if "the U.S. [is] involved with any procuring of weapons, transfer of weapons, buying, selling, anyhow transferring weapons to Turkey out of Libya?"

A surprised Mrs. Clinton initially responded: "To Turkey?"

"I will have to take that question for the record," she said. "That's — I — nobody's ever raised that with me."

Mr. Paul said news reports indicated that ships had left Libya that might be carrying weapons.

"And what I'd like to know is — the annex that was close by — were they involved with procuring, buying, selling, obtaining weapons, and were any of these weapons being transferred to other countries, any countries, Turkey included?" he asked.

Mrs. Clinton said: "Well, senator, you'll have to direct that question to the agency that ran the annex, and I will see what information is available."

"You're saying you don't know?" Mr. Paul asked.

"I do not know. I don't have any information on that," she responded.

Details of the CIA operation could not be learned. A U.S. official said the operation was set up last year to try to procure or control weapons that could be used by terrorists that had been taken from the armed forces of the former regime of Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

A U.S. military official said the new Libyan regime was very supportive of Syria's rebels fighting the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Sen. Ron Johnson: Secretary Hillary Clinton, you failed (USA Today)

Ron Johnson

9:02p.m. EST January 23, 2013

Benghazi is a failure of leadership — before, during and after the terrorist attack.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Our diplomatic forces were denied the security they repeatedly requested for many months.

Four Americans were murdered.

Afterward, Americans were also misinformed as to the nature and perpetrators of that attack.

During her Senate testimony, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that approximately 25 Americans who were on the ground or who witnessed the terrorist attack in Benghazi were immediately evacuated. Secretary Clinton also revealed that neither she, nor her senior people, debriefed or spoke with those people immediately after the attack, or for months afterward, to understand what happened. She stated that she didn't want to be later accused of playing politics.

When I questioned her about the misinformation disseminated for days by the administration, most notably by Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice on Sunday news programs five days after the attack, she asked, "What difference does it make?"

If you don't expeditiously debrief the people who witnessed the attack, how can you understand who initiated it, what weapons they used and who may have been involved? How do you initiate a proper response if you don't know what transpired? How do you move properly to protect other American assets and people in the region? How do you know what failures occurred, so that you can immediately correct them, if you have not debriefed the very victims of those failures? And lastly, how do you tell the truth to the American people if you don't know the facts?

Our diplomatic forces in Benghazi were denied the security they repeatedly requested for many months before Sept. 11, 2012. Secretary Clinton stated that she was not told of those desperate requests in the most dangerous region in the world. As a result, our people in Benghazi were ill-prepared to repel or avoid that attack, and four Americans were murdered. For many days after the event, the American people were also misinformed as to the nature and perpetrators of that attack.

In truth, Benghazi is a failure of leadership — before, during and after the terrorist attack.

To answer Secretary Clinton, it does make a difference. It matters enormously for the American public to know whether or not their president and members of his administration are on top of a crisis and telling them the truth.

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., is a member of the Foreign Relations Committee.

At Benghazi hearings, 'gotcha' politics: Our view (USA Today)

The Editorial Board

9:05p.m. EST January 23, 2013

Senators' finger-pointing overshadows larger security challenges.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Clinton deserves a measure of the responsibility, which she has accepted.

But some of the GOP rhetoric was over the top.

America has more urgent security priorities going forward.

The terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya, on the 11th anniversary of 9/11, which left Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans dead, became a particularly unseemly part of last fall's presidential campaign.

Republicans seized on the tragedy in a bid to undermine President Obama's record on national security. The Obama administration deflected legitimate questions about the attack and seemed to slow-walk efforts to tell Americans what really happened.

The ugly truth emerged last month in a report by an independent review board that spread the blame broadly. State Department officials had rejected pleas for more protection amid warnings that the security situation in Libya was deteriorating dangerously. Despite its sanctimonious grandstanding, Congress was complicit in the tragedy, too: It had restricted funding for diplomatic security.

Wednesday's long-awaited congressional testimony by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was an opportunity to end the incessant political advantage-seeking over Benghazi and explore the larger issues going forward. Instead, the day-long hearings in the Senate and the House generated more heat than light.

Republicans treated the proceedings as a chance to rough up Clinton, a possible contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, on her way out the door as secretary of State. Clinton is a legitimate target for criticism who deserves a measure of the responsibility, which she has accepted. But some of the GOP rhetoric was over the top, such as Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul's assertion that she should have been fired for not reading diplomatic cables, and South Carolina Rep. Jeff Duncan's accusation that she let the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi become a "death trap" and committed national security "malpractice."

More important, the finger-pointing overshadowed the urgent priorities going forward.

One of those is to bring the Benghazi murderers to justice and send the message that any terrorists who target Americans will be hunted to the ends of the earth. So far as is known, more than four months after the attack, none of those responsible for the deaths of Stevens and his colleagues has been captured or killed.

Another priority is improving diplomatic security in dangerous areas, particularly Arab nations where strongmen have been toppled and near-anarchy reigns. In Libya, the downfall of Moammar Gadhafi has left a desperately weak central government, with heavily armed militias vying for power.

More broadly, the United States needs to figure out the right mix of diplomacy, nation-building and military assistance to counteract the spread of Islamic terrorism in Northern Africa. Is Congress willing to spend money to back up its demands for action? And how does the United States apply the lessons from Libya to other, more critical countries such as Syria and Egypt?

These are tough questions with complicated answers, or no real answers at all. Dealing with them is much harder than continuing to search for scapegoats.

Africa's fast-reaction force ready to go from Colorado (Washington Times)

By Rowan Scarborough-The Washington Times Wednesday, January 23, 2013

Four years after its startup, U.S. Africa Command has its own fast-reaction commando force — based at Fort Carson, Colo., thousands of miles from the troubled continent.

The command, known as Africom, turned out to be a toothless tiger when it faced its biggest crisis on Sept. 11 as militants attacked the U.S. Consulate and an annex in Benghazi, Libya, and killed four Americans, including the U.S. ambassador.

The Benghazi debacle highlighted the fact that Africa Command, despite its oversight of a volatile region, had few combat forces or a quick-response special operations unit called a Commander's In-extremis Force (CIF) that is designed for such emergencies. Each geographic combatant command, except Africom on that day, had a CIF.

Africom and U.S. European Command are based in Stuttgart, Germany. Army Gen. Carter Ham, Africom's top officer, turned to his neighbor's command CIF to deploy to Benghazi. But that force was conducting training in Central Europe.

During the eight-hour attack on the consulate, the best that Africom could muster was two unarmed spy drones that relayed video feeds to the Pentagon and the CIA.

Four months after Benghazi, it is difficult to determine whether Africom is any better equipped to deal with a similar crisis in North Africa, where al Qaeda-linked groups appear to be on the march.

The command declined to answer that question from The Washington Times as another hot spot, the West African country of Mali, is under assault from Islamic extremists.

Africom, which has responsibility for all U.S. military operations on the continent except Egypt, now has its own CIF.

But a defense official said the CIF resides at Fort Carson, home to the Army's 10th Special Forces Group — 6,000 miles away from any flash points in Africa.

"They're not located in Europe. They are not in Africa," a defense official told The Times. "They are located out of Fort Carson."

Africa Command operates one base on the continent, at Djibouti, several thousand miles from Benghazi — too far away to help the American ambassador, his information officer and two former Navy SEALs who were killed by al Qaeda-linked militants.

"There are no intentions to establish any other bases in Africa at this time," the defense official said.

When told that Africom's first fast-reaction force is based near the Rocky Mountains, a senior retired officer told The Times: "You can't be serious. That's pathetic. I absolutely cannot believe that. I'm astounded by that."

The Pentagon escaped criticism in a State Department blue-ribbon commission report about the Benghazi attack: It castigated the State officials for failing to provide better security at the mission despite heightened extremist violence and repeated requests from diplomats for more protection.

But the Defense Department did feel the sting of criticism in a subsequent inquiry by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

It singled out the State Department and the Pentagon for failing to plan — to assess the growing violence in Libya and look at forces available in case of an attack.

Said the senior retired officer, who was consulted by senior officials after the attack: "They had no assigned forces that could respond. They also had not alerted any forces to be in preparation to respond and possible move them closer because it was 9-11 and the fact that Benghazi certainly was heating up."

The Senate report called the military's inability to respond a tragedy.

"[The Defense Department]and AFRICOM tried to provide effective support on September 11th, but given the nature of the attack in Benghazi and the distance of their assets from Benghazi, they were tragically unable to do so," the report said.

It listed the assets that might have helped if moved sooner: "AFRICOM's lack of operational assets near Benghazi hindered its capacity to evacuate U.S. personnel during the attacks. The Djibouti base was several thousand miles away. There was no Marine expeditionary unit, carrier group or a smaller group of U.S. ships closely located in the Mediterranean Sea that could have provided aerial or ground support or helped evacuate personnel from Benghazi. AFRICOM also lacked a dedicated Commander's In-extremis Force (CIF) — a specially trained force capable of performing no-notice missions."

The Pentagon's timeline and the Senate report showed that, at about 2 a.m. Libya time, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta ordered three units — European command's CIF, a special commando team in the U.S. and a Marine Corps anti-terrorism team in Rota, Spain — to respond to the Benghazi assaults.

They arrived at a staging base in Sicily long after the attacks had ended. The dead and survivors were flown to Tripoli in chartered aircraft.

The attack on the mission where U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens was killed began at 9:40 p.m. local time.

The two U.S. teams arrived in Sicily on Sept. 12.

Clinton, grilled on Benghazi attack, cites spreading regional threat (LA Times Updated)

In sometimes testy exchanges, Republican lawmakers press secretary of State on whether the administration missed warning signs of the terrorist attack that killed Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in Libya.

By Paul Richter, Los Angeles Times

5:17 PM PST, January 23, 2013

WASHINGTON — Republican lawmakers failed to open new lines of inquiry on the deadly Sept. 11 attack on the U.S. mission in Libya despite back-to-back grillings Wednesday of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton for a fuller explanation of the administration's response to the much-debated terrorist assault.

Testifying weeks before she is expected to leave office, Clinton emphasized in consecutive sessions before the House and Senate foreign policy committees that there was a "rapidly changing threat environment" in North Africa, citing the recent terrorist attack in Algeria and growing instability in Mali, Nigeria and elsewhere.

"We now face a spreading jihadist threat," she told the Senate panel. She said the flow of weapons and fighters from Libya since the overthrow of the late leader Moammar Kadafi "is the source of one of our biggest threats."

