

Misreading Benghazi and Terrorism

The Republican case of a Benghazi terror “cover-up” never made much sense because President Obama immediately called it an “act of terror.” But now other parts of the GOP’s contorted narrative are collapsing as well, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar observes.

By Paul R. Pillar

It always has been difficult to discern any logic behind the endless recriminations about the fatal incident in Benghazi, Libya, in September 2012 in which four Americans were killed, or rather about how the Obama administration is said to have described the incident at the time.

A notion somehow appears to be involved that President Barack Obama supposedly had been saying that international terrorism had been licked and didn’t want to admit that the incident in Libya demonstrated that this was not so. But Mr. Obama never had said that terrorism was licked. In fact, he had been saying a lot about it being a threat and had been shooting missiles from drones at a rate that did not suggest otherwise. And losing four Americans at an overseas mission is a bad thing to happen on any President’s watch regardless of whether the label of terrorism is applied or not.

Now the FBI, assisted by U.S. military commandos, has apprehended Ahmed Abu Khattala, who is accused of leading the fatal attack on the facility in Benghazi. So both the purveyors and the targets of the recriminations have occasion to make rhetorical adjustments.

Supporters of the administration can say, “All right, if you want to focus on terrorists responsible for the incident you’ve been making such a big deal about, we got the main culprit.” Opponents of the administration can say that it should not have taken two years to get him.

Mostly the opponents are falling into old habits in searching for ways to criticize Obama, by saying Abu Khattala should be taken to Guantanamo and kept out of the civilian criminal court system. That familiar posture, based on a chest-thumping desire to proclaim that we are at “war,” ignores how much Guantanamo has become a liability rather than an asset and how much more successful the regular criminal courts have been in meting out punishment to terrorists than have been the military tribunals, where the only two convictions of Guantanamo detainees who have been tried have been vacated on appeal.

Nabbing Abu Khattala and trying him for whatever role he had in the incident two years ago is the right thing to do. But the more we devote attention, regardless

of one's political posture or opinions of administration policy, to a character such as him, the more we perpetuate a misdirection of attention that afflicts much American policy debate about problems in the Middle East.

David Kirkpatrick's profile of Abu Khattala in the New York Times describes him as a "local, small-time Islamist militant" who stood out as being "erratic" as well as extremist. He had no known connections to international terrorist groups, according to officials who have been briefed on the relevant investigations.

Oh, and as the attack in Benghazi was taking place, Abu Khattala was telling others that the assault was retaliation for the inflammatory video that administration opponents back here in the United States have strenuously argued had nothing to do with the incident. In short, the Benghazi episode is hardly a milestone in international terrorism. The apprehension of this local thug, although it serves justice, also will have little to do with the prospects for international terrorism.

The general tendency that this case illustrates, beyond the partisan motivations that have sustained the ridiculously prolonged preoccupation with this one incident, is a fixation on the malevolent intentions, real or sometimes imagined, of individual evil-doers who play leading roles in either groups or states.

This fixation is at the expense of attention to broader patterns of public sentiment or political culture (and yes, sometimes even reactions to scurrilous videos) that have much more to do with where security problems will arise and where U.S. interests will be threatened.

We saw this tendency in George W. Bush's day, when threats to the United States were neatly packaged as "the terrorists", so neat that a chimerical alliance between a regime and a terrorist group became a principal rationale for toppling a leader without paying attention to the broad forces this would unleash and the extremism this would stimulate, all of which is reflected in the violent mess that is Iraq today.

We saw it more recently in the bipartisan support for military intervention in Libya, with again a focus on toppling a disliked leader and again inattention to the forces and culture that would be left in his place and that led to what happened at Benghazi two years ago.

We saw the tendency in a somewhat different way with the exuberance accompanying the killing of Osama bin Laden three years ago. Bin Laden obviously was a far more consequential figure than dozens of Abu Khattalas, but by the last part of

his life in hiding he was doing little directing of operations. The exuberance exceeded the impact his death had on the course of international terrorism.

President Obama never claimed that the raid at Abbottabad was a death knell of international terrorism, but Republicans' fears that it would be seen that way, what might be called Abbottabad envy, were a major motivation for hyping the Benghazi incident the way they have.

We have seen the tendency in excessive reliance on the use of armed drones, to the point that their counterproductive effect on counterterrorism through collateral casualties and associated anger may outweigh the benefit of eradicating the individual bad guys who are the targets.

And we see it today in how alarm over ISIS focuses narrowly on the evil intentions of this one group while paying less heed to the broader conflicts and objectives that have more to do with the chaos that worries us, a focus that has led otherwise respectable people to flirt with craziness by calling for the United States to go to war simultaneously in both Syria and Iraq.

Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)
