

# Ex-CIA director's testimony fuels new round of anti-Russian agitation

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Former CIA Director John Brennan appeared before the House Intelligence Committee Tuesday, giving lengthy testimony that sparked an avalanche of headlines about allegations of collusion between the Trump presidential campaign and Russian intelligence.

The greatest attention was given to Brennan's declaration that there had been a pattern of contacts between Trump aides and Russian officials that aroused the suspicion of the CIA during the summer of 2016.

"I encountered and am aware of information and intelligence that revealed contacts and interactions between Russian officials and US persons involved in the Trump campaign that I was concerned about because of known Russian efforts to suborn such individuals," he told the panel. "And it raised questions in my mind again whether or not the Russians were able to gain the cooperation of those individuals."

Brennan refused to identify any of these individuals or answer a direct question about whether Trump was one of those targeted. Later in his testimony, after considerable badgering by Republican representatives, he reiterated that there were still matters to investigate. When he left office on January 20, 2017, he said, "I had unresolved questions in my mind as to whether or not the Russians had been successful in getting US persons, involved in the campaign or not, to work on their behalf, again, either in a witting or unwitting fashion."

Brennan never actually said that there was any collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian officials, claiming that was something still to be determined in ongoing investigations by the FBI and the special counsel appointed by the Department of Justice, former FBI Director Robert Mueller. But he referred repeatedly to "contacts" between unnamed Trump aides and Russian government operatives.

"If someone left this hearing today and said that you

had indicated that those contacts were evidence of collusion or collaboration, they would be misrepresenting your statements, correct?" asked Rep. Mike Turner, an Ohio Republican. Brennan conceded: "I would say it was not an accurate portrayal of my statement."

While Republican members of the intelligence committee sought to defend Trump, Democratic members indulged in anti-Russian witch-hunting that recalled the heyday of Joseph McCarthy. Several representatives slipped in references to "Soviet" as well as Russian intelligence operatives and techniques.

One Democrat, Jim Himes of Connecticut, bemoaned what he called the refusal of Trump's supporters to face facts and their tendency to "attack the messenger," i.e., those in the intelligence agencies leaking material against Trump. He concluded, "We're playing precisely into Russia's fondest hopes. We're doing something that in my opinion the great cold warriors, be it Ronald Reagan or Harry Truman, would never have allowed."

The chronology outlined by Brennan actually suggests that alleged Russian interference in the 2016 campaign was not considered an urgent issue by the Obama administration and the US intelligence apparatus during that period, despite claims to the contrary more recently.

Brennan indicated that the CIA was the first US government agency to become aware of alleged Russian efforts to interfere in the election campaign during July 2016. That was when, on the eve of the Democratic National Convention, the Hillary Clinton campaign and the Democratic Party first made the claim that the Russian government was responsible for hacking Democratic National Committee emails and collaborating with WikiLeaks to leak them, so as to

embarrass Clinton and tip the election to Trump.

In his testimony Tuesday, