

Dec. 29: David Kirkpatrick, Darrell Issa, Joaquin Castro, Ben Wizner, Eugene Robinson, Andrea Mitchell, Robin Wright, Elliot Abrams, Peter Stearns

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DAVID GREGORY: Breaking News: A bombshell report in *TheNew York Times* could change the debate over the deadly attack on Americans in Benghazi, Libya on September 11, 2012, one of the hot political topics of this year.

ANNOUNCER: From NBC News in Washington, the world's longest running television program, this is MEET THE PRESS with David Gregory.

GREGORY: And good Sunday morning. Happy holidays. *TheNew York Times* report concludes there was no involvement by al Qaeda in the attack that killed four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens. *TheTimes* also says in a piece out this morning that the attack was in part fueled by anger over an American-made video critical of Islam. So does this bolster the Obama administration's initial response to the attack and undermine its critic? Coming up, I'll have exclusive interviews with the journalists who broke the story in *TheTimes* and also one of the key Republicans in Congress who claim there was indeed a cover-up. Also this Sunday, some of the key questions for 2014. Will Obamacare survive in its current form? Plus the U.S. and the state of the world how much influence does America still have around the globe? And what more is in store from leaker in exile Edward Snowden? I'm going to speak with his lead U.S. attorney coming up in just a couple of minutes, but first the developments in the Benghazi story. Joining me here in Washington in our-- on our set is NBC News chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell. And from Vermont this morning, *New York Times* Cairo bureau Chief David Kirkpatrick and the writer of today's report. David, thanks for being here. This is a significant story because it changes the narrative; it changes the debate around Benghazi. And let me lay out for context what you conclude in your own investigation. I'll put it up on the screen for our viewers at home. Months of investigation, you write, by *The New York Times*, centered on extensive interviews with Libyans in Benghazi who had direct knowledge of the attack there and its context, turned up no evidence that al Qaeda or other international terrorist groups had any role in the assault. The attack was led instead by fighters who had benefited directly from NATO's extensive air power and logistics support during the uprising against Colonel Qaddafi. And contrary to claims by some members of Congress, it was fueled in large part by anger at an American-made video denigrating Islam. So the al Qaeda connection and the video t-- two key points. How do you know it wasn't al Qaeda?

MR. DAVID KIRKPATRICK (Cairo Bureau Chief, *New York Times*): Well, I don't think I'm out on a limb there. I think honestly if you asked anybody in the U.S. intelligence business, they would tell you the same thing. I've talked to some of the people, who I believe were lead perpetrators, and it's just-- it's just obvious from them and the people around them, they're-- they're purely local people. Their-- their pasts are known, their records are known, when they were in prison, who they hung out with in prison, who their associations are. There is just no chance that this was an al Qaeda attack if, by al Qaeda, you mean the organization founded by Osama bin Laden. Now I've tried to understand some of the statements coming out of United States Congress blaming al Qaeda for this, and the only way that they make sense to me is if you're using the term al Qaeda a little differently. If you're using the term al Qaeda to describe even a local group of Islamist militants who may dislike democracy or have a grudge against the United States, if you're going to call anybody like that al Qaeda, then okay. Certainly there were some anti-western Islamist militants involved in this attack. But to me that's a-- that's a semantic difference and not a useful way of answering the original question...

GREGORY: Right.

MR. KIRKPATRICK: ...which is, did the group founded by Osama bin Laden and lead by Ayman Zawahiri lead this attack.

GREGORY: So let me bring in Andrea Mitchell as well because-- and-- and both of you listen to this, in the days after the attack on September 16th on this program and others, then U.N. ambassador, excuse me ambassador of the United Nations, Susan Rice, now the president's national security adviser, came on the program and I asked her about whether there was a terrorist element involved. This is what she said then.

(Videotape; September 16, 2012)

MS. SUSAN RICE (U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations): Putting together the best information that we have available to us today, our current assessment is that what happened in Benghazi was, in fact, initially a spontaneous reaction to what had just transpired hours before in Cairo. Almost a copycat of-- of the demonstrations against our facility in Cairo which were prompted, of course, by the video.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: So she says the video was a part of this, this was a spontaneous event in part based on what the intelligence community believed. That's being bolstered, that original assessment by this reporting in *The New York Times*.

MS. ANDREA MITCHELL (Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent, NBC News): Well, I think that they're not...

MR. KIRKPATRICK: Well, if I can interrupt you...

GREGORY: Yeah.

MR. KIRKPATRICK: ...I would say, no, we're not bolstering that original assessment. In fact, she made some clear misstatements there. This was not a street protest and it was not a copycat of what happened in Cairo. That was just an unarmed street protest. This is a group of armed men, who inspired by a video, deliberately attacked the compound. And so what she's doing-- what she's doing there through her misstatement is actually setting up a kind of a false dichotomy. Either it was a spontaneous street protest or it was an armed terrorist attack. And neither of those turns out to be exactly the case. It was an armed terrorist attack motivated in large part by the video.

GREGORY: But that's the point of the-- the-- the role of the video as opposed to, you know, care-- an attack that was carefully planned and orchestrated.

MS. MITCHELL: I think that you can parse the words. It's very clear and it was clear from the review board's report that the State Department itself had commissioned. That review board led by Mike Mullen and Ambassador Pickering said that there was a terrorist element here. So, I think, the question is how much were they motivated by or sparked by the video, and how much was it purely terrorism, anti-U.S., anti-western terrorism showing again how vulnerable the consulate and the outposts were. And I think part of the problem with Susan Rice's approach and in her defense the State Department's approach, as well, in those first few days where everyone was trying to cover up, appropriately, they thought, the fact that this was a CIA outpost. This was barely a diplomatic mission. It was a cover for an outpost to try to disarm-- disarm the very militias that ended up attacking.

