

# GOP lawmaker: Benghazi witnesses will contradict account

Oren Dorell, USA TODAY 1:23 a.m. EDT May 7, 2013

*The hearing will explore why the State Department never activated its Foreign Emergency Support Team.*



(Photo: AFP/Getty Images)

Testimony from three State Department "whistleblowers" scheduled to appear at a hearing on Capitol Hill on Wednesday will show that politics played a role from the start in the government's handling of the Sept. 11 attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, a Republican lawmaker says.

The hearing will explore why the State Department never activated its Foreign Emergency Support Team, a unit made up of security and intelligence professionals who specialize in responding to crises, said Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah.

Chaffetz believes the reason is that activating the team, whose members have connections to the CIA and the military, would have labeled the attack "a terrorist activity," which then-secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's State Department did not want to do.

"They didn't want the political label of a terrorist attack," said Chaffetz, who heads the national security subcommittee of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, which is holding Wednesday's hearing.

"Early on in this fight these people made a critical bad decision in that they did not activate these people simply because they were afraid it would be labeled as terrorism. It was pure politics."

Daniel Benjamin, who ran the State counterterrorism bureau that headed the Foreign Emergency Support Team at the time of the attack, denied on Monday that his bureau was cut out of decision-making on Benghazi.

"I can say now with certainty, as the former coordinator for counterterrorism, that this charge is simply untrue," he said in a statement released by the State Department. "At no time did I feel that the bureau was in any way being left out of deliberations that it should have been part of."

Whether to deploy the FEST team was the first issue his office considered, Benjamin said. The idea was rejected out of concern that it "might well have complicated the difficult situation of U.S. personnel on the ground in Libya," and endanger more lives there and elsewhere around the world, he said.

But Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said testimony Wednesday from the people he termed whistleblowers will contradict both the White House and the State Department's official versions of what happened.

State Department and White House spokespeople initially blamed the attack, which occurred less than two months before presidential elections, on a mob that formed spontaneously in response to an anti-Muslim video that appeared on the Internet.

But several members of Congress say the initial assessment of the CIA that the attack was an operation by al-Qaeda linked terrorists was edited out of talking points disseminated by the Obama administration to the American public.

"It was scrubbed, it was totally inaccurate, there's no excuse for that," Rep. Stephen Lynch, D-Mass., told *Fox News* Sunday.

However, Lynch, a member of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said Republicans control the House and should have done a better job getting good information from administration officials in Benghazi.

Hearings Wednesday will include testimony from Mark Thompson, acting deputy assistant secretary for counterterrorism, Gregory Hicks, former deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires in Libya, and Eric Nordstrom, the former regional security officer in Libya. All are current State Department employees.

U.S. ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens died in the attack along with State Department employee Sean Smith, and former Navy SEALs Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods.

Issa said many witnesses fear to speak in public.

"Their principal reticence of appearing in public is their concern of retaliation at the hands of their respective employers," Issa said.

An Accountability Review Board appointed by Clinton issued a report saying the attacks was the result of terrorism but that U.S. military assets were not available to respond in time to intervene and save the Americans. The State Department released a statement Monday by the board's chairman, Ambassador Thomas Pickering, and its vice-chairman, Adm. Mike Mullen, who said they had "unfettered access to everyone and everything including all the documentation we needed," for their investigation.

"Our marching orders were to get to the bottom of what happened, and that's what we did," the statement said.

Chaffetz said the hearing will explore whether the military's failure to intervene was a result of an order to stand down.

"Previously the administration had been adamant there were no resources or personnel available," Chaffetz said. "On the contrary we will hear testimony that we had military personnel geared up and ready to go and they were told to stand down. Why is that?"

Former Defense secretary Leon Panetta had said previously that there were no U.S. military assets nearby that could have halted the attack, which lasted for several hours.

Maj. Robert Firman., a Pentagon spokesman, said Monday that the military's account that was first issued weeks after the attack "hasn't changed."

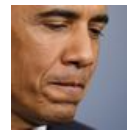
"There was never any kind of stand down order to anybody," Firman said.

Before the attack, U.S. personnel in Benghazi issued multiple requests for additional security that was denied by the State Department, requests that Clinton said she never saw.

Chaffetz says documents and testimony "so far disputes that contention."

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