

The Real Benghazi Story Is The False Explanation Of the Tragedy, Motivated By Politics

WASHINGTON – The much-anticipated appearance by Hillary Clinton, former Secretary of State and now leading Democratic Party presidential contender, before the House Committee on the Benghazi terror attack, has not added anything new.

Nothing new

I have seen nothing that makes me change my mind on what happened in Benghazi in 2012, on that unhappy anniversary of September 11, when the US Consulate was attacked by radicals, and 4 Americans, including Christopher Stevens, the US Ambassador, were killed.

Here is the story

Here is my (perhaps) over simplified summary. The US Government, in this particular case the State Department led by then Secretary Clinton, did not appreciate that post-Gaddafi Libya was a very dangerous place. Indeed, requests for additional security made by the US Embassy, and personally by Ambassador Stevens, were not seriously considered. As a result the Libya posts had inadequate protection.

Sadly, when the Benghazi facility came under attack on September 11, 2012, insufficient American defenses were overwhelmed. People got killed.

Well, this is sad. Of course, in hindsight it is always easy to point fingers and conclude that then Secretary Clinton was and is responsible for these deaths. But this would be

somewhat unfair. Hundreds, possibly thousands of possible threats to US diplomatic posts come in every day. Hard to respond to all of them. Hard to prioritize in the most appropriate manner.

Bad judgment

In the case of Benghazi, it is obvious that everybody, including then Secretary of State Clinton, dropped the ball. They did not understand the severity of the situation, and they did not beef up security.

Well, what can we say. This was a huge mistake. But we are all human, and therefore fallible.

Here is the real story

However, this is not the real story.

The real story is about how the Obama administration –and this includes then Secretary Clinton– reacted to this tragedy. Indeed, after the news of the Benghazi attack came out, the Obama White House, fearful of the possible negative political repercussion on Obama –keep in mind that this happened just week before the November 2012 presidential elections– deliberately introduced a bogus explanation about what caused the attack.

Avoid political repercussions

It is clear that they desperately wanted to avoid any accusation that the Obama administration had underestimated the possibility of more terror attacks against Americans.

And why this concern?

Well, because President Obama had claimed that his administration had successfully decimated al Qaeda. The official narrative throughout the 2012 political campaign had been that, after the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 2, 2011

by US special forces, the terrorism threat was essentially gone –for good.

Therefore, one had to find an “explanation” for the Benghazi tragedy –clearly an act of terrorism– that would say that the attack was in fact about something else.

Nothing to do with terrorism.

Hence the introduction of the “*video did it*” bogus story. In order to muddy the waters, the Obama people came out with the clever explanation whereby the Benghazi attack was a spontaneous popular reaction to a video released in America that attacked Islam, and was therefore considered blasphemous by many believers in the Arab world, including Libya.

Ambassador Rice sent out to tell the bogus “video” story

This being “the truth” that they wanted American voters to believe –again, remember that all this occurred just weeks before the presidential elections– the Obama White House sent then UN Ambassador Susan Rice to appear on many TV programs, so that she could deliver this false narrative whereby “*the anti-Muslim video caused the Benghazi attack*”.

This was not said casually. This was carefully plotted. They all knew that they were telling a lie, with the obvious goal of protecting a President on the eve of a crucial vote. Once again, as the record of her public and private pronouncements indicates, Secretary of State Clinton, was a willful participant. She repeated the bogus story about “the video”, while she knew the truth, as her own e-mails –now public– revealed.

Deliberate manipulation

In my judgment, this is the real problem. Yes, we can all agree that Secretary Clinton and her staff showed poor judgement in handling the security of US posts in Libya. As a

result, the US Consulate in Benghazi was not properly protected. This is bad. But it was an error. May be an egregious, unforgivable error. But it is still an error.

What followed instead was deliberate manipulation motivated by politics. This may have been clever, but it was and is morally reprehensible.

Willful distortion

And this is the real problem. We cannot accuse Hillary Clinton of having deliberately overlooked the security situation of the US diplomatic posts in Libya. But she happily joined the conspiracy aimed at distorting what actually happened in the night of September 11, 2012 in order to help her boss, President Obama.

Again, all this is morally reprehensible. If we give Hillary Clinton a pass on this, by saying that "It is a well-known fact that all politicians lie or at least engage in willful distortions", we are deliberately lowering our moral standards.

A democracy run by duplicitous liars is not going to be a healthy place. If we choose them as our leaders, whatever damage they will cause in the long run, will be our fault.

