

Exploiting the Benghazi Attack

The Romney campaign thinks it has an opening with the Obama administration's shifting explanations about the lethal attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya. But the reality is that diplomatic service is never risk free and facts about a complex event are never immediately clear, notes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

events like the attack The seemingly endless public rehashing of the attack in Benghazi that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans is not taking a form that serves any useful purpose. That would be true even without the political slant that was stemmed from efforts to turn some of the recriminations into a campaign issue.

The loss of the four public servants was a tragedy. The rehashing does not alleviate that tragedy. Some relevant truths should be recalled:

Diplomacy is a dangerous line of work. The memorial wall at the State Department listing the many U.S. diplomats, going back more than two centuries, who have been killed in the line of duty is a reminder of that. There is an inherent tension for diplomats between doing their duties well, with everything that entails regarding contact and exposure in faraway places, and living securely.

Hindsight is cheap. After any incident such as this, one can uncover warnings that might have been applicable to the incident that occurred, measures that could have been taken that conceivably could have prevented the occurrence and various other "what ifs."

What does not routinely get noted is that the same sorts of things could be unearthed about countless other facilities that do not get attacked and countless other lethal incidents that do not occur. What is unearthed is a product of the second-guesser's luxury of hindsight.

One always can construct an after-the-fact case that any one such incident was preventable; this is not the same as saying that such incidents in the aggregate are preventable.

Resources are limited; threats are not. Even if U.S. diplomats consistently opted for living securely over doing their jobs well, total security cannot be bought. Second-guessing about how more security should have been provided at any one facility rather than any of dozens of others elsewhere (that did not happen to get attacked this time) is just another example of hindsight.

Information about lethal incidents is not total and immediate. The normal pattern after such events is for explanations to evolve as more and better information becomes available.

We would and should criticize any investigators who settled on a particular explanation early amidst sketchy information and refused to amend that explanation even when more and better information came in. A demand for an explanation that is quick, definite and unchanging reflects a naive expectation, or in the present case, irresponsible politicking.

The public second-guessing does nothing to honor the service of those Americans who died. And it does nothing to prevent similar incidents. The Secretary of State has, per standard procedures, appointed an accountability review board (led by a highly respected and experienced retired diplomat, Thomas Pickering) to assess what happened in Benghazi. Let the board do its job.

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The 'Citizens United' Tsunami

The five right-wing justices on the U.S. Supreme Court downplayed how distorting their *Citizens United* decision would be to American politics. But the tidal wave of campaign cash is now inundating U.S. voters with unchecked factual claims, says Michael Winship.

By Michael Winship

That ringing in your ears isn't church bells or a touch of tinnitus. It's the sound of campaign cash registers all over the country, chiming together like the world's biggest carillon, as money pours in as never before.

The total being spent for all the races in 2012 is projected at \$6 billion this year; possibly rising to as much as \$8 billion which perhaps not coincidentally is the same amount the National Retail Federation estimates Americans will spend on Halloween.

Scary stuff, and almost as frightening is the realization that even though Election Day's still more than a month away, the post-analysis already has

begun, much of it focused on whether those vast amounts of campaign money spent on TV have had an effect or merely annoyed the hell out of the viewing population of America, especially if you live in one of the swing states where the din has been unbearable.

Maybe, as some have argued, minds were made up long ago and all the spending has been a waste, reminiscent of the famous comment by British Air Chief Marshal Arthur "Bomber" Harris writing about the dropping of millions of propaganda leaflets over the Maginot Line during the first weeks of World War II: "My personal view is that the only thing achieved was largely to supply the continent's requirement of toilet paper for the five long years of war."

Nevertheless, the bulk of all those billions worth of campaign lucre is going to TV ads, and consultants and strategists are moving political spots around the airwaves like pieces in that tri-dimensional chess game Spock and Kirk used to play on "Star Trek."

Rick Klein at ABC News tells us that because early voting has started, "both candidates are [already] on the air with messages that are geared toward the very end," a change from traditional campaigning. *The Washington Post* reports that "President Obama has a little-noticed strategic advantage that gives him more control over the money he has raised.

"While Mitt Romney relies heavily on massive amounts of cash held by the Republican Party and interest groups, Obama has more funds in his own campaign coffers. That allows him to make decisions about where and how to spend the money and to take better advantage of discounted ad rates, which candidates receive under federal law.

"In one Ohio ad buy slated to run just before the election, for example, Obama is paying \$125 for a spot that is costing a conservative super PAC \$900."

So the maneuvering continues. Despite the pundits, we won't know the full impact for a while to come and chances are that all that money will have its deepest impact on down ballot races for the House and state legislatures, where massive cash infusions can overwhelm sparsely funded competition.

All of which is interesting and relevant; none of which you will see or hear being reported on the local TV stations that are hauling in the bounty that is political ad spending. Most of them are owned by giant media companies, and given their record of forthright transparency it may come as no surprise that the stations are resistant to allowing coverage on their local news about those profits and where the money's coming from.

Tim Karr at the media reform group Free Press has just written a report, "Left

in the Dark,” revealing that in five cities in swing states, local TV stations have received millions of dollars in political advertising from outside groups like the Koch Brothers’ Americans for Prosperity, Karl Rove’s American Crossroads and the pro-Obama Priorities USA.

But with a single exception, there was no local reporting on the cash these groups are pouring into the election and no fact-checking of the claims made in their ads.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during the two weeks before the recall election against incumbent Governor Scott Walker when outside money was swamping the state there was nothing on local news about political ad spending. But there were 53 segments that mentioned Justin Bieber, the Canadian singer who has countless young fans but to the best of our knowledge has not yet established a super PAC.

In the swing state of Ohio, during the month of August, “Cleveland’s four affiliate stations provided no coverage of the Koch brothers-funded group Americans for Prosperity, despite airing the group’s anti-Obama attack ads more than 500 times. Americans for Prosperity has reportedly spent more than \$1.5 million to place ads on Cleveland television stations.”

And in Charlotte, North Carolina, site of the Democratic National Convention, “four affiliate stations provided no local reporting on the three top-spending political groups, the anti-Obama American Crossroads, Americans for Prosperity, and Restore Our Future. From Jan. 1-Aug. 31, 2012, these three groups cumulatively spent more than \$4 million to place ads on Charlotte stations.

According to the Free Press report, “This profiteering may explain broadcasters’ reluctance to investigate the relationship between political ad spending and local media. In exchange for this massive influx of cash, broadcasters must take their public interest obligations seriously.

“They must cover the money that’s poisoning our politics, expose the groups and individuals funding political ads in their markets, and address the falsehoods presented in most of these spots.”

Nonetheless, we have “a system gamed to a point of dysfunction by wealthy, undisclosed donors and media corporations that are all too content to just cash their checks.”

To be fair, some stations are doing some form of due diligence local stations in Denver, Orlando, Phoenix, Dallas and Minneapolis, for example, are attempting to fact-check political ads running on their air. But they’re overwhelmed, and the media giants that have taken over most of our TV have been able to ignore their public obligations with impunity. Free Press and other media watchdog groups do

their best, and your involvement is essential if they're to keep reporting what the most of the press especially local TV stations will not.

The recent FCC decision to insist that stations place online public records of political ad buys was an important step toward transparency. But even after Election Day has passed, pressure has to continue on Congress, the IRS, the FCC and the Federal Elections Commission despite its current, weakened and feckless status. Dark money has to be dragged, kicking and screaming, into the light.

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