"We have to recognize this is a global movement," she said of groups aligned with Al Qaeda. "We can kill leaders, but until we help establish strong democratic institutions ... we're going to be faced with this level of instability."

In sometimes testy exchanges, Republicans pushed Clinton on whether top administration officials missed warning signs of the terrorist attack that killed U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in the Libyan city of Benghazi.

Clinton said she never saw any specific requests for additional security in Benghazi, saying such requests went to lower-level security professionals at the State Department.

"They didn't come to me," she said. "I didn't approve them. I didn't deny them."

Though most GOP members treated the outgoing secretary with deference, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky said bluntly that had he been president, he would have fired her for failing to read diplomatic cables from Benghazi.

"With your leaving, you accept culpability for the worst tragedy since 9/11," Paul said. "I would have relieved you of your post. I think it's inexcusable."

Clinton said she accepted all 29 recommendations of an independent investigative board, adding that 85% were "on track" for completion in March.

"As I have said many times, I take responsibility," she said. "Nobody is more committed to getting this right."

Although the controversy could tarnish Clinton, a potential presidential candidate in 2016, it has produced no apparent effect on her lofty public approval ratings. Republican congressional aides acknowledged that it would be difficult to keep the issue in the spotlight.

Clinton's voice broke as she related how she watched Marines carry the four flag-draped caskets off a military plane at Andrews Air Force Base.

"I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, and the wives left alone to raise their children," she said.

Clinton seemed to lose patience with Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.), who said that had she had picked up the phone and called one of the survivors, she could have cleared up uncertainty about whether the attack followed a "spontaneous demonstration" or not.

"Was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans?" Clinton asked in a rising voice. "What difference, at this point, does it make?"

"It is, from my perspective, less important today looking backward as to why these militants decided" to launch an attack "than to find them and bring them to justice, and then maybe we'll figure out what was going on in the meantime," she said.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) told Clinton that her answers "are not satisfactory to me.... Here we are, four months later, and we still don't have the basic information."

Law enforcement and congressional sources say three suspects have surfaced in the Benghazi case.

One is in custody in Egypt, but the FBI has had little or no access to him so far, sources said.

Another suspect was identified as Ali Ani Harzi, who was detained until 10 days ago by Tunisian authorities. FBI agents had brief access to him in December, and came away unsure of his role or whether his statements on the case were accurate.

Clinton told the Senate committee that Tunisian authorities were monitoring Harzi and believed they could find him if necessary.

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Times staff writer Richard Serrano in Washington contributed to this report.

Tough finale for Hillary Clinton (San Francisco Chronicle Editorial)

Published 5:17 pm, Wednesday, January 23, 2013

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's long-delayed testimony on the deadly Sept. 11, 2012, attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, was every bit as contentious as anticipated. Republicans were aggressive in their questioning - and Clinton was combative in her response.

What the House and Senate hearings did not provide were significant new insights into how the Obama administration missed the urgency of pre-attack warnings about the security problems, why it took so long to send help or whether Americans were intentionally misled with claims that the assault that killed U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three others was the result of a spontaneous demonstration.

Clinton, usually a public figure of steely reserve, showed blasts of emotion under the intense questioning. She choked up as she talked about seeing the flag-draped coffins of the victims. She flashed anger when pressed about the administration's time lapse in acknowledging that the assault was an orchestrated act of terrorism. She drew the ire of her GOP foes when she noted the department's frustration at getting Congress to allow more spending on security.

At one point, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., a potential White House contender in 2016, suggested that "had I been president," Clinton would have been fired for failing to read cables from Stevens about security concerns.

As political theater, it was a draw. But there were two substantive takeaways that should hearten and concern Americans. The good news: The State Department is making good progress on 29 recommendations to upgrade security for its diplomats. The bad news: There is no longer any dispute that this was an act of terrorism. And the perpetrators have not been brought to justice.

What doesn't matter to Hillary Clinton (San Francisco Chronicle)

Debra J. Saunders, Chronicle Columnist

Published 5:17 pm, Wednesday, January 23, 2013

"With all due respect, the fact is, we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go out and kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make?" Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a hearing on the Sept. 11, 2012, attack in Benghazi, Libya, that left Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, Tyrone Woods, Sean Smith and Glen Doherty dead. "It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from happening again."

It matters because a protest gone wild or Libyan guys out for a walk require a very different response - better perimeter security - than a planned armed terrorist attack. A premeditated attack would show that Foggy Bottom was blindsided. A premeditated attack would mean that the administration probably ought to change the way it thinks.

It matters because news reports place some of the Benghazi thugs in Algeria, where their corpses were found after an attack that left 38 hostages dead, including three Americans. The New York Times reports that Algeria captured three Egyptian militants who were involved in both attacks.

I agree with Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., who said, "Barack Obama was not responsible for the Benghazi attack any more than George W. Bush was responsible for the 9/11 attacks."

But if there is evidence that the overthrow of Libyan leader Moammar Khadafy - however well deserved - has destabilized North Africa to an extent that endangers America's national security, the Obama administration would do well to confront that possibility. Mayhap this administration should be more circumspect before further fertilizing the so-called Arab Spring.

The Senate and House hearings Wednesday were not particularly illuminating on that score. For the most part, Democrats fawned over Clinton while Republicans bloviated when they should have been pressing for specific information.

Republicans resumed their tireless efforts to get the Obama administration to come clean about the thinking behind Ambassador Susan Rice's appearance on "Meet the Press" and other Sunday shows on Sept. 16. Rice said, "What happened in Benghazi was in fact initially a spontaneous reaction to what had just transpired hours before in Cairo, almost a copycat of the demonstrations against our facility in Cairo, prompted by" an anti-Muslim video. She also claimed there was no evidence the Benghazi attack was "preplanned."

It is clear today that the administration preferred to blame an American-made video rather than well-armed al Qaeda-inspired terrorists: The election was less than two months away.

Now the election is four years away. Still, Clinton refused to acknowledge that the video didn't cause a clearly planned terrorist attack. "We don't know all the motivations."

So here's what matters. It matters if al Qaeda-inspired terrorists planned this attack. It matters if the same group was involved in the Algeria killings. It doesn't matter if a few guys angry about a video somehow found themselves in the company of armed militants intent on killing a U.S. ambassador.

Debra J. Saunders is a San Francisco Chronicle columnist.

Kelly Ayotte on Hillary Clinton's testimony: "So many questions that went unanswered" (CNN)

January 23rd, 2013
10:12 PM ET

Tonight, Sen. Kelly Ayotte talked to Piers Morgan about Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's testimony at the Benghazi hearings earlier today. There "is still so many questions that went unanswered and frankly some unsatisfactory answers," the Republican senator said.

Clinton said "she was clear eyed about the dangers and threats in Eastern Libya but then she said that 'I didn't see any of the security requests,' which were multiple, coming from the consulate," the New Hampshire senator began. "If you are clear eyed about dangers and threats from Eastern Libya, why weren't you asking the questions about 'do we need more security?'"

Ayotte's concern lies with how situations like the attack on the consulate in Benghazi, Libya are handled in the future:

"When we address what happened here and going forward, we also better address, how are things communicated up the chain of command and why, when you know you're clear eyed about the danger, do you not ask 'have their been additional request?'"

Clinton delivers forceful defense on Benghazi in congressional testimony (Washington Post Updated)

By Anne Gearan, Published: January 22 | Updated: Wednesday, January 23, 5:40 PM

In what probably was her final major public appearance as secretary of state, Hillary Rodham Clinton spent Wednesday delivering a forceful defense of the Obama administration's response to the killings of four Americans in Libya last year and praising the commitment of the United States' diplomats.

Clinton, who returned to work this month after suffering a concussion and blood clot in early December, spent six hours testifying and answering questions. She started at 9 a.m. before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and ended after 5 p.m. with the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Her long-awaited testimony provided little in the way of new information about the attack in Benghazi. But confronting her critics and delivering a spirited defense of the administration's response was essential to the effort to put the tragedy behind her as she leaves a job for which she has received wide praise and contemplates a possible presidential run in 2016.

At times, the usually composed Clinton was emotional, choking up as she described meeting the caskets of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and the three other Americans who were killed in the assault on a diplomatic outpost on Sept. 11. Occasionally her patience wore thin. After one Republican pressed her on the administration's shifting explanations for the attack — which it initially described as the result of a protest — she pounded the table.

"What difference, at this point, does it make?" Clinton demanded. "It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again."

She reiterated that she takes responsibility for what an independent investigation called security lapses and systemic failures within the State Department. But she rejected all suggestions by Republicans that there had been a cover-up in the aftermath of the assault on the temporary post and a nearby annex used by the CIA. She also said she never saw requests by Stevens and others for more security.

Controversy over the Benghazi attack has dogged the administration for months. Republicans' accusations that U.N. Ambassador Susan E. Rice gave a misleading description of the events leading up to the assault resulted in her withdrawing from consideration to replace Clinton, opening the door for the nomination of Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.).

An investigation by an Accountability Review Board appointed by the State Department faulted the department for security shortcomings and not heeding warnings about the dangers in Benghazi and elsewhere in Libya. The board recommended broad changes in security and a review of the way the department spends money and Congress provides it.

Clinton pledged to adopt all 29 recommendations from the review board, saying that many already are being implemented. But she insisted that diplomats must be able to travel and work in dangerous places to do their jobs.

The promises did not satisfy her toughest critics. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) called it "outrageous" that the secretary was not interviewed by the investigators who conducted the independent review.

"I was not asked to speak," Clinton said, adding that she would have done so if the investigators had thought it important.

For the most part, questions from Democrats were prefaced with praise for Clinton's tenure as secretary and focused on ways to improve diplomatic security. Republicans were harsher. Rep. Jeff Duncan (R-S.C.) accused Clinton of "national

security malpractice" for not better protecting the post where Stevens was killed. "You let the consulate become a death trap," he said.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) greeted Clinton politely, but switched his tone quickly, telling her, "Your answers are not satisfactory to me." He said that "numerous warnings" about militant activity in Libya were not addressed and that the State Department's desire for a "soft footprint" in the country "was to some degree responsible for what took place."

Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) said he would have fired Clinton if he had been president, eliciting a gasp from a Clinton aide. And Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Calif.) trying to pin Clinton down later in the day, observed, "Everybody has their own CYA to do here."

On a lighter note, Rep. Steve Chabot (R-Ohio) drew chuckles when he wished Clinton "the best in your future endeavors — mostly."

The sessions took place the day before Kerry's Senate hearing to replace Clinton as secretary. Clinton, who lost the Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama in 2008, had always said she would serve only one term in his Cabinet. Kerry, though still chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chose not to participate in the hearing to avoid the appearance of a conflict, aides said.

