

May 12: Darrell Issa, Dianne Feinstein, Thomas Pickering, Adam Kinzinger, David Brooks, Katty Kay, Wes Moore

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MR. DAVID GREGORY: This Sunday, the battle over Benghazi. Did the White House play politics with terrorism or is this a raved up Republican attack machine at work against the president and Hillary Clinton?

This week, a career diplomat challenges the official line on Benghazi in riveting detail.

(Videotape)

MR. GREGORY HICKS: I received a call from the prime minister of Libya. I think it is the saddest phone call I have ever had in my life. He-- he told me that Ambassador Stevens had passed away.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: And House Republicans aren't about to stop asking questions. Is the administration holding back?

(Videotape)

REP. JOHN BOEHNER: The White House has done everything possible to block access to the information that would outline the truth.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: This morning, my exclusive interview with the Republican leading the charge; Chairman of the House Oversight Committee, Congressman Darrell Issa of California.

Then, the man who insists that charges of a cover-up or pure fiction, Former Ambassador Thomas Pickering who led the independent investigation into the Benghazi attacks; he joins me.

Plus, response from Democratic Senator and Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee Dianne Feinstein. Later, our roundtable on the political impact of Benghazi and the other news. The immigration fight, the economy as the stock market takes off, and the alarming number of sexual assaults in the military. What should be done?

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. The president and his administration under fire now on two fronts; news just this morning. In the developing controversy over the IRS targeting of conservative Tea Party groups, The Associated Press reporting this Sunday that senior IRS officials knew of the targeting as early as 2011, contradicting recent public denials by the commissioner. And in the growing congressional investigation over the administration's response of the September 11th attacks in Benghazi, Libya, has the White House now on the defensive. That's where we are going to start this morning, with the Republican leading the investigation into these matters, the Chairman of the House Oversight Committee, Darrell Issa. Chairman, good to have you here.

REP. DARRELL ISSA (R-CA/Chair, Oversight and Government Reform Committee): Well, thanks for having me on and obviously this is an important issue to the American people.

GREGORY: Well-- and let's get into it then because I want to know where you're going. Congressional leaders including yourself are calling on the White House to release more e-mails related to all of the communication and reaction to the Benghazi attacks the very next day. What are these e-mails? What's in them? And, do you think the White House is holding something back?

REP. ISSA: Well, David, there are three distinct areas that haven't been answered. First of all, a full understanding of why urgent request repeatedly for more security before the attacks were denied? We've had statements that it wasn't about money. But at the same time, people are asking for more security, they got less. The British ambassador has two assassination attempts, and yet we keep a facility that was not able to withstand even a few minutes of attack. Then, those seven hours while the attack was going on. Was the response correct? Could it have been better? Why wasn't-- why weren't things at least tried or revved up to be tried? Those are important questions. And then afterwards, how could you change talking point 12 times from what seems to be relatively right to what seems to be completely wrong?

GREGORY: Why don't I start there because in the immediate aftermath, there is both intelligence and there is internal administration communication basically saying that a terrorist group appears to be involved, right? Ansar al-Sharia. There's communication about this in the State Department, but those are removed ultimately from the talking points in preparation for members of Congress and for Susan Rice, the ambassador to the United Nations, who appeared here and on other Sunday morning talk shows. And Steve Hayes has reported about this in The Weekly Standard. He writes about some of these changes. The official who changed it at the State Department, The Weekly Standard confirmed was State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland, worried that members of Congress would use the talking points to criticize the State Department for "not paying attention to agency warnings" about security in Benghazi. In an attempt to address those concerns, CIA officials cut all references to Ansar al-Sharia and made minor tweaks. But in a follow-up e-mail at 9:24 PM, Nuland wrote that the problem remained that her superior-- she did not say which ones were unhappy. The changes, she wrote, did not "resolve all my issues or those in my building leadership." You suggest others how she's playing politics with the aftermath of this. But Chairman, didn't the CIA-- didn't the intelligence community have the final word on what the accurate talking points would be?

REP. ISSA: No, not at all. If you keep pushing back, you get a first report from the CIA. That's their report. Then you push back, you get a little different. You push back, you get a little different. That's manipulating the CIA to get the-- the truth you want.

GREGORY: CIA can't stand up for itself and say, no, no, these are the facts?

REP. ISSA: The fact is, there was a fact witness. His name was Ambassador Stevens. He said, "Greg, we're under attack," to his number two. That was the definitive statement from the ambassador on the ground before he was murdered. You have a fact witness. And you follow that up with fact witness after fact witness. So, to blame the CIA is a convenient truth. The real truth is, the people who were there in Tripoli and in Benghazi knew this was a terrorist attack from the get-go. That's been said under oath. And that's the reason that we need to know more about how these got changed.

GREGORY: Chairman, my reporting of the immediate aftermath of this talking to administration officials is that CIA Director David Petraeus made it clear when he briefed top officials that there-- that there was a spontaneous element to this, that it was not completely known that this was a terrorist attack right away. You don't give any credence to the notion that there was some fog of war, that there were-- there were conflicting circumstances about what went on here.