GREGORY: So David, just to find a point here, there's a larger takeaway in your reporting, the result of your investigation. One thing that is not removed is the sting against this administration for inadequate security for a diplomatic outpost on the ground in post-war Libya.

MR. KIRKPATRICK: Yeah, I would say in addition to inadequate security, there was a real intelligence failure here. You know, there is a-- there is a substantial CIA operation tasked with trying to figure out what are the threats to American interests among these militias and it's clear that the United States fundamentally understood the dynamics of those militias. The people who attacked the compound were members of the militias the U.S. expected to help protect the same mission.

GREGORY: All right. David Kirkpatrick, thank you very much for your reporting and for coming on the program this morning. I appreciate it. Happy New Year to you. Joining me here with Andrea is Republican Congressman Darrell Issa of California, Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. In a few minutes, I'll also be speaking with Democratic Congressman Joaquin Castro of Texas. He's in San Antonio this morning. Congressman Issa, let me start with you. Back in May on this program, after the independent review board came out with its conclusions about what had happened, you and I had the following exchange. I'd like to play it and then ask you about it now.

(Videotape; MEET THE PRESS, May 12, 2013)

REP. DARRELL ISSA (R-CA/Chair Oversight and Government Reform Committee): The fact is we want the facts. We're entitled to the facts. The American people were effectively lied to for a period of about a month. That's important to get right.

GREGORY: And I just want to be clear what you believe the lie was.

REP. ISSA: This was a terrorist attack from the get-go. It was never about a video.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Do you-- have you changed your mind based on *The New York Times* investigation? Were you wrong about that?

REP. DARRELL ISSA (R-CA/Chair Oversight and Government Reform Committee): Well, *The New York Times*, quite frankly, David, did some

very good-- David Kirkpatrick did some very good work. But interviewing people in Benghazi after the fact, after the world has been told about this video, is really not real-time. So we have seen no evidence that the video was widely seen in Benghazi, a very isolated area, or that it was a leading cause. What we do know is September 11 was not an accident. These are terrorist groups, some of them linked to or self-effacing or self-claimed as al Qaeda linked, but I think David made a-- and before I go on, I wanted to make a very good point that David put out. Look, it is not about al Qaeda as the only terrorist organization any more than Palestinian, Islamic, jihad or Hamas or Hezbollah.

GREGORY: But you-- no, no, but you said repeatedly that it was al Qaeda, and the reason that matters is that...

REP. ISSA: No...

GREGORY: ...you and other critics said the president specifically won't acknowledge it's al Qaeda because it's an election year and he wants to say that after bin Laden, it's been decimated and would make him look bad if it were al Qaeda.

REP. ISSA: al Qaeda is not decimated and there was a group there that was involved that is linked to al Qaeda. What we never said, and I didn't have the-- the security look behind the door, that's for other members of Congress, of what the intelligence were on the exact correspondents with al Qaeda, that sort of information. Those sources and methods I've never claimed. What I have claimed, and rightfully so, is Ambassador Stevens and others alerted well in advance that they had a security threat, including, of course, the attempt-- two attempts to kill the ambassador, the British ambassador, the closing down of these facilities and so on. On the day that the ambassador was killed, he said it was-- in a cable, it was not a question of when-- or if but when there would be an attack. So we had warning beforehand, and we-- instead of increasing security, we reduced security.

GREGORY: Right.

REP. ISSA: During the attack, eight and a half hours, we didn't launch so much as one F-16. There's a lot of questions about not what the military capability is today, which has been improved. But what the military capability in response was there and why there wasn't a greater attempt.

GREGORY: But-- but when you...

REP. ISSA: And then lastly, there was this clear attempt, and Andrea said it very well, there was an attempt to put a-- put a bright spot, and maybe it was to cover up CIA activities, but they went out on five stations and told a story that was at best a cover-up for CIA, and at worst, something that cast-- cast away this idea that there was a real terrorist operation in Benghazi. And by the way, there is nobody from the U.S. government in Benghazi today. It is too dangerous to go there.

GREGORY: Andrea, question on this?

MS. MITCHELL: One point is that they were denying a CIA outpost in the initial days because it was still too dangerous and because we don't talk about intelligence.

REP. ISSA: We still call it the annex officially.

MS. MITCHELL: We still call it the annex. But to the point of why use the-- the term al-Qaeda. Because you and other members of Congress are sophisticated in this and know that when you say al Qaeda, people think central al Qaeda. They don't think militias that may be inspired by bin Laden and his-- and his other followers. So it-- it is a hot button for political reasons from the administration's view.

REP. ISSA: But Andrea, it was accurate. There was a group that was involved that claims an affiliation with al Qaeda. Now, al Qaeda is not a central command in control. It was, in fact, a loose group that could take general statements and act on them. The important thing in our investigation and the Oversight Committee investigation, where people have said under oath repeatedly they were not given the security they asked for in advance, they can't understand why there were not clear attempts to help them during those eight and a half hours.

GREGORY: All right. But these -- these are separate issues, chairman.

REP. ISSA: And-- and then afterwards, the facts were not properly stated.

GREGORY: But the key-- the key question is, do you stand by that the administration lied about who was behind it and what initially happened given this reporting?

REP. ISSA: I think David Kirkpatrick very clearly says that the statements made were false and misleading. He says that in his report, I don't have to state anything. I'll stand, quite frankly, behind what the Kirkpatrick...

GREGORY: Misleading based on the amount of information they had at the time.

REP. ISSA: No, not at all.

GREGORY: Isn't there a distinction between fog of war and an attempt to deceive?

