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Fact Checker

# Issa's 'suspicious' that Hillary Clinton told Panetta to 'stand down' on Benghazi



By **Glenn Kessler** February 21   Follow @GlennKesslerWP

(Jim Lo Scalzo / EPA)

*“We need to have an answer of when the secretary of defense had assets that he could have begun spinning up. Why there was not one order given to turn on one Department of Defense asset? I have my suspicions, which is Secretary Clinton told Leon [Panetta] to stand down, and we all heard about the stand-down order for two military personnel. That order is undeniable. They were told not to get on — get off the airplane and kind of stand by — and they’re going to characterize it wasn’t stand down. But when we’re done with Benghazi, the real question is, was there a stand-down order to Leon Panetta or did he just not do his job? Was there a stand-down order from the president who said he told them to use their resources and they didn’t use them? Those*

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*questions have to be answered.”*

– **Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), [remarks during a GOP fundraising dinner](#), Concord, N.H., Feb. 17, 2014**

The Fact Checker has [written at length](#) on the [2012 tragedy at Benghazi, Libya](#), in which four Americans, including the U.S. ambassador, were killed. Some readers may think it is old news. But every so often a new allegation emerges.

During a fundraising dinner for New Hampshire Republicans, Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) raised a startling allegation: “I have my suspicions, which is Secretary Clinton told Leon [Panetta] to stand down.”

Issa is chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee and thus has every right to raise provocative questions. But while allegations of a “stand-down” order periodically emerged during the months-long investigation of the incident, recent congressional reports have cast serious doubt on those claims.

[A report by Republicans on the Armed Services Committee](#) recently declared: “There was no ‘stand down’ order issued to U.S. military personnel in Tripoli who sought to join the fight in Benghazi.” A [bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee report](#) released in January said: “The Committee has reviewed the allegations that U.S. personnel, including in the IC [Intelligence Community] or DOD, prevented the mounting of any military relief effort during the attacks, but the Committee has not found any of these allegations to be substantiated.”

Issa actually appears to acknowledge that, saying that it was not characterized as “stand down.” But then he uses the

phrase again in a series of questions: “Was there a stand-down order to Leon Panetta or did he just not do his job? Was there a stand-down order from the president who said he told them to use their resources and they didn’t use them?”

Granted, Issa is speaking off the cuff in response to a question, so maybe precise clarity should not be expected. But he clearly suggests that someone — in particular possible presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton or even President Obama — told Panetta not to act. As he put it, “Why there was not one order given to turn on one Department of Defense asset?”

Frankly, it would be rather surprising for a secretary of state to tell a defense secretary how to deploy his troops. What does the evidence show?

### **The Facts**

The [official timeline of DOD actions](#) on Sept. 11-12, 2012, shows that the incident began at 3:42 p.m., Washington time, and that by 5 p.m., Panetta and Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were at the White House discussing possible options with Obama. A Predator drone arrived over the Benghazi facility at 5:10 p.m. Between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m., Panetta convened a series of meetings and gave verbal authorization for the following actions:

1. A Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team (FAST) platoon, stationed in Rota, Spain, is told to deploy to Benghazi, while a second FAST platoon in Rota is told to prepare to deploy to the embassy in Tripoli.
2. A Special Operations force training in central Europe, known as the Commander’s In-Extremis Force (CIF), is told

to prepare to deploy to a staging base in southern Europe.

3. A Special Operations force based in the United States is told to prepare to deploy to a base in southern Europe.

(Separately, six U.S. security personnel left the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli for Benghazi and landed by 7:30 p.m., and “performed heroically,” the report says. Four other personnel had hoped to join them but were told to remain behind to defend diplomats there. That incident later led to allegations that they were ordered to “stand down,” but the Special Operations commander later told investigators that the decision was correct in hindsight because otherwise his team would not have been there to deal with the wounded arriving from Benghazi.)

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The House Armed Services report makes it clear that Obama told Panetta to do what he needed to do — and that Clinton did not speak with him on Sept. 11 as deployment decisions were made:

“[A]s to specifics” of the U.S. reaction, Secretary Panetta testified to the Senate that the President “left that up to us.” Secretary Panetta said the President was “well informed” about events and worried about American lives. He and General Dempsey also testified they had no further contact with the President, nor did Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ever communicate with them that evening.

A footnote added: “Secretary Clinton testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 2013 that she and General Dempsey spoke about the attack on

September 12. Furthermore, she said on the day of the attack she participated in a ‘secure video conference’ which included ‘senior officials’ from DOD.”

Here’s how Panetta described Obama’s instructions in his testimony: “He basically said, do whatever you need to do to be able to protect our people there.”

Of course, the deployment of forces by Panetta turned out to be pretty poor. It took six hours just for the units to prepare to depart for Libya. Not until 17 hours after Panetta issued the order did the CIF finally make it to the staging base in southern Europe. An hour later, one FAST platoon arrived in Tripoli. Thirty minutes after that, the Special Ops force from the United States arrived in Europe.