REP. ISSA: David Petraeus said what the administration wanted him to say is the indication. Ambassador Pickering heard what the administration wanted to hear. The only under oath people I know about who have said what happened on the ground that day was, in fact, before our committee just on Wednesday. And more importantly, you know, when-- when Face The Nation had Susan Rice saying one thing and the President of Libya saying just the opposite, that should have been a wake-up call, a real wake-up call that there was something wrong because we were effectively calling the President of Libya either incompetent or a liar. Either way, diplomatically, we went down the wrong road. You reconcile with the government that is hosting you before you go on national television and make that kind of claim.

GREGORY: What is-- what is the big picture here? You are saying that administration officials--are these political advisors to the president, are these non-political appointees--bullied the CIA into saying what the polit-- the political advisors in the White House wanted him to say? Is that your charge?

REP. ISSA: David, we're not making charges.

GREGORY: No, no. You just said...

REP. ISSA: David...

GREGORY: ...the CIA was-- had to back down from what they originally wanted to say and that David Petraeus said what the White House wanted to say. I mean, those are very serious charges.

REP. ISSA: Those-- those talking points are not the starting talking points, they're the ending talking points. So we're not reaching every conclusion. We are not accusing who changed that. 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. The attack succeeded very quickly, in no small part because the consulate or the diplomatic facility in Benghazi was denied the kind of support it needed or, quite frankly, the decision to leave which might have been just as good. Either way, they were, in fact, covering up an easy attack that succeeded that was about-- was from the get-go really about a terrorist attack. It was never about a video. So when we look at what we know, the question is, how do we prevent a facility from being under protected, how do we respond better if we have seven hours or more of an attack, and how do we get the truth out? There's three sections all of which the American people are entitled to, and so far, Jay Carney has said a lot of things that aren't believable even to you and the rest of the press. We've had testimony by people under oath that I think are pretty believable, and I know they're accountable for what they say.

GREGORY: Who else do you want to hear from in the days and the weeks ahead?

REP. ISSA: Well, on Monday, I'll be sending Ambassador Pickering a request for a deposition. We're going to want to go through at length how the ARB reached its conclusions, who it interviewed and why we believe there are short...

GREGORY: This is the Accountability Review Board that investigated the attack.

REP. ISSA: Right. I mean, ultimately if that got it right, then we can-- we can put this to a rest. We believe it was insufficient. We believe that it's likely that they did not interview all the people. We have one witness who said I wanted to be interviewed and I wasn't. And, you know, one of the questions that came out of our hearing--Gregory Hicks, the acting ambassador, has not been allowed to look at the classified ARB report even though he is the foremost authority on at least what was happening in Tripoli and what the communication was.

GREGORY: And-- and as you point out Ambassador Pickering. He is here. We'll talk to him in just a minute to get some of his response. I want to add-- have you respond to something else. You know, Former President Bush gave an interview this week in which he talked about e-mail in the executive branch, particularly his own. I want to play that for you and then ask you about it.

(Videotape; April 2, 2013; C-SPAN)

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: --learned that I didn't e-mail anybody when I was president. I-- I was fearful of-- of congressional intrusion into my e-mails so-- which is kind of sad really because a lot of history's lost when presidents are nervous about their personal papers being subpoenaed.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: That was a couple of weeks ago. Congressional intrusion was his fear. Now, what we're talking about with regard to Benghazi does not involve a president's e-mail but it involves e-mails in what's called the interagency process. And what your critics have asked is, are you reading into something that is not there, discussions about what happened, about what the various inputs of information are. Are you over reading?

REP. ISSA: Well, we're obviously having a debate in federal court because of Fast and Furious in which the executive branch lied to Congress and then refuses to deliver the in-agency debate about how you perpetrate and continue that lie for months. We have a basic difference of opinion with the executive branch. Not a Republican, not a Democratic, but a basic dis-- difference. If you lie, deceive or cover-up and that's discovered, then those papers behind the scenes become very appropriate to be seen by the coequal branch. Now, I'm one of those people that very strongly supports that the deliberative process in the ordinary course is not something we should be asking for. But when the wheels come off, when in fact, people make a decision to give us something that's false and it's shown to be false and then particularly if there're false statements to Congress, of course we have an-- an obligation to look at it and that does appropriately include those e-mails. And in this case, you've got 12 changes. We have-- Ambassador Pickering has every right and obligation to look at every one of them and we have every obligation to look over his shoulder and see what was independent, what was given. Now, Ambassador Pickering has said he's been given all of the documents and access to all of the people. Well, we haven't and we're the coequal branch, he was simply acting as an appointee of the-- the secretary.

GREGORY: What did Secretary of State Hillary Clinton fail to disclose or fail to do that makes her a target for you?

REP. ISSA: Hillary Clinton's not a target. President Obama's not a target. The target is how did we fail three different ways, fail to heed the warnings of an impending attack, fail to respond properly during the attack? At least-- we certainly could have done better and I think everyone knows that. And then failed to get the truth to the American people at a timely fashion.

GREGORY: You don't hold the president and the secretary of state responsible for those failings?

REP. ISSA: It's their administration, but what we have to find out is, how did we not get it right before the attack, how did we not get it better during the attack and how did we not get the truth after. If they're involved in it, of course they should be held responsible. But one of the problems

with this ARB report is, it doesn't seem to find anybody at the high level of state department or anyone else to have failed. And I'm going to tell you something. Certainly, Under Secretary Kennedy who has not been held accountable-- three of his people have been held supposedly accountable, but he was getting the facts on a daily basis and one of the questions is, isn't this career professional of 34 years or more-- isn't there some accountability? We certainly think that it needs to be asked.