REP. ISSA: Gregory Hicks hearing the last words of Ambassador Stevens to the outside world was told, we're under attack. And under oath when asked, if you-- if the ambassador had seen a protest or anything else earlier, would he have reported it, he said of course, yes. The fact is people from this administration, career professionals, have said under oath there was no evidence of any kind of reaction to a video and, in fact, this was a planned attack that came quickly. That's the evidence we have by people who work for the U.S. government and were under oath.

GREGORY: And again, the reporting today indicating that there was no evidence to be found of di-- of direct al Qaeda-- core al Qaeda link to all, this was clearly an attack as people on the ground felt it was.

REP. ISSA: Look, David-- David, in fairness, Kirkpatrick doesn't have the classified information that Mike Rogers and others have, and neither do I. I have never asserted that there was...

GREGORY: Classified information can also be based on incomplete information. It's real-time. If intelligence were always right, we wouldn't have a lot of the oversight in this country we have. Initial reports are often wrong, are they not?

REP. ISSA: What we know, David, is that the initial reports did not name this video as the prime cause. There was a small piece of information in a cable, they seized on it along with a lot of other information and chose to use that as a talking point. And Andrea, I think you hit it right on the head. If this was always about trying to deflect the fact that there was a larger other facility, fine, but the administration should honestly say that. We've already had Director Clapper say he effectively, he lied as little as possible before the Congress.

MS. MITCHELL: But didn't the administration-- Mister Chairman, didn't the administration's own review board, the independent review board, Admiral Mullen and Ambassador Pickering come to the conclusion that the security failures you cited from Gregory Hicks and other witnesses were accurate? And it was a slamming report in terms of the security.

REP. ISSA: It was a slamming report. My concern with that report is it doesn't go high enough. It doesn't go to Undersecretary Kennedy and others who had direct responsibility. But having said that, yes, they made it clear that they should have had security they didn't have. Admiral Mullen in front of my committee, when asked, if they had had a fast team like Yemen had or like Libya has today, would there have been an attack and in his opinion, with those kinds of forces behind the walls, there wouldn't have been an attack.

GREGORY: Let me-- I want to turn to Congressman Castro just before I let you go, I quickly want to touch on Obamacare, which is a big area of concern for you, especially the Oversight Committee. Your colleague in the Senate, Senator Ron Johnson told *The New York Times* this on Friday. And I want to put it on the screen. "It's no longer just a piece of paper that you can repeal and it goes away. There is something there. We have to recognize that reality. We have to deal with the people that are currently covered under Obamacare." Some 400,000 in your state of California have signed up and have enrolled in Obamacare. Will Obamacare survive, whether you like it or not?

REP. ISSA: Obamacare is a reality. Unfortunately, it's a failed program that is taking a less than perfect health care system from the standpoint of cost and making it worse. So the damage that Obamacare has already done and will do on January 1st, 2nd and 3rd will have to be dealt with as part of any reform. Some of these things that the administration talks about as good are, in fact, large expansions in Medicaid. The fact that people right-- well into the middle class are going to get subsidies, is going to cause them to look at health care differently. Health care sort of in a Third World way of do we get subsidies from the government for our milk, for our gasoline and, oh, by the way, for our health care? So as Americans, we're going to have to ask the question of have we done anything to drive down the cost of health care? The answer obviously is no, we're going up. Are we making it more affordable with government subsidies? Yes, but are government subsidies the answer or do we really need to look at the cost drivers of health care to get effective health care delivered at an affordable price which was the stated goal of the Affordable Care Act.

GREGORY: All right. Congressman Issa, thank you very much.

REP. ISSA: Thank you.

GREGORY: A lot to get to this morning. I would have loved even more time on health care, but we're out of time this morning.

REP. ISSA: NSA next time.

GREGORY: Hopefully you'll come back and NSA as well. Thank you very much. Congressman Castro let me bring you into this but before you touch on health care, give me your response as a Democrat more allied with this administration on the aftermath of Benghazi and this reporting this morning. Does it change the debate?

REP. JOAQUIN CASTRO (D-TX/Armed Services Committee): Well, it certainly does, David. And I hope that Chairman Issa and others have

learned a lesson from this. Chairman Issa and members of that committee crusaded for over a year on what was really a fairy tale claiming that the administration knew that al Qaeda was involved and wouldn't admit it. And the fact is that when a tragedy like this happens, whether it's something like this or a mass shooting at a school, there is a lot of information that comes out at the beginning that later has to be verified. But the important thing is that Susan Rice and the administration were trying their best to level with the American people. And some of the information that came out early, although it may have been wrong, that was their best effort. Darrell Issa and others took that and crusaded against the administration in a way that I think has been a big distraction for the American people.

GREGORY: Let me ask you about health care. The news this morning is that there have been 1.1 million Americans who have enrolled via healthcare.gov, a surge that we have seen in the last days and weeks. Back in September, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, said this was the standard of success.

(Videotape; NBC NIGHTLY NEWS; September 30, 2013)

WOMAN: What does success look like?

MS. KATHLEEN SEBELIUS (Secretary of Health and Human Services): Well, I think success looks like at least seven million people having signed up by the end of March 2014.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: So we're about 1.1 million now, certainly far short of that standard of that goal. If you don't reach it, what are the implications?

REP. CASTRO: Well, obviously, we're going to try as hard as we can to reach it. The Affordable Care Act is something that's good for the country. It really is a new day for the American people. They can't be denied now because of preexisting conditions. They won't hit lifetime caps, and we have been a little bit behind the curve. But on Christmas Eve and the day just before that, there were about a million people that were either on the website or made a phone call to enroll, and so we've seen the numbers spike up incredibly since November 1st.

GREGORY: Do you believe that the individual mandate will have to be delayed? Is that something worth considering?

