



Obama faces rising Libya scrutiny in final presidential debate

By: Brian Hughes - October 21, 2012

How the Obama administration responded to the deadly Sept. 11 terrorist attack at the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, is shaping up as the focal point of the final presidential debate, a prospect that makes the president's supporters nervous with the candidates virtually tied two weeks from Election Day.

President Obama is sure to point to a series of foreign policy successes, such as the killing of Osama bin Laden, during the prime-time forum in Boca Raton, Fla. But it's the deaths of four Americans, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens, at the U.S. consulate in Libya last month -- and what some see as the Obama administration's fumbling of the aftermath of the terrorist strike -- that create an opportunity for Republican nominee Mitt Romney.

"It's clearly the area of greatest vulnerability during the last four years in terms of his policies," said Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East negotiator and adviser to six secretaries of state. "It hits close to home. It raises a competency issue."

"Given how the conversation went last time, it will be hard for Romney to make a dent on this," said Jordan Tama, a professor at American University and intelligence and counterterrorism policy adviser to Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

But a number of commentators have said that an effective attack on the administration's waffling statements after the incident could put Obama on the defensive.

Republicans clearly have that in mind. "The thing about Benghazi is that they continue shifting their story," Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., said on Green Bay's WTAQ radio. "They're refusing to answer the basic questions about what happened. It leads to more questions than answers."

After the strike in Libya, the president and other administration officials for days blamed the incident on an anti-Islam video they said motivated a random act of violence. However, not only was the attack orchestrated by a network of terrorists, the intelligence community labeled it as such the very next day, new reports show.

In fact, Stevens sounded alarms over his security concerns weeks before the attack even took place, congressional investigators revealed. At House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearings earlier this month, embassy officials testified that repeated requests to the State Department in Washington for beefed-up security went unanswered.

Still, the president contends he made the public aware of the violence in Libya as soon as he knew about the changing details on the ground. Based on strong rhetoric leading up to the debate, Romney is likely to accuse the president of deceiving the American public.

Some questioned how much political juice Romney could squeeze from the incident at this point.

"Honestly, it's something of a mixed bag," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "It appeals to his base, but I find it hard to believe it will turn a lot of undecided voters. At the end of the day, the president doesn't determine the size of a security detail at a consulate."