GREGORY: You've got Republicans talking about this being Watergate. One Republican raising the specter of impeachment. Conservative groups raising money off of the Benghazi story. Are you hurting your own credibility and your own find-- fact-finding mission by politically overreaching?

REP. ISSA: Well, if I was, then I would be. But I'm not. You know, I-- I investigated the mineral management service and made strong recommendations to the Bush administration that it needed real change because it was a dysfunctional agency. And I'm sad that I didn't stay on top of it more tenaciously because ultimately, the Gulf of Mexico got filled with oil because that agency wasn't doing enough of its job of making sure the oil companies did their job. So I can never again look at something where four men died and I believe needlessly and then say, well, I'm going to just say they've taken care of it, it won't happen again. No. Congress has an obligation to say, what did you do to make sure it doesn't happen again? And Charlene Lamb and other low-ranking people being reassigned to other jobs. That's not going to prevent these three separate mistakes from happening again.

GREGORY: The issue of security that you talk about, how do we prevent this from happening again? The reality chairman, as you know, is it it's happened throughout our recent history. Just look at some of the attacks on diplomatic compounds or facilities or U.S. interests over the years. You go back...

REP. ISSA: You know, Gregory Hicks, in fact, testified to what happened in Bahrain under his watch.

GREGORY: Hold on, let me just go through...

REP. ISSA: How in fact they prepared for a possible attack and they survived the attack even though they lost a few cars...

(Cross talk)

GREGORY: But look-- but look at these attacks on U.S. interest spanning Republican and Democratic administrations including President Bush's administration. Why is there not more of an effort to beef up security after these attacks happen and even, you-- you know, even before this happened in Benghazi?

REP. ISSA: David...

GREGORY: And isn't this Congress's job to spend the money to beef up security?

REP. ISSA: David, I-- well, first of all, money is spent by the-- the secretary of state and her people. We appropriate the money. I have spent over 12 years both on the Intelligence Committee and on the Foreign Affairs Committee and now on the Oversight Committee. I visited countless embassies and consulates. I've seen both behind the scenes on the Intelligence Committee and the overt actions of what we do. And we do a great deal. And we do it well. But in areas of high risk, in areas like North Africa and for that matter, Sub-Saharan Africa, we're not really prepared for the kind of-- of attacks we're getting. We haven't been since the-- the two bombings of our embassies and then the Cole. So can we do better? Yes. Must we do better? Yes. But when you have clear signs and you have career professionals asking for more security and they're second-guessed, not for financial reasons, but for reasons of apparently wanting a normalization, an appearance of normal, that has to be asked. Why wouldn't you let the career professionals have their way when they say here's a risk, they tried to kill the ambassador, the British ambassador twice. They blew up the wall at this very facility in Benghazi two separate times, one they actually breached it, and yet security was cut, not increased. That's not about the broad picture. It's about this example of what went wrong.

GREGORY: But do you need a select committee on-- on something like this? Something like (Unintelligible) or is your-- your investigation sufficient here?

REP. ISSA: You know, let's not blow things out of proportion. This is a failure, it needs to be investigated. Our committee can investigate. Now, Ambassador Pickering, his people and he refused to come before our committee that...

AMB. THOMAS PICKERING (Former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs/Chair, Accountability Review Board on Benghazi): That is not true.

GREGORY: All right. We're-- we're going to get to Ambassador Pickering.

REP. ISSA: We have-- we have it in-- we have it in writing, we have White House correspondence. It may not have been the Ambassador's decision but it was the White House decision. That has been reversed. We're inviting him on Monday along with Admiral Mullen to come, to go through,

with his papers, a private deposition so we can get the facts in a nonpartisan way.

GREGORY: Right.

REP. ISSA: We'll have Republicans and Democratic...

GREGORY: Well, all right. Ambassador Pickering, you-- you just jumped in here. You're willing to appear?

AMB. PICKERING: Of course. I've said the day before the hearings, I was willing to appear to come to the very hearings that he disclu-- he excluded me from. The White House told me back that he said...

REP. ISSA: One second. Please-- please don't tell me I excluded you.

AMB. PICKERING: Well, the-- the majority was-- we were told the majority said I was not welcomed at that hearing. I could come at some other time.

REP. ISSA: Well, as-- as the ambassador just said, the day before the hearing, if the White House said we'd like to have him, there's a procedure. He could have been the Democratic witness. And we would have allowed him. The Democrats requested no witness. The fact is, we don't want to have some sort of a stage show. We had fact witnesses. They testified. We have the Ambassador and-- and Admiral Mullen who conducted and oversaw the ARB. We're inviting them on Monday. We'll go through, not in front of the public but-- but in a nonpartisan way questions and answers and then obviously...

GREGORY: All right.

REP. ISSA: ...a hearing to follow at an appropriate time. I'm delighted to have a long-serving career diplomat willing to come before us. I don't think it was his decision to say no. But we were told no until just before the hearing

GREGORY: All right. Well, let me-- let me do this. Chairman, stick around for just a minute because I also want to ask you about this IRS story. But I want to stay on this theme. Ambassador Pickering, you led this investigation along with Admiral Mullen. And the criticism about this investigation is, it didn't go far enough. You didn't specifically interview Secretary of State Clinton. You didn't probe into what she did or did not do in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. You focused on lower level officials and you didn't sufficiently address the very point that the chairman brings up, which is why wasn't there sufficient address to the fact that there was a deteriorating security situation in Benghazi?