The Armed Services report also says one FAST platoon was delayed because the troops had to pause at a base to change clothes because of a request from the Libyan government, which it said apparently feared combat-ready troops would “unduly alarm or inflame” Libyans.

So, contrary to Issa’s claim that “not one order” was given to deploy one DOD asset, there were plenty of orders.

Meanwhile, there appears to be no evidence that Clinton spoke directly with Panetta, in an apparent effort to override Obama’s instructions. So what is Issa talking about?

Frederick Hill, a spokesman for the Oversight Committee, said that Issa was speaking of Clinton and Panetta as “institutional actors” operating at the “highest levels of the State Department and the Department of Defense.” He suggested the shorthand of “Clinton” and “Leon” was used because it was easier for the audience to understand than “State” and “DOD.”

Hmm. Is this credible? After all, Issa was speaking to a political audience, and he just happened to evoke the name of the leading Democratic candidate for president. Last time we checked, the “State Department” was not a potential candidate for president.

(Issa previously has said he personalizes institutions. Speaking on the Rush Limbaugh show in 2010 he once said Obama “is one of the most corrupt presidents in modern times” but then later told CNN that he meant to say “one of the most corrupt administrations.”)

Hill said: “Chairman Issa is asking a very straightforward question: Did high-level figures at the State Department, working under Secretary Clinton’s direction, impede the military response to Benghazi or was this only about the military not being prepared and positioned to respond?”

Hill noted that the Armed Services report “does not draw a conclusion about whether the State Department sought to discourage, limit or constrain a military response.” He added that it “is undeniable that a Special Operations commander in Tripoli was given an alternative order when he intended to take his team to Benghazi as the attack raged,” though “Chairman Issa acknowledged in New Hampshire that many do not consider this to have been a ‘stand-down’ order.” He added that “the record is also clear that the State Department delayed the deployment of a Marine team that arrived in Tripoli the next day” — this is in reference to the request from the Libyan government to remove military uniforms — and that State “stopped the deployment of a multi-agency response team.” ([The CBS report that Hill cited](#) also said the White House believed the Foreign Emergency

Support Team (FEST) was not necessary.)

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Hill said none of Panetta's orders directed units to Benghazi as fighting occurred: "If you're fixated on the term 'turn on,' remember that military units frequently reposition — the chairman is clearly talking about why a DOD combat asset was not directed to go to Benghazi."

"All of this is relevant to the state of mind among officials that night and whether they did everything they could to respond to the Benghazi attack or whether other factors were considered that led to a more cautious approach," Hill said.

### **The Pinocchio Test**

When the Fact Checker [gave Four Pinocchios to Issa](#) for claiming that Clinton signed a cable denying security for Benghazi, we said: "He would be on stronger ground if he didn't claim that she wrote this or signed it, but that it was fishy and he was seeking more information."

Hill suggests that Issa's reference to "suspicions" that Clinton told Panetta to "stand down," as well as his series of questions, represent that sort of caveat.

It is correct that Issa poses a series of questions, but his repeated use of the phrase "stand down" and his personalizing of the alleged actions ("Secretary Clinton;" "Leon") leave a distinct impression that either Clinton or Obama delivered some sort of instruction to Panetta to not act as forcefully as possible. He even incorrectly asserts that not a single order was given to use any DOD asset. One could argue the response was slow, bungled or poorly handled. But Issa is crossing a line when he suggests there was no

response — or a deliberate effort to hinder it.

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## **Four Pinocchios**

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# Rep. Darrell Issa disputes his Four-Pinocchio ratings



By **Glenn Kessler** March 3   Follow @GlennKesslerWP

(Lauren Victoria Burke/Associated Press)

**CHRIS WALLACE:** *That brings up my final question for you, because you have come under fire both in the IRS and Benghazi and other investigations of your committee for political witch hunts. They point specifically to a speech you gave to GOP fundraiser in New Hampshire in February about the Benghazi terror attack. Here's a clip.*

**VIDEO CLIP:** *Why there was not one order given to turn on one Department of Defense asset? I have my suspicions, which is Secretary Clinton told them to stand down.*

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**WALLACE:** *But the Washington Post Fact Checker cited that bipartisan report you mentioned, the Senate Intelligence Committee, that there were no stand-down orders, and there is also no evidence that Clinton ever spoke to Leon Panetta, then defense secretary, that night. And for the second time, they gave you four Pinocchios, which is their highest level of falsehood. How do you respond to that, sir?*

**REP. DARRELL ISSA:** *Well, first of all, the first one was for quoting something that was in somebody else's report, believing that it was true, which is an unusual way to get four Pinocchios. But in this case, the secretary of state was responsible for this normalization policy that existed in Benghazi. Witnesses have told us that they asked for help. The president himself implied that he told Leon Panetta, then secretary of defense, to use what efforts they could and what we know for a fact is not one aircraft, not one rescue of DOD was launched to get there in that 8 1/2 hours.*

