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By JAKE MILLER / CBS NEWS / May 12, 2013, 11:56 AM

Gates: Some Benghazi critics have "cartoonish" view of military capability

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Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates forcefully defended the Obama administration on Sunday against charges that it did not do enough to prevent the tragedy in Benghazi, telling CBS' "Face the Nation" that some critics of the administration have a "cartoonish impression of military capabilities and military forces."

Gates, a Republican who was appointed by then-President George W. Bush in 2006 and agreed to stay through more than two years of President Obama's first term, repeatedly declined to criticize the policymakers who devised a response to the September 2012 attack on a U.S. diplomatic facility in Benghazi, Libya, that left four Americans dead, including the U.S. Ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens.

"Frankly, had I been in the job at the time, I think my decisions would have been just as theirs were," said Gates, now the chancellor of the College of William and Mary.

"We don't have a ready force standing by in the Middle East, and so getting somebody there in a timely way would have been very difficult, if not impossible," he explained.

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Suggestions that we could have flown a fighter jet over the attackers to "scare them with the noise or something," Gates said, ignored the "number of surface to air missiles that have disappeared from [former Libyan leader] Qaddafi's arsenals."

"I would not have approved sending an aircraft, a single aircraft, over Benghazi under those circumstances," he said.

Another suggestion posed by some critics of the administration, to, as Gates said, "send some small number of special forces or other troops in without knowing what the environment is, without knowing what the threat is, without having any intelligence in terms of what is actually going on on the ground, would have been very dangerous."

"It's sort of a cartoonish impression of military capabilities and military forces," he said. "The one thing that our forces are noted for is planning and preparation before we send people in harm's way, and there just wasn't time to do that."

Gates said he could not speak to allegations that the State Department refused requests for additional security in the months prior to the attack. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has been increasingly targeted for criticism by Republicans for her handling of the crisis and the government's response, with some even raising the possibility that the State Department engineered a coverup to protect her political future.

But when Gates was asked whether he thought that might be a possibility, he replied flatly, "No."

"I worked with Secretary Clinton pretty closely for two and a half years, and I wouldn't want to try and be somebody...trying to convince her to say something she did not think was true," he said, adding that he has not spoken with Clinton about the events in Benghazi.

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Gates also defended the administration's circumspect response to the ongoing civil war in Syria, saying that despite the obviously vexing threat of Syrian disintegration, it would be a "mistake" to think America should - or even could - play a more muscular role in shaping the outcome.

"I believe that we have misjudged the Arab Spring and the Arab revolutions," Gates said. "We tend to forget that if you look back over the last 200, 250 years, the history of revolutions is not a pretty one."

"I think in all of these countries, including Syria, you have the threat of civil war, the threat of these countries falling apart," he said. "And for us to think we can influence or determine the outcome of that, I think, is a mistake. I thought it was a mistake in Libya. And I think it is a mistake in Syria."

While calls for outright military intervention - "boots on the ground" - have not gained any traction among policymakers on either side of the aisle, many have suggested arming the rebels working to unseat Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The United States is already providing nonlethal assistance to some rebel groups in Syria, and the administration has signaled that it is revisiting its earlier opposition to sending arms and munitions to rebel groups.

Gates, however, warned that "caution, particularly in terms of arming these groups and in terms of U.S. military involvement, is in order."

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