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13 Hours trailer

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The Real Hero of Benghazi and 13 Hours: Chris Stevens, Chinook

STEVE RUSSELL | 1/17/16

"The simple fact is. ... that average Americans, in their natural state, if you will excuse the phrase, are the best ambassadors a country can have. ... They are not suspicious, they are

eager to share their skills, they are generous. But something happens to most Americans when they go abroad. Many of them are not average. ... they are second-raters." – *The Ugly American*

The title of the 1958 novel by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick has passed into popular culture with an oddly reversed meaning. We speak of an "ugly American" as the kind of tourist who goes on a reservation and tries to invite himself to sacred ceremonies or pokes cameras in the faces of persons who have not consented.

In fact, the "ugly American" in the novel of the same name was a hard-working man in a third world country who understood that other peoples are seeking their own destiny, not an imperfect rendering of America's. He was, in fiction, a man like J. Christopher "Chris" Stevens, American diplomat and pride of the Chinook Nation.

Born in Grass Valley, California, Chris Stevens got his Chinook blood and tribal enrollment through his mother. After earning a history degree from the University of California, Stevens joined the Peace Corps and was posted to Morocco. After his Peace Corps hitch, he picked up a Masters and a law degree and joined the United States Foreign Service.

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Stevens was a career diplomat who spoke French and Arabic. His reputation was as a genuine searcher for positions that benefitted his country and his host country. Arabs trusted him because he had a track record.

When Libyans got rid of their dictator, Chris Stevens knew that was a beginning rather than an end, and creating democratic institutions in the aftermath of despotic rule by strongman would be hard. He needed to hear from Libyans on the ground and the best place to do that was not sitting in the U.S. Embassy in

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The stakeholders in the Libyan revolution who had risked everything had taken their first real estate in the eastern part of Libya, where Benghazi had been the seat of the National Transitional Council, the umbrella group for organizations opposed to the dictator Muammar Gaddafi. During the revolution, Stevens had been U.S. liaison to the rebels.

Chris Stevens went to Benghazi because that's where the people were who would either build a democratic Libya or things would fall apart over division of the spoils left by the end of the dictatorship.

Stevens knew he was taking a side against radical Islamists and he knew he was on al-Qaeda's hit list. He requested additional security, which was not forthcoming. Whether that was because he had been posted to Tripoli rather than Benghazi, we don't know, but the fact of the matter was that the CIA had a much bigger footprint in Benghazi than the State Department.

That was the lay of the land when Islamist radicals may or may not have been stirred up by riots flaring all over the Arab world about a silly video produced in the U.S. that was as disrespectful to the Prophet Muhammad as can be imagined. Either for that reason or in retaliation for a drone strike that killed Libyan al-Qaeda leader **Abu Yahya al-Libi**, a mob attacked the lightly defended Benghazi consulate.

Chris Stevens was able to retreat to a safe room, but when the consulate was set ablaze he was overcome and died from smoke inhalation. Another U.S. diplomat died with Stevens and two civilian security contractors died in a subsequent attack on the CIA compound.

Since that tragedy on September 11, 2012, Benghazi has been a political epithet in the United States. The crisis was perceived as a golden opportunity by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's legion of political enemies or, as she called them in 1998, the "vast right-wing conspiracy." The mere repetition of "Benghazi!" as an epithet was thought to sink the dire threat of another Clinton in the White House.

In 2008, Ms. Clinton had run for President and the nomination appeared to be hers to lose. One of the obstacles thrown in her path was *Hillary: The Movie*, which featured a parade of conservative pundits discussing the serial scandals of the Clinton years as if they were real.

The Federal Election Commission sued to enjoin distribution of the movie close to the election, citing several violations of the McCain-Feingold Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act. While the Election Commission prevailed at first, the final result was *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which destroyed McCain-Feingold and opened the political process to unlimited money from corporations and labor unions.

This was the prelude to the 2016 release of another election year movie, *13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi*. Overhearing conversations in the rock-ribbed Republican environs of Williamson County, Texas, I heard other theatregoers expressing eager anticipation of an entertainment that would sink that #%^@! woman once and for all.

Auteur (he wore too many hats to be described as a mere director) Michael Bay disappointed those who came to grind political axes. Best known for the *Transformer* movies and inventive ways to blow things up, it is no surprise that his combat footage grabs viewers by the throat like Steven Spielberg's rendering of the Normandy landing in *Saving Private Ryan*.

In *13 hours*, the heroes are veterans of various Special Forces who have signed on as private contractors to babysit CIA bureaucrats, who represent overeducated jerks making life difficult for the working stiff who actually make things happen.

The most obnoxious character in the film is also at the center of the major political controversy from *13 hours*, which has nothing to do with Hillary Clinton. The CIA station chief, portrayed as a jaded lifer running out the clock on his last post, allegedly orders the professional security guards to stand down when the consulate comes under attack. The consulate, he believes, is the State Department's problem.

Why is this such a big deal that the actual station chief, now retired, held a press conference to deny it? Five words in the opening titles: *This is a true story*.

Whether the CIA station chief gave a stand down order, we can't know, but the authors of the book on which the movie was based were the men who claimed they were ordered to stand down.



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Those men on the spot also determined to aid Chris Stevens because they said of

him, "He's the real deal." The real deal in contrast to "BS political appointees." Among the locals, they believed he was "a rock star," a belief lent credibility by the public demonstrations protesting his death.

The ex-GIs put up the best fight they could. They were lightly armed and, not speaking the language like Chris Stevens, could not tell which armed civilians were friend or foe. *13 Hours* is about their heroism in response to Chris Stevens' heroism.

The film takes a dim view of the leadership offered by both the CIA and the State Department, but it is a general indictment of bureaucratic sloth and butt covering. The only individual who gets roasted is the CIA station chief.

Within days of the tragedy, a CNN reporter entered the ruined consulate in Benghazi and found Chris Stevens' diary. In the Ambassador's handwriting, the reporter read the entry for September 11:

It's so nice to be back in Benghazi. More stronger emotional connection to this place — the people.

Stevens then wrote about reconnecting with people "from the old days."

His last entry:

Never ending security threats. ...

R.I.P. Chris Stevens, U.S. diplomat and son of the Chinook Nation.

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