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Republicans Press Obama on Libya Security Before Debate

By Laura Litvan and Jeff Bliss October 19, 2012

Top Republicans on a House oversight panel demanded that President Barack Obama say whether the White House staff played any role in decisions on security at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, raising new questions days before a presidential debate on foreign policy.

"Your administration has not been straightforward with the American people in the aftermath of the attack" on Sept. 11 that killed U.S. Ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens and three other Americans, House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Chairman Darrell Issa and Representative Jason Chaffetz, who heads a subcommittee, said today in a letter to Obama.

In addition to repeating criticism of the administration's changing accounts of the attack, the Republicans said the panel found requests from personnel in Libya for increased security beforehand had been turned down because the administration was eager for a "normalization" of relations with that country after the rebellion that ousted ruler Muammar Qaddafi.

"These critical foreign policy decisions are not made by low or mid-level career officials –- they are typically made through a structured and well-reasoned process that includes the National Security Council at the White House," wrote Issa of California and Chaffetz of Utah.

Obama and Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney on Oct. 22 will face off for their final campaign debate, an exchange focused entirely on foreign

policy. The committee's top Democrat said today that Issa was using the investigation for partisan gain in advance of the debate.

'Crossed the Line'

An investigation "should be thorough, careful and responsible," Representative Elijah Cummings of Maryland said in a letter to Issa. "In my opinion, your letter crossed the line by throwing out partial, incomplete and in some cases inaccurate information in an effort to help your candidate for president."

The House exchanges over Libya came as the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee said it has opened it own investigation into the circumstances surrounding the attack.

Committee Chairman Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut independent, and Senator Susan Collins of Maine, the panel's top Republican, requested documents and a classified briefing on the attack in letters to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and Director of National Intelligence James Clapper.

Candidate Debates

In the two previous presidential debates, Romney has criticized Obama for the administration's suggestion soon after the attack that the incident grew out of a spontaneous protest against an offensive anti-Muslim video circulated on YouTube.

Obama and other administration officials have since said that it was a terrorist attack from the start and that changing explanations stemmed from evolving intelligence reports.

In the Oct. 16 debate, Obama told Romney the suggestion that "anybody on my team would play politics or mislead when we've lost four of our own, governor, is offensive."

Issa and Chaffetz today also released 166 pages of documents the Republicans used as the basis of an Oct. 10 panel hearing. The committee heard testimony from a State Department witness who said he was turned down when he asked that a 16- member security support team scheduled to leave Libya in August be extended.

The witness, Eric Nordstrom, who was a regional security officer in Tripoli, also acknowledged in prepared testimony that having more members of that team with Stevens in Benghazi on Sept. 11 "would not have enabled us to respond to that kind of assault."

Embassy Cables

The documents also include cables sent under Stevens' name outlining challenges to security in the area, including one issued the day he died.

"The American people have a right to know why the administration withdrew security resources over the objections of embassy officials and why their government did not heed the warnings of Ambassador Stevens and his colleagues," the two lawmakers wrote Obama.

In the letter to Issa, Cummings said the documents released by the Republicans were selective and provided a "contorted and incomplete" account of security at the consulate.

While Issa wrote Obama that the State Department ignored "two formal requests" for five security agents in Benghazi, Cummings said one of those requests was only for a minimum of three agents. Issa also failed to mention that there were five agents present in Benghazi on the night of the attack, Cummings said.

Review Board

Tommy Vietor, a spokesman for the National Security Council, declined to comment and said questions about Issa's letter should be directed to the State

Department, which has established an accountability review board to determine whether mistakes were made.

In the Senate, Lieberman and Collins today released three letters dated yesterday that seek extensive information from the administration, without stating opinions about circumstances surrounding the attacks.

In a letter to Clapper, they asked if there was any information warning of a possible attack and how alerts about possible threats were communicated to consulate staff. The lawmakers also requested from Clapper any intelligence assessments regarding the need for additional security.

The senators asked Clinton for a chronology and description of the attack and administration assessments of initial statements about the attack made by senior officials. The senators sought any video used by State Department officials to follow the melee.

Information about the role of private security contractors also was requested.

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