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Republicans weigh risks, benefits of select committee on Benghazi

By: Guy Taylor – May 19, 2013

The Benghazi terrorist attack has stormed back onto the front pages, and as the attention grows, so do calls from House Republicans who want their party leaders to name a special investigative committee to take control of the inquiry.

More than 150 House Republicans have signed on to a resolution that would create a "select committee" to focus on inquiries by the public and Congress about the Sept. 11 attack in Libya that left four Americans dead.

Forty members of Congress in the past three weeks have joined the push for a single committee.

House Speaker John A. Boehner, Ohio Republican, has resisted — largely, analysts say, because the long-term political risks of a high-profile probe could outweigh any short-term benefit.

"This issue is not a sure-fire winner politically for the Republicans unless there is some bombshell that can be surfaced through a hearing in a select committee that has not already been surfaced by the multiple hearings that have been held so far," said Christopher A. Preble, who has monitored the Benghazi scandal from his office at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

"If you spend a lot of time and there's no additional information that comes out through the process, then you have the appearance of having, at a minimum, wasted a lot of time on a fairly insignificant matter," Mr. Preble said.

Wasting a lot of time, he said, means that the Republican focus on Benghazi "just might reflect poorly on the party" as the November 2014 congressional elections approach. The latest Benghazi revelations — along with reaction to the Internal Revenue Service's targeting of conservative groups and the controversy over the Justice Department's seizure of reporters' phone records — are dominating the news cycles.

On Sunday, the White House dispatched Dan Pfeiffer to blitz the talk shows. The senior adviser defended the administration on several fronts, telling ABC's "This Week" that Republicans owe an apology to U.N. Ambassador Susan E. Rice over their reactions to her initial remarks on Benghazi.

"The Republicans who had been talking about this, now that they've seen the emails, owe

Ambassador Rice an apology for the things they've said about her in the wake of the attack," he said.

On Fox News, he said the assertion that the Obama administration was not responsive during the Benghazi attack was "offensive."

Republicans fired right back.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, told "Meet the Press" that the administration "made up a tale" about the attacks, and Rep. Jason Chaffetz, Utah Republican, said a cover-up is continuing.

"People deserve the truth, and the families deserve the truth," Mr. Chaffetz said, calling for more investigation.

Rep. Frank R. Wolf, Virginia Republican, is leading the House push to consolidate the investigations that are spread across five committees.

Without such a consolidation, Mr. Wolf wrote, "Benghazi could get lost in the shuffle." Mr. Boehner, who used the five committees' interim report to pressure the White House last week into releasing email traffic related to the Benghazi "talking points," hasn't embraced the idea of one committee.

Michael Steel, a spokesman for Mr. Boehner, said the "speaker continues to have confidence in the chairmen and members of the committees of jurisdiction."

The benefit of a select committee would be the power of the chairman to subpoena officials from across the spectrum of government agencies, said Jill Shatzen, Mr. Wolf's spokeswoman.

This would mean significantly more efficiency over the current situation, in which committees investigating Benghazi are limited to subpoenaing only from agencies under each committee's specific domain.

A single committee, though, could ruffle the feathers of the chairmen pursuing investigations in the House Oversight and Government Reform, Judiciary, Armed Services, Foreign Affairs and intelligence panels.

After months of quiet action, the chairmen released an interim report last month that cleared the Pentagon and intelligence communities of wrongdoing in the run-up and response to the attack.

Instead, the report placed blame on the White House and State Department — in particular on then-Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, whom the chairmen accused of ignoring calls for enhanced security at the diplomatic mission.

Going forward, the question is what sort of political "bombshell" revelation in the offing could make an enhanced Benghazi inquisition worthwhile.

Thomas E. Mann, a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution, said Republicans would be wise to stay away from a select committee.

"The ongoing investigations of Benghazi have already outstripped the seriousness and significance of the political questions that are being raised," Mr. Mann said. "A select committee could easily become more a focus of ridicule than credible congressional investigation."