

Petraeus: CIA Blamed Terrorists For Libya Attack

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Testifying out of sight, ex-CIA Director David Petraeus told Congress Friday that classified intelligence showed the deadly raid on the U.S. Consulate in Libya was a terrorist attack but the administration withheld the suspected role of al-Qaida affiliates to avoid tipping them off.

The recently resigned spy chief explained that references to terrorist groups suspected of carrying out the violence were removed from the public explanation of what caused the attack so as not to alert them that U.S. intelligence was on their trail, according to lawmakers who attended Petraeus' private briefings.

He also said it initially was unclear whether the militants had infiltrated a demonstration to cover their attack.

The retired four-star general addressed the House and Senate intelligence committees in back-to-back, closed-door hearings as questions persist over what the Obama administration knew in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks and why its public description did not match intelligence agencies' assessments.

After the hearings, lawmakers who questioned Petraeus said he testified that the CIA's draft talking points in response to the assault on the diplomatic post in Benghazi that killed four Americans referred to it as a terrorist attack. Petraeus said that reference was removed from the final version, although he wasn't sure which federal agency deleted it. Adding to the explanation, a

senior U.S. official familiar with the drafting of the points said later that a reason the references to al-Qaida were deleted was that the information came from classified sources and the links were, and still are, tenuous. The administration also did not want to prejudice a criminal investigation in its early stages, that official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to discuss the process publicly.

Democrats said Petraeus made it clear the change was not done for political reasons during President Barack Obama's re-election campaign.

"The general was adamant there was no politicization of the process, no White House interference or political agenda," said Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif. "He completely debunked that idea."

But Republicans remain critical of the administration's handling of the case. Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., said Petraeus' testimony showed that "clearly the security measures were inadequate despite an overwhelming and growing amount of information that showed the area in Benghazi was dangerous, particularly on the night of Sept. 11."

In fact, Petraeus told lawmakers that protesters literally walked in and set fire to the facility, according to a congressional official who attended the briefing. U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens died from smoke inhalation. Petraeus said security at the CIA annex was much better, but the attackers had armaments to get in.

Separately on Friday, the Democratic leader in the Senate rejected a request from John McCain and two other senators for a

Watergate-style congressional committee to investigate the Benghazi attack. In a letter to McCain, Sen. Harry Reid said several committees in the House and Senate are already investigating and he would not allow the Senate to be used as a "venue for baseless partisan attacks." Republican House Speaker John Boehner also said this week that a special committee was not necessary.

Petraeus, who had a long and distinguished military career, was giving his first Capitol Hill testimony since resigning last week in disgrace over an extramarital affair with his biographer, Paula Broadwell. Lawmakers said he did not discuss that scandal except to express regret about the circumstances of his departure and say that Benghazi had nothing to do with his decision to resign.

He was brought to a secure room beneath the Capitol, avoiding crowds of photographers and television cameras.

Petraeus testified that the CIA draft written in response to the raid referred to militant groups Ansar al-Shariah and al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb but that those names were replaced with the word "extremist" in the final draft, according to a congressional staff member. The staffer said Petraeus testified that he allowed other agencies to alter the talking points as they saw fit without asking for final review, to get them out quickly.

The congressional officials weren't authorized to discuss the hearing publicly and described Petraeus' testimony to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., said

Petraeus explained that the CIA's draft points were sent to other intelligence agencies and to several federal agencies for review. Udall said Petraeus told them the final document was put in front of all the senior agency leaders, including him, and everyone signed off on it.

"The assessment that was publicly shared in unclassified talking points went through a process of editing," Udall said. "The extremist description was put in because in an unclassified document you want to be careful who you identify as being involved."

Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., said it remained unclear how the final talking points developed. The edited version was used by U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice five days after the attack when the White House sent her out for a series of television interviews. Republicans have criticized Rice for saying it appeared the attack was sparked by a spontaneous protest over an anti-Muslim video.

"The fact is, the reference to al-Qaida was taken out somewhere along the line by someone outside the intelligence community," King said. "We need to find out who did it and why."

King said Petraeus had briefed the House committee on Sept. 14, and he did not recall Petraeus being so positive at that time that it was a terrorist attack. "He thought all along that he made it clear there was terrorist involvement," King said. "That was not my recollection."

After two hours with Petraeus, the Democratic chairman of the Senate's intelligence committee and the panel's top Republican sparred over Rice's

televised comments.