Clinton praised diplomats who are working in peril and on a shoestring, asking Congress to free up existing funding and provide more money for security at high-risk embassies and other diplomatic posts worldwide.

As ambassador to Libya, Stevens had sent repeated cables to Washington seeking better security, a point several Republicans raised during the two sessions. In the morning hearing before the Senate, Clinton said that she never saw the requests. "They did not come to me," she said. "I did not approve them. I did not deny them."

Even under sometimes tough questioning, Clinton visibly lost her temper only during the exchange with Sen. Ronald H. Johnson (R-Wis.) when he accused Rice of "purposely misleading the American public" about events leading up to the Benghazi attack. Five days after the assault, Rice said in television interviews that it grew out a spontaneous protest, not a planned terrorist operation. The administration later reversed that view.

Slamming the table and staring at Johnson, Clinton said: "Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that people were trying in real time to get to the best information."

Clinton cast the attack that killed Stevens, diplomat Sean Smith and CIA contractors Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty as part of a larger rise of militancy across a vast swath of northern Africa and the Middle East. Linking the attacks loosely to the instability now on display in Mali and Algeria, Clinton said understanding and confronting that challenge transcends politics.

"We are in a new reality. We are trying to make sense of changes that nobody had predicted but which we're going to have to live with," she said. "Let's be honest with ourselves. Let's avoid turning everything into a political football."

Clinton's voice broke as she described receiving the caskets of the Americans at Joint Base Andrews a few days after the attack.

"For me, this is not just a matter of policy. It's personal," she said, choking up. "I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews. I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, the sisters and brothers, the sons and daughters, and the wives left alone to raise their children."

Clinton Hits Back at Critics on Libya (Wall Street Journal Updated)

GOP Assails Secretary of State Over Handling of Attack; 'Benghazi Did Not Happen in a Vacuum,' She Says

By SIOBHAN GORMAN And JAY SOLOMON

Updated January 23, 2013, 8:50 p.m. ET

WASHINGTON—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton defended the Obama administration's handling of the September terrorist attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya—as well as her overall legacy—in a long-awaited congressional appearance Wednesday.

Mrs. Clinton was by turns emotional and fiery as she faced Republican lawmakers who have pressed her for months to testify about charges that she and the State Department failed to properly defend U.S. posts in Libya despite extensive warnings about terrorist threats. Her appearances Wednesday before Senate and House committees also served as a final opportunity for Republicans and political critics to directly challenge her record at the State Department before she steps down as secretary.

She nearly wept while recounting her meeting with relatives of the four Americans who were slain in Benghazi, including the U.S. ambassador, Christopher Stevens. And she pounded on a table as she dismissed detailed queries from a Republican senator about what was known about the attack and the assailants in the hours and days after it occurred as well as why the administration's initial description wasn't more accurate.

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," Mrs. Clinton snapped at Sen. Ron Johnson (R., Wis.), in response to those questions. "Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?"

Democrats largely praised the former first lady's record as top U.S. diplomat, but many Republicans made clear they weren't satisfied with her responses. They said she failed to adequately explain the State Department's refusal to provide more security, the administration's description of the attack as an outgrowth of political protests that were racking the region at the time in response to an anti-Muslim movie, or changes by Central Intelligence Agency officials to public "talking points."

"The answers, frankly, that you've given this morning are not satisfactory to me," said Sen. John McCain (R., Ariz.), who has been among the harshest critics of the administration's handling of Benghazi. Mrs. Clinton, who said she initiated an open investigation of the incident and had sent State Department officials to Capitol Hill more than 30 times to testify, concluded that critics may never be satisfied. "We just have a disagreement," she told Mr. McCain.

Mrs. Clinton, 65 years old, delayed her testimony for more than a month amid a string of health problems that kept her sidelined from the State Department, including a blood clot that formed near her brain.

As Mrs. Clinton leaves office, 69% of Americans approve of her job as secretary of state, according to an NBC/Wall Street Journal poll released last week. Sen. John Kerry (D., Mass.) has been nominated to be her successor, and his Senate confirmation hearing is Thursday. Mrs. Clinton is widely seen as a front-runner to become the Democratic nominee for president if she decides to run in 2016.

Two members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who were among her questioners Wednesday, are viewed as potential GOP presidential contenders in 2016: Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida and Rand Paul of Kentucky.

Mr. Paul said Wednesday that he would have fired Mrs. Clinton if he had been president at the time of the Benghazi attack. He accused the secretary of state of being "culpable" in the worst terrorist act against the U.S. since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

"Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post," he said, referring to messages from Benghazi about security concerns. "I think it's inexcusable."

Mrs. Clinton repeated that she has taken responsibility for the State Department's handling of the attacks. She said the reason she convened an Accountability Review Board and asked that its findings be made public was to ensure an independent investigation of the Benghazi attacks. The accountability board found the State Department's response to the Benghazi attack showed "systemic failures" in its handling of consular security. It faulted a "lack of proactive senior leadership" for security in Benghazi, and said physical security was "profoundly weak."

Republicans have charged that the Obama administration, following the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden and a series of drone strikes on other top militant leaders, prematurely declared victory against al Qaeda. Tennessee Sen. Bob Corker, the top Republican on the senate panel, said the group has grown even more dangerous in the wake of the Arab Spring.

The departing secretary said that while al Qaeda has been weakened in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the group represents a global movement that can't easily be decapitated. Mrs. Clinton said al Qaeda militants and sympathizers are now returning home and joining up with Qaeda affiliates and related militant groups, which is bolstering jihadist syndicates. Mrs. Clinton acknowledged security threats posed by the militant groups operating in North Africa. She said the political rebellions that have spread across the Middle East and Africa over the past two years have created opportunities for democratic change as well as instability.

"We can kill leaders, but until we help establish strong democratic institutions, until we do a better job communicating our values and building relationships, we're going to be faced with this level of instability," she said.

"Benghazi did not happen in a vacuum," Mrs. Clinton said. "The Arab revolutions have scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region."

She characterized an Islamist insurgency in Mali as "a very serious ongoing threat."

"We are in for a struggle," she said. "But it is a necessary struggle."

Mrs. Clinton said that the investigation into the attacks is continuing and that the Federal Bureau of Investigation is pursuing some promising leads, though she didn't elaborate. A suspect who had been held in Tunisia but was released is being closely watched by the Tunisians, she said.

"I certainly hope that the FBI is able to investigate, identify, and hold responsible those who waged this attack against us," she said. "Based on their work, they feel they are pursuing some very positive leads."

Mrs. Clinton spoke delicately around the CIA presence in Benghazi—referring to "the annex" that was the base for the CIA there. She said the State Department and "other government agencies" need to strengthen their security agreements.

Her comments in both the Senate and House hearings clarified an earlier misunderstanding between the State Department and CIA. At the time of the attack, State Department officials believed they had a formal arrangement with CIA for backup security, while CIA didn't think there was a formal responsibility. Mrs. Clinton described as a more informal understanding.

"We had a very good relationship with the annex in Benghazi. We helped them. They helped us," she told the Senate panel. "It was more on-the-ground working together. It wasn't part of an overall template."

Secretary of State Clinton Claims Fault for Benghazi Attack in Heated Hearing (PBS NewsHour)

REPORT AIR DATE: Jan. 23, 2013

SUMMARY

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke before Senate and House committees about the deadly attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Gwen Ifill reports on Clinton's taking responsibility for the inadequate security as well as her rejection of claims from Republicans that the Obama administration had deceived the nation.

TRANSCRIPT

GWEN IFILL: Secretary of Clinton – Secretary of State Hillary Clinton testified for the first time today about last September's deadly attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya.

Her testimony before Senate and House committees was at times tense and even emotional.

HILLARY CLINTON, Secretary of State: As I have said many times, I take responsibility, and nobody is more committed to getting this right. I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger and more secure.

GWEN IFILL: From the start, Sec. Clinton made clear she accepts ultimate blame for security failings before the attack that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans. She told a Senate hearing this morning, it's not just about policy; it's personal.

HILLARY CLINTON: I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews. I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, the sisters and brothers, the sons and daughters, and the wives left alone to raise their children.

GWEN IFILL: But sparks flew when Senate Republicans accused the Obama administration of deceiving the nation by initially suggesting the Benghazi attack was something other than terrorism.

Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin:

SEN. RON JOHNSON, R-Wis.: We were misled that there were supposedly protests and then something spread out of that, an assault sprang out of that. And that was easily ascertained that that was not the fact.

SEN. RON JOHNSON: And the American people could have known that within days, and they didn't know that.

HILLARY CLINTON: With all due respect, the fact is, we had four dead Americans. Was it because of a protest? Or was it because of guys out for a walk one night and decided they would go kill some Americans? What difference at this point does it make?

It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator. Now, honestly, I will do my best to answer your questions about this, but the -- the fact is that people were trying in real time to get to the best information.

GWEN IFILL: Republican John McCain pressed Clinton on why U.S. consular staff evacuated from Libya to Germany weren't questioned sooner.

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN, R-Ariz.: I categorically reject your answer to Sen. Johnson about, well, we didn't ask these survivors, who were flown to Ramstein the next day, that they -- that this was not a spontaneous demonstration.

To say that it's because an investigation was going on? The American people deserve to know answers, and they certainly don't deserve false answers.

So, here we are four months later and we still don't have the basic information. Now, if you want to go out and tell the American people what happened, you should at least have interviewed the people who were there, instead of saying, no, we couldn't talk to them because an FBI investigation was going on.

HILLARY CLINTON: Well, Senator, I understand your very, very strong feelings.

You knew Chris. You were a friend of Chris. You were one of the staunchest supporters of the efforts to dislodge Gadhafi and try to give the Libyan people a chance. And we just have a disagreement. We have a disagreement about what did happen and when it happened with respect to explaining the sequence of events.

We did get to talk to the D.S. agents when they got back to this country. We did so. It was not before September 15. We had no access to the surveillance cameras for weeks, which helped to answer a number of questions.

GWEN IFILL: The challenges continued later in the day before the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

REP. DANA ROHRBACHER, R-Calif.: Over and over and over again, it was repeated that we had enraged the Islamic terrorists which, by the way, what's that do?

When you say that we enraged the Islamic terrorists, that means we're at fault, they're not at fault.

HILLARY CLINTON: I want to be clear that, of course, it was a terrorist attack.

The very next day, I called it an attack by heavily armed militants on our compound. I think there is still, however, questions about exactly what caused it, who the attackers were.

GWEN IFILL: In the Senate, Kentucky. Republican Rand Paul said Clinton, who is leaving office shortly, should have been fired first.