America Needs A New Interpreter Of The Old Values

WASHINGTON – Intentionally or by default, Barack Obama has become the champion of the dispossessed and of the downtrodden. Against all odds, (considering a weak economy and

high unemployment), he won the 2012 re-election with a simple message: Mitt Romney and running mate Paul Ryan are “bad people”.

Evil conservatives

Their (evil?) goal, according to the well orchestrated Obama campaign narrative, was and is, (if they get another chance), to destroy the social safety nets that guarantee a semi-decent life for those who work hard but get little from a system that is stacked against them.

If you vote for me –promised Obama– I guarantee that you’ll keep your Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Disability Insurance, and the rest of it. And I promise that I shall keep fighting for greater equality. Therefore, and mark my words, don’t be stupid. If you vote for the Republican ticket you are doomed, because they’ll take the little you have away from you.

Well, thanks in part to Romney’s unforced errors that seemed to confirm the artfully created image (by the Obama campaign) of the heartless “vulture capitalist”, Obama got re-elected.

“Sweet Populism” has no standard-bearer

But the moderate right that had placed its hope on Mitt Romney right now is a political orphan. As Pepperdine University Professor Ted McAllister points out in an extremely insightful and elegantly written WSJ op-ed piece, (*“Sweet Populism” Awaits Its Leader*, August 6, 2014), now within Middle America (traditionally centrist but leaning conservative) there is a palpable yearning for a new, inspired leader (a new Ronald Reagan) who will be able to forge a message of hope based on the reaffirmation of the “Good American Myth”, that McAllister calls “Sweet Populism”.

This is about a set of old (but still vibrant) principles that explain how “everybody can make it in America” if we

would only refocus on self-reliance and industry in this rich and generous land of opportunity that always rewards personal effort, ingenuity and enterprise.

Here is the creed and the program: Let's unleash the creativity of all hard-working Americans. Let's tear down the barriers (taxation, hyper regulation, and what not) that stifle individual efforts. Let's make this country great again.

Conservative and revolutionary ideas

And so, (I would add), we can be both conservatives and revolutionaries, reaffirming the eternal validity of old principles that will allow us to dream about and reach greater heights. And, while engaged in this endeavor, we shall also reaffirm this country's greatness, a greatness founded on the fundamental goodness of the American people.

"Sweet Populism": America's secret sauce

As Ted McAllister puts in his essay:

"Sweet populism is a peculiarly American species, organized around a version of the country's history that is positive and incomplete; stresses the importance of self-reliance; seeks to remove obstacles to individual empowerment when they emerge; and aims any anger it produces at those who deny the essential goodness of the American idea".

Tea Party got it half right

I fully agree. And I also agree with McAllister that the Tea Party Movement failed to capture the essence of this Good Myth. It could only articulate an emotional anti-government message. "Cut taxes and cut government". But this is not enough. Ronald Reagan's brilliance was in his ability to make himself into the prophet of a New Era of Hope, strongly grounded on the reaffirmation of old values.

The Tea Party focused on theoretically correct but in the end abstract and impractical ideas of fiscal purity. In the end, its members have been unable to produce a compelling message that would convincingly combine good ideas that will promote growth, while restraining spending. The Tea Party seems to be “anti-this, and anti-that”. But it is unable to provide a warm, inspiring message that will sway Middle America.

Left: focus on injustice

As McAllister points out, the left has its myth too. But it is not in sync with the narrative of America as a Blessed Land of Opportunity. Its focus is on injustice. The rich rigged the system in their favor. As a result they get all the goodies while the rest of us, hard-working Americans, get the crumbs.

Therefore, the thrust of any progressive public policy has to be the promotion of social and economic equality. And, in order to get there, those who gamed the system now have to pay up.

As the 2012 elections have demonstrated, this “social justice” message, (combined with a weak Republican candidate), worked rather well.

America is on the wrong track

But now we are stuck. While we got out of the Great Recession, there is a general sense of unhappiness. The economy now grows, but only a little, (about 2% a year). Unemployment is down; but it is still very high, (around 6%), while millions of people who are lucky enough to be employed struggle with the meager income provided by their low paying part-time jobs, the only ones they can get.

Indeed, by coincidence the WSJ today also published the results of a national poll that shows how 71% of Americans believe that the country is “*on the wrong track*”. This high

percentage of really unhappy Americans includes people who voted for Obama in 2012.

Who will lead?