REP. CASTRO: No, at this-- at this point I think that we should continue with the law. You know, the administration, of course, has made some adjustments, but David, there is not a single big law like this that America has passed, probably in our history, where there haven't had-- have been changes made to it to tweak it to make it better. So some of those delays that you see the administration making are really in the best interest of the American people and made with the intent of serving the American people and getting people health care in a better way.

GREGORY: The fight coming up in the New Year will be over the economy and jobless benefits that are set to expire for Americans who are out of work. What are the economic ramifications of letting those benefits expire?

REP. CASTRO: Well, obviously, you've got about 4.1 million long-term unemployed in this nation. In Texas alone, we've got sixty-six thousand people who as of yesterday lost their benefits. Two hundred and thirty-five thousand people in all who will lose their benefits through midway in 2014. So it's not only the benefits which, by the way, only average about three hundred dollars a month. So it's not only the benefits to them but also all of that economic development for the country, for retailers, for grocers, et cetera, and so it's going to have a sizable impact on our economy if Congress doesn't come back and do something about it.

GREGORY: All right. Congressman, Castro in Texas this morning. Happy New Year to you. Thanks so much for your time.

REP. CASTRO: Happy New Year. Thank you.

GREGORY: We're back here in one minute with one of Edward Snowden's lead attorneys. Are more surprises in store for 2014? Plus, this holiday season, praying for Billy Graham.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: He felt that God did this to put him in that place so that he could be a spiritual counselor and adviser, and every one of the presidents always, at some point in that relationship, would talk to my father about spiritual things.

GREGORY: My colleague Harry Smith with a special look at the man who has been a spiritual leader to millions for more than half a century.

Plus, our round table is back with its analysis and insights about the U.S. and our position in the world. What are the biggest threats to the U.S. in 2014 and how will President Obama handle them.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: President Obama and the U.S. intelligence world were rocked this year by the leaks from Edward Snowden. Here's this week's front

page of *The Washington Post*. Snowden was interviewed for hours by Barton Gellman and he said that, quote, "The mission is already accomplished, I already won." But the questions remain including Snowden's plans for 2014. Snowden's key legal adviser in the United States Ben Wizner joins me now. Ben, good to have you here.

MR. BEN WIZNER (Legal Adviser to Edward Snowden/Director, ACLU Speech, Privacy and Technology Project): Glad to be here, David.

GREGORY: Welcome to MEET THE PRESS.

MR. WIZNER: Thanks.

GREGORY: So the question is what happens in 2014 legally when he says, Mister Snowden, I've already won that may not be the view of the court. Just this past week, there was a ruling on the U.S. district court by Judge William Pauley that concluded the following: No doubt the bulk telephony metadata collection program vacuums up information about virtually every telephone call to, from or within the United States. That is by design, as it allows the NSA to detect relationships so attenuated and ephemeral they would otherwise escape notice. As the September 11th attacks demonstrate the cost of missing such a thread can be horrific, the bulk telephony metadata collection program represents the government's counter-punch connecting fragmented and fleeting communications to re-construct and eliminate al-Qaeda's terror network. So here's a district court judge disagreeing with another district court judge. If it's going to go to the Supreme Court, the U.S. Court of Appeals has to do something. Is that where this is headed?

MR. WIZNER: Well, it is, but let me just say this district judge is not just disagreeing with another judge, he's also disagreeing with the president's own hand-picked advisory panel--that panel which included a former top-level CIA official, a former counterterrorism-- counterterrorism adviser, concluded that they had seen no evidence that the bulk telephone metadata program had been uniquely successful had stopped any kind of attacks. So there is a dispute about whether this is, you know, effective or even legal. But yes, I think we always expected that there would be differences of opinion in the lower courts. There is no question that it's time for the Supreme Court to weigh in and-- and to see whether, as we believe, the NSA allowed its technological capabilities to outpace democratic control.

GREGORY: One of Snowden's key claims is that this is an abusive program. This is an abuse of government authority. I can understand the argument that there is the potential for abuse by this kind of bulk collection. What is the actual abuse that's occurred?

MR. WIZNER: Well, this is a general warrant. I mean, this is what the framers of the constitution were worried about when they said that the government needed to have individualized suspicion before it collected records from the American people. What the NSA has done is they flipped that on their head. They say we're going to collect everything now because we can and we think that it will be relevant to some investigation in the future...

GREGORY: But the Supreme Court said that that was okay. If you just that your-- your-- your data between you call someone else, that just the data, not the content, that that's not private.

MR. WIZNER: You know, the Supreme Court said that was right about one person.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

MR. WIZNER: The Supreme Court didn't say that was right about all people. Remember, the-- the NSA-- that's exactly right. They're collecting the telephone records of-- of every American. But I want to go back to that *Washington Post* headline where Mister Snowden said, I won and mission accomplished. He didn't mean that the mission was accomplished. What he meant was that what he had set out to do was to bring the American public into the conversation, to bring open federal courts into the conversation, to bring the whole Congress into the conversation. He did his part. It's now up to the public and our institutional oversight to decide how to respond to these allegations.

GREGORY: This is the ultimate act of civil disobedience. The question is, why doesn't he come back and face the music, face charges? Is that the honorable thing to do? Here's the president speaking in August of this year.

(Videotape; August 9, 2013)

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: So the fact is that Mister Snowden has been charged with three felonies. If, in fact, he believes that what he did was right, then like every American citizen, he can come here, appear before the court with a lawyer, and make his case.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Would he do that? Under what circumstances would he do it?

MR. WIZNER: Here's the problem with that. The-- the law under which Mister Snowden is charged, the 1917 Espionage Act, a World War I-era

statute, doesn't distinguish between leaks to the press and the public interest. And I think we can all agree that some of this information has been profoundly in the public interest and someone who sells secrets to an enemy for-- for personal profit. And in fact, the Department of Justice has argued in legal cases that it's actually worse, a worse violation to the law to leak to the press, than it is to sell it to an enemy, because all enemies get to see it. Well, that's true. But the American public also gets to see it. And in a democracy, it's very, very important that...

