

FARAH STOCKMAN

How could Chris Stevens die because of a YouTube clip?



By **Farah Stockman** | GLOBE COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 12, 2012

Last year, I invited Chris Stevens to the White House Correspondents Dinner. He was a friend-of-a-friend, and a diplomat who was stationed in Benghazi, the rebel stronghold in Libya. I thought he would give an excellent, off-the-record update on everything that was going on.

“I’m supposed to go to Libya this wknd,” he wrote back. “I expect to be back by late April. I will let you know if I might be delayed.”

It turns out, he was delayed. Chris stayed in Libya, and never made it to the dinner. Come out to Benghazi, he told me. “All the other big papers are there.”

I was delighted to hear that he had been promoted to US ambassador after the regime was toppled.



BEN CURTIS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Chris Stevens

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

So it was a shock this morning to turn on the news and hear that he had been killed by smoke from a fire started by an angry mob that attacked the US

consulate because of an America-made

YouTube movie insulting Islam. He had been through so much. He survived the whole war in Benghazi. How could he just die now, like this?

Related

- **Anti-Islam filmmaker in hiding after protests**

So, I got myself a cup of coffee and sat down to watch the trailer of that YouTube movie. It's called Innocence of Muslims, made by Sam Bacile, an Israeli-American real estate developer based in California. It felt like a Saturday Night Live spoof. Terrible acting. Weird card-board-looking desert backdrops. And scenes that felt like soft-core porn, depicting the Prophet Mohammed as a sexual deviant and an idiot. How could Chris, one of our nation's finest ambassadors, die because of this?

Just to be clear, the blame for Chris's death rests squarely with the mob who attacked our embassy. Their actions are despicable, and perhaps were incited by long-standing enemies of the United States. Muslims who are angry at how their religion has been portrayed must stop responding in violent ways that perpetrate the idea of Islam as a dangerous faith.

But shouldn't people who knowingly incite violence against the United States – as a crude, thinly-veiled publicity stunt - also be held accountable?

Bacile knew that his ridiculous movie would spark massive protests against the United States across the Muslim world.

"We went into this knowing this was probably going to happen," a consultant on the film, Steve Klein, told the Associated Press. But they did it anyway. For what benefit?

This situation is reminiscent of the Florida preacher who insisted on burning the Koran, even after being warned that it would spark deadly

attacks on US soldiers in Afghanistan. Indeed, there is evidence that Florida pastor Terry Jones' promotion of Bacile's film triggered the embassy protests on Tuesday. (The movie has been on YouTube since July.)

I can't think of a time when the reckless actions of a few private citizens have cost us so much - in American lives, tax dollars and credibility around the world. Just because we have the freedom to say what we want doesn't mean saying whatever we want is just or prudent. Americans rightfully pride ourselves for our freedom of speech, but one great downside of the First Amendment is that the inner thoughts of our stupidest citizens are put on display for the whole world to see.

It is worth noting that a movie similarly insulting the Jewish faith would likely be considered illegal hate speech in much of Europe, which has seen the kind of death and destruction that hate speech can unleash. Even in the United States, speech deliberately inciting violence against an religion or ethnic group can be considered a crime.

A final thought: It's sad that Chris's death is being used as fodder in a presidential campaign. When the embassy in Cairo was being surrounded by an angry mob, some poor diplomat inside released a statement saying: "We condemn the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims."

Little did he or she know that Mitt Romney would use that as an excuse to attack Obama for allegedly sympathizing with the attackers. Shouldn't calming anger towards Americans in Egypt be more important than electioneering? Should we be sticking together at a time like this? With friends like these, who needs enemies?

Try BostonGlobe.com today and get two weeks FREE.