As McAllister writes, the yearning for a new interpreter of the American idea of freedom, and of the promising horizons it can open up today, is there. However, the millions of American moderate conservatives need a convincing standard-bearer.

Washington Now Dominated By Not So Great Scandals – Too Much Focus On Benghazi and The IRS Because There Is Nothing Interesting Coming Out Of The Obama White House – No Major Initiative, No Reform Plan

By Paolo von Schirach

May 17, 2013

WASHINGTON – The most telling evidence of Obama's weakness is that B or C category "scandals" have monopolized the attention of most media and commentators. We have the resurfacing of the

once dead Benghazi terror attack story. This is something that seemed to have legs during the political campaign last year. Then Romney failed to press it and the Republicans essentially let it go. Now there are new testimonies that have exposed at least one fact: the Obama administration was less than candid in telling the real story as it was unfolding.

Benghazi, IRS stories dominate

Still, all these embarrassing details do not amount to criminal acts. And yet the Obama administration is visibly on the defensive. Add to Benghazi the more recent story of the Internal Revenue Service denying tax free privileges to conservative organizations. We still do not know how bad this is; but the IRS story is dominating the news cycles. And then there is the story of the Justice Department using a very heavy hand against the Associated Press as it investigates a leak of classified information regarding terror activities in Yemen.

Nothing else to talk about

This stuff is serious. But these are not the mega scandals that can signal political death or worse for a sitting President. So why do they dominate the news cycle? Very simple. Because there is nothing else to report. President Obama has lost the initiative. There is absolutely nothing worth talking about coming from the White House. Of course, it is not Obama's fault that Washington is now paralyzed due to divided government. And yet Obama is the incumbent President. There is only one President. And the President is supposed to lead, even when the going is tough. In fact, he is supposed to lead especially when the going is tough.

No Big Idea

And what could Obama do? Well, he could and should articulate a most compelling plan to reform public spending (yes, that would have to include Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid)

and taxes. He could elaborate a national energy strategy. He could articulate a new vision of America's role in world affairs in a multi-polar world. All this is tough, especially in this politically poisonous environment. Yet, who said that being President should be easy? We call "Great" the Presidents that accomplished difficult tasks. All the others get a foot note.

But, so far at least, the President has not even tried to be Great. He proposed nothing major. He has smallish ideas here and there. But, quite frankly, it looks as if the country tuned out. Hence the exaggerated space devoted to the "scandals". There is excessive coverage because there is nothing else to cover.

Obama soon to become irrelevant

As things stand today, probably the only big new legislation coming out of Washington in the next few months will be comprehensive immigration reform. And on this truly important issue President Obama is a follower rather than a leader. The whole idea was launched by a bipartisan group of Senators.

Of course, it is too early to call Obama an inconsequential President. Still, here he is, at the beginning of his second term, and it seems as if he has already run out of gas. Unless he puts forward an ambitious, intelligently crafted agenda that will captivate and energize the Nation, as 2016 approaches, Obama will be less and less relevant.

Obama Presented His State-Led Policy Agenda – Rubio Proposed The GOP Alternative – Good Message, But An Ill At Ease Messenger Who Seemed At Times Overwhelmed

[the-subtitle]

By Paolo von Schirach

February 13, 2013

WASHINGTON – Only hubris can explain the obvious disconnect between Obama's re-election by a decent but hardly overwhelming margin and the rather grandiose agenda of more federal programs involving various sectors that he outlined in the State of the Union message.

Divided America

It is true that Obama run for re-election as the champion of state intervention and as the defender of entitlements and benefits for the poor and retirees. And it is true that on this basis a majority of Americans voted for him. But it is also true that almost half the country did not agree. So much so that the Republicans, certainly opposed to this interventionist plan, kept control of the House.

Looking at what is clearly an America deeply in debt and politically divided almost in the middle, a wise re-elected leader would propose to stabilize public spending safeguarding the needs of the poor and most vulnerable, while pushing tax reforms aimed at reigniting growth. He would try to do all

this by seeking genuine compromise with the other side.

Obama: a political agenda

But no, Obama is not doing any of this. Having observed that the House Republicans are quarreling with one another on what should be the best conservative, "small government" agenda, Obama seems to be bent on exploiting these internal divisions attempting to defeat the GOP politically by proposing taxes that some Republicans would accept and others would reject. In other words, Obama, a second term President not running for re-election, is still campaigning against an admittedly not so formidable GOP. Great strategy, revealing cunning and political dexterity; but a lousy way of governing.