GREGORY: But he took an oath not to disclose classified information.

MR. WIZNER: That's not right. He took an oath to follow the constitution. Now he certainly signed the same standard classification agreement that everybody else signs. But his oath was to the constitution. Now, if the law allowed him to make a public interest defense; if the law allowed him to say, look at all the good this has done; if the law allowed him to say, the government hasn't been able to prove any harm from these disclosures; sure, he would face trial in that kind of system. But for now, he doesn't believe and I don't believe that the cost of his active conscience should be a life behind bars.

GREGORY: How often are you in touch with him? And how are you in touch with him?

MR. WIZNER: We're in touch very regularly over encrypted channels.

GREGORY: Would he come back to the United States under any circumstances?

MR. WIZNER: Sure, he would come back to the United States. He hopes to come back to the United States. I mean, do you like...

GREGORY: But only if given some deal, some amnesty?

MR. WIZNER: You know, amnesty is not a dirty word. There's a lot of people in this town, including some who have been on your show, who have been given amnesty. We just don't call it that. Lying to congress is a crime. Torturing prisoners is a very serious crime. There are lots of times when people violate the law and society decides for one reason or another to look forward rather than backwards. I think that this one of those cases. Mister Snowden's disclosures had been profoundly valuable to the country and to the world. They've really changed the whole debate here. And I also think that there is much that the United States could gain through conversation with him.

GREGORY: I understand your-- your point of view. And I wonder if you can understand those who believe that here is Mister Snowden, who has great faith in the American constitution, who is in exile in Russia, a country that does not have faith in our constitution, or in the freedoms that it affords.

MR. WIZNER: Absolutely. And I actually think if there is one thing that we all should agree on, it's that Edward Snowden shouldn't be in Russia. The reason why he's in Russia is that the United States revoked his passport when he was transiting through there. And I hope that the U.S. will-- will see that it's not in anybody's best interests for him to be there, and that even if he isn't going to return here, that there should be some other place where he can live.

GREGORY: He's a big public figure now. What can we expect from him in 2014?

MR. WIZNER: You know, it's very possible that he will emerge a little bit.. You know, he's been called a narcissist in a lot of corners. But as you know, your network and every other has been trying to get interviews with him. People have been trying to-- to give him money for book deals and movie deals. And-- and he prefers to-- to stay out of the limelight. But I do think we can expect to see him engage a little bit more in the public debate.

GREGORY: Certainly I'd love to have him here at this table and talk about his views. Mister Wizner, thank you very much.

MR. WIZNER: Thanks, David.

GREGORY: We appreciate your time this morning.

And coming up here, the U.S. and the world. How has President Obama handled America's foreign policy, from the brink of war with Syria over its chemical weapons, to the controversial nuclear agreement with Iran? Our roundtable is back to analyze the hot spots and the issues that will define America's role in the world in 2014 and beyond. That's up next after this short break.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Coming up here, our special round table about the US and the state of the world in 2014. It's coming up next, after this brief break.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: We are back. We have a special round table we put together to talk about the U.S. and the state of the world. Back with me is NBC News chief foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell; also here, the *Washington Post's* Eugene Robinson; author and foreign policy analyst Robin Wright; Elliott Abrams, foreign policy advisor to Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush; and the provost and professor of history at George Mason University, Doctor Peter Stearns, first time on the program. He's here because I spent more than a month with you listening to the great courses in your brief history of the world; which, you know, made me sound very smart in front of my kids, even though they weren't as interested. So Professor Stearns, welcome. Welcome, all of you. So I guess, Eugene Robinson, as we think about the U.S. and the state of the world, it is still my big question. What is the big story in the U.S., about the U.S., that dominates 2014?

MR. EUGENE ROBINSON (Columnist, *Washington Post*): Well, number one, this continuing conflict between two visions of government...

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

MR. ROBINSON: ...which paralyzes our government, and-- and in turn, paralyzes the world, in-- in that the U.S. is so the center of the world economy and the world political system. More government, less government, big government, small government. This whole approach is-- that-- this conflict is going to continue. That's-- that's one thing. Other big stories, we saw of course, our domestic surveillance, the Snowden story, you've covered that in the last segment. And one story, a huge story in 2013 that we kind of don't mention, was the acquittal of George Zimmerman and the-- and the-- and the-- the racial issues and conflict that remain just under the surface that bubble up from time to time, that erupt. And I think you can predict we'll have more eruptions in-- in 2014. We've come to big anniversaries of the Civil War, big anniversaries of the emancipation, this and that. And we'll see more of that.

GREGORY: And this-- this-- Professor Stearns, our historical context, the rest of the world looks at us and looks at how healthy the United States is to be a world leader. And that becomes a lot about our domestic disputes, about ideology, about role of government, health care and the like.

DR. PETER STEARNS (Provost and Professor of History, George Mason University): Absolutely. Obviously, the recurrent paralysis in Washington is-- is an international embarrassment. Hardly a signal advertisement for democracy. But I do think there was one other, if not story, process that's a little more encouraging; and that was however weak the economy is still, the fact is, economic improvement in the United States has arguably improved our-- our global position.

GREGORY: You think...

MS. MITCHELL: I think one story that is sort of connected to that in a perverse way, is the growing income inequality. We're seeing, as we speak today, the continuing surge on Wall Street; but the fact that companies are not investing, they're sitting on their profits, and that the people at the lowest end of the income ladder are becoming more and more disadvantaged. And that gap is connected to what Gene was talking about, the role of government, which is perhaps best identified and symbolized by Obamacare.