Chairman Dianne Feinstein of California said Rice relied on "unclassified talking points at a very early stage. ... I don't think she should have been pilloried for this."

Feinstein recalled the faulty intelligence of the George W. Bush administration, used to justify the invasion of Iraq in concluding that country had weapons of mass destruction.

"A lot of people were killed based on bad intelligence," she said. Feinstein added that mistakes were made in the initial intelligence on Benghazi, but she said, "I don't think that's fair game" to blame Rice — who has been mentioned as a possible nominee for secretary of state. "To say she is unqualified to be secretary of state I think is a mistake."

Top committee Republican Sen. Saxby Chambliss of Georgia said Rice had gone beyond the talking points.

"She even mentioned that under the leadership of Barack Obama we had decimated al-Qaida. She knew at that point in time that al-Qaida was responsible in part or in whole for the death of Ambassador Stevens," Chambliss said.

Schiff, the California congressman, said Petraeus had said Rice's comments in the television interviews "reflected the best intelligence at the time that could be released publicly."

"There was an interagency process to draft it, not a political process," Schiff said. "They came up with the best assessment without compromising classified information or source or methods. So changes were made to protect classified information."

Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., said it's clear that Rice "used the unclassified talking points that the entire intelligence community signed off on, so she did completely the appropriate thing." He said the changes made to the draft account for the discrepancies with some of the reports that were made public showing that the intelligence community knew it was a terrorist attack all along.

Lawmakers spent hours Thursday interviewing top intelligence and national security officials, trying to determine what intelligence agencies knew before, during and after the attack. They were shown a video to illustrate the chronology of the attack, which edited together security video from the consulate and surveillance footage taken by an unarmed CIA Predator drone, and even local Libyan cellphone footage taken from YouTube showing Stevens being carried out by people who looked like they were trying to rescue him.

A U.S. official who viewed it said the video shows clearly there was no demonstration prior to the attack, and then, suddenly armed men started streaming into the mission. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to discuss the investigation publicly.

Associated Press writers Adam Goldman, Larry Margasak, Donna Cassata, Henry C. Jackson and Andrew Miga contributed to this report.

Repairs

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He said work is only just beginning because of a comprehensive assessment that has taken place since the flood ended.

During much of the summer in 2011, the dam sustained releases of 160,000 cubic feet per second (cfs), more than doubling the previous record of 70,000 cfs. To evaluate the effects of the high flows, numerous tests have been completed, such as an assessment this summer using ground-penetrating radar.

"It's just taken time. It's not a

simple assessment to know what's going on under the concrete and so forth," Becker said. "In addition to the flood, the facilities have 55 years of wear and tear on them, so I think a real thorough assessment makes a lot of sense."

He added that those assessments will continue as the scheduled repairs are made.

"At the upper end of the spillway, they are going to drill some holes and install some monitoring instruments below the spillway slab to measure the pressures beneath so they can really see exactly what's happening," he said.

Becker said both the assessments and the repairs will be

aided by the Corps' plans to lower releases at Gavins Point Dam to an average of 12,000 cfs from December through the end of February. The reduction is the first of several drought conservation measures planned by the Corps.

"The water will be lower in the spillway and it will make it easier for the contractors to access," Becker said. "And the upper end of the spillway will dry out, so they should be able to get in there and work in the dry conditions."

Complicating the matter of lowering the releases is the request of officials in Missouri earlier this week to keep the higher flows present. Leaders in the state and the barge industry are

concerned that the planned releases could reduce the amount of water flowing to the Mississippi River enough to halt barge traffic, stopping the transportation of millions of tons of essential goods.

While the Corps has announced it will continue with its plan to lower the releases to 12,000 cfs despite those concerns, Becker said the repairs to Gavins Point could be slowed should the Corps reverse its decision.

"It's much easier to do that work when it is dry rather than wet," he said. "Higher flows

would make it more difficult to do the spillway repairs, but we haven't heard that that's going to happen."

Although the Corps has focused on making a thorough assessment of flood-related damage to this point, Becker noted that other repairs have been performed as well.

For the past month, workers have been rebuilding the rock bank on the north shore of the river where 12 feet of riverbed was lost in the flood. By the time the work is done in February, 40,000 tons of rock will be installed in the riprap bank, Becker said.

The Corps also repaired a boat ramp at the end of the Training Dike this spring, he said.

Becker stressed that, despite the necessary repairs being done, the dam remains fully functional.

"We're not constrained by the condition of our facilities," he said. "This is just a really good chance to get them in top condition for the needs of the future."

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