SEN. RAND PAUL, R- Kentucky.: I'm glad that you're accepting responsibility. I think that ultimately with your leaving, you accept the culpability for the worst tragedy since 9/11. And I really mean that. Had I been president at the time, and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post. I think it's inexcusable.

GWEN IFILL: Democrat Dick Durbin of Illinois accused Republicans of applying a double standard.

SEN. RICHARD DURBIN, D-Ill.: I do want to make one point, for the record here, about whether the American people are told everything right away, in the right way, so that they can be fully informed. And I would like to refer to five words for them to reflect on: Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

We were told by every level of government here there were Iraqi weapons of mass destruction that justified a war, the invasion of the United States. We're still searching for those weapons. They didn't exist. Thousands of Americans lost their lives.

We could have a hearing on that, if you'd like.

GWEN IFILL: While the Benghazi attack was the main focus, Clinton also turned her attention to upheaval elsewhere in North Africa.

HILLARY CLINTON: Benghazi did not happen in a vacuum. The Arab revolutions scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region. Instability in Mali has created an expanding safe haven for terrorists who look to extend their influence and plot further attacks of the kind we saw just last week in Algeria.

GWEN IFILL: In Mali, elements of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, known as AQIM, have seized a large swathe of territory, prompting France to intervene militarily with airpower and ground troops.

The U.S. military is providing transport flights to aid the French, and Clinton said other assistance is still under consideration.

HILLARY CLINTON: But it is a necessary struggle. We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven. People say to me all the time, well, AQIM hasn't attacked the United States.

Well, before 9/11, 2001, we hadn't been attacked on our homeland since, I guess, the War of 1812 and -- and Pearl Harbor. So you can't say, well, because they haven't done something they're not going to do it.

This is not only a terrorist syndicate; it is a criminal enterprise.

GWEN IFILL: Clinton also said the recent crisis at a natural gas plant in Algeria is more evidence of the growing threat of AQIM.

Islamist militants seized the site last week, and the Algerian military struck back. The Algerian government says at least 37 foreign hostages were killed, including three Americans.

Clinton conceded many questions remain about that incident.

HILLARY CLINTON: And let me offer our deepest condolences to the families of the Americans and all of the people from many nations who were killed and injured in that recent hostage crisis. We're in close touch with the government of Algeria. We stand ready to provide assistance. We are seeking to gain a fuller understanding of what took place so we can work together with Algerians and others to prevent such terrorist attacks in the future.

GWEN IFILL: Clinton is expected to be back before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee tomorrow, to introduce her likely successor, Sen. John Kerry.

JEFFREY BROWN: Online, you can watch some of the more heated exchanges from the hearing, as well as read the full testimony transcript.

In Light of Benghazi Hearings, Taking Stock of Arab Spring, North Africa Turmoil (PBS NewsHour)

ANALYSIS AIR DATE: Jan. 23, 2013

SUMMARY

As Secretary Clinton offers congressional testimony on the consulate attack in Benghazi, Jeffrey Brown talks with former U.S. ambassador Nicholas Burns and Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute about Clinton's performance and whether the United States is doing enough to combat Islamic militants in North Africa.

TRANSCRIPT

JEFFREY BROWN: And we pick up on Secretary of State Clinton's testimony today and issues it raised about Benghazi, the growing dangers in Africa, and the challenges for U.S. foreign policy.

We're joined by former U.S. diplomat Nicholas Burns, who served in Republican and Democratic administrations. He's now with the Kennedy School of Government and Harvard University. And Danielle Pletka, vice president for foreign and defense studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

Nick Burns, I want to start with you and start with Benghazi. Was there more light shed today? Where do things stand in terms of understanding what happened and the response to it?

NICHOLAS BURNS, Former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs: Well, Jeffrey, I thought it was a commanding performance by Secretary Clinton. She was well informed. She was a master of the detail in all the briefings.

And she took responsibility, which was the right thing to do. She said that she will implement all the 29 recommendations of the accountability review board. Now, I think that the Republicans there obviously had a right and I think they had an obligation to ask tough questions, because this was a disaster for the American Foreign Service to lose four people in one day, including Ambassador Chris Stevens.

But I must say just watching it this morning and as it went on this afternoon in the House of Representatives, there were elements of partisanship that we really don't need anymore. It was almost as if we have been transported back to September and October and the presidential campaign.

And certainly the remarks will of Sen. Rand Paul were ugly. And they were very unwise, to accuse Secretary Clinton of culpability in the way that he did. I think we have got to move forward, Jeffrey, to two big issues. One is, how do we protect our diplomats going forward? And part of that answer is for the State Department to learn the lessons of what happened and what went wrong.

Part of it is for Congress to fully fund embassy security. Congress denied the State Department \$340 million that it needed last year to fortify our embassies. And the second big issue ...

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, let me stop you there.

NICHOLAS BURNS: How do we now go after the terrorist groups?

JEFFREY BROWN: OK. You have put them both on the table then.

Let me get Danielle Pletka in.

First, what do you think of what unfolded today with Secretary Clinton in the ...

DANIELLE PLETKA, American Enterprise Institute: Well, I think Nick was right. The secretary has obviously got a great command of the facts. She's a good speaker. She's authoritative. And she was a member of Congress. She knows how to handle her former colleagues.

But it really was a lot of sound and fury signifying not very much. She didn't really answer questions about what happened in the run-up to the attack, why our response wasn't better. And all of these efforts to direct us to move forward and to learn these lessons really fail to understand that the way we move forward is by acknowledging exactly what went wrong.

Just saying "I take responsibility" is admirable and sounds gutsy, but it doesn't really mean you're taking responsibility.

JEFFREY BROWN: But what about what Nick Burns says, that there's now been this review? It's looked at it. It's come up with many recommendations. And that is -- what she's saying is, in a sense, that's the way to move forward is to implement it and learn from what happened.

DANIELLE PLETKA: Well, it's a very Washington perspective. You know, we have our blue-ribbon commission. We appointed the right generals and former diplomats.

The truth is that what happened, and the reason this became a scandal is not just because of the absolutely dreadful murder by terrorists of four people serving their country. It was because the White House and the State Department and many others insisted for a full week after the attack that occurred on Sept. 11th that it was the responsibility of a film and the response to a film, and not a terrorist attack.

Now, the American people, not the Congress, not the secretary, they deserve answers, and those answers really haven't been forthcoming, and they were not on show today.

JEFFREY BROWN: Well, Nick Burns, try -- respond to that, but also sort of try to move this into the larger picture, because the other part of what she was talking about, of course, today was the other parts of what's unfolding in North Africa and how do we move forward.

NICHOLAS BURNS: Well, Jeffrey, I would just say that Secretary Clinton does have 29 specific recommendations before her by a very serious panel, and she's in the middle of implementing all of them.

I think that's the right thing for her to do. And, therefore, I did think that she dealt directly with the questions that were asked today. There's a much larger issue here. And that that's we're witnessing that two years into the Arab revolutions -- and the Arab revolutions are entering a new and dangerous phase, and we're seeing it in North Africa in this part of the world, with the terrorist attack and hostage-taking in Algeria of last week, with the destabilization of Libya, and in some ways of Egypt itself.

And you're seeing now a radical terrorist group, Islamic terrorist group taking over the northern part of Mali. This has consequences of the entire region of what the Africans call the Sahel, which extends from Mauritania in the west, Mali, Burkina Faso, the southern parts of Libya, and Tunisia and Algeria.

It's very important for American interests that we respond to this and go after those terrorists. And thank goodness for the French, who have now taken up the lead with a lot of African countries supporting them, by the way, to try to stop this group. It's very important that we meet that challenge.

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, so, Danielle Pletka, does your critique from Benghazi extend to what is unfolding now, when you see the administration responding or not responding?

DANIELLE PLETKA: Well, not responding is the answer.

I think the entire trend has been troubling. And I think Benghazi was merely a symptom of a larger policy of retreat, of unwillingness to deal with the challenges that we're facing from al-Qaida, because it's not just in the Maghreb. It's not just in Libya and in Mali and in Algeria. It's also in Yemen. It's in Sinai. It's in Iraq. It's, of course, in South Asia and Afghanistan and Pakistan.

JEFFREY BROWN: But in what ways do you see us retreating, specifically in North Africa, in Maghreb?

DANIELLE PLETKA: Well, I think it's nice that Nick said that we should thank the French, and absolutely the French have interests in Mali as well.

Apparently, the administration is really struggling right now about how much support to provide to the French, not on the ground, but merely on the question of refueling their flights.

If we're not even willing to do that, it does beg the question about how willing we're going to be to step up to this challenge in the Maghreb.

JEFFREY BROWN: You see a larger pulling back happening in the administration?

DANIELLE PLETKA: Absolutely. I think that is the signal we have gotten from the president's appointments.

I also think, frankly, that it's the signal that we got in Libya. The subcontracting of arming the forces in Libya that were fighting Gadhafi to Gulf countries meant that arms flowed not to people who we chose, not to people who NATO chose, but to people who were chosen by Gulf countries.

That's one of the reasons we have this terrible blowback.

JEFFREY BROWN: Well, Nick Burns, that's larger question. And, of course, we're at the beginning of a new administration. We heard the inaugural speech the other day. Do you see the administration somehow pulling back from its efforts particularly in Africa?

NICHOLAS BURNS: No, I don't at all. I think that's unfair criticism.

First, the president has appointed both Sen. John Kerry and Sen. Chuck Hagel, internationalists, capable people who really know what they're talking about. Second, the administration began lifting by C-17 aircraft French soldiers into Mali on Monday. We're providing all sorts of logistical and intelligence support to them. We're behind them.

And, third, the administration I think has done very well in engaging in Egypt. And as we talk, Jeffrey, about the stability of the Middle East, Egypt is the keystone country. And a lot is going wrong in Egypt, but a couple of things are going right. Elected government paying attention to its constitutional responsibilities has kept the peace agreements, the Camp David accords with Israel, and has a working relationship with the United States.

So, I'm worried about a lot of these trends in the Middle East. We haven't even talked about the civil war in Syria. But I do think the administration is focused on this. The president has a working relationship with President Mohammed Morsi. Israel has to meet a lot of these tests. They will meet -- they will need American support.

And I think we are seeing an engaged, sophisticated administration at work.

JEFFREY BROWN: All this, of course, Danielle Pletka, goes to the sort of continuing fallout from the Arab spring, all of these countries that Nick Burns just talked about and the management of that.

DANIELLE PLETKA: And that's reality challenge.

