



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on February 22, 2016

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Benghazi Attack Retold

Just in time for the kick-off of the electoral season comes a movie that reminds Americans yet again what is wrong with the government we have endured for the past eight years. The riveting *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*, directed by big-budget action film director Michael Bay and based on the nonfiction book *13 Hours* by Mitchell Zuckoff, is a soldier's-eye view of the notorious terrorist assaults on two American compounds in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012. The movie is not for all tastes, featuring combat violence aplenty (though no gratuitous gore) and an excess of R-rated language. But it is political storytelling at its best — precisely because it tries very hard to be subtle. There are no overt references to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, for example, even as the frustrating paralysis of official government channels puts lives in danger. But the viewer is left in no doubt as to who the worst villain is: not the battalions of Libyan terrorists, but the government functionaries unable and unwilling to make the hard decisions.



With Hillary Clinton now in a tight race with Bernie Sanders for the Democratic presidential nomination, *13 Hours* is as politically relevant as any election-year film since 1976's *All the President's Men*. Yet to be seen, however, is whether this film will have a discernible impact on the candidacy of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Face-saving Lies

From the beginning, the Benghazi attack was politicized by the Obama administration; of this there can be no serious doubt. It has been well-established via testimony and paper trails — much of it directly pertaining to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton — that the Obama administration, fearing an electoral backlash, sought to portray the twin attacks as a demonstration, which spiraled out of hand, against an obscure anti-Muslim film; this while knowing from the outset that it was in fact a carefully planned and executed terrorist attack by Libyan extremists, timed to fall on the infamous anniversary of the original September 11 terror attacks on U.S. soil. For example, Secretary of State Clinton, scant hours after the original attack, made a public statement blaming the attacks on an incoherent American-made anti-Muslim video *Innocence of Muslims: The Crimes of Prophet Mohammed*. President Obama made similar claims the following day, with Hillary Clinton standing beside him. And then-White



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House Press Secretary Jay Carney laid the blame squarely on the notorious video two days after that in a press conference. As late as two weeks after the attack, on September 23, President Obama continued to retail the official line, telling no less prominent an audience than the UN General Assembly that “there is no video that justifies an attack on an embassy.”

Yet shortly after Hillary Clinton made her first public statement on the attacks, she sent an e-mail to her daughter Chelsea indicating that “two of our officers were killed in Benghazi by an al-Qaeda-like group.” The next day, Hillary informed Hesham Kandil, the prime minister of Egypt, in a telephone conversation that “we know that the attack in Libya had nothing to do with the film. It was a planned attack — not a protest.”

This information was all extracted, wisdom-tooth style, after years of stonewalling and coverup by the Obama administration, thanks to the ongoing efforts of the much-maligned congressional Select Committee on Benghazi. The evidence from the paper trail and public record is very clear: Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and the entire Obama administration concealed the truth about the Benghazi attacks, and sought to portray them as a spontaneous upwelling of Muslim rage, because the truth of what happened contradicted the then-current reelection narrative that “al-Qaeda is on the run.” When Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney dared to confront Obama during the second presidential debate for his administration’s mischaracterization of the Benghazi attacks, the president huffily took offense. Supposedly impartial CNN debate moderator Candy Crowley took the president’s side, embarrassing Romney for daring to speak what has since become widely acknowledged as fact, that the “t-word” (terrorism) was stricken from administration talking points on Benghazi until long after the event.

Adding to the consternation within the Obama administration was the self-evident fact that the Benghazi attacks were an unintended consequence of America’s intervention in the Libyan civil war, an intervention that led to the death of Moammar Gadhafi at the hands of a mob and the subsequent descent of Libya into violent anarchy, with numerous heavily armed factions battling for control across the country, openly defying such legitimate civil authority as existed and, in some cases, threatening foreign players in Libya, including the United States.

Against this chaotic backdrop, U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens, an expert on Arabic language and culture, was a much-respected figure among ordinary Libyans, and appears to have been sincerely concerned with the plight of Libyans post-Gadhafi.