GREGORY: It's interesting, if we throw this out there, the U.S. role today as a world leader compared to ten years ago, and it has fallen. Because you've now got 53 percent saying that the United States is less important and less powerful in the world. Robin?

MS. ROBIN WRIGHT (Joint Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center): Absolutely. And I think this reflects something that's happening globally. We're seeing not only the democratization demands within countries, but the democratization demands among countries, that there is no-- in a post-cold war world, there is no superpower rivalry, there is no major power. We are the biggest power because of our economy, because of our military. But there are other countries, whether they're upcoming countries like India and Brazil that want to have a place in the decision making, whether it's at the United Nations or in deciding the big questions. They're-- we're seeing, you know, the rise of China, not just because of its economy but because of its growing kind of claim to territory, whether it's in the three seas-- the South Sea, the Yellow Sea, the East China sea-- in a rivalry with Japan that there are kind of a set of conflicts that are redefining our ability to influence. We're seeing what's happening in the Middle East that's quite extraordinary with our alliances. A year ago, Saudi Arabia and Egypt were our close friends and now Saudi Arabia saying it's moving away...

MR. ELLIOTT ABRAMS (Deputy National Security Adviser 2005-2009/Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relationship/Author, Tested by Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict): You know...

MS. WRIGHT: ...and Egypt is-- you know, has gone through a military coup.

MR. ABRAMS: What links the internal and the external-- President Obama.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

MR. ABRAMS: I mean, 2013 is generally thought not to have been a good year for him. 2014, he's got an off-year election. If he loses the Senate, a lot of people are going to say, okay, now he's really a lame duck on the international leadership question. It's partly fundamental issues like the economy, it's partly a question of national leadership. And if you look to people in the Middle East-- Arabs, Israelis-- they all seem to think the

United States is receding.

GREGORY: Well, and-- and the-- and the question is whether the United States-- whether the issue is whether the United States chooses to use its influence, not whether it's lost its influence; which really leads to something that The Economist wrote about in its World of 2014-- World in 2014 issue, which I enjoy every year. And one of the leaders says this: "...Obama has seemed a defensive president, retreating from Iraq and Afghanistan, unwilling to guide the Arab awakening and keen to "outsource" responsibility in other regions to local powers.... The question is whether the cautious Mr. Obama will use this to leave a mark on the world... Like many second-term presidents, he will increasingly focus on matters abroad. Now that America looks a little stronger, might he become a little bolder?" And Professor Stearns, to me, this goes to a question of what is coming to define this era of world history and how Obama plays in it?

DR. STEARNS: Well, look. I mean, one-- one point's already been-- been mentioned. Whether-- no-- no-- no matter what Obama does, the world is becoming more multi-polar. It's not only democratization, it's global industrialization. So we will simply not have the single voice that we thought we might have 10 or 11 years ago. That's not going to happen. At the same time, we're also dealing with the winding down of a second inconclusive war that probably did us no good in the world, and that's an area where Obama can display leadership, in helping us define what's our mission after this? Not to reclaim sole superpower status. That's an elusive...

GREGORY: Well, so where-- where does-- where is he bolder, Elliott Abrams? Where-- how does he make a difference?

MR. ABRAMS: I don't think he's going to be bolder. I think his main concerns are still domestic. And I do think there's a leadership gap here. I mean, if we look at what our Middle Eastern friends are saying, and some of those who surround-- who are surrounded, really, by China-- they're saying, where are you guys? You used to be the biggest power here. What are you doing? I'd say we see this in Syria. And in the Middle East, that's the thing that people point to.

MS. WRIGHT: But...

GREGORY: But...

MR. ABRAMS: President stepped up, and then he stepped back.

MS. WRIGHT: ...but the power...

MR. ROBINSON: But you can ask the question, though, how well did that work out? How well did it work out for the United States to essentially believe that it had the right to-- to try to direct events in the Middle East? I would argue that there is at best a mixed record. And-- and I think President Obama would argue that it didn't work out that well. That, in fact, we have to find a different road that-- and that doesn't-- you know, make us the boss of everybody.

MS. WRIGHT: Sixty-- two-thirds of Americans in three recent polls indicate that they thought the-- the Afghan war was the wrong war to engage in, or it had gone on too long, that this is-- has been a failure. But the exertion of power or presence in the region-- in the world generally-- doesn't mean the use of military force. It often means the use of diplomacy. And that's where I think President Obama actually scores points. That in dealing with Iran, which is likely to be the big story of 2014, that he has tried a diplomatic initiative that has borne a little bit of fruit, and maybe the only way we can avoid another war in the Middle East. And that on Syria, there are some really ugly choices. There is nothing that is particularly attractive. And the story on Benghazi this morning illustrates because some of the people who are responsible for the attack on the Benghazi mission were those who have benefited from the U.S...

MS. MITCHELL: Two quick...

MS. WRIGHT: ...NATO strikes on Libya. And so that our intervention in Syria doesn't necessarily mean that those we like are going to win; and frankly, there aren't that many to like in Syria on either side anymore.

MS. MITCHELL: On Syria, I think that the main criticism that you hear from multiple sides, not just from-- from Elliott Abrams, is that we waited too long to decide who to back. And by now, that vacuum has been filled with the Islamicists and the people that we want to train have fled, and-- and longer can play a role. And then Assad-- you can't make a statement Assad must go, and then not take some action.

GREGORY: But there...

MS. MITCHELL: But one other quick point was the Israeli-Palestinian gambit. And I think that it shows, as Robin was just saying, that there is a boldness to the diplomacy of this second-term president that many might not have expected that comes from John Kerry who is leaving again on New Year's Day for the Middle East.

