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The world of Benghazi believers

By: [Lauren French](#)

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Hillary Clinton passed on the Sunday shows after the Benghazi attacks to preserve her White House aspirations.

The White House is covering up for political reasons why President Barack Obama wasn't in the Situation Room as the attacks were unfolding.

And there are reasons CNN can track down the masterminds behind the 2012 ambush but the U.S. government can't.

These are just a sampling of the doggedly held views of a die-hard cadre of Republican lawmakers about the controversial events that led to the death 20 months ago of four Americans in Benghazi — a word that is now synonymous for conservatives with cover-up and conspiracy.

Call them the Benghazi believers.

([PHOTOS: 10 slams on Obama and Benghazi](#))

These Republicans — and there are dozens — are deeply convinced that the truth has yet to be fully aired about the attacks on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Libya that killed U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans.

A solid majority believe Obama and his aides have repeatedly misled Congress about the attacks, spinning a political message to promote the president's 2012 reelection. A handful of them take as fact that then-Secretary of State Clinton obstructed the delivery of adequate security to diplomats on the front lines in Libya.

They hope that the new select committee created last week in the GOP-led House — led by loquacious former prosecutor Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) — will finally unearth the truth.

Another South Carolina GOP lawmaker, Mick Mulvaney — a Gowdy ally — contends that Congress has yet to scratch the surface of what happened in Benghazi. He says many of the unanswered questions about the attacks stem from conservatives' deep distrust of the Obama administration.

([Also on POLITICO: Gowdy defends Benghazi select committee](#))

"[The distrust] has to do with everything — whether or not the White House has fully disclosed what they know. That is the big issue," Mulvaney said. "You can't even start to have a discussion about what happened before, during or after until you have all the facts about who was involved and what they were doing."

At least some of those facts have already come before Congress. Eight congressional committees — most exuberantly the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee — have investigated Benghazi, poring over 25,000 pages of documents and receiving, alongside individual members, 50 briefings. A Senate Intelligence Committee panel probed the incident, concluding more could have been done to strengthen security on the ground before the attacks. And the State Department's Accountability Review Board was critical of the department for ignoring requests for security upgrades at the Benghazi compound.

The Obama administration didn't bolster its credibility among critics by withholding until recently an email authored by Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes outlining "goals" for then-Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice in her appearances on the Sunday shows after the attacks.

(PHOTOS: 10 quotes on Hillary Clinton and Benghazi)

Mulvaney said the select committee could uncover a number of unanswered things, including evidence of political motivation at the White House aimed at muddying the post-attack narrative.

"Do I think generally the White House has a motivation to cover up mistakes in an election year? Yes, I do," he said.

He added, "What's the worst-case scenario? The worst case is that someone in the White House knew that it was a concerted effort on the behalf of terrorists and they looked around ... and said, 'This is going to look very, very bad for us. We cannot tell them the truth. What can we tell them?' And someone looked around and said we have riots down in Cairo based on these videos."

For Gowdy — who says his new committee will function more like a "trial" — the administration's mistakes began before the attacks. He said he plans to delve deep into Clinton's tenure at State — underlining Democratic fears that his probe is another way to trap Clinton in the Benghazi morass just as the former first lady is considering a 2016 presidential bid.

Democrats are quick to note the risks in giving Republicans a bigger podium to discuss their Benghazi theories.

The GOP faced heavy criticism for running with unproven stories that were quickly debunked in the months after the attacks. Those included the idea that there was a "stand-down" order in which that the State Department intentionally stopped the military from rushing to Benghazi during the attacks or that Clinton personally denied requests for additional security — theories the Republican-controlled House Armed Services Committee rejected.

Gowdy said he plans to focus on who in the State Department made the decision to keep open the Benghazi compound despite a flood of memos in the months before the attack detailing how the region's security was deteriorating.

"[After] the episodes of violence in Libya ... why we were the last flag flying? The British had already pulled out, the British ambassador had almost been assassinated, the International Red Cross was targeted. ... I think it's eminently fair to ask, why we were still in Benghazi?" Gowdy said.

Rep. Devin Nunes (R-Calif.), who sits on the House Intelligence Committee, which has interviewed eight CIA security officers, said Congress needs exponentially more facts on Benghazi.

“There are still many questions about missing documents and classification of documents. You have to go through a fact-gathering process until you can get to the level where you’re at the National Security Council and others who, in my opinion, made some questionable decisions and have not been held accountable,” he said.

Rep. Jim Jordan — an Ohio Republican who will sit on the select committee and has previously had access to troves of Benghazi documents as well as private briefings from witnesses from his post on Oversight — said he still wants answers on why “repeated requests for additional security prior to Sept. 11, 2012,” went unanswered.

“We’re going to get the truth, plain and simple,” he said.

Florida Rep. John Mica, a senior Oversight member, said the Obama administration prompted the creation of the select committee because of its “stonewalling,” adding that the new panel must find out why the military wasn’t promptly sent to the compound after the attacks started.

“Oh, there’s no evidence of an order to stand down. But, we know our military had the ability to save those Americans. We know that the State Department had the ability to keep those Americans safe and no one acted,” he said.

Rep. Lee Terry (R-Neb.) said he wants the select committee to uncover why more military assets were not directed to Benghazi.

“We know now that things could have been done to save these people,” he said during a speech last week on the House floor. “They were not done.”

Rep. Patrick Meehan — a moderate Pennsylvania Republican who also serves on the Oversight panel — is still wondering about Clinton’s role.

“[Clinton] very deliberately moved away the assets that were military and encouraged the ambassador to make a move toward Benghazi during a time that all of the information was showing that it was a very dangerous area and it was very likely American assets, including our own embassy could be a target. It was counterintuitive to be reducing the presence,” Meehan said.

He added: “There is an awful lot here on the front end that were deliberate policy decisions ... because they fulfilled a desire to demonstrate that Al Qaeda was in control and we had made a correct choice to intervene the way we did in Libya ... among the backdrop of a political campaign where, unfortunately, this was a fundamental issue.”

The Obama administration has dismissed Republican claims as “conspiracy theories” — a term White House spokesman Jay Carney used last week.

Many of the Republican beliefs center on why Rice and the Obama administration first blamed a video for prompting the attacks.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) said he still believes there was, at best, a clumsy attempt to depoliticize the attacks and at worst a coverup when Clinton first blamed the outbreak on an

anti-Islamic video.

Graham is one of the most outspoken Senate Republicans on Benghazi.

“All I’m saying is, why did [Clinton] issue a press release at 10 p.m. our time, talking about a video when there was no evidence this was caused by a video?” he said in an interview. “I want to know why she was trying to start a narrative about the video that night. At the end of the day, why wasn’t she on television? That has always perplexed me.”

One of the biggest believers in an alternate version of events in Benghazi is Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-Texas) — who has come under intense fire for presenting his unusual theories on Benghazi without much evidence.

Gohmert says the select committee should focus on “why” Stevens was killed.

“I had a private meeting with them Libyans who were initially involved in the ouster of [the late Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi], and they said ‘You Americans keep wanting to know who killed your ambassador, but you should be wanting to know why was he killed.’ There are a lot of questions that remain unanswered.”

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