AMB. PICKERING: Let me say that I hope the chairman has read our report. Our report has 29 recommendations. The bulk of them concern the insufficiency of the State Department's preparation of that post to deal with the security challenges. I don't think that there is any other explanation. And I can't believe that in fact, he still sits here and makes those charges. The second issue he raised was the seven hours. We looked into this extensively with the military. Admiral Mullen himself...

GREGORY: Seven hours. Just talk about-- you're talking about the night of the attacks?

AMB. PICKERING: The night of the attack...

GREGORY: Yeah.

AMB. PICKERING: ...in Benghazi. And Admiral Mullen and I and all the other members of the board concluded, after the testimony in which we interviewed many people, that there was no way that any military activity could have been put in place to deal with that particular question. He...

GREGORY: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and others have said nobody could have gotten there in time.

AMB. PICKERING: General Dempsey said so, Admiral Mullen, the retired chairman said so.

GREGORY: But were you not critical of the fact that there was no contingency planning of a...

AMB. PICKERING: There was...

GREGORY: ...of a chaotic situation in North Africa.

AMB. PICKERING: ...there was contingency planning, David, and that contingency planning helped. The contingency planning involved the annex coming to help the people who were under attack at the mission. And it was fairly clear that that particular set of activities helped a great deal. We may have had more people killed if that hadn't happened. We've been told that the only witnesses that are of any value are people in Tripoli. We interviewed everybody still alive on the ground who was at the U.S. mission that night.

REP. ISSA: Well, and that-- ambassador...

AMB. PICKERING: And I have...

REP. ISSA: ...that's an important point. We've been denied even the names of those individuals. The fact is, our committee wanted to speak to the individuals from Benghazi. They were neither encouraged nor produced nor even their names made available to us. Look, two of the most respected career people I know, the Ambassador and Admiral Mullen, who I've-- I've worked with much more closely than the Ambassador, I respect them. We have an obligation to look for any of the inconsistencies, and yes, I understand that in seven hours, they look back and say we couldn't have saved those men. The question-- one of the questions is, in hour one, what orders were given to begin the process? Who was put on alert? Who was asked? This could have gone on like Tehran. This could have gone on for weeks or months. So there's a lot of those questions. All we're really asking is, why is it that the Ambassador and the Admiral reached a conclusion? We have their output; their unclassified and classified output.

GREGORY: Right. Let's have the Ambassador-- let's have the Ambassador respond to that.

AMB. PICKERING: You also have access to the classified testimony.

REP. ISSA: Well, actually...

GREGORY: But let's-- let's-- I want-- but let's...

REP. ISSA: Ambassador, we've-- we've gotten the-- we've got the classified report but we don't have any of the interviews you did. We don't have even the-- we don't even have the list of everyone you interviewed. So...

AMB. PICKERING: The list of interview I believe is in the classified report...

(Cross talk)

GREGORY: All right. I-- I want to get to a larger picture though. Excuse me-- excuse me, Ambassador. I want to come back to this fundamental question.

REP. ISSA: Yeah, please.

GREGORY: Did you not pay sufficient attention to-- and time with the secretary of state?

AMB. PICKERING: I believe we did. We had a session with the secretary. It took place very near the end of the report. It took place when we had preliminary judgments about who made the decisions, where they were made, and by whom they were reviewed. We felt that that was more than sufficient for the preponderance of evidence that we had collected to make our decisions and you know that our decisions was two of those people should be separated from their jobs. Two others failed in their performance.

GREGORY: The press secretary to the president Jay Carney said back in November, he-- he talked about how changes were made, who made changes to these talking points prepared for Congress and for Ambassador Rice. This is what he said back on November 28th.

(Videotape; November 28, 2012)

MR. JAY CARNEY (White House Press Secretary): The White House and State Department have made clear that the single adjustment that was made to those talking points by either of those two-- these two institutions were changing the word consulate to diplomatic facility because consulate was inaccurate. Those talking points originated from the intelligence community. They reflected the IC's best assessments of what they thought had happened.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: We know that's not accurate. We know that in fact, the State Department, Victoria Nuland, was involved in removing from the talking points previous warnings about security and references to a terrorist group, an extremist group, being involved in the attack based on what was being reported on the ground and by intelligence. Is the administration guilty of playing politics with terrorism?

AMB. PICKERING: With full respect, the Accountability Review Board was there to look at the question of security. We did not examine talking points after the fact. It was not (Unintelligible).

GREGORY: All right. I'm going to end on this point which is about the IRS...

REP. ISSA: Yes.

GREGORY: ...and this revelation. They have apologized for this. What more would you like to see? Are you satisfied with the apology?

REP. ISSA: This-- this...

GREGORY: That the targeting conservative groups in an election year for tax exempt status.

REP. ISSA: Well, you said it all. They targeted conservatives for tax exempt status, but the bottom line is they used key words to go after conservatives. This is something you have to institute changes to make sure it doesn't happen again. There has to be accountability for the people who did it. And quite frankly, up until a few days ago, there's got to be accountability for people who were telling lies about it being done. And-- and lastly, to be honest, one of the most offensive parts is, my committee and Jim-- Jim Jordan and I instigated this investigation, got the IG to do the investigation, before the IG's report comes to the public or to Congress as required by law, it's leaked by the IRS to try to spin the output. This mea culpa is not an honest one. The honest one is, in fact, let's see the-- the IG report, let's go through it. And then let's-- just like the Ambassador said on the 29 changes, which we agree with, let's see what the instituted changes need to be to make this not happen again.