Be that as it may, in the State of the Union message Obama dished out his partisan list with proposed new federal programs for almost anything, with predictable applause coming from all the Democrats in the audience and cool Republican reactions.

It is obvious that, without GOP participation, none of these Obama initiatives will become law. So why produce them? Well, for political reasons. As a way to create fissures among Republicans, just as Obama did with the tax issue.

Indeed, even though higher taxes will do very little in any effort to fix the deficit, the controversial issue divided the House Republicans, undermining the authority of House Speaker John Boehner. Again, lousy policy-making; but great politics.

GOP rebuttal

And what is the GOP alternative to all this? I am afraid the Republicans have a lot of work to do, and I mean a lot. They picked rather green Florida Senator Marco Rubio to deliver the rebuttal to the President's Address.

Unfortunately on TV a polished delivery counts almost as much,

if not more, than substance. Rubio's delivery was not so great. Here and there he appeared uncomfortable if not overwhelmed. (Yes, I refer to his awkward reaching out for water in the middle of a solemn speech and to his obvious nervousness displayed in other moments). The indirect message that the public got from this man who appeared uncomfortable in his role as national GOP spokesman is that the GOP does not have a strong national leader. Marco Rubio did not appear ready for prime time.

Rubio as national GOP spokesman?

That said, it was not a disaster. Rubio did a good job explaining the fundamental philosophical differences between a Republican vision whereby in America the Government does little while enabling the private sector to unleash growth and the statist Obama vision whereby growth is good only if it is properly balanced via government action.

Rubio did propose a decent and credible GOP alternative. Even though he formulated it in his own words, with a lot (probably too many) of autobiographical references, it is the same vision of a private sector-led economy proposed by Mitt Romney last November.

Give or take a few details, there is nothing wrong with it. And quite frankly it is certainly more in line with American mainstream values and history. The problem is that a majority of Americans (although not a huge majority) today do not buy it, as Obama's re-election proved.

Better messenger?

The GOP needs a good national spokesman to convince the public that its vision should become national policy. Many Republican Governors sold it successfully to state audiences. So, it can gain national traction. Still, given what I have seen so far, I am not so sure that Marco Rubio is the right man to sell it.

Immigration Reform May Succeed – The Republicans Want Latino Votes – However, Let's Remember That Immigration Is About Becoming Citizens, Not Just Legal Workers – America Is About Shared Values, Not About Jobs

[the-subtitle]

By Paolo von Schirach

January 29, 2013

WASHINGTON – In perennially divided and dysfunctional Washington it seems that Republicans and Democrats may have found enough common ground to hatch a decent immigration reform plan that may actually get enough votes and a presidential signature.

Immigration as a priority

Of all the burning issues on the policy makers agenda –budget, debt ceiling, fiscal and tax reform– this is not the most urgent. But it may have risen to the top because the Republicans may have finally realized that they need to end their stupid and self-destructive opposition to legalizing an estimated 12 million people (mostly from Central America and

Mexico) here in the US but without legal status.

Romney's immigration policy

We do remember that Mitt Romney (incredibly) argued during the campaign that he favored "self-deportation" as a solution for illegal immigration. By that he meant that, if we really enforced labor laws and other provisions, illegal immigrants would have no jobs and therefore would be forced to pack and go away. Neat idea. Except that it was and is a colossal idiocy. Imagine 12 million people, some of them in the US for decades, packing and leaving. Very practical, no?

Romney's totally insane positions on immigration contributed to his defeat in November. The GOP got less than 30% of the Hispanic vote. In some states these low numbers meant assured defeat, given the large numbers of Latino voters.

GOP learnt a lesson?

Well, may be the Republicans in Congress learnt something and therefore now are eager to appear in favor of reform. At least some of them, (like Cuban American Florida Senator Marco Rubio) want to be in front.

Hard to say what the final product will look like. Still, there seems to be a good chance to get bipartisan consensus on at least a broad policy goal. The shared objective (so far) is to pass legislation that will create a path to legal status for illegal immigrants. That said, the road to legalization can be made easy or extra complicated.

Easy or hard path to legal status?

If the Republicans are worried about resistance from their conservative core, they will (stupidly again) fight to create an obstacle course for illegals that will become a source of frustration and resentment. Indeed, if you make it too complicated and costly to apply for and then finally obtain

legal status, creating a never ending process requiring too much documentation that needs to be checked and approved, accompanied by heavy fines and an endless waiting list, this would defy the policy goal.

