

The Washington Post

Issa's absurd claim that Clinton's 'signature' means she personally approved it

Posted by Glenn Kessler at 06:00 AM ET, 04/26/2013



(Mark Wilson/GETTY IMAGES)

"The secretary of state was just wrong. She said she did not participate in this, and yet only a few months before the attack, she outright denied security in her signature in a cable, April 2012."

— Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, on "Fox and Friends," April 24, 2013

House Republicans issued a scathing report this week on the Obama administration's handling of the terror attack last year on a U.S. diplomatic facility in Benghazi, Libya, in which U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed. The report — endorsed by five committee chairmen — has some interesting information in it, particularly in raising questions about how the infamous talking points on the incident were crafted.

One of the headline items in the report was the claim that an April 19, 2012, State Department cable acknowledged a request from the embassy in Libya for additional security assets but ordered that a planned drawdown would proceed as scheduled. "The cable response to Tripoli bears Secretary Clinton's signature," the report said, referring to the message as "the April cable from Clinton."

Clinton told Congress that the security issues in Libya "did not come to my attention or above the assistant secretary level." The State Department's Accountability Review Board report on the incident

backs her up, saying that failure to provide proper security was the result of decisions made at senior levels within two bureaus of the State Department.

But Fox host Brian Kilmeade all but accused Clinton of perjury when he interviewed Issa, saying the report “sharply contradicts her sworn testimony.... [It] is in direct contradiction of what she told everybody, told the country.”

In response, Issa asserted that “she outright denied security in her signature in a cable.”

The Fact Checker spent nine years covering the State Department, and so these claims about a “signature” seemed rather odd. Let’s explore what this really means.

The Facts

Cable is a bit of an old-fashioned word, but then the State Department — the nation’s first Cabinet department — is a tradition-bound organization. These days, State Department cables in effect are group e-mails, which are stored in a database and made available to people with the proper security clearances. As part of that tradition, every cable from an embassy bears the “signature” of the ambassador — and every cable from Washington bears the “signature” of the secretary of state. The protocol is explained in the State Department’s Foreign Affairs Manual:

Signature

a. The Communications Center (IRM/OPS/MSO/MSMC) will place the name of the Secretary on all telegrams to posts.

b. Domestic telegrams originated within the Washington metropolitan area and transmitted through the 5th Floor Communications Center will bear the signature name of the Secretary at the end of the telegram. If a "signed by" line is used, it must appear as part of the text before the "End of Message" symbol.

Note that not even the drafter of a cable gets to put the secretary’s “signature” on the cable; it is done by the worker bees in the communications center. Moreover, every single cable from Washington gets the secretary’s name at the bottom, even if the secretary happens to be on the other side of the world at the time.

Because of this protocol, “Secretary Clinton ‘signed’ hundreds of thousands of cables during her tenure as secretary,” said State Department spokesman Patrick H. Ventrell. “As then-Secretary Clinton testified, the security cables related to Benghazi did not come to her attention. These cables were reviewed at the assistant secretary level.”

This antiquated system means that a slew of routine messages in theory bear the imprimatur of the secretary. Using the WikiLeaks archive of State Department cables, we turned up the following cables that were sent to the embassy in Tripoli with the “signature” of either Condoleezza Rice or Clinton during the first two months in 2009.

Announcing the ratification of the U.S.-IAEA Additional Protocol, Jan. 3, 2009.

This detailed the talking points for diplomatic missions regarding the Bush administration’s signing of a nuclear agreement. Signed RICE.

Travel Alert for Israel, West Bank and Gaza, Jan. 6, 2009

This was a routine travel alert issued during the Israeli operation in Gaza in 2009. Signed RICE.

Shortage of Hotel Rooms in Monrovia, Jan. 15, 2009

“Embassy Monrovia advises travelers that due to numerous events scheduled by the Government of Liberia, hotel rooms during March 1-10, 2009 will be extremely limited and only Mission essential country clearance requests will be approved.” Signed RICE.

Executive Orders on Closing Guantanamo, Jan. 24, 2009

This provided an explanation of the executive orders signed by President Obama ordering the (never-happened) closure of Guantanamo detention center. Signed CLINTON.

Talking Points on Chad-Sudan Relations for Embassy Tripoli, Feb. 3, 2009

"Department requests that Embassy Khartoum and Embassy N'Djamena urge the Governments of Chad and Sudan to cease support of opposing rebel groups and continue to work toward normalized relations." Signed CLINTON.

