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Hearing on Benghazi Security Issues

Testimony

Patrick F. Kennedy
Under Secretary for Management

Testimony Before the House Oversight Committee

Washington, DC

October 10, 2012

Chairman Issa, Ranking Member Cummings, members of the Committee.

I'd like to open by reading a quotation to you: "Libyans face significant challenges as they make the transition from an oppressive dictatorship to a stable and prosperous democracy," but, "it is clearly in the U.S. interest," and "it will be an extraordinary honor to represent the United States during this historic period of transition in Libya."

Those were Ambassador Chris Stevens' words at his Senate confirmation hearing this past Spring. They help us understand why he went to Libya, why he viewed his efforts there as important, and why it is imperative that we continue his work. Chris Stevens believed that no challenge was too big or too hard if our national security interests and our values were at stake. And that is what's at stake in Libya.

Continuing the spirit of cooperation the Department has shown Congress since the attack on our post in Benghazi, we are here today to answer your questions and participate in a constructive discussion about how we can mitigate the risk of this tragedy ever happening again. We are here at your request – and before we ourselves know all the answers or have the benefit of any reviews. You will hear from me and two of my Diplomatic Security colleagues, Eric Nordstrom and Charlene Lamb

As Secretary Clinton has said, the American people -- and America's diplomats in particular -- deserve a full and accurate accounting of the events that resulted in the death of four Americans.

I have been a foreign service officer for nearly forty years. I have served every President from Nixon to Obama. No one is more determined to get this right than the President, the Secretary and the men and women of the State Department. And nobody will us hold us more accountable than we hold ourselves. The men we lost were our friends and colleagues, a cross section of the men and women who put their lives on the line every day in the inherently dangerous work of diplomatic service to our nation.

The Secretary has already appointed an Accountability Review Board led by Ambassador Thomas Pickering, a retired career Foreign Service Officer with an impeccable record. His board also includes former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen, as well as Hugh Turner, Richard Shinnick, and Catherine Bertini, all of whom are distinguished public servants with long experience in diplomacy, intelligence, development and management.

Last week, the board began its work to determine whether our security systems and procedures were appropriate in light of the threat environment, whether those systems and procedures were properly implemented, and any lessons that may be relevant to our work around the world. The Secretary has asked the Board to work as quickly and transparently as possible, without sacrificing diligence and accuracy.

This is a complicated investigation that will necessarily take time to complete. As this work continues, we will learn more about what actually happened, and we will be able to better assess the facts and information we have. In addition, of course, there is an open criminal investigation being conducted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Until these investigations conclude, we are dealing with an incomplete picture. And, as a result, our answers today will also be incomplete.

No one in the Administration has claimed to know all the answers. We have always made clear that we are giving the best information we have at the time. And that information has evolved. For example, if any administration official, including any career official, were on television on Sunday, September 16th, they would have said what Ambassador Rice said. The information she had at that point from the intelligence community is the same that I had at that point. As time went on, additional information became available. Clearly, we know more today than we did on the Sunday after the attack. But as the process moves forward and more information becomes available, we will be sure to continue consulting with you.

I would like to take a moment to address a broader question that may be on your minds: Why is it necessary for representatives of the United States to be in Benghazi despite the very real dangers there? This question cuts to the core of what we do at the State Department and to the role of America in the world.

Ambassador Stevens first arrived in Benghazi during the height of the revolution, disembarking from a chartered boat, when the city was the heart of the opposition to Colonel Qadhafi and the rebels there were fighting for their lives. There was no doubt that it was dangerous. A bomb exploded in the parking lot of his hotel. The transitional authorities struggled to provide basic security. Extremists sought to exploit any opening to advance their own agenda. Yet Ambassador Stevens understood that the State Department must operate in many places where the U.S. military cannot or does not, where there are no other boots on the ground, where there are serious threats to our security. And he understood that the new Libya was being born in Benghazi and that it was critical that the United States have an active presence there.

That is why Ambassador Stevens stayed in Benghazi during those difficult days. And it's why he kept returning as the Libyan people began their difficult transition to democracy. He knew his

mission was vital to U.S. interests and values, and was an investment that would pay off in a strong partnership with a free Libya.

In the days after the attack on our facility in Benghazi on September 11th, the people of that city showed how right he was. Thousands marched in the streets mourning their fallen friend. Signs read, "Chris Stevens Was a Friend to All Libyans." The people of Benghazi overran extremist bases. Civilians insisted that militia disarm and support the new democracy. They confirmed what Chris Stevens knew so well: The United States is better off because Chris Stevens went to Benghazi.

It is right and appropriate to review the security procedures in place and to work to improve them for the future. We too ask ourselves if we provided our people in the field with everything they needed to do their jobs. We are already asking ourselves every question to better understand what happened, and how, if we can, we reduce the risk of it happening again.

But one thing is not up for debate today or any other day: The men and women who risk their lives in the service of our country are heroes. It is up to each of us to support them, not second-guess them – particularly those who carry the burden of trying to provide security in a dangerous environment.

Diplomacy, by its very nature, often must be practiced in dangerous places. We send people to more than 275 diplomatic posts in 170 countries around the world. No other part of our government is asked to stretch so far or reach so deep. We do this because we have learned again and again that when America is absent – especially from the dangerous places – there are consequences: extremism takes root, our interests suffer, and our national security is threatened. As the Secretary says, leadership means showing up. So that's what we do. And that's how we protect this country and sustain its global leadership.

Now we can, and we will, reduce the risk to the brave men and women who serve – but we cannot eliminate it. Our facilities must be protected, but not all are fortresses.

I want to be clear: The Department of State regularly assesses risk and allocation of resources for security; a process which involves the considered judgments of experienced professionals on the ground and in Washington, using the best information available. The assault that occurred on the evening of September 11, however, was an unprecedented attack by dozens of heavily armed men.

We must continue deploying our diplomats and development professionals to dangerous places like Benghazi. There is no other alternative. As the Secretary said, "We will not retreat. We will keep leading, and we will stay engaged everywhere in the world, including in those hard places where America's interests and security are at stake. That is the best way to honor those whom we have lost."

All of us at the State Department will honor Glen Doherty, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Chris Stevens by continuing their work with the same purpose and resolve that they demonstrated every day. Our hearts and prayers go out to their family and their friends.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for this opportunity. The Congress is an important partner in providing resources for our diplomatic security, so I look forward to working with you to continue providing America's diplomats with the support they need to carry on their important work on behalf of the United States all over the world.

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