I do agree with imposing restrictions for people with criminal records. But if we want to make sure that everybody paid all their taxes and what not (how do you check that, anyway?) this "reform" will soon become a bad story –with all the blame going to those (once more the wicked Republicans in the House) who insisted on making it harder rather than easy to become a legal resident.

Make it as easy as possible

I favor a quick path. We may include fines, but they have to be mostly symbolic, not punitive. As to the principled (again, mostly Republican)insistence that first we must certify that the border is secure and only then we may proceed with immigration reform, I say enough of this nonsense. The US-Mexico border is not totally sealed, but it is mostly secure. Of course, the virtual end of the South to North flow we have seen in recent years has to do mostly with the US recession that halted demand for cheap labor. But some credit should be given to improved border controls.

While in the case of this proposed legislation the devil is really in the details I am reasonably confident that most Republicans will do their best to show that they aren't dragging their feet. They want to give the impression that they are reasonable and humane people eager to solve an old mess that is really inconsistent with a country ruled by laws.

Remember: this is about citizenship, not about working legally

In all this I really hope to see immigrants fully integrated into the American main stream. The inability to have access to legal status contributed to the creation of ethnic ghettos in which the illegals could more easily hide. As a result we have

large pockets of people in America who are here only for economic reasons and who are separated by language and status from the larger society. This is bad.

Immigration reform will be a real success if and when most, if not all, of these residents with no status will be real citizens, with a genuine allegiance, not just to their communities, their families and their jobs, but to the United States of America.

American is mostly about shared values, not about jobs

The Oath of Allegiance to the Constitution –after which a legal resident becomes a US citizen–should not be viewed as a formality, something that needs to get done to compete an administrative process. It should be viewed for what it is intended to be: a reasoned and willful declaration of allegiance to the values of this country, for whose protection and enjoyment the Founding Fathers created our institutions. (The very end of the Oath places the burden of sincere allegiance on the immigrant: “...And I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion...”. This means that I take I take this step of choosing American citizenship because I really want to and mean it).

America is founded on citizens who share and uphold basic values; and not on people seeking mostly economic opportunity. If this country wishes to endure, let's make sure that all of us, old and new citizens, remember that we are here because we share a vision and not just an economy.

America's Problem: Half The Country No Longer Believes In The Virtues Of Free Market Capitalism

WASHINGTON – America's biggest problem –as the recent presidential elections have demonstrated– is that a bit more than half the country no longer believes in unfettered free enterprise as the main engine of both personal and national growth.

Government is better

Obama's re-election (with 51% of the votes) as the defender of entitlement programs as they are, of state intervention and as proponent of income redistribution through taxation shows that a majority of American voters today believe that the benign hand of government helping them is a better and safer bet than the Republican promise to lower taxes and public spending, so that the spirit of can-do enterprise can be once more liberated and put to work. At least 51% of American voters are not so sure about free enterprise.

Capitalism as a model lost the battle of ideas

Let's face it. The 2008 recession destroyed capitalism's credibility and mystique. The system failed. And it failed big time. Most of the almost theological assumptions about the sanctity of markets were proven wrong by the Financial Catastrophe.

Nothing illustrates this failure more than Alan Greenspan's contrite admission that he –The Flawless Maestro– had made a huge mistake. All his life he believed that financial markets would self-regulate in a fashion that would allow them to

price risk appropriately and thus avoid excesses. Well, it wasn't so. No self-regulation. On the contrary, even the most elementary rules dictating restraint were broken.

And it turned out that our Wall Street Captains were not just unwise, they were in fact complicit in a sinister orgy of speculation and greed in which they all succumbed to the zany idea that financial manipulation would make them super rich. In so doing, they almost sank America.

Romney successfully portrayed as the enemy of the common people

Right or wrong, this is the prevailing narrative. And this is what those who voted for Obama believe in. Poor Mitt Romney came along saying that he had the super manager credentials to really fix this mess.

The premise for his challenge was that Obama had done a poor job as economy's steward during his first term. *"Well –said a confident Romney– let the amateurs go back home and let me, the real pro, handle the economy. I know this stuff. I have done it all my life"*.

Well, this impeccable resume became Romney's main political liability. Precisely because of his close identification with venture capital, Romney was conveniently depicted by the Democrats as the arch-enemy, as the fox in disguise who wanted to run the chicken coop. Thanks to the clever character assassination dished out by the Obama campaign, Romney was doomed.

