

LAST FALL'S EFFORTS AGAINST RUSSIA: INFLUENCE VERSUS TAMPER



NYT has a story – citing “former government officials” and eventually citing Harry Reid – that’s attracting a lot of attention. It explains the CIA had evidence in August that Russia was affirmatively trying to elect Trump, rather than just hurt Hillary.

In an Aug. 25 briefing for Harry Reid, then the top Democrat in the Senate, Mr. Brennan indicated that Russia’s hackings appeared aimed at helping Mr. Trump win the November election, according to two former officials with knowledge of the briefing.

The officials said Mr. Brennan also indicated that unnamed advisers to Mr. Trump might be working with the Russians to interfere in the election. The F.B.I. and two congressional committees are now investigating that claim, focusing on possible communications and financial dealings between Russian affiliates and a handful of former advisers to Mr. Trump. So far, no proof of collusion has emerged publicly.

[snip]

In the August briefing for Mr. Reid, the two former officials said, Mr. Brennan indicated that the C.I.A., focused on

foreign intelligence, was limited in its legal ability to investigate possible connections to Mr. Trump. The officials said Mr. Brennan told Mr. Reid that the F.B.I., in charge of domestic intelligence, would have to lead the way.

Given Jim Comey's description of the FBI assessment Russia wanted to elect Trump – which he described as an “enemy of my enemy” approach, rooting against the Pats at all times because he's a Giants fan – and given the NSA's continued moderate confidence in this claim, I don't make too much of the CIA claim. Furthermore, given Roger Stone's public exchanges with Guccifer 2 in the weeks leading up to this briefing (and CIA's purported prohibition on involvement in domestic affairs), I also don't put too much stock in CIA's evidence of Russian coordination. In precisely this period, after all, Brennan continued to publicly brief that Putin was out of his depth, which seemed then and seems even more now to underestimate Putin's ability to play the United States.

The line about Brennan saying FBI would have to investigate the ties between Trump and Putin also reminds me of the recent complaint, laundered through BBC's Paul Wood, that FBI is fucking up the investigation and CIA should take the lead.

The rest of the article includes partisan details that have attracted a lot of attention but that – in light of this Lisa Monaco interview – seem to miss some distinction. The NYT describes a conflict between a bipartisan statement about the integrity of the election and a more assertive statement implicating Russia with influencing the outcome of the election.

In the briefings, the C.I.A. said there was intelligence indicating not only that the Russians were trying to get Mr.

Trump elected but that they had gained computer access to multiple state and local election boards in the United States since 2014, officials said.

Although the breached systems were not involved in actual vote-tallying operations, Obama administration officials proposed that the eight senior lawmakers write a letter to state election officials warning them of the possible threat posed by Russian hacking, officials said.

But Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Republican majority leader, resisted, questioning the underpinnings of the intelligence, according to officials with knowledge of the discussions. Mr. McConnell ultimately agreed to a softer version of the letter, which did not mention the Russians but warned of unnamed “malefactors” who might seek to disrupt the elections through online intrusion. The letter, dated Sept. 28, was signed by Mr. McConnell, Mr. Reid, Speaker Paul D. Ryan and Representative Nancy Pelosi, the ranking Democrat.

On Sept. 22, two other members of the Gang of Eight – Senator Dianne Feinstein and Representative Adam B. Schiff, both of California and the ranking Democrats on the Senate and House intelligence committees – released their own statement about the Russian interference that did not mention Mr. Trump or his campaign by name.

Here’s the full statement from Feinstein and Schiff:

Based on briefings we have received, we have concluded that the Russian intelligence agencies are making a serious and concerted effort to

influence the U.S. election.

At the least, this effort is intended to sow doubt about the security of our election and may well be intended to influence the outcomes of the election—we can see no other rationale for the behavior of the Russians.

We believe that orders for the Russian intelligence agencies to conduct such actions could come only from very senior levels of the Russian government.

