

AT SOME POINT TRUMP'S DENIALS ARE ABOUT CRIMINAL DEFENSE, NOT JUST DENIAL

After hanging out with Vladimir Putin informally in Da Nang, Donald Trump again said he believes Putin's denials that he interfered with the election.

"He said he didn't meddle. He said he didn't meddle. I asked him again. You can only ask so many times," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One as he flew from Da Nang to Hanoi in Vietnam. Trump spoke to Putin three times on the sidelines of summit here, where the Russia meddling issue arose.

"Every time he sees me, he says, 'I didn't do that,'" Trump said. "And I believe, I really believe, that when he tells me that, he means it."

"I think he is very insulted by it," Trump added.

This has the chattering class horrified, again, about what this does for the intelligence community.

That's all true, but I think this is about more than Trump preferring the analysis of an old KGB spy.

As this NYT story released last night makes clear, the Mueller investigation is closing in on Trump's close aides, including Stephen Miller and (as I'll point out later) Jeff Sessions. I have reason to believe something will be announced in the very near future that will blow the investigation wide open, in ways that may directly implicate the President.

But, as I've said repeatedly, the Russian operation built in multiple levels of deniability, not just the WikiLeaks cut-out. So it may be that whatever actions personally implicate Trump involve enough deniability he will be able to claim – or try to – that he didn't know the actions he took involved working directly with the Russians.

In other words, at some point these repeated public claims aren't about trusting Putin over his intelligence community. They're about mounting a criminal defense.