Managing the E-Mail System, Feb, 9, 2009

This cable provided tips on using the e-mail system, including:

— "Do not send electronic greetings (e-cards); multimedia files that are not business related; chain letters; letters or messages that offer a product or service based on the structure of a chain letter, including jokes, recipes, or other non-business related information; or conduct any other activity that causes congestion or disruption of an intranet or the Internet are prohibited."

— "Do not use 'Reply to All' unless the response is indeed applicable to all addressees."

— "AVOID USING ALL CAPITAL LETTERS - IT IS PERCEIVED AS SHOUTING!!! It can be seen as offensive to the receiver."

— "Unless confirmation of receipt is requested, avoid sending gratuitous 'Thanks' replies."

Signed CLINTON.

Brazzaville –New Key Office Telephone Numbers, Feb. 17, 2009

This short cable provided new phone numbers of key offices of the U.S. Embassy in Brazzaville. Signed CLINTON.

You get the picture.

We also checked with former senior State Department officials, who agreed it would have been highly unlikely for Clinton to have even viewed the cable in question, or even known it had been issued.

"A very small fraction would be seen by the secretary of state," said R. Nicholas Burns, a career diplomat who was undersecretary of state for political affairs under Rice.

Burns said he would only show a cable to Rice if it had very sensitive instructions for an ambassador and he wanted to be sure she agreed with his draft language. But generally he said the secretary is much too busy and would never see the cables. He added that sometimes even assistant secretaries would not view cables that are sent out under the secretary's "signature."

Burns noted that the confusion over "signature" is a common misunderstanding about State Department cables. He frequently has to correct historians from overseas who mistakenly believe the secretary's name at the bottom of the cable has much meaning.

"I can say that from being there with one secretary and reviewing the work of many other secretaries in my academic research, there are many, many cables the secretary never sees," said Larry Wilkerson, who was chief of staff to Colin L. Powell. "From time to time, the deputy may 'chop' [approve], the undersecretary may 'chop', or the assistant secretary or office director may 'chop' — and the cable goes." Wilkerson added that there is a way to learn who saw a cable before it was issued.

"Were I in my old job, I could tell immediately by going to the administrative section on the 7th floor [where the secretary's office is] and asking to see the coordination and approval sheet," he said. "That reflects all who saw it, complete with their initials, indicating they saw it. It also includes who approved it. If it did not get to the secretary, that sheet should be in the originator's bureau/office. In short, there is a very specific record who saw and 'chopped' on any cable, whether it got to the 7th floor or not."

Frederick R. Hill, spokesman for the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, defended Issa's claim that Clinton "outright denied security" because her "signature" was on the cable, in part because he says State has been uncooperative in explaining the circumstances of the cable. He noted that House Republicans have called on Obama to make the cable public:

This cable shows that resource denial decisions did not just occur informally — in phone conversations and e-mails amongst less senior officials — but were actually run up the

chain of command and made through supervised Department processes sanctioned under the Secretary's authority.

Some of the names of those who participated in the process of clearing and approving the cable viewed by congressional investigators were inexplicably redacted by the State Department from the document. On multiple occasions, Congressional investigators objected to these type of redactions and requested unredacted documents, including this cable. State Department has still not complied with these requests.

The Pinocchio Test

In his interview, Issa presented this as a "gotcha" moment, but it relies on an absurd understanding of the word "signature." We concede that there might be some lingering questions — such as whether anyone in Clinton's office saw this cable before it was issued — but that does not excuse using language that comes close to suggesting Clinton lied under oath.

Issa would be on much stronger ground if he didn't claim that Clinton signed it, but that it was fishy and he was seeking more information on who had crafted and approved the cable. The House GOP report also veers close to the edge with its phrasing about Clinton's "signature."

In some ways, one could argue this is worth Three Pinocchios because, after all, it is technically correct to refer to a "signature." But that ignores the fact that the State Department is a vast organization and even office directors can send out a cable that ends up with the secretary's "signature."

At this point, Issa has no basis or evidence to show that Clinton had anything to do with this cable — any more than she personally approved a cable on proper e-mail etiquette. The odds are extremely long that Clinton ever saw or approved this memo, giving us confidence that his inflammatory and reckless language qualifies as a "whopper."

Four Pinocchios



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