I mean, these are the questions. You know, all of these sort of bureaucratic ideas, you know, he has a relationship, we're maintaining this, we had a panel, we're following recommendations, this is really about the national security of the United States and support for our allies in the region.

And they're looking to us. And what they are seeing is not, gee, we have a great relationship with these people. They're seeing that we're not engaged on the most pressing issues that are of importance to them, whether it's the Iranian nuclear problem, it is the spillover from what is happening in Syria. It's 80,000 people dead in Syria.

We have genuine threats that we're facing, and we're not managing it by having a good diplomatic relationship with these people. We are not dealing with it. And we are going to pay.

JEFFREY BROWN: All right, very much to be continued.

Danielle Pletka and Nicholas Burns, thank you both very much.

DANIELLE PLETKA: Thank you.

NICHOLAS BURNS: Thank you.

Clinton takes on critics over Benghazi at tense Hill hearings (Fox Updated)

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FoxNews.com

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton began her long-awaited testimony Wednesday on the Benghazi terror attack by taking "responsibility" -- but she used the full day of hearings to repeatedly deny involvement in key controversies and pointedly reject the allegations of Republican lawmakers.

The feisty testimony before House and Senate committees, likely to be the outgoing secretary's last, elicited praise from Democrats and frustration from Republicans. Far from putting the issue to rest, the testimony further fueled a debate that has raged on Capitol Hill for four months.

Though she said officials are following some "very promising leads" on the terrorists, Clinton herself acknowledged there are still several open questions about what prompted the attack that night.

The flash point Wednesday came during morning testimony.

Republican Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson claimed the department could have "easily" determined what happened that night by interviewing staffers who were evacuated. He was referring to the administration's initial claim that the attack sprung out of a protest. It was later determined there was no protest on the ground in Benghazi. Diplomatic security agents said as much to the FBI during interviews on Sept. 14, despite administration claims to the contrary two days later.

"We were misled that there were supposedly protests and something sprang out of that," Johnson said. "The American people could have known that (there was no protest) within days, and they didn't know that."

At that point, Clinton began to raise her voice.

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," she said.

"I understand," Johnson said.

Clinton continued to speak, raising her voice and gesturing: "Was it because of a protest or is it because of guys out for a walk one night and they decide they go kill some Americans?"

"What difference, at this point, does it make?"

Clinton, lowering her voice, then said it is the administration's job to "figure out what happened" and prevent it from happening again.

Later in the testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Clinton acknowledged the administration did not have a "clear picture" of what happened in the immediate aftermath. She said perhaps officials didn't do a good enough job explaining that they "didn't have a clear picture."

But Clinton still said the motivations of the attackers, to this day, are not clear. "Even today there are questions being raised," she said, referring to findings in the classified version of a recent report that she could not describe in detail.

Clinton, throughout the hearing, walked a fine line between taking responsibility generally for what went wrong and challenging specific allegations against her department and the administration.

During the opening of the hearing, Clinton said she has "no higher priority" than the security of her department's staff, and that she is committed to making the department "safer, stronger and more secure."

"As I have said many times, I take responsibility, and nobody is more committed to getting this right," Clinton said, later choking up when describing how she greeted the families of the victims when the caskets were returned.

Clinton went on to deny having ever seen the requests for more security from the Libya team that were denied by officials within the State Department.

"I didn't see those requests, they didn't come to me," Clinton said, adding those kinds of requests wouldn't normally come to the secretary.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., later suggested lives could have been saved if Clinton were more involved in reviewing security requests.

He said that if he were president, "I would have relieved you from your post."

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., after the exchange with Johnson, said he was not satisfied with the secretary's answers, complaining that the public still doesn't have answers on what happened.

Clinton, while pushing back against Johnson, also said she was not involved in crafting the controversial statements that U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Susan Rice made on Sept. 16 -- in which she asserted the attack was "spontaneous" and linked to a protest.

"I wasn't involved in the talking points process," Clinton said, though she said she wasn't aware of anything that would have "contradicted" the information Rice had at the time.

Clinton also defended the administration's actions on the night of Sept. 11, when the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi came under fire and four Americans died.

"I directed our response from the State Department and stayed in close contact with officials from across our government and the Libyan government," she said. "No delays in decision-making. No denials of support from Washington or from our military."

Citing the findings of a review panel, she said: "The board said the response saved American lives in real time -- and it did."

Several accounts relayed to Fox News, though, suggest possible delays in the response.

Fox News has learned from senior U.S. defense officials that a FAST team of Marines out of Spain was asked by State Department officials to change out of their Marine uniforms after being asked to leave for Libya to help -- this required them to deplane and delayed them by about 90 minutes, according to Pentagon officials.

Then there is the decision by Clinton and State Department Undersecretary of Management Patrick Kennedy not to mobilize the Counterterrorism Security Group, which is composed of experts on terrorism from across government agencies and makes recommendations on the response to crises involving terrorism.

Further, there are questions about the perceived delays CIA officials -- stationed in Benghazi -- encountered that night and their frustration that air support was not sent from nearby Sigonella air base. In recent weeks, Fox News has learned that the rescue unit that left Tripoli was told that air support would be above when they landed in Benghazi. It wasn't.

During the hearing on the House side Wednesday afternoon, Clinton was also pressed on why she was never interviewed by the State Department-sponsored board that investigated the incident. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., said that was "outrageous."

Clinton said the board thought she was not "relevant" to their investigation because they were focusing on security officials. She said she "gladly" would have spoken with them.

She also addressed concerns about the four State Department officials who were removed from their jobs in the fallout from the attack - but were not removed from the department. She suggested federal law restricts what disciplinary measures could be taken against them.

The hearing Wednesday comes amid a broadening threat to U.S. interests across North Africa. There are reports that some of the attackers who took hostages in the deadly raid on an Algeria gas plant may have also participated in the Libya attack.

"Benghazi did not happen in a vacuum," Clinton said Wednesday, while saying later she could not verify that specific claim. She said instability has created an "expanding safe haven for terrorists" who plot into Algeria and other countries.

Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., top Republican on the Senate committee, lamented "the spiking of the ball and the thinking that when Usama bin Laden was gone that was the end of Al Qaeda."

"We know nothing could be further from the truth," he said.

Clinton appeared to agree that the terrorist threat is far from diminished, saying Al Qaeda "wannabes" and "affiliates" continue to pose a challenge.

Clinton forcefully defends handling of Benghazi attack (Reuters Updated)

By Arshad Mohammed and Tabassum Zakaria

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday forcefully defended her handling of the September 11 attack on the U.S. mission in the Libyan city of Benghazi and denied any effort to mislead the American people.

The attack by armed militants that killed U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans threatens to stain Clinton's legacy as secretary of state and could cast a longer shadow should she decide to make a White House run in 2016.

By turns emotional and fierce, Clinton choked up at one point in six hours of congressional testimony as she spoke of comforting the Benghazi victims' families and grew angry when a Republican accused the Obama administration of misleading the country over whether the attack stemmed from a protest.

"With all due respect, the fact is that we had four dead Americans," Clinton said angrily as she testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, an appearance delayed more than a month because of her ill health.

"Was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?" she said, making chopping motions with her hands for emphasis.

"It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again."

During the morning Senate hearing and a later session in the U.S. House of Representatives, Republicans and Democrats pointed fingers at each other, with Republicans accusing Clinton's State Department of mismanagement and Democrats defending her.

But little new information about the Benghazi incident and the administration's response to it emerged from the lengthy hearings. Clinton did say that there were at least 20 other U.S. diplomatic posts under serious security threat, but declined to name them at the public session.

Clinton cast the Benghazi incident as part of a long history of such violence as well as the result of instability since the Arab Spring of popular revolutions began in 2011, toppling authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen.

"Benghazi did not happen in a vacuum," Clinton said. "The Arab revolutions have scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region."

'I TAKE RESPONSIBILITY'

On the same day as the Benghazi assault, a mob angered by a U.S.-made video depicting the Prophet Mohammed as a fool and philanderer attacked the U.S. embassy in Cairo. There were later attacks on U.S. embassies in Tunisia, Yemen and Sudan.

Republicans harshly criticized Clinton, and President Barack Obama's administration more generally, with Senator Bob Corker saying the Benghazi attack and the U.S. response displayed "woeful unpreparedness" for the events sweeping the region. Senator Rand Paul said Clinton should have been fired.

Clinton, echoing comments she first made on October 15, said: "I take responsibility." She stressed that she had accepted all the recommendations of an independent panel that investigated the incident and that held lower-level officials responsible.

"Nobody is more committed to getting this right. I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger and more secure," Clinton said.

Militants attacked and overwhelmed the U.S. diplomatic facility in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11 in a sustained assault.

The official U.S. inquiry released on December 18 concluded that "leadership and management failures" in two State Department bureaus led to a security posture "inadequate for Benghazi and grossly inadequate to deal with the attack that took place."

The unclassified version of the "Accountability Review Board" report also faulted poor coordination and unclear lines of authority in Washington. Four lower-level officials were placed on administrative leave following the release of the inquiry, which did not find Clinton personally at fault.

Clinton is expected to step down in the coming days once her designated successor, Senator John Kerry, is confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

Originally due to testify on December 20, Clinton had to postpone after she suffered a concussion when she fainted due to dehydration. Doctors later found she had a blood clot in her head and hospitalized her for several days.

Several senators, noting the vehemence of Clinton's defence, said she appeared to have fully recovered.

While many senators warmly praised her four-year tenure as secretary of state, and several hinted at the possibility of her running for president in 2016, some Republicans were scathing.

They pressed Clinton about what they described as an August 16, 2012 cable from Stevens saying that the Benghazi mission could not withstand a coordinated attack.

"That cable did not come to my attention," Clinton replied, saying that the State Department receives 1.43 million cables a year.

"Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables ... from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post. I think it's inexcusable," Paul, a Kentucky Republican, told Clinton.

'AS COMBATIVE AS EVER'

Senator John McCain, an Arizona Republican, told Clinton it was "wonderful to see you in good health and as combative as ever," before going on to say that he categorically rejected one of her answers and found others unsatisfactory.

While clouding Clinton's tenure at the State Department, the controversy over the Benghazi attack also cost Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, her chance to succeed Clinton as secretary of state.

Republicans in Congress blasted Rice for her comments five days after the attack in which she said it appeared to be the result of a spontaneous protest rather than a planned assault.

Rice, who has said her comments were based on talking points from the U.S. intelligence community, eventually withdrew her name from consideration for the top U.S. diplomatic job.

"We were misled that there were supposedly protests and then something sprang out of that, an assault sprang out of that," Senator Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, told Clinton, referring to Rice's appearance on Sunday television talk shows.