GREGORY: All right. Chairman Issa, Ambassador Pickering...

AMB. PICKERING: Thank you.

GREGORY: ...this debate will go on. Thank you both very much for being here.

REP. ISSA: Thank you, David.

GREGORY: Coming up, we're going to get reaction to what you just heard from the Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Democrat Dianne Feinstein of California; plus, the alarming number of sexual assaults in the military--another big story this week. What should be done about it? The president weighed in this week. We'll hear what he said, plus, get perspective from two combat veterans, Congressman Adam Kinzinger of Illinois and author Wes Moore. Also joining us the BBC's Katty Kay and David Brooks of the New York Times, right after this short break.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Coming up, we're going to do some of the news just made here on Benghazi and the political fallout, as well. Is it going to hurt Hillary Clinton's presidential prospects in 2016? The roundtable is here, Senator Feinstein. We'll get into it right after this.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: And we're back. We'll speak to our political roundtable in just a moment, but I want to begin with Senator Dianne Feinstein, Chair, of course, of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Democrat of California. And, Senator, your reaction to what you've heard thus far, particular the ins and outs on these talking points and what seems to be the central charge that is these e-mails are rel-- revealed that the administration at various levels wanted to scrub the fact that there was a link to terrorism of this September 11th attack in Benghazi.

SEN. DIANNE FEINSTEIN (D-CA, Chair, Intelligence Committee): Well, I disagree with the conclusion. We have held six separate hearings. We have interviewed every intelligence head. We have read the e-mails. We sent a sub-- spent a-- a considerable amount of time with David Petraeus when he was director of the agency with the CIA, analysts involved. We will shortly be producing what I hope will be a bipartisan review. You know, what-- what I hear being assessed is all kinds of ulterior motives, and I don't believe they existed. And I have looked through all of the intelligence proceeding, Benghazi. There was no tactical intelligence, but there was intelligence to the effect that there had been prior attacks, that this was a dangerous area. You can say the security was inadequate. It was. But it was-- this was not a consulate or an embassy, therefore it did not have marines. You can question whether it should have been there in the first place. But I don't think you can question that there was malevolence on the part of the president, on the part of the secretary of state or anyone else. It was a very unfortunate incident that turned in to be, I think, a great and very painful learning experience.

GREGORY: But when you see some of these e-mails that no doubt you already reviewed as Chair of the Intelligence Committee, all of this was reviewed with Intelligence Committee members, Republicans and Democrats. At the time, nobody accused anybody of a cover-up. But you do see-- that the talking points have from them removed, any reference to terrorist groups being involved. Can't you understand the accusation that...

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Yeah...

GREGORY: ...people were spinning this as-- as something other than a terrorist attack?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: ...well, let-- let me-- let me say this. I think the talking points were wrong. I think the talking points should not be written by the

intelligence community. I think the intelligence community should not be doing talking points for members of Congress and our report will in essence say that. Talking points can't be done by committee either. And these were. They were passed from one to the other to the other. And changes were made. The White House made virtually no changes. The word "consulate" was changed to "mission" and John Brennan made a change in syntax of one sentence. That was it.

GREGORY: But you had the whole-- you had the State Department pushing back on what those talking points were and they were ultimately changed. And the White House was running that process, right, as an interagency process?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Well, as more became known, the talking points were changed. Senator McCain said, and I happen to agree with this...

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

SEN. FEINSTEIN: ...that when you see a group going up with RPGs and weapons to-- to break into one of our facilities, you can assume it's a terrorist attack. Unfortunately, the word extremist was used which is not as crystal clear as terrorist. The real-time video which we have all seen reveals that there was virtually no defense. The militia from Libya sent to guard the embassy disappeared the minute these people came down the street. These people just walked right into the facility...

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

SEN. FEINSTEIN: ...so that is the painful learning lesson that we have.

GREGORY: Well, there is also a political charge that is coursing through this. The pivotal moment of all of this. Back in-- in-- in February, Senator McCain was on this program, and this was the exchange with what he thought was-- the actual cover-up. Watch this.

(Videotape; February 17, 2013)

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN (R-AZ): And-- and shouldn't pe-- people be held accountable for the fact that four Americans died including...

GREGORY: For what? You said there is a cover-up, a cover-up of what?

SEN. MCCAIN: ...including a very dear man. I-- I'm...

GREGORY: I'm just asking you a cover-up of what?

SEN. MCCAIN: ...of the information-- of the information of concerning the deaths of four brave Americans. The information has not been forthcoming. You can obviously believe that it has. I know that it hasn't.

Why did the president, for two weeks-- for two weeks during the heat of the campaign, continued to say he didn't know whether it was a terrorist attack or not? Is it because it interfered with the line of al Qaeda is decimated and everything's fine in that-- in that part of the world? Maybe. We don't know. But we need the answers.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: Is that criticism warranted, Senator?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Well, I think some of it is. It was in the last of a political campaign. We have gone through all of this. Now, we are going through it again and my concern is when Hillary Clinton's name is mentioned 32 times in a hearing, that a point of the hearing is to discredit the secretary of state who has very high popularity and may well be a candidate for president. So I understand Republicans had a grievance because this happened a month before the election. And every effort has been made to turn it into something that's diabolical. I don't see that. And if I did, I would say it, but I don't see that.