We call on President Putin to immediately order a halt to this activity. Americans will not stand for any foreign government trying to influence our election. We hope all Americans will stand together and reject the Russian effort.

Note the difference in emphasis: the letter from Congressional leaders emphasizes voting apparatus. Also note (and I suspect this is far more important than any report has yet made out) the letter Mitch McConnell was willing to sign states clearly that voting systems are *not* being designated critical infrastructure (which Jeh Johnson tried to do in early January, to much resistance from the states).

We urge the states to take full advantage of the robust public and private sector resources available to them to ensure that their network is secure from attack. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security stands ready to provide cybersecurity assistance to those states that choose to request it. Such assistance does not entail federal regulation or binding federal directives of any kind, and we would oppose any effort by the federal government to exercise any degree of control over the states' administration of elections by designating these

systems as critical infrastructure.

In other words, the Democrats wanted this to be about Russian *influence*, whereas the government was primarily worried about Russia affecting the outcome of the election at the polls.

Here's how Monaco described the effort, which she describes as largely successful.

[M]y own view on that is we did not want to do anything to do the Russians' work for them by engaging in partisan discussion about this, which is why we were so intent upon getting bipartisan support, and ultimately, we did so from the House and Senate leadership, in trying to get the state and local governments to work with us to shore up their cybersecurity.

We made a specific effort to go to Congress, to say we want bipartisan support for state governments to take us up on our offer to shore up their cybersecurity in their election systems, because there was a tremendous amount of resistance. This is an election year, I think there was a view that we—if we came to state and municipal governments and said, “We want to help you shore up your cybersecurity for your election system,” they viewed it as a big federal takeover.

We really needed bipartisan support for the efforts we were making, largely out of the Department of Homeland Security. Ultimately, that turned out to be a smart way of doing business, and we ended up having 48 of 50 states take us up on our offer, but we needed bipartisan support to do it. Ultimately, that turned out to be a smart way of doing business, and we ended up having 48 of 50 states take us up on our offer, but we needed bipartisan support to do

it.

For Monaco, the effort was entirely about convincing states to accept help from DHS to ensure the machines counting the vote would not be compromised in a way that would affect the vote, not about the theft of emails from the DNC.

Incidentally, one of the two states that refused DHS help was Georgia, which of course is conducting an election to replace Tom Price as we speak, and which accused DHS of trying to hack its systems in the weeks after the election.

Two more comments on this. First, Mitch McConnell appears to have been in the right on this. Public discussion of the probes at the time noted that such hacks had happened in the past and generally sought credentials, not voting information. DHS released a warning on the polling probes on September 20, a week before the Leaders' statement was released, and it still discussed the probes in terms of stealing PII.

(U//FOUO) DHS has no indication that adversaries or criminals are planning cyber operations against US election infrastructure that would change the outcome of the coming US election. Multiple checks and redundancies in US election infrastructure—including diversity of systems, non-Internet connected voting machines, pre-election testing, and processes for media, campaign, and election officials to check, audit, and validate results—make it likely that cyber manipulation of US election systems intended to change the outcome of a national election would be detected.

(U//FOUO) We judge cybercriminals and criminal hackers are likely to continue to target personally identifiable

information (PII), such as that available in voter registration databases. We have no indication, however, that criminals are planning theft of voter information to disrupt or alter US computer-enabled election infrastructure.

And the October 7 joint DHS/ODNI statement –released *after* the Leaders’ statement – still stopped short of blaming Russia for those probes.

Some states have also recently seen scanning and probing of their election-related systems, which in most cases originated from servers operated by a Russian company. However, we are not now in a position to attribute this activity to the Russian Government.

In other words, McConnell’s resistance to blaming Russia in that September 28 letter was completely consistent with the public intelligence at the time.

Finally, now how the role of Richard Burr and Devin Nunes always gets glossed over in these descriptions? I get that people want to blame Mitch for refusing to take a tougher line. But what were Trump’s campaign surrogates doing at the time?