Clinton rejected the charge.

"People have accused Ambassador Rice and the administration of, you know, misleading Americans," she said. "Nothing could be further from the truth."

Earlier in her testimony, Clinton appeared to try subtly to distance herself from Rice's comments.

"The very next morning, I told the American people that heavily armed militants assaulted our compound, and I vowed to bring them to justice. And I stood with President Obama in the (White House) Rose Garden as he spoke of an act of terror," she said.

Clinton's voice cracked as she spoke of comforting families who lost relatives in the incident, the first since 1988 in which a U.S. ambassador was killed.

"For me, this is not just a matter of policy - it's personal," Clinton told the Senate panel.

"I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews," she added, her voice breaking as she described the ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland when the men's remains were brought home.

"I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, the sisters and brothers, the sons and daughters and the wives left alone to raise their children," she said.

(Additional reporting by Andrew Quinn and Patricia Zengerle; Editing by Will Dunham and David Brunnstrom)

At Testy Benghazi Hearing, Clinton Urges Lawmakers to 'Look Forward' (Roll Call)

By Emily Cadei

Roll Call Staff

Jan. 23, 2013, 5:08 p.m.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton urged lawmakers Wednesday to focus on how the United States can improve security and diplomacy in unstable places like North Africa in the future, rather than dwell on past statements about the attack on an American compound in Benghazi, Libya, in September and the motivation of the attackers.

"It is, from my perspective, less important today looking backwards as to why these militants decided" to attack the Benghazi facility, Clinton testified at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Wednesday morning. Rather, the United States needs to be "looking forward."

"Libya is still dangerous. It is still in a very unstable status. And whatever we can do for them, we at least ought to agree we need to do and get out there and start delivering," she said.

It was an emotional day on Capitol Hill for Clinton, who also testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the afternoon. In one of her final appearances as secretary of State, she choked up as she recalled greeting the flag-draped coffins of the four Americans killed in Benghazi, which she said she felt responsible for.

She also displayed flashes of anger when responding to Republican accusations that the Obama administration played politics in its characterizations of the attack, which took place during the homestretch of the presidential election.

As they have for months, GOP lawmakers zeroed in on United Nations Ambassador Susan E. Rice's comments on Sunday news programs, five days after the attack, that it had evolved out of protests against an anti-Muslim video.

"We were misled that there were supposedly protests and then ... an assault sprang out of that," Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., a new member of the Foreign Relations panel, asserted. "And that was easily ascertained that that was not the fact and the American people could have known that within days."

Clinton denied that, noting that it took weeks for Washington officials to piece together the full picture and timeline of the attack. The independent review board appointed by the State Department found that there are still questions about the attackers' motivations and planning, she pointed out.

Johnson kept pressing and Clinton finally exploded. "With all due respect, the fact is, we had four dead Americans," she said, voice raised. "Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans — what difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can prevent it from ever happening again."

To that end, the review board issued 29 recommendations in a report released last month to help shore up security in high-threat posts, as well as address some of the bureaucratic roadblocks that hindered communications around Benghazi.

In hindsight, it has become clear that security at that compound was woefully inadequate, Clinton conceded. She testified that specific security requests for the U.S. consulate in Benghazi coming in the summer before the attack never rose to her level.

"I didn't see those requests, they didn't come to me, I didn't approve them, I didn't deny them," Clinton told lawmakers.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., responded that "it was a failure of leadership not to know these things."

"Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi ... I would have relieved you of your post," he said.

The Accountability Review Board "made very clear that the level of responsibility for the failures that they outlined was set at the assistant secretary level and below," Clinton responded.

The State Department is now implementing all the recommendations released by that board in December.

Clinton told lawmakers that "fully 85 percent" of the tasks that the department developed out of those recommendations "are on track to be completed by the end of March, with a number completed already."

The State Department is also instituting an annual High Threat Post Review chaired by the secretary of State.

Clinton, who is expected to be replaced by Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., in the coming weeks, urged lawmakers to work with the State Department going forward to "really understand and address the resources, support and changes that are needed to face what are increasingly complex threats."

Democrats, notably Robert Menendez of New Jersey, the committee's presumed next chairman, and House Foreign Affairs ranking Democrat Eliot L. Engel of New York, called on their fellow lawmakers to support more funding for diplomatic security, which they noted has not met State Department requests in recent years.

Menendez also supported Clinton's calls to alter contracting laws, which, according to Clinton, require the State Department to accept the lowest-priced contract for security guards.

"We have requested a change in the legislation that would allow us to use some discretion to try to deal with the varieties and vagaries of these local guard forces," Clinton told the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Separately, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, the top appropriator for the State Department, blasted House Republicans for not including a Senate-backed provision to bolster embassy security from an emergency supplemental spending measure (HR 152) the House passed last week.

"For Republicans to blame the administration for failing to protect our diplomats, without acknowledging their own efforts to slash resources for embassy security, is pure, distilled hypocrisy," Leahy said Wednesday in a written statement.

A number of Republicans commented that it's not that clear money, itself, is the issue.

"This committee would have no idea whether the appropriate amount of money is being spent, or if that could have prevented what happened in Benghazi because we've never done an authorization ... never done the kind of oversight that this committee ought to do," Senate Foreign Relations ranking Republican Bob Corker of Tennessee said in his opening remarks.

Clinton heartily supported Corker's call for the committee to restart the practice of passing authorization bills for the State Department, which she said could better bring in line foreign policy between the administration and Capitol Hill

"I know that you share our sense of responsibility and urgency," Clinton told the Senate panel. "And while we all may not agree on everything, let's stay focused on what really matters: protecting our people and the country we all love."

Clinton warns of growing threat to US in North Africa, says 'we are in for a struggle' (Fox)

Published January 23, 2013

FoxNews.com

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in what amounted to her exit interview on Capitol Hill, gave an ominous preview of the threats facing America in North Africa and the Middle East -- suggesting the U.S. may be mired in the region for years to come.

The hearings Wednesday before House and Senate committees were meant to address the terror attack Sept. 11 in Libya. A feisty Clinton adamantly defended the administration during the course of those hearings, and at one point she lashed out at a senator who suggested officials misled the public about the consulate attack.

But pulsing through the drama on Capitol Hill on Wednesday was a significant message from the outgoing secretary. She warned that the United States will have to contend with Al Qaeda "wannabes and affiliates" going forward -- and that the threat is already flaring in places like Mali and Algeria, as well as Libya.

"Make no mistake about it, we've got to have a better strategy," she said.

In Mali, where the U.S. military is helping fly French troops and supplies in and out of the country in support of a French military operation, Clinton compared the situation to Afghanistan.

"This is going to be a very serious, ongoing threat," she said. "If you look at the size of northern Mali, and if you look at the topography, it's not only desert, it's caves -- sounds reminiscent."

She added: "We are in for a struggle, but it is a necessary struggle."

France went into Mali on Jan. 11 after Islamist fighters captured a key town. The international community has been concerned about the Islamists' advances. While the government controls the south, Al Qaeda-tied militants run the north.

"We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven," Clinton said, while arguing in favor of a pro-active U.S. policy there.

"People say to me all the time, 'well AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) hasn't attacked the United States,'" she said. "Well, before 9/11, 2001, we hadn't been attacked on our homeland since I guess the War of 1812 and Pearl Harbor. So you can't say, well, because they haven't done something they're not going to do it."

The secretary went on to describe how overthrowing Muammar Qaddafi in Libya has further fueled instability in the region, saying weapons from that heavily armed regime have streamed into the rest of North Africa.

"This Pandora's Box, if you will, of weapons coming out of these countries in the Middle East and North Africa, is the source of one of our biggest threats," she said.

She said she could not confirm reports that terrorists involved in the attack on the U.S. compound in Benghazi were also involved in the recent hostage crisis in Algeria, in which at least 37 people, including three Americans, were killed. But she confirmed that Libyan weapons were indeed involved.

"There's no doubt that the Algerian terrorists had weapons from Libya," she said. "There's no doubt that the Malian remnants of AQIM have weapons from Libya."

How the 2016ers Played at the Benghazi Hearings (ABC)

By Arlette Saenz

Jan 23, 2013 6:00pm

Wednesday's hearings with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton may have been about Benghazi, but they also stoked some 2016 chatter, as they included three politicians who could wind up as big names in the next presidential election.

In the hot seat: potential Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, who was back on her stomping grounds on Capitol Hill, where she served as a senator representing New York state for eight years. In one of her final appearances in her post as secretary of state, Clinton was animated, combative, emotional and at times defiant as she endured nearly five hours of questioning from both sides of Congress about the September attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, which left four Americans, including Ambassador Chris Stevens, dead.

As she went head-to-head with senators at Wednesday morning's Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, two possible Republican opponents had the opportunity to throw questions at the Democratic star, providing each of the participants with potential footage for future campaign ads.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., who sits atop many potential 2016 candidate lists, adopted a mild-mannered approach, first welcoming Clinton before questioning her about her knowledge of the security situation in Benghazi before the attack.

"We all wish that ... this had never had happened, so this hearing would never have had to happen. But it's good. We're glad to see you here and wish you all the best," Rubio said. Clinton responded, "I appreciate your kind words. ... I reiterate my taking responsibility."

"Were you ever asked to participate in any sort of internal or interagency meeting with, before this attack, with regard to the deteriorating security situation in Libya?" Rubio asked.

But Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who told ABC News' Jonathan Karl last year that he's "interested" in a 2016 run, delivered a much harsher greeting to Clinton, saying he would have fired her if he had been president.

"I'm glad that you're accepting responsibility. I think that ultimately, with your leaving, you accept the culpability for the worst tragedy since 9/11. And I really mean that," Paul said. "Had I been president at the time, and I found that you did not read the cables from Benghazi, you did not read the cables from Ambassador Stevens, and I would have relieved you of your post. I think it's inexcusable."

The Kentucky senator didn't stop there. When he got to his questioning, Paul asked whether the U.S. had routed weapons from Libya to Turkey.

"To Turkey? I will have to take that question for the record," Clinton said in response. "Nobody's ever raised that with me."

But amid the questioning from her potential future opponents, many Democrats were not shy about voicing their admiration for Clinton, and one expressed her hope that secretary of state won't be Clinton's final political post.

"You will be sorely missed, but I for one hope not for too long," Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said.

The Benghazi hearings were not the first political moment this year that pitted future presidential contenders against one another. When it came to voting on the fiscal cliff deal earlier this month, Republican heavyweights fell on different sides. Paul and Rubio voted against the deal, while Rep. Paul Ryan, R- Wis., Mitt Romney's running mate who might make his own run for the presidency, came out in support of the plan, which Vice President Joe Biden, another politician with his eye on 2016, helped broker.