GREGORY: The-- the question that I have is whether-- you know, you see this after the armistice in World War I. Churchill was a lone voice in

arguing that there were still threats that had to be confronted in Great Britain, and this British society wanted nothing to do with it. And that's a bit of what we're going through. We still face terror threats, terror safe havens, in some of the familiar places, in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Places that the president said we are committed to rooting out al Qaeda. And yet, we're in such a period of retrenchment-- on the left and the right in many circles-- it makes it difficult for any American president to be bold in a way that I think you'd like him to be bold.

MR. ABRAMS: Well, I think the problem is there's a huge price to be paid. If we pull out completely from Afghanistan in 2014, you can see during this president's term a rebuilding of al Qaeda there.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

MR. ABRAMS: Look at the price in Syria. We stood back. We didn't do much in Syria. 200,000 people dead, six million refugees, threatening all the countries around them, and 10,000 jihadis now gathered there-- not in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the Middle East. It's very dangerous. And what I fear is that during this period of retrenchment, we're going to see the threats grow. And then if you hand them off to the next president, that-- that's not going to work.

MS. MITCHELL: The last president did that.

GREGORY: Professor Stearns, how do you-- how do you see the period?

DR. STEARNS: Hard to say. I-- I would like to-- to make one other point, though. Boldness is not just boldness in some of the conventional diplomatic areas. And I'm not trying to downplay the seriousness of terrorist threats. There are bold opportunities, for example, in leadership on environmental policy. I'm not trying to play political correctness.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

DR. STEARNS: But a nation that works, for example, with China that's eager to collaborate on environmental issues, for very selfish reasons. There are opportunities to develop new kinds of alignments and collaborations that don't-- that-- that don't ignore the more conventional operations, but strike out in new ways that could be very fruitful. I think that's an area where bold leadership is possible.

GREGORY: If we have a deal-- we'll look at the big calendar for next year, coming up in a few minutes-- if there were to be a deal with Iran in the middle of next year, how does that impact diplomacy around the regions? Does that help to burn out the Syrian civil war? Does it have impacts beyond that?

MS. WRIGHT: I think that actually the Syrian-- that the Iranians, having just come back from Iran, are quite interested in seeing a settlement in Syria. That they understand the damage and the dangers to the region, because of all of the factors that Elliott mentioned. This is terribly destabilizing, in a way far in excess of what Afghanistan and its conflict did. So that I think they're prepared at this point to lob off the head-- in other words, Assad-- but to keep the body. To see him go, but to see-- whether it's the Ba'ath Party remain or a coalition of the Ba'ath Party and the opposition, that that-- they'd be prepared to work. But they also have to feel that they're being participants in the political process.

GREGORY: Right.

MS. WRIGHT: And the stakes on this issue in Iran are in many ways what-- not just the nuclear issue, but they're really the kind of things we want to see in Iran, whether it is the opening up of a political system, the inclusion of all-- a wider array of political players, women's rights. That when I talk to people in Iran, they were all saying, everything depends on the nuclear deal. The women's rights activists saying, if there is a nuclear deal, then we believe the administration-- the current new President Rouhani-- will have greater say in doing things that-- what we want, whether it's including reformers in the political process, dealing with some of the regional dimensions with the United States and the Gulf countries that are important allies to us.

GREGORY: All right. Let me get a break in here, there is a lingering question on the state of the world peace that I want to ask about. But I also want to talk about some of our big choices politically in this country next year in 2016. We'll talk about that, the key deadlines and the fights ahead. Plus, he's been a spiritual leader to millions for more than half a century. We're looking at the life and legacy of Billy Graham during the close of our holiday season. Coming up after this.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: He wasn't preaching his message, he was preaching God's message.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Here now, some of this year's Images to Remember.

(Graphics on Screen)

Boston Marathon Bombing, April.

Typhoon Haiyan, November.

Government Shutdown, October.

The Birth of Royal Baby George, July.

Pope Francis' First Year, October.

GREGORY: Great image of Pope Francis. There were so many of them with that young boy grabbing his leg and stealing the show on this year's Images to Remember. And coming up next, here from one religious man to another, a look at the life and legacy of the world's most famous preacher, Billy Graham. Coming up next.

(Announcements)

(Videotape; December 23, 1979)

REV. BILLY GRAHAM: Well, I'd like to sort of retire and take it a little bit easy. But I believe that I've seen enough people's lives changed that I'm going to continue proclaiming the gospel as long as I can.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: That of course was legendary Christian leader Billy Graham here on MEET ON THE PRESS back in 1979. After a lifetime of preaching the gospel to millions worldwide and serving as pastor to the White House, Reverend Graham is now fighting for his life at the age of 95. Our own correspondent Harry Smith talks to Franklin Graham about his father's unwavering faith, his life and his legacy.

(Videotape)

MR. HARRY SMITH: Just last month, Billy Graham delivered what might well be his last sermon.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: And he said, Franklin, I want to preach one more time. And he said that to me several times.

MR. SMITH: No longer capable of standing at a pulpit, Franklin Graham told us his father's message was recorded this past summer. And the film The Cross was completed in time to celebrate his father's 95th birthday in November.

REV. BILLY GRAHAM. I want to tell people about the meaning of the cross.

MR. SMITH: Soon thereafter, Billy Graham was hospitalized. And while he has returned home, he is not well.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: He's very weak. His vitals are good, you know, blood pressure, heart rate, these kinds of things are good. And he's eating a little bit. But he's just extremely weak. And so I've asked people to pray. So you know, people who are watching this program, I would hope that they would pray for him. He would appreciate it very much.

MR. SMITH: Billy Graham had a gift. When he spoke, it seemed the world listened. He preached to millions and they came forward.

REV. BILLY GRAHAM. There is a way.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: I believe that God empowered him. And my father, when he stood to preach, he wasn't preaching his message, he was preaching God's message.