GREGORY: Rand Paul says in Iowa as he is ramping up for a presidential run, talking about Secretary Clinton, "It was an inexcusable, it was a dereliction of duty," he said, it would-- "It should preclude her from holding higher office."

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Well, I think that's nonsense, and I think the American people will think it's nonsense. This is a woman who has devoted herself to the job, who has as traveled the earth, who has tried to bring countries and organizations and groups closer together. She's a builder, not a divider. And I think-- you know, I'm really sorry because what is happening is that the credibility is being lost when these attacks take place, first on the president, now on the secretary of state. And candidly, we have looked into this probably more than anyone in terms of time spent. And our-- our Intelligence Committee will have a report, and I hope we will put some of these things to rest.

GREGORY: I want to ask you about the other big issue you're working on this week, that is immigration. Is there going to be an overall

immigration reform bill that's passed in the Senate? I don't have to tell you, you've been involved in the markup. The pushback from Republicans is, look, we have got to get border security right and it's got to be tough before we get to any of the business of a-- a citizenship pathway for those here illegally.

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Well, we saw in the committee, we passed 32 amendments, Thursday. What we saw was a prodigious effort to say nobody could be on the pathway to a green card until the border was 100 percent or somehow 90 percent absolutely guaranteed secure. The border patrol has been doubled. There are nearly 25,000 border patrol now on the border. And intrusions have dropped dramatically. Of the fence, the Secretary of Homeland Security testified that about 300 mile-- excuse me, I think close to 350 miles of fence have already been built. And there's some left to do with less than 50 miles. We have air resources. You have drones. You have cameras. The-- the border has been fortified more than any time in our history. And I think that we need to move ahead with this. I think we will move ahead. I think it's our chance. If we fail this time, I think you're not going to have another chance in the next decade. So I am very hopeful the people-- the Gang of Eight has held together. They have sup-- they understand the break points. They are supporting one another. If that continues on the floor when the bill gets to the floor, I think we have a very good chance of success.

GREGORY: Let me widen this discussion. David Brooks, as we talk again about Benghazi, you know, here this morning and what's new this morning, the Chairman of the House Oversight Committee is falling short of saying this was Hillary Clinton and President Obama's fault. But he does say the administration essentially directed the intelligence community to back off what they wanted to say.

MR. DAVID BROOKS (Columnist, New York Times): There's an underlying narrative here which I actually think is wrong. The underlying narrative is that the CIA is this bunch of technically pure non-political people and then they produce a product which is then doctored by a bunch of political people either at State or at the White House. My reading of the evidence is that a very terrible event happened at a CIA-- basically a CIA facility. They went into intense blame-shifting mood, trying to shift responsibility on to the State Department, on to anywhere else. And the State Department pushed back. They said no, it's not our fault, it was your facility. And so they pushed back and they said why are we suddenly releasing information that we haven't been releasing so far? So the CIA was super aggressive. There was some pushback. Out of that bureaucratic struggle, all the talking points were reduced to mush and then politics was inserted into it. So I don't think we should necessarily say this is politics intruding on a CIA pure operation.

GREGORY: Congressman, don't you see the muddle in all of this that it's not so clearly Watergate as some Republicans allege?

REP. ADAM KINZINGER (R-IL, Foreign Affairs Committee/Iraq and Afghanistan War Veteran): Look, I'm not out to try to bring anybody down. I just want the answers. And, you know, I look at a couple of things. Number one, who changed the talking points? These are questions that go to motivation. But I do know that Ambassador Rice went on every morning show and said this was a result of a YouTube video, this was not a terrorist attack. It was frankly told to us in a closed door meeting in Congress by Hillary Clinton, too. And the other question, you know, as a pilot in the military, I went to survival training and the first thing they tell you is, your country, just know, no matter how long you're in prison, your country will move heaven and earth to come get you and that it appears in this case the country didn't move heaven nor earth to come get them. And the administration says, well, we had seven hours, we couldn't have made it in time. And, to me, that's irrelevant. What matters is you didn't know when the second attack was coming. Why did you not pull out all the stops to get some assets in place to save these four men or any future attack that could be happening?

GREGORY: Wes Moore, you're also a veteran of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. That is something you hear a lot in this community, in the Special Forces community and diplomatic community. Which is why didn't they go after our guys to-- you know, to try to do something and was there enough contingency planning, that's a question I asked Ambassador Pickering to be able to move if something like this were to occur.

MR. WES MOORE (Author, The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates/Afghanistan War Veteran): Well, I think the challenge was both under contingency planning, but also coordination, about who actually had the jurisdiction to send in, what was the timeline because the fact is, you know, I-- I agree with you on the point that regardless of what the timeline was, there should have been contingency plans particularly once we heard about the level of the threat. Where the challenge though comes in, I think, this also comes into an idea of lesser included, right? Where we cannot by-- by trying to overstate the argument, we also undermine the argument where we have to also understand that at its fundamental core that investigations should happen. There needs to be more that we can understand and a baseline that we can understand from this issue. But then we can start clouding the issue by trying to put in all the other elements like what-- like what Senator Feinstein was talking about, you know, trying to indicate specific individuals who are responsible. That's where this issue becomes clouded and the fact is that's when the truth also becomes very muddled in as well.