Days later, Ryan voted against a bill that would provide \$50 billion of additional relief for victims of superstorm Sandy, many of whom hail from the state of another possible 2016er — Gov. Chris Christie — of New Jersey.

Hillary Clinton defends handling of Benghazi attack (BBC)

23 January 2013 Last updated at 17:15 ET

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has angrily defended her handling of the raid on a US consulate in Libya, in back-to-back hearings on Capitol Hill.

Mrs Clinton lashed out at a senator who accused the Obama administration of misleading the public.

She took responsibility for security failures that led to the 11 September attack but said she had not seen requests for more security beforehand.

It was her last appearance at Congress as America's top diplomat.

"Nobody is more committed to getting this right," Mrs Clinton told the Senate foreign relations committee.

"I am determined to leave the state department and our country safer, stronger and more secure," she added.

Emotional testimony

She was questioned about the raid on 11 September last year on the US consulate in Benghazi that left the US envoy to Libya, Christopher Stevens, and three other officials dead.

The ambassador died of smoke inhalation when he was trapped in the burning consulate building, after armed men stormed the compound.

The assault triggered a major political row over who knew what and when.

The incident became an issue in the presidential campaign, and outrage in Congress led the US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, to withdraw from the race to succeed Mrs Clinton.

Last November, Ms Rice admitted releasing incorrect information after the Benghazi attack - she said on a Sunday chat show on 16 September that the attack had stemmed from an anti-US protest.

Ms Rice later said there had been no attempt to mislead the public, but Republicans were unconvinced.

At Wednesday's Senate hearing, Senator Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, said: "We were misled that there were supposedly protests and then something sprang out of that, an assault sprang out of that."

Mrs Clinton replied with a raised voice: "But with all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans - was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans."

Thumping the table four times, she added: "What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, senator."

In another tense moment, Senator Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican, said Mrs Clinton's acknowledgement that she had not read the cables from Libya seeking additional security ahead of the attack was "inexcusable".

"Had I been president at the time and I found that you did not read the cables," he said, "I would have relieved you of your post."

Mrs Clinton told the senators her department was implementing - as well as going above and beyond - 29 recommendations by an independent panel that investigated the incident.

Earlier, Mrs Clinton's voice cracked with emotion as she described the moment she and President Barack Obama welcomed home the coffins of those killed in the Benghazi attacks.

"I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, the sisters and brothers, the sons and daughters, and the wives left alone to raise their children," she said.

Mrs Clinton testified in the afternoon before the House foreign affairs committee, where Republican members pressed her on why cables and other memos about security deficiencies in Benghazi seemed to have been ignored.

"The dots here were connected ahead of time. The state department saw this was coming," said Representative Ed Royce, a Republican and the chairman of the panel. "The state department didn't act."

Four state department employees have been put on administrative leave over the Benghazi attack.

Mrs Clinton, who is stepping down from her post in two weeks, has spent a month recuperating from a series of ailments in December, which delayed her testimony.

She is considered a strong candidate for the Democratic nomination for president should she run in 2016.

Mr Obama has nominated Democratic Senator John Kerry to replace her as Secretary of State.

Budget figures challenge Dem claims about lack of funding for embassy security (Fox)

Published January 23, 2013

FoxNews.com

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton repeatedly cited a supposed lack of funding for embassy security during testimony Wednesday on the Libya terror attack, opening the door for congressional Democrats to suggest stingy Republicans contributed to leaving the post in Benghazi vulnerable.

Democratic New York Rep. Eliot Engel claimed Congress "slashed" diplomatic security requests over the past two years.

Budget numbers, though, show the overall diplomatic security budget has ballooned over the past decade. While there were modest decreases in funding in recent years -- and Congress has approved less than was requested -- the overall security budget has more than doubled since fiscal 2004.

For that year, the budget was \$640 million. It steadily climbed to \$1.6 billion in fiscal 2010. It dipped to \$1.5 billion the following year and roughly \$1.35 billion in fiscal 2012.

Slightly more has been requested for fiscal 2013.

It's difficult to tell how much was specifically allocated for Benghazi. Tripoli was the only post mentioned in the department's fiscal 2013 request -- funding for that location did slip, from \$11.5 million in fiscal 2011 to \$10.1 million the following year. Slightly more has been requested for fiscal 2013.

Still, then-Deputy Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security Charlene Lamb testified in October that the size of the attack -- and not the money -- was the issue.

Asked if there was any budget consideration that led her not to increase the security force, she said: "No."

She added: "This was an unprecedented attack in size." Asked again about budget issues, Lamb said: "Sir, if it's a volatile situation, we will move assets to cover that."

Asked Wednesday about Lamb's testimony, Clinton noted that the review board that examined the Libya attack found budget issues have played a role.

"That's why you have an independent group like an (Accountability Review Board), that's why it was created to look at everything," Clinton said.

Defiant Clinton takes on lawmakers on Libya attack (AP Updated)

By MATTHEW LEE and DONNA CASSATA | Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered fiery rejoinders Wednesday to Republican critics of the Obama administration's handling of the deadly attack on a U.S. mission in Benghazi, facing off with lawmakers who included potential 2016 presidential rivals.

At times emotional and frequently combative, Clinton rejected GOP suggestions in two congressional hearings that the administration tried to mislead the country about the Sept. 11 attack that killed Chris Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, and three other Americans. She insisted the State Department is moving swiftly and aggressively to strengthen security at diplomatic posts worldwide.

In her last formal testimony before Congress as America's top diplomat — but perhaps not her last time on the political stage — Clinton once again took responsibility for the department's missteps and failures leading up to the assault. But she also said that requests for more security at the diplomatic mission in Benghazi didn't reach her desk, and reminded lawmakers that they have a responsibility to fund security-related budget requests.

Three weeks after her release from a New York hospital — admitted for complications after a concussion — Clinton was at times defiant, complimentary and willing to chastise lawmakers during more than 5 ½ hours of testimony before two separate committees. She tangled with some who could be rivals in 2016 if she decides to seek the presidency again.

Her voice cracking at one point, Clinton said the attack and the aftermath were highly personal tragedies for the families of the victims who died — Stevens, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty — as well as herself.

"I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews. I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters and the wives left alone to raise their children," she told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at a packed hearing.

Clearly annoyed with Republican complaints about the initial explanation for the attack, she rose to the defense of U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, who was vilified for widely debunked claims five days after the attack that protests precipitated the raid rather than terrorism.

Clinton said, "People were trying in real time to get to the best information." And she said her own focus was on looking ahead on how to improve security rather than revisiting the talking points and Rice's comments.

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., pressed her on why "we were misled that there were supposedly protests and something sprang out of that, an assault sprang out of that."

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," she said, her voice rising and quivering with anger as she and Johnson spoke over each other.

"Was it because of a protest? Or was it because of guys out for a walk one night decided they would go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening again, Senator."

If Johnson's comments drew an irritated response from Clinton, she notably ignored Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., when he said he would have fired her if he had been in charge and found that she had not read cables from her team in Libya asking for more security. Paul is a potential 2016 presidential candidate.

"Had I been president and found you did not read the cables from Benghazi and from Ambassador Stevens, I would have relieved you of your post," Paul said. "I think it's inexcusable."

Clinton and other officials have testified that requests for additional security did not reach her level, and a scathing independent review of the matter sharply criticized four senior State Department officials who have been relieved of their duties.

"I did not see these requests. They did not come to me. I did not approve them. I did not deny them," she said.

Later, before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republican Rep. Jeff Duncan of South Carolina repeatedly challenged Clinton's claim to have looked at the tragedy with "clear eyes," saying she should have personally ensured security at the mission.

He said Clinton had "let the consulate become a death trap" in denying requests for additional security and called it "malpractice."

Clinton said she could have let the review board's report remain classified and told Congress "goodbye" before leaving office. But she said, it's "not who I am. It's not what I do."

Absent from the Senate hearing was Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., the man tapped to succeed Clinton, who is leaving the administration after four years. Kerry, defeated by George W. Bush in the 2004 presidential election, is expected to win swift Senate approval. Clinton is to introduce him at his confirmation hearing on Thursday.

Politics play an outsized role in any appearance by Clinton, who was defeated by Barack Obama in a hard-fought battle for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination. She is the subject of constant speculation about a possible bid in 2016.

A former New York senator and the wife of former President Bill Clinton, she is a polarizing figure but is ending her tenure at the State Department with high favorability ratings. A poll last month by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found 65 percent of Americans held a favorable impression of her, compared with 29 percent unfavorable.

On the panel at the Senate hearing were two possible 2016 Republican presidential candidates — Florida's Marco Rubio and Paul, a new member of the committee — as well as John McCain of Arizona, who was defeated by Obama in November 2008.

Clinton, 65, did little to quiet the presidential chatter earlier this month when she returned to work after her hospitalization. On the subject of retirement, she said, "I don't know if that is a word I would use, but certainly stepping off the very fast track for a little while."

In a second round of questioning on Wednesday, Clinton testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee where Republican members pressed her on why cables and other memos about security deficiencies in Benghazi seemed to be ignored.

"The dots here were connected ahead of time. The State Department saw this was coming," said Rep. Ed Royce, R-Calif., the chairman of the panel. "The State Department didn't act."

Clinton told senators the department is implementing the 29 recommendations of the review board and going beyond the proposals, with a special focus on high-threat posts.

"Nobody is more committed to getting this right," she said. "I am determined to leave the State Department and our country safer, stronger, and more secure."

Clinton had been due to testify in December but postponed her appearances after fainting, falling and suffering a concussion while recovering from a stomach virus that left her severely dehydrated. She was then diagnosed with a blood clot near her brain and returned to work only on Jan. 7.

She won bipartisan well-wishes on her recovery, but while Democrats were quick to praise her for accomplishments as secretary of state, Republicans then hit her with withering criticism.

"It's wonderful to see you in good health and combative as ever," said McCain.

But in the same breath, he dismissed her explanation of events, the administration's response to warnings about the deteriorating security situation in Libya and even the attention paid to Libya after rebels toppled Moammar Gadhafi. "The answers, frankly, that you've given this morning are not satisfactory to me," McCain said.

To McCain, a friend that Clinton served with in the Senate, she replied matter-of-factly: "We just have a disagreement. We have a disagreement about what did happen and when it happened with respect to explaining the sequence of events."

Some Democrats raised the point that Congress had cut funding for embassy security.

