

House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
**Benghazi and Beyond**  
November 15, 2012  
Testimony by Ronald E. Neumann  
Ambassador (ret)  
President, American Academy of Diplomacy

Madam Chairman, Representative Berman, thank you for asking me to testify. Your hearing focuses on the future as well as the past. To address the future well I believe one needs a perspective that embeds security issues within the context of our larger diplomatic purpose. Thus, I think my value added is in speaking about the issues of carrying on diplomacy in a dangerous world. My credentials to do so are based on my 40 years of Federal service in which I have been in one war as a soldier and three—Algeria, Iraq and Afghanistan--as a diplomat. I have carried a weapon when under assassination threat in two other countries and had my embassy stormed by mobs in yet another country. I note this because in considering Benghazi it is useful to remember that this is not a new world in which the diplomatic profession confronts dangers never seen before. The dangers are real enough, and they evolve tactically, but conceptually they are not new.

I have four basic points to make.

First, there is no absolute security. We recently saw a full up Marine base in Helmand suffer a perimeter breach, loss of life and destruction of aircraft by around 15 attackers. When security breaks down there will be many legitimate questions about what could have been done differently. However, they need to be framed in the context of what was known of threats and why risks were taken, not against a belief that we should be able to foresee all threats.

This brings me to my second point. The central issue that must repeatedly be confronted is about balance; how much risk to take to accomplish what mission and how important is that mission to our national purpose? Many decisions of this type will need to be made in the field by senior diplomats working with their security professionals.

My third point touches on the role of the State Department in supporting security. This is complex and there will be many detailed questions that as a retired official I will not be able to answer. But one thing I can tell you is that when security funding is tight you have a constant tension between new security demands in evolving situations and the difficulty of finding funding in budgets that have to be established months or years earlier for presentation to Congress. I am not proposing wasteful largess but I do think that the concept of reserve funds and authorities needs serious consideration if security is to err on the side of flexible response. State's role also must include security training for senior managers as well as security officers.

My final point touches on the political responsibility of those in both the executive branch and the congress. Personnel in the field must make difficult decisions about risk to accomplish their mission. When things go wrong it is reasonable to review those decisions, as the Congress and

the Accountability Review Board are now doing. However, if the post facto examination becomes too politicized you will reinforce at the political level in Washington a fear of taking risk that has already gone too far in my judgment. Sound foreign policy judgments require knowledge that can only be gained by interaction on the ground. If our diplomats now retreat even further into their bunkers, if they become even more hampered in their ability to actually understand the local scene, and if as a result they cannot distinguish successful policies from failing ones the fault will not be in some weak kneed “diplomatic culture” but in the failure of political authorities in Washington to assume their own responsibilities.

I would like to expand on these points.

### **No Absolute Security**

To observe that there is no absolute security is not the same as justifying all risk. But it is important to understand that in many countries there is a virtually continuous stream of threats. Some are more serious. Some are too vague to help although in retrospect one may see something that was missed at the time. My point is simply to describe a complex environment in which there is a constant “white noise” factor of security threats. That is the context in which real decisions about security get made. Security can always be better. It will never be perfect.

### **Risk vs. Benefit**

In the war situations of Iraq and Afghanistan we have needed and been able to have military security or military back up of diplomatic security. That is not going to be possible in much of the rest of the world. Governments, even those that lack the capacity to provide full security for diplomats, tend to be sensitive about their sovereignty. In many cases they will not allow all the security measures that we deem necessary. For example, in many countries our embassies are located closer to streets than we would like in the age of car-bombs. And many of these countries will not agree to close all the streets that we would like closed. Sometimes we have ways to push, or prod, or threaten in order to get the cooperation that we need but sometimes we don't. So we are constantly making decisions about how much risk to take in countries all over the world. It may be that in some cases we should decide to pull out rather than take risks. Those decisions are difficult because often they are about degree of risk vs. the utility of being on the ground. Consider two cases; the real one of Libya and the likely future one of Syria.

In Libya we have a weak but sensitive government, an extremely difficult security situation and a national interest in trying to support more moderate elements to help the country to a stable future free of extremism and terrorism. In this fluctuating situation with a multitude of players and political forces our policy interests absolutely require on the ground work. That is the only way to know the people, to make judgments about who to help and how, to identify risks and to make the course corrections that will be essential to implement any policy in such turbulent times. That is a situation in which military level force protection may not be possible both because the Libyan government may not agree to it and because too much of the appearance of an occupying army might play into the hands of the very extremists whose influence we want to weaken. I am not justifying the specific decisions made before the attack nor commenting on the

particulars of the security posture now. Rather, these comments are simply to point out that to accomplish America's political purpose our diplomats are going to have to take some risks.

I suppose one could argue that for a variety of reasons the mission is too difficult and the risks too great and therefore we shouldn't be in Libya at all.

But even if you could make that case for Libya, and it is not one I would agree with, consider Syria. When the day comes that Basher al Assad leaves the situation in Syria is likely to be at least as dangerous and chaotic as is the one in Libya. Actually, it will probably be more dangerous because hostile outsiders like Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon will probably be operating to preserve their interests. Israel will have a strong interest in what happens inside Syria. So too will Iraq and Turkey, all of whom share borders with Syria. Will it be wise to say that this is just too dangerous so we have to leave the future to others? I doubt it. In a country where personal relations and trust are the bedrock of effectiveness we cannot operate only by cell phone and internet with people we do not know and acquire the knowledge to make wise policy choices. We will need to be on the ground in order to influence people and policy outcomes. That will mean taking risks. How will we judge which ones to take?

