

JOHN BRENNAN, DOING THE HOLIDAY FRIDAY NEWS DUMP WRONG

On Friday, October 14 at 8:30 PM, NBC posted a story promising, "CIA Prepping for Possible Cyber Strike Against Russia."

The Obama administration is contemplating an unprecedented cyber covert action against Russia in retaliation for alleged Russian interference in the American presidential election, U.S. intelligence officials told NBC News.

Current and former officials with direct knowledge of the situation say the CIA has been asked to deliver options to the White House for a wide-ranging "clandestine" cyber operation designed to harass and "embarrass" the Kremlin leadership.

The sources did not elaborate on the exact measures the CIA was considering, but said the agency had already begun opening cyber doors, selecting targets and making other preparations for an operation.

On Friday December 9, just hours after President Obama announced a review of the intelligence on Russia hacking the election, at least one senior US official (which I said at the time "seems primarily to come from Democratic Senators") told the WaPo,

The CIA has concluded in a secret assessment that Russia intervened in the 2016 election to help Donald Trump win the presidency, rather than just to undermine confidence in the U.S. electoral system.

Over the following week, caveats on that story got leaked to the press. But on Friday, December 16, literally as the White House press corps was waiting for President Obama to speak, the WaPo reported that John Brennan released a letter to CIA's workforce telling them FBI and DNI agreed one reason Russia hacked the election was to get Trump elected.

FBI Director James B. Comey and Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. are in agreement with a CIA assessment that Russia intervened in the 2016 election in part to help Donald Trump win the White House, officials disclosed Friday, as President Obama issued a public warning to Moscow that it could face retaliation.

[snip]

The positions of Comey and Clapper were revealed in a message that CIA Director John Brennan sent to the agency's workforce Friday.

"Earlier this week, I met separately with FBI [Director] James Comey and DNI Jim Clapper, and there is strong consensus among us on the scope, nature, and intent of Russian interference in our presidential election," Brennan said, according to U.S. officials who have seen the message.

As I noted, the quoted parts of the letter didn't actually say what the purpose of the hack was, and it made clear that Brennan had met separately with Jim Comey and James Clapper, meaning any claim of consensus was merely Brennan's view of the serial meetings. In its report, the WaPo made no note that a week earlier it had reported that getting Trump elected was the (singular) goal of the hack, whereas here it was saying getting Trump elected was one of the goals.

On December 20, a senior intelligence

official suggested to me this leakapalooza came from Congress, not the CIA. I noted I had made that so clear that a Harry Reid aide had given me shit about it. I also noted that the second leak came from a Brennan letter, which of course was carefully crafted and easily leaked.

On Thursday December 22 at 9:27 PM, NPR posted an interview between Mary Louise Kelly and John Brennan. It played the interview during Morning Edition and All Things Considered. Here's the full transcript.

In one version of the interview, Kelly explained to Steve Inskeep that the interview wasn't supposed to cover Russia at all but in fact spent 20 minutes (out of 52) on it.

He did not want to talk about Russia *at all*. When his team was confirming the interview with me they said, he's not gonna go there, he's not gonna talk about Russia. I said, well, I gotta ask about Russia. And they said, *well*, you can try. So I did and we ended up talking about Russia for close to 20 minutes.

After Kelly asked, "hand over heart, is [the intelligence] solid?" Brennan assured her Russia did in fact "try to interfere" in the US election. Brennan explained,

There is very strong consensus among not just the leaders of these organizations but also the institutions themselves. And that's why we're going through this review. We want to make sure that we scrub the information and make sure that the assessment and analysis is as strong and as grounded as it needs to be.

Kelly then goes on to prod him about motive specifically, mentioning that his letter said FBI and DNI agreed on the "nature, scope, and intent" of the hack. But she doesn't yet raise what the conflict had been – whether

Putin wanted to get Trump elected or not – or even any of the stated motives at all. Brennan responded by not addressing that issue either,

I will not disagree with you that the why is tough. And that's why there needs to be very very careful consideration of what it is that we know and what it is that we have insight into and what our analysis needs to be. That's why this review is being done, to make sure that there is going to be a thorough look at the nature, scope, and intent of what transpired.

Kelly reminds him that what had been appearing in the press is that Russia hacked the election "with the purpose of swinging it to Donald Trump." Brennan responds,

Kelly: Is that an accurate characterization?

Brennan: That's an accurate characterization of what's been appearing in the media, yes.

Kelly: Is that an accurate characterization of where the CIA is on this?

Brennan: Well, that's what the review is going to do. And we will make sure that President Obama and the incoming administration understands what the intelligence community has assessed and determined to have happened during the run-up to this election.

Which brings NPR to the big headline of their story from an interview in which Brennan didn't want to discuss Russia at all. Kelly explains that Brennan doesn't want to hack Russia in retaliation for its hack. Here's why:

Well, this country is based on the democratic principles that our nation was founded upon. And there is a lot of

challenges throughout the world to those principles of freedom, liberty, freedom of speech and the will of the people in order to govern as they see fit. And the election process is one of those foundational elements of our democracy. And I individually believe that there are certain things that this government, our country, should not be engaged in because it is inconsistent with those precepts, those tenets of the United States of America. So this was what's making, you know, this challenging, which is how to safeguard our system, safeguard our digital domain, and make sure that there are decisions that can be taken that will deter, maybe sometimes punish those who violate the law, as well as try to attack our national security and try to undermine the democracy that we are.

Kelly asked how retaliating in kind would undermine American democratic principles.

Help me understand. Connect that line for me. How would retaliating in kind – so, a cyberattack against Russia – how would that undermine American democratic principles?

Well, I think if we hold dear the principles of democracy, liberty, freedom and freedom of speech and the right of people everywhere to have governments of their choosing, preventing the conduct of a free and fair and open election, devoid of interference and foreign manipulation, is something that I think the United States government, as well as the American people, would certainly want to make sure that's going to be who we are.

And so there are a lot of things that those adversaries, enemies that we have, whether they be terrorists or

proliferators or ... whomever. Nation-states. They do some things that I think are beyond the pale. That's why I don't think we should resort to some of the tactics and techniques that our adversaries employ against us. I think we need to remember what we're fighting for. We're fighting for our country, our democracy, our way of life, and to engage in the skulduggery that some of our opponents and adversaries engage in, I think, is beneath this country's greatness.

[snip]

We need to make sure that we are going to lead the way when it comes to allowing countries and people to choose their leaders, free of that foreign interference. And that's the concerns we have, as we've seen, not just the United States but in other countries as well, the hand of foreign actors. And I don't think it's a secret that the the Russians have tried to influence the outcome of elections in other countries as well. So this is not just a question of their cyber activity. It's a question of their using their influence in ways that are inconsistent, I believe, with what should be happening in these countries' electoral processes.

Brennan goes on to state that the CIA has never tampered in elections in the 21st century (though he admits CIA does do what it can to ensure people get to vote), even while asserting that the rebels in Aleppo have not gotten adequate outside support.

So to sum up: CIA doesn't want to retaliate against Russia because that's not consistent with the democratic principles on which this country was founded.