"We have to get our act together," she told the panels, chiding House GOP members for recently stripping \$1 billion in security aid from the hurricane relief bill and the Senate panel for failing for years to produce a spending authorization bill.

In something of a valedictory, Clinton noted her robust itinerary in four years and her work, nearly 1 million miles and 112 countries.

"My faith in our country and our future is stronger than ever. Every time that blue and white airplane carrying the words "United States of America" touches down in some far-off capital, I feel again the honor it is to represent the world's indispensable nation. And I am confident that, with your help, we will continue to keep the United States safe, strong, and exceptional."

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Fla., expressed incredulity that the independent review board did not interview Clinton for its extensive report. She also complained about the department's "false narrative" that four employees lost their jobs over the attack.

"There's just been a shuffling of the deck chairs," said Ros-Lehtinen.

Clinton said earlier that she was not asked to speak to the review board but would have been available. She said the four employees have been removed from their jobs and have been placed on administrative leave, but federal rules prevent the department from taking more drastic steps.

Her testimony followed more than three months of Republican charges that the Obama administration ignored signs of a deteriorating security situation and cast an act of terrorism as mere protests over an anti-Muslim video in the heat of a presidential election. U.S. officials suspect that militants linked to al-Qaida carried out the attack.

Associated Press writers Bradley Klapper and Andrew Miga contributed to this report.

Clinton's back, and fighting fit (AFP)

By Jo Biddle

WASHINGTON — It was vintage Hillary Clinton. For those who may have thought that prolonged illness might have taken a toll, the feisty secretary of state proved once again why she's a force to be reckoned with.

She may have disappeared off the radar for several weeks -- felled by flu and later a blood clot caused after she fainted and suffered a concussion -- but Clinton showed Wednesday that she's back, and in fighting form.

For several hours, the 65-year-old Clinton gave a consummate performance displaying political skills honed over decades first working as a lawyer and then in public life as a first lady and US senator from New York.

At a Senate hearing into the attack on the US mission in the Libyan city of Benghazi, she choked back tears over the lives lost but, in a flash of anger, unleashed long-held frustration at Republican charges of a bid to cover up the actual sequence of events on the night of September 11.

"Was it because of a protest, or was it because of guys out for a walk one night who decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make?" Clinton shot back, pounding the table.

That remark could come back to haunt her.

For as she prepares to step down at the end of her four-year stint as the top US diplomat, Clinton's testimony will once stoke speculation about her plans.

The ghost of futures yet to come stalked the hearings, as Clinton faced questions from young senators Marco Rubio and Rand Paul -- both of whom have been eyed as possible Republican party presidential candidates in 2016.

If so, they could find themselves up against Democrat Clinton, who many observers believe will run again to be the nation's first woman president after taking time out to rest and recuperate.

"Watching Hillary Clinton eye Marco Rubio as he begins questioning calls to mind the way a tiger eyes a gazelle," tweeted one eager Twitter user.

Although Clinton has repeatedly denied she harbors ambitions to be the next president, a new Washington Post-ABC News poll released Wednesday said 67 percent of all Americans -- a record high -- had favorable views of her.

With a nod to her possible White House bid, Republican Representative Steven Cahot wryly told her at a later House hearing, "I wish you well in your future endeavors -- mostly," eliciting one of Clinton's famous laughs.

"I'm biased in saying this, but I think she has been, and history will show her to have been, one of the great secretaries of state," White House spokesman Jay Carney said Wednesday.

"She came in office at a time when we were dealing with a diminished reputation worldwide, where our alliances were frayed... she did extraordinary work in advancing the president's agenda," he added.

In one of her last appearances before US lawmakers, Clinton, wearing the black-rimmed glasses which she had previously mostly kept hidden from public view, accepted full responsibility for security lapses in Benghazi.

But with an eye on defending her legacy, she reclaimed her mantle as America's top cheerleader abroad.

"After four years in this job, traveling nearly a million miles, visiting 112 countries, my faith in our country and our future is stronger than ever," she told lawmakers.

"Every time that blue and white airplane carrying the words 'United States of America' touches down in some far-off capital, I feel again the honor it is to represent the world's indispensable nation."

On Thursday, Clinton will appear before senators again to introduce the man tapped to succeed her -- Senator John Kerry. He is likely to sail through his Senate confirmation hearing and could take over by the end of the month.

And Clinton will step back into the shadows, for the first time in decades, leaving everyone guessing when or if she will return to public life again.

Five things we learned from the Benghazi hearings (CNN)

By Elise Labott, CNN Foreign Affairs Reporter

updated 8:11 PM EST, Wed January 23, 2013

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Hillary Clinton testifies for more than five hours before two congressional committees

Clinton, at one point, grew exasperated with line of questioning over Benghazi response

Some Republican lawmakers say they are not satisfied with Clinton's answers

Four Americans killed in September 11 attack, including U.S. ambassador to Libya

Washington (CNN) -- Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday took on Republican congressional critics of her department's handling of the deadly September terrorist attack in Libya.

Conservative GOP members challenged Clinton on the lack of security at the diplomatic compound in Benghazi as well as the erroneous account that the attack grew spontaneously from a protest over an anti-Islam film produced in the United States.

At two hearings, which together totaled more than five hours, Clinton acknowledged a "systemic breakdown" cited by an independent review of issues leading up to the armed assault and said her department was taking additional steps to increase security at U.S. diplomatic facilities.

Here are five things we learned from the hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations and House Foreign Affairs committees.

1. What Clinton did the day of the Benghazi attack

Clinton spent the better part of last September 11 trying to get a handle on security at several other U.S. embassies in the Middle East where anti-American protests were in full swing over an anti-Muslim film produced in the United States.

She said the U.S. embassy was "under assault" by crowds trying to scale the wall. American embassies in Yemen and Tunisia were also facing a "serious threat. Clinton personally called the president of Tunisia, she said, to "beg him to send reinforcements, which he did, to finally save our embassy."

By 4 p.m. that day, Clinton was notified about the Benghazi attack. In the coming hours, she was in meetings and spoke with staff, the American Embassy in Tripoli and other U.S. officials.

Directing the U.S. response from the State Department, Clinton stayed in touch with officials across the administration and with the Libyan government.

She instructed her staff to "consider every option, to just break down the doors of the Libyan officials to get as much security support as we possibly could."

Clinton said in the hours and days following the attack in Benghazi, there were "no delays in decision-making. No denials of support from Washington or from our military," something an independent board established to review the matter cited in its report.

2. U.S. diplomatic posts in some 20 countries under threat

Clinton said threats to U.S. diplomatic posts are ongoing.

"Sitting here today, we probably have at least 20 other posts that are under a serious threat environment as I speak to you," she told senators. "We operate in places where we know that our facilities are being surveilled for potential attacks where we have a steady Intel stream of plotting."

Clinton detailed what the State Department has done to begin implementing the 29 recommendations of the Accountability Review Board to improve security at diplomatic posts in high-threat areas, in addition to a few of her own.

Specifically, Clinton has appointed a team, led by her deputy, to focus on tightening security, sent joint teams of military special forces and diplomatic security threat analysts to more than a dozen high-risk posts and appointed a senior official to focus exclusively on those areas.

The State Department is also working to streamline requests for security so they make their way more quickly up the chain of leadership.

Despite the threat, Clinton stressed the importance of U.S. leadership and diplomatic presence in the Middle East.

"We've come a long way in the past four years, and we cannot afford to retreat now," Clinton told senators. "When America is absent, especially from unstable environments, there are consequences. Extremism takes root, our interests suffer, our security at home is threatened."

3. Clinton not shying away from a fight

Clinton grew emotional and held back tears when talking about U.S. personnel killed in the Benghazi attack.

"For me, this is not just a matter of policy, it's personal. I stood next to President Obama as the Marines carried those flag-draped caskets off the plane at Andrews," Clinton said as she choked back tears. "I put my arms around the mothers and fathers, the sisters and brothers, the sons and daughters, and the wives left alone to raise their children."

But she lost patience with the focus of Republican senators on talking points used by U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice on the next Sunday's talk shows that focused on a protest at the U.S. post in Benghazi, which turned out not to have taken place.

When Sen. Ron Johnson pressed Clinton on why the State Department didn't call U.S. personnel who were evacuated from Benghazi to determine whether there was a protest, Clinton took him to task.

"With all due respect, the fact is we had four dead Americans," Clinton reminded Johnson as she banged her hand on the table.

"Was it because of a protest or was it because of guys out for a walk one night decided they'd go kill some Americans? What difference, at this point, does it make? It is our job to figure out what happened and do everything we can to prevent it from ever happening," she said.

4. Militants in Mali and Algeria have arms from Libya

Clinton warned the security situation in northern Mali, where international forces are battling militants, has been exacerbated by flow of weapons from neighboring Libya following the fall of Moammar Gadhafi.

She said there was "no doubt" such weapons were also used in an attack by militants on an Algerian natural gas plant last week.

She noted the aftermath of the Arab spring has changed power dynamics and stretched security forces across the region thin.

Calling the campaign struggle against the Islamic fighters a necessary response to "a very serious, ongoing threat," Clinton said the "United States cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe-haven for Islamist rebels that could eventually pose a more direct threat to U.S. interests."

Nothing the increased strength of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the regional affiliate of the al Qaeda network fighting along side local Malians, Clinton warned that the United States must prepare for the possibility that groups like AQIM could threaten direct attacks on U.S. interests as they gain power.

"You can't say because they haven't done something they're not going to do it," Clinton said. "This is not only a terrorist syndicate, it is a criminal enterprise. So make no mistake about it, we've got to have a better strategy."

5. Republicans still aren't buying it

While their tone was generally respectful, several Republican senators made clear they were unsatisfied with Clinton's answers.

Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), one of the administration's toughest critics since the Benghazi attack, took Clinton to task for what he considered lackluster attention to the growing threat in Benghazi.

McCain wanted to know why Clinton hadn't read a cable from Ambassador Christopher Stevens warning that the mission in Benghazi could not survive a sustained assault.

Sen. Rand Paul said it would have been an offense worthy of firing Clinton had he been president.

McCain also blasted Clinton's answers to questions about the administration's claim that a protest had taken place in Benghazi.

"The American people deserve to know answers, and they certainly don't deserve false answers," McCain told Clinton.

Clinton was more diplomatic with her old friend, saying she respected his strong feelings for the incident given his own relationship with Stevens, but that they disagreed about what happened and when it happened with respect to explaining events.

In addition to lessons the State Department learned about improving security at diplomatic posts, Clinton, who called the Benghazi attack an act of terrorism since Day One, suggested the administration might learn another lesson.

"Just withhold. Don't say what you don't know for sure until it's finally decided."