MR. SMITH: While Graham preached to packed stadiums, he was also a pastor in the White House, no matter the party of the president.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: Well, he felt that God did this to put him in that place so that he could be a spiritual counselor, an adviser, and-- every one of the presidents always at some point in that relationship would talk to my father about spiritual things.

MR. SMITH: Franklin Graham might have become a prodigal son. In the beginning, he was not about his father's business.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: When I saw my father preach in Madison Square Garden, and I was a little embarrassed, I think the first time I heard him preach. You know, like that's my father up there, and, you know, I kind of slid down in my chair.

MR. SMITH: Young Graham was kicked out of his first college. But by 22, he returned to the fold. And while the resemblance to his father is

striking, he is his own man; outspoken about Islam, questioning President Obama's Christianity, for which he later apologized.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: Well, I've never really been one to try to be politically correct. I just feel that, you know, truth is truth, and-- and sometimes I probably offend some people.

MR. SMITH: With that kind of no-nonsense attitude, Franklin Graham has run Samaritan's Purse for more than 30 years, a ministry aimed at helping people when they need it most.

(Videotape)

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: This plane will be on its way soon to the Philippines.

(End videotape)

MR. SMITH: Graham's call to serve the less fortunate is something he shares with Pope Francis. And he applauds the new pope, but to a point.

He was asked about gays in the church and he said, who am I to judge? Would there ever be a shift for you on that issue?

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: Well, God would have to shift, and God doesn't. God's-- God's word is the same yesterday, today, a million years from now. And this is sin. But to wink at sin and-- and to tell somebody it's okay, when I know the consequences of what will happen one day when they have to stand before God. So I want to warn people, and I think the pope is right when he says he is not the judge. He is not the judge. God is the judge.

MR. SMITH: Franklin is also the head of the organization his father started; and in that role, helped his father fulfill his wish for a final sermon.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: Help my father finish well. I feel that's-- that's what God wanted me to do, is to help him finish well.

MR. SMITH: And Graham told us that sermon received more response than anything his father had done before.

REV. FRANKLIN GRAHAM: And when I told him, he just-- he was quiet for a second, then he just said, praise the Lord. And he said it real strong with a loud voice, and he was excited.

MR. SMITH: For MEET THE PRESS, Harry Smith.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Thank you, Harry. When you think about big, sweeping, historical figures, Billy Graham -- and we've talked so much-- and Franklin Graham talks so much about this pope, Pope Francis, and his potential to reach those heights as well.

MS. MITCHELL: I think Pope Francis is the-- the biggest thing that happened this year on the world scene. In the way that you think of Pope John Paul and the impact that he had in Eastern Europe. This pope, not only in his flock-- clearly, I'm not Catholic, but I-- I stayed up Christmas Eve just to watch the replay of that mass and to hear the homily. I am so moved by him and by the message of-- of caring for the poor and for those who can't care for themselves.

MS. WRIGHT: In a time...

GREGORY: Yeah.

MS. WRIGHT: ...time without leader-- leadership in so many...

GREGORY: Right.

MS. WRIGHT: ...parts of the world that he's providing principle, morality and direction is-- is quite striking.

GREGORY: And we look-- Professor, when we look at Billy Graham and the shadow that he cast for years and years in this country; which is what, you know, makes the comparisons to the likes of Pope Francis. But Billy Graham is an enduring figure.

DR. STEARNS: Absolutely. I mean the-- the role of papal leadership at this point, he not only mentioned attention to the poor after all, he also emphasized peace. And I think in a year where presumably we will-- we wind down a war-- I'm not trying to be naïve-- but some discussion of what peace can mean, and what role the United States could play in helping to construct a more durable peace in key regions, I think, is one of the things that ought to be on the agenda.

GREGORY: We end the year looking ahead, Gene, at some of the key dates for next year which are about foreign affairs and domestic affairs-- the State of the Union in January, March is the deadline to sign up or face a fine for health care...

MR. ROBINSON: Right.

GREGORY: ...the end of that timetable for Iran in July, midterm elections in November, perhaps leaving Afghanistan by the end of next year. A lot there.

MR. ROBINSON: Right. Mid-term election. Elections have consequences, and-- and so I think a lot of the year will be aimed at that election. One question I have about the campaign running up to that election, was mentioned by Franklin Graham, the culture wars. We've-- we've seen this year huge advance in gay marriage, a suggestion that maybe there could be-- there possibly is a truce in the culture wars. It will be interesting to see if indeed the truce holds or if the wars break out.

GREGORY: Right. Some recent advancements there.

MS. MITCHELL: And whether Hillary Clinton runs or not runs.

GREGORY: Right. And actually...

MS. MITCHELL: It's going to be this coming year.

GREGORY: ...commits to it this year. All right, I'm going to leave it there. Thank you all very much for spanning the globe with me this morning. I appreciate it very much. That is all for today. I hope you have a very happy and healthy New Year in 2014. We'll be back next week. If it's Sunday, it's MEET THE PRESS.

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From around the web

Do You Know What Your Last Name Means? (Ancestry.com)

These 10 Cars and Trucks Prove Least Reliable According to Consumer Reports (Wall St. Cheat Sheet)

Take The Virtual Color Personality Quiz Here (BHG)

Buying vs Renting: The Real Facts (YouTube)

A Ridiculously Simple Way to Pay Off Mortgage (Bills.com)

Best 5 Credit Cards with No Interest to Help You Get out of Debt (NextAdvisor Daily)

More from NBCNews.com

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Clint Eastwood's son, Scott, reveals dad's best advice (TODAY)

Go ahead, eat at night and have that egg: 5 health rules you can break (TODAY)

Teacher fired for pregnancy sues Catholic school (NBC News)

New Novartis drug may upend heart failure treatment (NBC News)

Intel hires senior Qualcomm exec to boost mobile business (NBC News)