One level of judgment is a Washington issue. Should we be represented at all in Syria, or Libya, or Iraq or Afghanistan?

A second level of judgment about risk vs. benefit will be in the interaction of the Embassy and Washington. What resources need to be provided? The situation may change, risks may grow. What was asked for in Libya and what was or was not done lies outside my expertise. But in the future as in the past ambassadors will have to make judgments about whether and how to appeal decisions they don't like or whether to get on with their job with what they have. Washington officials will have to consider whether to take a second look at how to spread resources that will always be somewhat inadequate for the many demands.

### **Utility of a Reserve Fund**

While there can never be as much funding as every contingency will require I do think it would be useful to look carefully at the concept of some form of reserve fund. Budgets justified and prepared in advance will not have full funding for all contingencies. But without a functioning reserve new risks can only be responded to by cutting other programs. This tension, between what to fund and what to cut, inevitably makes a bureaucracy slower to change course. Again, this is absolutely not a justification for decisions made about what resources to send to Libya. Indeed, I have been on the other end of the problem when I had to intervene very forcefully to overcome State Department resistance and have an incompetent contractor blocked from taking over our perimeter security in Kabul. But that said, without more room to maneuver financially security costs will continue to pose the risk of making responses to threats slower than they should be.

### **Field Judgments and Washington Responsibilities**

A third level of judgment is in the field. How much risk should one take in travel to a particular meeting? How much is the meeting worth to accomplishing a US national political purpose. If there are threats, how can they be mitigated? There are often creative solutions. In Baghdad we did many meetings in hotels in the so called "Red Zone" so that contacts could meet with us without the risks of trying to enter the "Green Zone" or being marked too much as friends of the Americans because our heavily armored convoy was parked in front of their home. In Algeria I told my security officer which districts I needed to visit in monitoring an election but left him the freedom to decide on specific polling places and routes. In Afghanistan there were innumerable situations where I had to judge actions against risks.

I have elaborated about the situation of making risk decisions in the field. The reason is that it is important for you to understand their complexity in order to understand two areas of responsibility; both of which involve the Congress as well as the Executive branch.

One involves resources and how they are used. State's training of security officers (RSOs and ARSOs in the jargon) has improved greatly in my opinion. Diplomatic security (DS) is making an effort to include in its training for ARSOs an understanding of how they must fit mission accomplishment into security. The American Academy of Diplomacy, of which I am president, has been pleased and honored to help in this.

I do believe that more thought needs to be given to how we train ambassadors and senior diplomatic managers to make decisions about risk. It is wise that ambassadors should pay attention to the advice of their RSO. But the ultimate responsibility for mission accomplishment belongs to the ambassador. It neither can nor should it be subordinated automatically to the security officer. The judgments are sometimes difficult and often turn on delicate balances between threat and possible mitigation. I have gotten experience through multiple critical threat posts. I have been shot at more than many RSOs. The average ambassador is unlikely to have the dubious benefit of this experience. I recommend more training be given to ambassadors, deputy chiefs of mission and principle officers of separate posts in how to make such decisions and how to work with their RSO.

There remains a critical area of responsibility to consider. That is the need to leave space for decisions in the field about the balance between risk and benefit. A zero risk approach, a search for fault that becomes overly politicized and turns into a "gotcha" game will increasingly create a political climate in Washington that is counter-productive for achieving our foreign political goals. Senior officials of this and future administrations, fearing responsibility for whatever goes wrong, will reinforce the climate that is already too far advanced in which our diplomatic personnel spend their time behind walls and looking at computer screens rather than getting out acquiring knowledge and exerting influence.

A great many of my diplomatic colleagues are prepared to accept risk. That is why the Foreign Service and USAID have been able for years to fill their positions in Iraq and Afghanistan with volunteers. Many, there and in other countries already feel their ability to do their jobs is excessively hampered by our own security restrictions. Many are willing to accept somewhat more risk to accomplish their mission. Not every risk is worth taking. Diplomats are not

soldiers. But neither can America's diplomatic interests be achieved from behind walls and razor wire.

Making the choices about how much risk to take is difficult. The price for getting it wrong or simply for bad luck is serious enough as it is. It should not be made more difficult by a Washington culture that stifles field judgment in the interest of keeping Washington officials from bureaucratic risk.

It is correct to do a post mortem when a tragedy such as Benghazi occurs. It is right to look at what officials knew and why they made the judgments they did. After all, it was Ambassador Stevens who made the judgment that he should travel to Benghazi.

But if reasoned inquiry turns into domestic politics there will be long term damage to our ability to execute foreign policy. A reasoned inquiry asks how to adapt but must also ask how to avoid over-reaction. The policy costs of security enhancements and restrictions need to be weighed along with the risks to personnel. These are difficult responsibilities to accept in Washington. They are even more difficult in the field where the consequences of getting a decision wrong can be paid in blood. Yet that is exactly why I believe the Congress and the Executive have a mutual responsibility to support reasoned decision making in the field by our senior diplomats as well as giving them the resources to be as safe as possible.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear. I will be pleased to try to respond to your questions.