The audience does no longer believes the old story about capitalism

But Romney was doomed also because a bit more than half of the audience no longer believes the old American narrative of "self-help and individual effort". People are tired and disoriented. Capitalism failed. Corporate leaders behaved like

gangsters.

Therefore, now a liberal Government that promises help looks like a better bet.

And so it was. Obama won the political battle.

That said, the Obama policy medicine is a disaster. He may want to help out with more of this and that –and the people cheer. But he of all people should know that the cupboard is bare. There is no money, while public spending is still trending up.

America does not grow

Obama's ideological blinders prevent him from understanding that the country needs first and foremost higher growth. From a post war average of about 3%, we are down to 2%. This trend will get us closer to stagnating Europe and all its problems. In order to get to higher growth, it is essential to have a new Grand Bargain that would place entitlement programs on a sustainable course, while reforming our incomprehensible tax system in order to provide a strong encouragement to business creation.

Public assistance for ever?

Of course we need to extend a helping hand to those in need. But only if this is a way to make people self-sufficient sooner rather than later. *Unfortunately, the message now is that there are some perpetually weak constituencies that will need assistance in perpetuity.*

If you are on the receiving end of these public goodies, this may sound great. Easy for the moment to ignore the combined consequences of low growth, high spending (that goes mostly to assistance and income support, as opposed to investments), and more debt. If we looked at where sorry-looking Southern Europe is today, after having followed exactly this course of action

for a few decades, the end game should be obvious. But nobody within this new majority will point this out.

Who will make capitalism believable?

Until and unless somebody will come up with a credible message that will reignite enthusiasm for free market capitalism and sober governance, along with policies aimed at opening up real opportunity to all, America will continue to slowly slide into higher debt, mediocrity and eventually national decline.

Leaving Aside The Details Of The Unfolding Political Battles, America Is Fundamentally In Denial About The Severity Of Its Fiscal/Economic Predicament – President Obama Has No Plan – He Does Not Lead

[the-subtitle]

By Paolo von Schirach

January 4, 2013

WASHINGTON – Deep down all individuals engaged in self-destructive behavior know that they they should stop today and

immediately embrace healthier life styles. The drug addict knows. The alcohol dependent person knows. The smoker knows. The obese knows. And yet in most cases knowledge alone is not enough. Bad habits are deeply rooted and resilient. And it is easy to invent reasons for making changes "later".

I'll make changes later

In large part this is because people are only vaguely aware of the long term, cumulative impact of their bad habits. As they do not fear them enough, they do not take action. Yes, if I keep smoking I may get cancer. But not necessarily. Yes, my obesity may lead to type two diabetes, but may be not in my case. And so on.

America just like a substance abuse patient

If we look at America, its conditions are pretty much the same: chronic self-destructive behavior and denial about its consequences. America is a country that for decades indulged in bad habits –over spending financed by more and more borrowing– while neglecting the good habits –investments in education, R&D and new enterprises.

As a result this indebted nation is now under performing. It is fiscally challenged –high annual deficits, enormous national debt– while its economy, even though not horrible, is mediocre. Growth at 2% is better than Europe's; but lower than the historic 3% average. Unemployment at 7.8% is down from dramatic levels but still much higher than a historic norm around 4-5%.

We know what the problem is

All sane people knows that these conditions are bad and that they are trending down. More deficits mean larger debt; a tepid economy means erosion of our competitiveness in global markets. All experts know this. All reasonable policy-makers know this. All business leaders know this. And yet, just like

the average Joe who knows he should stop drinking today, America looks at its conditions and says: *"Yes, I should do something. But let me think about it"*.

In essence, this is our predicament: bad behavior with no sense responsibility. Instead of taking action, denial and more denial. We know that the politics are horrible. But the politics are horrible because of denial; because different players developed their own rationalizations and favorite narratives as to the causes of this dangerous predicament. And so, lots of finger pointing and little serious action.

Obama missed a chance to lead

The Fiscal Cliff talks that just ended with a partial deal could have been an opportunity for a Grand Bargain. A freshly re-elected President Obama could have taken the lead and said to his Republican opponents in Congress:

"Let's get together on this. This is about our Country's future. Let's set aside ideology and do the right thing. Yes, the rich should pay more into the system. This is fair. But we also recognize that long term entitlement spending is unsustainable. In order to make sure that the safety net will be there for those who really need it generations from now let's reconfigure these programs. Yes, some people will pay more and get less. But the truly needy will be fine. We also have to find better ways to properly match our national security priorities and our sky high defense spending.