Benghazi Deathtrap

The Benghazi facility was tragically ill-equipped to provide for the safety of any U.S. personnel, such as a U.S. ambassador, with its low walls, weak front gate, and poorly vetted, ill-equipped Libyan security personnel. The Benghazi attackers took advantage of this almost nonexistent security at the diplomatic compound in the eastern Libyan city. Contrary to widespread belief, the compound was technically neither an embassy nor an official consulate. Its precise function, in fact, has been the subject of considerable debate, with the Obama administration denying very plausible allegations in the media that the site (as well as a second, somewhat better-defended compound nearby, where CIA interests were ensconced) served in part as a transit point for the shipment of weapons from Libya to rebels in Syria and elsewhere. Clandestine Middle Eastern weapons trafficking has long been a stock-in-trade with Washington foreign policy elites. Yet the Iran Contra scandal during the Reagan administration



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gained huge coverage in the mainstream media, whereas no one in the major media organs, save perhaps Fox News, has shown any interest in pursuing allegations of gun-running out of Benghazi.

At dusk on September 11, between 125 and 150 heavily armed fighters accompanied by trucks bearing the logo of Ansar al-Sharia, a radical Islamist terrorist group, attacked the main diplomatic compound where Ambassador Stevens and six other Americans were housed. The attackers, many of whom wore flak jackets and had covered faces, blocked off all streets leading to the compound with “technicals,” or improvised fighting vehicles with mounted machine guns. Using RPGs, mortar fire, assault rifles, and hand-propelled grenades, the attackers then swiftly overwhelmed the compound’s meager defenses, setting buildings on fire before dispersing into the alleys of Benghazi to regroup for a second attack, later in the night, on the other American compound 1.2 miles away.

This second attack, as depicted in the movie, lasted much longer and met with fierce resistance from the few American defenders. It began just after midnight with heavy mortar, rocket, and machine-gun fire. The American defenders, equipped with night-vision glasses, exacted a fearful toll on the attackers, but the battle continued until dawn.

We all know how the story ended: Four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens, lost their lives. Stevens was trapped inside a safe zone in the diplomatic compound and was overcome by smoke. He was pulled out of the ruined building still barely alive by a crowd of Libyans in the aftermath of the attacks, and transported to a local hospital. Stevens was pronounced dead at the hospital and later retrieved by American forces for repatriation. Also deceased in the first attack was Foreign Service Information Manager Sean Smith, who had caught a man dressed as a Libyan policeman taking pictures of the compound earlier in the day. Perhaps Smith had a premonition; he wrote worriedly in his journal shortly before the attack: “Assuming we don’t die tonight. We saw one of our ‘police’ that guard the compound taking pictures.”

Two more Americans died in the second attack, both falling victim to mortar rounds, CIA/State Department contractors Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods, both former Navy SEALs. With the arrival of daybreak, the attack finally ended, and the Americans were able to escape to the Benghazi airport under Libyan escort to await evacuation.

13 Hours shows us how events unfolded, based on eyewitness accounts. The story centers on six security contractors, including Doherty and Woods, who were charged with beefing up the defenses of the second diplomatic compound in Benghazi to be attacked, a secretive CIA intelligence-gathering post whose very existence was unknown even to high-ranking officials in the U.S. government and military. As former Special Forces and combat veterans, the six security contractors are portrayed as unaccustomed to the cautious, bureaucratic ways of the CIA. The station chief, played ably by David Costabile (of *Breaking Bad* fame), is mostly concerned with finishing up his tour of duty in Benghazi incident-free and with keeping intact the chain of command at any cost. Even when the other diplomatic compound, where Ambassador Stevens is staying, is attacked, with flames and gunfire visible in the distance and personnel there pleading for help over the radio, Costabile’s nameless CIA chief stands firm, preventing the six security contractors from going to their aid — because he has not received authorization from his superiors, and because he fears what might happen if the six get themselves killed.

Eventually, the six defy his orders, only to find the compound already burning fiercely and most of the



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perpetrators fled. Correctly anticipating that their own compound will be the next target, they make their way back across town to defend the American personnel trapped there, in an epic, three-part gun battle that lasts until dawn.

There are in the film, to be sure, deft references to the indecision and venality that characterized the Obama administration's handling of the Benghazi attacks from the beginning. There is, for example, the moment when one of the heroes, who is in touch with family stateside via cellphone, informs the others that Americans back home are being told it was a protest against an anti-Muslim film, which they scoff at. There are the moments when the Americans under siege learn — to their disbelief — that the United States has no military assets close enough to give them air support or mount a rescue operation. And there is the constant bureaucratic paralysis that apparently prevents even an overflight of F-16s — a show of strength from Aviano Air Base in Italy that the trapped Americans in Benghazi beg for but do not get (rather incongruously, the U.S. government does muster one unarmed drone, depicted in the film, that circles high overhead, taking pictures of the chaos and carnage beneath but unable to intervene).