**WALLACE:** *But to be honest, do you not have any evidence that Secretary Clinton told Leon Panetta to stand down?*

**ISSA:** *Well, the use in answering questions in a political fundraiser, that was in response to a question, the term "stand down" is not used in some sort of an explicit way, but rather the failure to react, the fact that only State Department assets and only assets inside the country were ever used, that members of the armed forces, gun carrying, trained people were not allowed to get on the aircraft to go and attempt to rescue. Those kinds of things*

through State Department resources represent a stand-down. Not maybe on the technical terms of “stand down, soldier,” but on what the American people believe is a failure to respond what they could have.

### – Exchange on “Fox News Sunday,” March 2

Politicians are never happy to receive Pinocchios from the Fact Checker. We understand that, and of course offer them a chance to dispute our reasoning.

On “Fox News Sunday,” host Chris Wallace brought up two Four-Pinocchio ratings given to Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.), chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, for remarks concerning the 2012 attack on a U.S. compound in Benghazi, Libya. He offered two rationales in arguing that our rating was wrong, so let’s review the issues again.

#### **The Facts**

The [first Four-Pinocchio rating](#) concerned this statement by Issa on “Fox and Friends” on April 24, 2013:

*“The secretary of state was just wrong. She said she did not participate in this, and yet only a few months before the attack, she outright denied security in her signature in a cable, April 2012.”*

The Fact Checker awarded Four Pinocchios because every single cable from Washington — hundreds of thousands of them a year, even the most mundane — automatically receives the secretary of state’s signature, per State Department protocol. Very few cables are ever shown to

the secretary before being sent, and there is no evidence that Clinton ever saw this particular cable.

Speaking to Wallace, Issa explained, “The first one was for quoting something that was in somebody else’s report, believing that it was true, which is an unusual way to get four Pinocchios.”

Hmm, someone else’s report? He’s apparently referring to 43-page [“Interim Progress Report”](#) issued on April 23, 2013, by five committee chairmen in the House: Reps. Howard “Buck” McKeon (Armed Services), Ed Royce (Foreign Affairs), Bob Goodlatte (Judiciary), Mike Rogers (Intelligence), and Issa.

Perhaps Issa has forgotten he signed the report? He certainly didn’t when he appeared on “Fox and Friends,” as this is the question that prompted his Pinocchio-worthy comment: “Chairman Issa, you’ve been on this from day one; you released a 43-page report. And in it, it says what about what the former secretary of state knew?” Later in the interview, Issa referred to “our report” and “our investigation.”

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As we noted at the time, the report “veered close to the edge” with its phrasing but its language was not as objectionable as Issa’s comments. He also did not contradict the television host, who all but accused Clinton of committing perjury in her testimony before Congress.

In any case, politicians have an obligation to check the facts in reports before citing them. It’s not enough to

blame someone else's report — especially when it is your own.

As Wallace noted, the second Four-Pinocchio rating concerned Issa's recent assertion that he suspected that Clinton ordered Defense Secretary Leon Panetta to “stand down” troops during the effort to rescue Americans under attack. As Issa put it on Feb. 17:

*“Why [was] there not one order given to turn on one Department of Defense asset?”*

In his response to Wallace, Issa moves the goal posts. “We know for a fact is not one aircraft, not one rescue of DOD was launched to get there in that 8 1/2 hours,” he said. Here, he confirms our reporting that Panetta did issue a series of orders, but because of the location of assets, they didn't arrive until the next day.

(Issa does not mention that, separately, six U.S. security personnel left the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli for Benghazi, landed by 7:30 p.m. and “performed heroically,” according to [a report](#) issued by Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee. A bipartisan Senate Intelligence Committee [report](#) describes the group as a seven-person team: “A seven-person security team (consisting of two DoD personnel, four CIA personnel, and a linguist) flew from the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli to Benghazi and successfully helped evacuate the Americans from the Annex to the airport.”)

Issa then tries to redefine the term “stand down” as “the failure to react,” when in fact Panetta and DOD did react.

He also claims that “members of the Armed Forces — gun carrying, trained people — were not allowed to get on the aircraft to go and attempt to rescue.” He does not mention that the Special Operations commander in question later told investigators that the decision was correct in hindsight because his team otherwise would not have been in Tripoli to deal with the wounded arriving from Benghazi.

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We will also note that he does not deny to Wallace that he has no evidence showing that Clinton gave Panetta a stand-down order. That lack of evidence was the key reason he earned Four Pinocchios.

### **The Pinocchio Test**

Issa’s new explanations do not pass scrutiny. It is especially strange that he would refer to a report he signed — and touted at the time as his own — as “someone else’s report.” We reaffirm our awarding of Four Pinocchios in both cases.

### **Four Pinocchios**

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