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N4x [Presto, Suzanne. Lawmakers to probe attack on US compound in Benghazi]

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The U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee will hold a closed hearing Thursday to review the events surrounding the fatal attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11, 2012. Lawmakers say they want to review intelligence capabilities in the region, as well as the level of security at U.S. compounds.

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Four Americans were killed in the assault: U.S. Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens and military veterans Tyrone Woods, Glen Doherty and Sean Smith.

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“The United States condemns in the strongest terms this outrageous and shocking attack,” said President Barack Obama in a televised address the following morning. “We’re working with the government of Libya to secure our diplomats.”

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Militants staged the assault on the 11th anniversary of the deadliest terrorist attack the United States has ever known.

Spontaneous or Planned?

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A few days later, Libya’s interim president, Mohamed Magariaf, suggested al-Qaida was responsible.

Mr. Magariaf said the attack yielded “concrete evidence” about “who the attackers are, the way they attack, what kind of weapons they used.” He added

25 that “all this indicates clearly that the attackers are well trained and well prepared and have planned this in advance.”

That description contrasted sharply with comments made the same day by Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. She appeared on a number
30 of talk shows and described the attack as “a spontaneous reaction” to a protest hours earlier outside the U.S. embassy in Cairo. The protest in Cairo was apparently in response to an obscure anti-Islamic video on the Internet.

“We believe that folks in Benghazi, a small number of people came to the
35 embassy, or to the consulate rather, to replicate this sort of challenge that was posed in Cairo,” said Rice on ABC television’s This Week program. “And then as that unfolded, it seems to have been hijacked, let us say, by some individual clusters of extremists.”

40 Ambassador Rice says the intelligence community provided her with that now-discredited explanation.

Suggestions of Spin

45 But some Republicans suggested political maneuvering ahead of the presidential election.

“The Mideast is falling apart and they’re trying to spin what happened in Libya because the truth of the matter is al-Qaida is alive and well and

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counterattacking,” said Senator Lindsey Graham when he appeared on the CBS television program, Face the Nation.

55 Mitt Romney, who ran for president against President Obama, raised the issue in one of his debates with the president.

“And there was no demonstration involved. It was a terrorist attack, and it took a long time for that to be told to the American people,” said Romney, as he debated Mr. Obama. “Whether there was some misleading or instead whether
60 we just didn’t know what happened, I think you have to ask yourself why didn’t we know five days later when the ambassador to the United Nations went on TV to say that this was a demonstration. How could we have not known?”

In late October, the Reuters news agency reported that an official email showed
65 that the White House and State Department were advised hours after the assault that an Islamic militant group had claimed credit on Facebook.

“Posting something on Facebook is not in and of itself evidence, and I think it just underscores how fluid the reporting was at the time and continued for some
70 time to be,” Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters the following day.

Security

75 The level of security at the Benghazi mission is another contentious issue.

Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Wood, who worked with embassy security in Libya earlier this year, testified before lawmakers last month about the worsening security situation.

80 “Militias appeared to be disintegrating into organizations resembling freelance criminal operations. Targeted attacks against Westerners were on the increase,” Wood described. “In June, the ambassador received a threat on Facebook with a public announcement that he liked to run around the embassy compound in Tripoli.”

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Wood said the regional security officer tried to obtain additional personnel, but diplomatic security remained weak. The State Department rebuffed requests to extend the missions of security teams that had been protecting diplomats in the country.

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The U.S. Department of Defense released a timeline last week that indicates Pentagon leaders knew of the attack in Benghazi an hour after it began, but they were unable to mobilize reinforcements based in Europe in time to prevent the killings.

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The State Department says an independent Accountability Review Board is now examining the circumstances surrounding the Benghazi attack and its report might be ready by mid-December.