



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on December 15, 2012

## Rice Bows Out, but Benghazi Battles Go On

The battle over the non-nomination of Susan Rice is over, but controversy over the September 11 attack in Benghazi continues following the UN ambassador's announcement that she was withdrawing from consideration for the nomination to succeed Hillary Clinton as secretary of state. Ambassador Rice notified the president by phone Thursday afternoon that she would not be a candidate for the job, possibly sparing the President a battle he appeared to welcome shortly after his reelection last month.



"If Sen. McCain and Sen. Graham and others want to go after somebody, they should go after me," Obama said at a White House news conference in November, as he characterized as "outrageous" the sharply worded criticisms of Rice by Republican Senators John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. The senators and other Republicans had charged Rice with making false and misleading statements when, appearing on five Sunday news shows five days after the event, she described the armed assault that killed U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans in Benghazi as stemming from demonstrations over an anti-Muslim video on the Internet, rather than a planned terrorist attack. Both Obama and Rice have said she was relying at the time on intelligence reports of an incident still in the early stages of investigation.

"When discussing Benghazi, I relied on fully cleared, unclassified points provided by the intelligence community, which encapsulated their best current assessment," Rice said in an op ed article the *Washington Post* published [online](#) Thursday. "I have never sought in any way, shape or form to mislead the American people." But a battle over her nomination would distract from other, more important issues, she said.

"I have never shied away from a fight for a cause I believe in," Rice wrote. "But, as it became clear that my potential nomination would spark an enduring partisan battle, I concluded that it would be wrong to allow this debate to continue distracting from urgent national priorities — creating jobs, growing our economy, addressing our deficit, reforming our immigration system and protecting our national security. These are the issues that deserve our focus, not a controversy about me."

Obama never publicly said he planned to nominate Rice for the job, though his spirited defense of her reinforced the widespread belief that she was his first choice. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry has also been under consideration and the Massachusetts Democrat is now considered the almost certain choice.

"I think he'd be much more easily confirmed in the Senate than Susan Rice," McCain [said](#). Kerry is "immensely qualified and he would be easily confirmed," said [Senator John Barrasso](#), a Wyoming Republican and a member of the Foreign Relations Committee.

Republican praise for Kerry's foreign policy credentials now is in sharp contrast to 2004, when he was the Democratic nominee for President. Republicans described him then as a conviction-less flip-flopper



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on the Iraq War, as evidenced by his own statement that he had voted for a supplemental appropriation for the war “before I voted against it.” Kerry was at times aligned in GOP rhetoric with the government of France, which had opposed the U.S.-led invasion. “He looks French,” the *New York Times* quoted an unnamed White House political adviser as saying when it had become clear that Kerry would be the nominee.

The Senate rarely blocks the promotion of one of its own, however, and Obama is expected to choose former Senator Chuck Hagel, a Nebraska Republican, to succeed the retiring Leon Panetta, as secretary of defense. Hagel, who became a critic of the Iraq War in his final years in the Senate, is also expected to draw little opposition from Senate Republicans, despite his past criticisms of McCain’s foreign policy and his refusal to endorse the Arizona Republican in his race against Obama in 2008.

Should Kerry get the State Department job, it would open up a Senate seat in Massachusetts, where Republican Sen. Scott Brown, who lost his reelection bid last month to Democrat Elizabeth Warren, may be ready to try again. Brown won the seat in a 2010 special election to succeed Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, who had died the previous summer. His two years in the Senate and his reported \$37 million in campaign expenditures this fall no doubt increased Brown’s name recognition, even if they failed to win him reelection.

Graham issued a statement Thursday, saying he respected Rice’s decision but would “continue working diligently to get to the bottom of what happened in Benghazi.” The issue hounded Rice during the weeks and months following the attack. Critics claimed she should have known the information she said was given to her by the intelligence community was false and that it was clear by the time she made her round of TV appearances that the Benghazi attack was not the violent overflow of a spontaneous demonstration. McCain, who followed her on a *Face the Nation* interview on CBS, later [said](#) he heard her “incredible story and right after [that] the president of the Libyan National Assembly said it was al Qaeda ... and yet she never changed her story.”

The Benghazi affair became an issue in the presidential campaign, with Obama issuing a sharp rebuke to Republican opponent Mitt Romney in the foreign policy debate for suggesting the president or anyone in his administration had deliberately misled the American people over what happened there. A [letter signed by 97 House Republicans](#) urged the president not to nominate Rice to head the State Department.

“Ambassador Rice is widely viewed as having either willfully or incompetently misled the American public in the Benghazi affair,” the letter said.

Controversy has also revolved around claims of inadequate security at the diplomatic outpost in Benghazi and reported redactions of references to al-Qaeda involvement in the attack in the talking points that were given to Rice. [Speaking at the United Nations](#) two weeks after the event, President Obama also implied the Benghazi attack was related to the anti-Muslim video. Playing down the al-Qaeda role may have been part of an election campaign strategy to preserve the narrative of a President who killed bin Laden and had al Qaeda on the run.

McCain, Graham and freshman Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) have called for the creation of a select committee to investigate the administration’s handling of events related to the Benghazi attack, though it is unlikely to happen, since Democrats retained control of the Senate in last month’s election. Both the White House and Congress, meanwhile, are preoccupied with negotiations over the budget deficits and efforts to avoid going over “the fiscal cliff.”



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As for the role of the “intelligence community” in the events surrounding the Benghazi attack and the story line that emerged from it, it might take more than a select committee of the U.S. Senate to penetrate the veil surrounding the CIA and its clandestine activities in the United States and around the world.

*Photo of Ambassador Susan Rice: AP Images*



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