GREGORY: You know, Katty Kay, a historical precedent I think is interesting, and I have been looking at it this week and that's the Beirut bombing of 1983 when our servicemen were killed respectively on a landing strip there, a deadly video. There were recriminations politically, the president taking responsibility. I was looking at the time. Sam Gibbons of Florida saying I've only got three words, Lebanon, Reagan's, Vietnam. Senator Fritz Hollings saying that, the deployment of American troops in this type of situation borders on the criminal. All they are doing is sitting there, hunkered down at the end of a runway, waiting to be killed and on and on he goes. A tragedy that became a political issue here in Benghazi, it

somehow becomes a scandal. What is the difference between tragedy and actual scandal?

MS. KATTY KAY (Washington Correspondent, BBC World News America/Anchor, BBC World News America): It is the insertion of politics. And if you are a Republican who feels that this is a cover-up, you feel you've been vindicated this week. Democrats feel that the Republicans are trying to smear the White House with this. And I think actually for the American public, the points of whether there were twelve different versions of the talking points and the e-mails that were sent, that's not what concerns them or perhaps should concern them. The bigger picture here is one about missing intelligence in Benghazi in the run-up to this attack, the fact that there were 40 separate attacks against foreigners in the six months before the attack against this facility. Why were those not connected? Why was the security not sufficient? Those are the issues that should concern us. Those are the issues that actually matter to American security abroad. This issue of talking points I think is becoming so intensely political, so confusing, that it's going to be missed by the American people and probably should be missed by the American people.

GREGORY: Before I go to a break, Senator Feinstein, the kind of bottom line is, if there is something you would have liked to have seen the president or the secretary of state do differently after this broke, it would have been what?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Oh, to move faster, to say yes, this was in fact a terrorist act. I mean, it was so evident and...

GREGORY: But why did they drag their heels on the same?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: ...you know, we know there're training camps all around there.

GREGORY: If you believe that, why did they drag their heels?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: I-- I can't-- because they-- I think this is a cautious administration. You see it in other respects. I respect that. But this is one instance where, you know, it was what it was. And you saw it. The minute you knew what happened, you knew it was a terrorist attack. And you knew these groups had camps all around the area. So...

GREGORY: Did you think the political campaign was a factor?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Hard for me to tell because I'm not sure what impact it would have had if someone had said from the administration, yes, our mission was attacked. We believe it was some terrorist groups. We need to identify which one.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

SEN. FEINSTEIN: I-- I don't see what harm that would have done to the administration.

GREGORY: All right. Let me-- let me get to a break here. I want to come back and talk about another big issue this week, that sexual assaults in the military. What should be done about it? We've some key voices around the table to be able to address that. Plus, this IRS story especially with news this morning about some conflicting statements about why certain groups were targeted. We'll get the Senator's reaction to that as well and more from our roundtable, right after this.

(Announcements)

(Videotape; March 22, 2012)

MR. DOUGLAS SHULMAN (IRS Commissioner): There's absolutely no targeting. This is the kind of back and forth that happens when people apply for a 501(c)(4) status.

(End videotape)

GREGORY: So that was March of last year from the IRS commissioner. News this morning from the AP that in fact, he and other senior officials at the IRS knew there were conservative groups, groups with the word "patriot" in their names trying to get tax exempt status-- status who were put through kind of extra regulatory hoops to get that status. You heard Chairman Issa talk about that. Senator Feinstein, are you concerned about that?

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Yeah, I'm concerned about that. My understanding is the inspector general is doing a report. That report should be out shortly. And I think we have to take a good look at it.

GREGORY: There's no proof that the director himself of the IRS was personally aware of this...

SEN. FEINSTEIN: That's my understanding.

GREGORY: Yeah. But-- but that's a question certainly about...

SEN. FEINSTEIN: Somebody made the decision that they would give extra scrutiny to this particular group. And I think we have to understand why.

GREGORY: Is this...

SEN. FEINSTEIN: I don't understand why.

GREGORY: ...this is kind of lumped in this morning. We look at The Washington Post this morning, David Brooks, kind of a second term curse.

MR. BROOKS: Yeah.

GREGORY: You've got the Benghazi investigation going. Now, questions about the IRS. Does this further poison the well in Washington?

MR. BROOKS: Yeah. I mean, the-- the second terms are generally hit with scandal. In the Obama administration, you're not going to have a monetary scandal. These people are not financially corrupt. You're not going to have a sexual scandal. But they are very political. And so you could have this means spread that this is a hyper-politicized group of people who will twist things. And this IRS story is going to be big. It's going to confirm a lot of suspicions a lot of Republicans have. You combine that with the Benghazi thing, you combine it with even the red line in Syria where that looks like a political thing now because you wouldn't carry through it. So what the president needs I think is a group of people put out there who are the clearly above politics, who are senior older people; show that a significant part of this administration and the core of this administration is not hyper-political and that has been a problem for the administration I think since the get-go.

GREGORY: Huge story this week, if I can, is the sexual assault in the military and the figures that were revealed this week, Katty Kay, from 2010 to 2012, an increase of 35 percent within the military; the president very angry about it. This is men and women who are being assaulted. And this gets to a core issue which is, who you report assaults to in the military and the role of a military commander to even do away with the verdicts or decide whether the cases are brought.