By the same token, let's simplify our complicated and multi-layered tax system riddled with special treatments, exemptions and loopholes. Let's make it simple, user friendly, fair and business friendly.

And finally let's engage in a national all out effort to vastly improve public education standards in America. We all acknowledge that our future depends on how smart and innovative all our kids are going to be. Let's give all of

them the very best we can. This is a resourceful country. We do not lack intellectual capital. Let's deploy it so the all children get the best education our collective brain power can provide".

Petty quarrels about taxes

Imagine if President Obama had said this on the night of his re-election. He would be a hero and a real leader. But the President chose to turn this opportunity into a petty political battle about higher taxes for the rich. This easy populist remedy worked well with public opinion.

But the President knows better. It is totally disingenuous to say that our national predicament is mostly about the rich not paying their fair share of taxes. All experts and all policy-makers know that higher revenues, while not an insignificant contribution, would do very little to fix our fiscal problems, let alone our economy. Taxing the rich is all about political symbolism. It is not about serious policy-making.

More of the same

And now? Well, now expect more of the same. The President has not come out with a "Plan" about reforming taxes and spending while addressing American long term competitiveness. May be he thinks he does not need to. May be, just like the smoker who plans to quit but not just now, Obama is waiting for a better moment.

Slow moving crisis can be ignored

The tragedy in this situation is that we are not facing impending disaster. We are not about to go over another, bigger Cliff. We are just slowly sinking into feeble mediocrity of high debt and low growth. This deterioration is happening so slowly that most people can pretend it is not happening at all.

As a Nation, we are still in denial, and that is the real problem.

Because of Her Role In The Aftermath Of The Benghazi Debacle Ambassador Susan Rice Lost Her Chance To Become Secretary Of State – She Played A Political Role In Spinning A False Tale, Now She Pays A Political Price – But More To Come About Responsibilities Of Line Officers

[the-subtitle]

By Paolo von Schirach

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December 13, 2012

WASHINGTON – The terror attack against the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya has made another victim. It is UN Ambassador Susan Rice, the high ranking official who was sent back in September by the White House on all Sunday TV shows to push the silly explanation that the terror attack was in fact a spontaneous riot caused by the (unfortunately) made in America anti-Muslim video.

Ambassador Rice as messenger

Soon thereafter it became obvious that, when the White House sent Ambassador Rice as “messenger” on all Sunday TV shows, the administration knew very well what had actually happened in Benghazi. I wrote then (see link above to related stories) that Ambassador Rice was made to look like a fool, telling a lie to the American public because at the time –this whole affair was unfolding just weeks before the elections– the killing of a US Ambassador in the line of duty, (on September 11 of all possible dates), was treated like a potential political liability that needed to be explained away as a tragic event beyond Obama’s control.

Anyway, Susan Rice, the hapless loyal servant sent to play politics on TV is now paying a political price. As the messenger for the Obama White House untruths she has been openly attacked by senior Republican Senators, including John McCain. Having become a political liability, Ambassador Rice on December 13 withdrew her name from consideration as a possible future Secretary of State.

Political scapegoat

Of course this is all about politics. She was sent in front of the TV cameras because back then it seemed politically expedient to spin the story. She must have known that she was

being used, just as a pawn. Still, being a good trooper, she went on her mission aimed at obfuscating, this way doing her bit to help Obama's re-election. And now that she has become a political liability she lost her chance to be "promoted" by the boss she so loyally served.

She became the scapegoat. Obama regrets her decision to withdraw her name from consideration, but he accepted it. The Republicans who (along with the Murdoch media, that is FOX and the WSJ) clamor for the truth may feel partially vindicated, and so forth.

Truth about Benghazi yet to come

But this Benghazi story is not over yet. We are still waiting for the results of an official investigation that hopefully will reveal how was it possible to neglect basic security in such a critical diplomatic post like Benghazi. Someone made serious mistakes and this is the real blunder. Ambassador Rice is just an unfortunate political casualty because of her role as messenger. Indeed, as the President said, she had nothing to do with any decision-making regarding Benghazi. Certainly the UN Ambassador is not in charge of diplomatic security. (That being the case, then why was she chosen to tell the "video-did-it" story on all the TV networks? Because at the time it seemed politically expedient to send her).

