



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 9, 2013

Diplomat Says He Was Demoted for Questioning Official Account of Benghazi Attack

The deputy chief of mission under slain U.S. Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens [told](#) a House committee Wednesday he had been given a negative management review and “effectively demoted” to a desk job in Washington after raising questions about public accounts of last September’s attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi.

Gregory Hicks became the top diplomat in Libya following the death of Stevens and three others in the armed assault on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi. During nearly six hours of testimony before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, the 22-year Foreign Service veteran described the chaos that occurred during the night and early morning hours of September 11 and 12 and the courage of the diplomats and staff trapped in the compound. He also recalled calls he later received from both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commending him for his leadership role during the crisis.



But Hicks said he began running into resistance from State Department officials in Washington when he questioned the version of events rendered by Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, on network TV talk shows on the Sunday after the event. Rice related the Benghazi attack to anti-American demonstration that had occurred hours earlier in Egypt over an American-made, anti-Muslim video that had appeared on the Internet. She described the attack, which included automatic rifles, machine guns, mortars, and rocket grenades, as something that “evolved” out of a “spontaneous” demonstration.

“Our current best assessment, based on the information that we have at present, is that, in fact, what this began as, it was a spontaneous — not a premeditated — response to what had transpired in Cairo,” Rice [said](#) on ABC’s *This Week* “And then as that unfolded, it seems to have been hijacked, let us say, by some individual clusters of extremists who came with heavier weapons.... And it then evolved from there.”

Rice’s description of events has been the subject of controversy ever since. At Wednesday’s hearing, Rep. Trey Gowdy (R-S.C.) read from an e-mail he said was sent to senior State Department officials on the day after the attack from Elizabeth Jones, acting deputy secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs. In the message, dated September 12, Jones wrote that she had spoken with the Libyan ambassador to



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the United States, and “I told him that the group that conducted the attacks, Ansar al-Sharia, is affiliated with Islamic terrorists.” That, Gowdy said, was four days before Rice made her comments on the Sunday talk shows circuit. A report issued by House Republicans last month said references to Islamic terrorism had been edited out of “talking points” the State Department had given to Rice.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney Wednesday said officials were still not sure who was behind the attacks. Ansar al-Sharia had originally claimed credit for it on Twitter and then recanted, he said.

“What I can tell you is that it was the assessment of our intelligence community that the attacks were participated in by extremists,” Carney told reporters at the daily White House briefing. “That’s what I’ve said. That’s what Ambassador Rice said. She said on that Sunday that extremists were involved. What we didn’t know is what their exact affiliation was.”

Hicks said when he heard Rice’s description of events, “I was stunned. My jaw dropped and I was embarrassed.” He said that when he called Jones to ask about it, “The sense I got was that I needed to stop the line of questioning.” He said he ran into trouble when House Oversight Committee member Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) called on him in Libya and, said Hicks, his superiors at the State Department told him not to talk to the congressman. Hicks spoke with him anyway, and a State Department lawyer was excluded from one meeting for lack of the necessary security clearance, Hicks said. He then received an angry phone call from Cheryl Mills, Secretary Clinton’s chief of staff.

“So this goes right to the person next to Secretary of State Clinton. Is that accurate?” asked Representative Jim Jordan, Republican of Ohio.

“Yes, sir,” Hicks replied.

At the beginning of the hearing, both Hicks and committee chairman Darrell Issa detailed a long list of favorable reviews and commendations Hicks had received in his more than two decades in the Foreign Service. But he received a harshly negative review of his management style after raising questions about the Benghazi attack, and he told the committee he believed his reassignment as a desk officer at State Department headquarters was retaliation, a charge denied by the department.

In a statement issued late Wednesday, State Department spokesman Patrick H. Ventrell said Hicks “testified that he decided to shorten his assignment in Libya following the attacks, due to understandable family reasons.” He was given “a suitable temporary assignment” at the same salary, and he had submitted his preferences for his next job, Ventrell said.

Hicks appeared before the committee alongside Mark Thompson, deputy coordinator for operations in the State Department’s Counterterrorism Bureau, and Eric Nordstrom, former regional security officer in Libya. Hicks described the anger of an Army lieutenant colonel in charge of a four-man Special Operations team that was prevented from flying from Tripoli to Benghazi to aid in rescue efforts. Thomson said his Foreign Emergency Support Team was left out of the communications loop and decision making process that occurred during the crisis. According to State Department and Defense Department statements, the Special Operations unit was not ready to leave for Benghazi until it was too late to help, and Thompson’s emergency support unit, deploying from the United States, would not have arrived until after all Americans had been evacuated.

The State Department created its own Accountability Review Board, led by retired diplomat Timothy Pickering and former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen, to investigate events surrounding the Benghazi attack. But witnesses at Wednesday’s hearing said the investigation fell short of the mark. Hicks said the board failed to hold high-level political appointees at the department



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responsible for inadequate security in Benghazi. “They stopped short of interviewing people who I personally know were involved in key decisions,” Nordstrom said. The response to his own repeated requests for additional security, he said was, “Basically, stop complaining.”

Photo of (from right) Eric Nordstrom, Gregory Hicks, Mark Thompson: AP Images



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