MS. KAY: And almost as shocking as the number of case is the fact that 92 percent of reported assaults in the military never actually make it to a court process. So, there are two issues. One is that it's incredibly scary for young women and young men in an organization where following orders is what you are meant to do and where it is very hierarchical to go to seniors when those seniors might in some cases have been the perpetrators and say I've been the victim of assault.

GREGORY: Right.

MS. KAY: It's particularly hard in the military. And the prosecutorial process is flawed because it's left up to military commanders. Now, Senator Gillibrand this week is going to propose legislation that that gets taken away from military commanders, as it is in the UK where you have an independent review.

GREGORY: But-- right. But-- but Secretary Hagel is saying he's not prepared to do that, that there is still an issue with order and discipline. This is not a democracy, that's a-- Senator Graham pointing that out, that you can't change this process that dramatically. You've been in the military.

MR. MOORE: Yeah. Um, I...

GREGORY: Can you get real reporting if it goes up the-- the-- the chain of command?

MR. MOORE: I don't think-- I-- I don't think it's that difficult to change-- to change reporting. In fact, when you look at these numbers, I think it's something that has to be looked at.

GREGORY: Mm-Hm.

MR. MOORE: Because this isn't just an issue about fairness and equity, it's also an issue about recruiting and retention. You know, in 2016, we're going to have-- the military is going to be fully integrated where we're going to have women who will be allowed to serve in all different combat arms operations. This is something and-- and we can't act like this is something that hasn't been noticed by females and males who are serving in the military. I mean, one of the things I'm most proud of the military for and proud of my service is the fact that the military has actually always been ahead of society on so many issues. We integrated before society integrated. We had equal pay for men and women before society. Society still doesn't have the same measure. We also-- everything-- and also you look at even-- even basic issues of allotments of-- of jobs and criteria. This is one issue where we're still far behind on. And I think that if the military cannot figure out a process in order to sustain that, and we're talking about 93 percent of cases that actually don't get prosecuted, then I think we-- we have an obligation to be able to look at other means of being able to be examine, to investigate, and then to convict people who are guilty of crimes which is what they are.

SEN. FEINSTEIN: David, I think the key is what these two have just said. I think it has to be taken out of the command decision-making. It's clear that there is too much excuse. And this has got to stop. And there has to be zero tolerance. And that has to be supported by a separate judicial process whether it's a full court-martial process or anything else aside-- apart from the military command structure. And, you-- you-- you know, what's happening too, to women all over the world, the rapes in India, wh-- what's happening in this country (Unintelligible) the concern over the abuse of women against their will, it's got to stop. And the military ought to set the tone for a new day because it cannot continue like this.

GREGORY: Congressman, as I said, you're-- you-- you've been in the military. How do you feel about it?

REP. KINZINGER: This is a tragic situation. I mean, look, you have young women that are basically volunteering in some cases to give their lives for our country and they put themselves in some cases in a hostile environment. So I-- I think the military has got to be very open about saying any level officer, any level supervisor, if you hear of something, you have to report it up the chain. I can tell you as an officer, I have heard of-- if I would have heard of anybody in my command being mistreated, not only will I have reported up the chain, I would have dealt with it right there immediately. And people need to be encouraged to do that because-- look, you have to have the freedom to feel right where you are.

GREGORY: I want to end on a hopeful note, if I can. There was a wonderful image this week far apart from some of these, you know, horrible stories that we've been talking about and following, and that was Freedom Tower in New York and the Spire being put atop at 1776 feet. David Brooks, what did this mean?

MR. BROOKS: Well, finally, a little recovery. It took a long time. I've been up on the top of that thing.

GREGORY: Well, I would never go to the top of that thing.

MR. BROOKS: Terrifying. I was at the top of the building, not at the top of that thing.

GREGORY: Yeah, okay.

MR. BROOKS: And-- and, you know, it took a long time.

GREGORY: Yeah.

MR. BROOKS: But it means a lot to the city, just to walk around the city and look up there and see that something's back up there.

GREGORY: Yeah. You know, I was with President Bush when he first saw that 9-14-01 and the-- the lattice work sticking up. To see that level of recovery on a gorgeous day in New York means a lot to the country. We'll take a break here. Be right back.

(Announcements)

GREGORY: Thank you all. We are out of time. Before we go this morning, you can see this week's PRESS Pass conversation with the legendary astronaut Buzz Aldrin on our blog. That's at MeetThePressNBC.com. He wants to go to Mars. Happy Mother's Day. That's all for today. We'll be back next week. If it's Sunday, it's MEET THE PRESS.

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From around the web

- How To Invest \$100, \$1,000, Or \$10,000 (Business Insider)
- 8 Famous Lesbians Who Were Married To Men (MadameNoire)
- Deborah Norville: "Devastated" By Rheumatoid Arthritis (Lifescript)
- Take The Virtual Color Personality Quiz Here (BHG)
- Man shoots himself in head while posing for gun selfie (Digital Trends)
- The 13 Most Dangerous Cities In America (TheStreet)

More from NBCNews.com

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- Ikea reveals 75% of catalog images are CGI (TODAY)
- Prince William, Duchess Kate expecting baby No. 2: 'We're immensely thrilled' (TODAY)
- Usher talks UR Experience tour, performs on TODAY (TODAY)
- Family mourns slain journalist in tearful service (NBC News)
- NY soldier missing since World War II identified (NBC News)
- This Famous Toilet-Paper Maker Is Ditching the Cardboard Tube (NBC News)