Secretary Clinton unscathed

Ironically, for the time being, Secretary Hillary Clinton, the person who is in charge of the Department of State, and therefore ultimately responsible for any security lapses at the US Consulate in Benghazi, is left unscathed. So far at least, almost no political damage to her reputation. She will soon leave (voluntarily) the Secretary of State job sought by Ambassador Rice without any public embarrassment. If and when Clinton will decide to run for president in 2016, this whole Benghazi story will have been forgotten.

As for President Obama who no doubt had a role in sending Ambassador Rice to tell a fairy tale on TV, any political consequences? Well, he just got re-elected; and it is unlikely that this story will damage him in the future.

Because of Her Role In The Aftermath Of The Benghazi Debacle Ambassador Susan Rice Lost Her Chance To Become Secretary Of State – She Played A Political Role In Spinning A False Tale, Now She Pays A Political Price – But More To Come About Responsibilities Of Line Officers

[the-subtitle]

By Paolo von Schirach

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December 13, 2012

WASHINGTON – The terror attack against the US Consulate in Benghazi, Libya has made another victim. It is UN Ambassador Susan Rice, the high ranking official who was sent back in September by the White House on all Sunday TV shows to push the silly explanation that the terror attack was in fact a spontaneous riot caused by the (unfortunately) made in America anti-Muslim video.

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Romney Condemned By Fellow Republicans For Stating That The Democrats Won Because They Give Stuff To Voters – Yes, Politicians Should Be More Tactful; But The Fact Is That America Has Become An Entitlement Society

[the-subtitle]

By Paolo von Schirach

November 19, 2012

WASHINGTON – In the make believe world of politics in which telling the truth is a silly (in fact outrageous) idea Romney's post-election commentary to his supporters is yet another inexcusable gaffe. Imagine that: Romney stated that he lost to President Obama because the Democrat had the

irresistible electoral appeal of delivering free stuff to voters.

A horrible thing to say

What a horrible things to say. Think of that: Romney had the audacity to suggest that notoriously fair minded American voters would rather elect a President who promised to keep the gravy train running than an opponent who promised to reduce benefits because they are bankrupting the Nation. How could he even suggest that voters rather like getting benefits.

And now it is clear: Romney really means it. His most recent analysis simply reconfirms what he had already said about the "47%" who feel entitled to get favors, money, subsidies and what not.

Do not offend voters

While candidate Romney's first gaffe was explained away by other Republicans during the campaign, now that he is dead meat the latest one inspired righteous (and let me add totally fake) outrage. You just do not go around offending the voters, intoned wise men like Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal. You do not tell half the American electorate that they are just a bunch of leeches. This is really stupid, etc. etc.

Truth is: US has become an entitlement society

Fine, we get it. If you are in politics, you want votes and so you have to be nice to voters. Still, even if we agree that what Romney said was totally tactless and politically dumb, (showing that he never was a natural politician), the simple fact is that what he said is mostly true.

Just like Western Europe, America has become an entitlement society. So much so that entitlement spending is now about 60% of total federal outlays. Contrary to popular beliefs, willfully reinforced by the Democrats, Social Security and

Medicare recipients do not get back in benefits what they contributed in payments during their active years. It is an open secret that these mega programs do not pay for themselves. They are subsidized.

Add to them the steep increase in the number of disability pensions recipients, Medicaid, food stamps, expanded unemployment benefits and what not and you see how a large and growing percentage of Americans have become somewhat dependent on Washington's largess. And, yes, those who get stuff are more likely to vote for the candidates who offer it than for those who argue that, unless the programs are reduced, they become unaffordable.

Obama re-elected because he promised to protect social spending

And the Obama camp message during the campaign was based on this simple understanding of voters sentiments. They successfully painted Romney-Ryan as the crazy –in fact bloody minded– ideologues bent on destroying fully deserved entitlement programs, while Obama-Biden would protect them. And the Democrats clearly won the political argument.

Now, I fully agree with Governor Jindal and other Republicans that this basic fact cannot be the only foundation of any appealing, revamped Republican political message.

Populists only?

That said, if politics is only about blandishing voters, while consciously avoiding any discussion of the hard issues, including the fact that this Nation is about to be crushed by unsustainable debt caused mostly by unaffordable social spending, then the political process is destined to be the exclusive territory of clever populists totally comfortable with the simple notion that in order to get votes you hide the truth.

While the populists get the votes, witness Obama's success, America's serious problems are not dealt with today, and this signals bigger troubles ahead. We may not like to hear the truth about unaffordable social spending, but the deficits and debt they generate will come back to bite us.