There are also moral doubts expressed by members of the team of security contractors that the entire Libyan military adventure is ill-advised, and that they will end up dying in a foreign land for a cause that is clear to nobody.

What Washington Won't Learn

This, of course, is the most important lesson to be garnered from the Benghazi debacle — the same lesson that should have been learned in Vietnam, in Mogadishu, and in Iraq, among many other places: There is no moral basis for empire building and military interventionism. The late Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi was an awful tyrant, to be sure — one of many dragons the U.S. armed forces have been sent abroad to slay — but he was Libya's problem, not ours. The same could be said of Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Syria's Bashar al-Assad, but the lesson appears to fall on deaf ears among policymakers in Washington time and again. The Benghazi attacks have gained especial notoriety because of their timing (the crucial final sprint of the 2012 presidential campaign) and the Obama administration's consequent attempts to downplay their significance and cover up what actually happened. Not until Obama was safely reelected did the official narrative of Benghazi change, and Michael Bay's treatment of the incident leaves no doubt about what actually happened.

Nowhere in the film, incidentally, is there any evidence of an anti-American demonstration. Instead, we see shady-looking groups of Libyans skulking around the two American compounds, taking pictures and carrying out surveillance. Police cars and other vehicles drive up periodically, only to speed away, and supposedly trustworthy Libyan security personnel at the diplomatic compound take pictures of the facility and make suspicious phone calls. When the attacks come, they are — as accounts of the incident bear up — well-coordinated, carried out by heavily armed men with the help of a few locals.

This is not a movie about warm and sympathetic characters and their complex interpersonal relationships. Most of the dialogue is macho banter and military order-barking, as befits the subject matter. But *13 Hours* does show video footage of some of the men's families. The actors portraying the six contractors deliver their lines crisply, without a hint of schlock, although the presence of John Krasinski and David Denman playing comrades-in-arms is likely to provoke cognitive dissonance among fans of the TV comedy series *The Office*.



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In the end, the movie avoids the tedious sermonizing so typical of Hollywood political thrillers, preferring to tell the story as close to the book as it can and trust the viewer to draw his own conclusions. It is impossible for any rational viewer not to feel empathy for the four men killed so needlessly in Benghazi, nor disgust for the calculated political gamesmanship that led up to this debacle. While the movie occasionally traffics in excessive Arab stereotypes (almost everyone in Benghazi is untrustworthy and prone to hair-trigger violence, apparently, as shown by the tense street confrontation at the beginning of the film and in many other non-combat situations), it also makes clear that huge numbers of Libyans were appalled by the Benghazi attacks and demonstrated by the tens of thousands in anger and shame at the death of the hugely popular American ambassador. Chris Stevens, unlike many American diplomatic personnel, had a sincere and idealistic regard for the people he worked with, and worked hard to help Libyans recover from their desolating civil war. That Libya is now a failed state, overrun with extremist Islamic militias (including ISIS), is a bitter epitaph.

Whether *13 Hours* will provoke sustained, renewed interest in Hillary Clinton's role in the Benghazi affair is yet to be seen. After all, the Benghazi terror attacks and subsequent coverup are but some of the more recent of a long train of scandals and outrages perpetrated by the former First Lady, stretching all the way back to "Travelgate," the now-nearly-forgotten firing of the entire White House travel staff and their replacement with Clinton cronies at the beginning of President Clinton's first term. In that and many other subsequent scandals, Hillary has had as much involvement as her corrupt husband — yet the mainstream media, determined to see her in the White House where she can inflict maximal damage on the U.S. body politic, have by turns ignored and pooh-pooed any suggestion that Clinton's hands might be sullied or her character tainted. Were it not for the determined efforts of the Select Committee on Benghazi, the entire affair, including Clinton's complicity, would already be in the memory hole alongside the aforementioned "Travelgate," as well as Whitewater, Chinagate, Filegate, Cattlegate, and other Clinton scandals too numerous to mention.

13 Hours, then, has done what the media have so far refused to do: shine a critical light on a major foreign policy failing of the Obama administration and of its chief architect, Hillary Clinton. Overall, it is a spare, worthwhile portrayal of selfless American military virtue at its best, and should take its place among the best films (so far) to foray into the vexed politics and nuanced morality of America's post-9/11 wars and entanglements.

Movie-going voters, take heed.



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