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Issa's 'suspicions' 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

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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 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.”

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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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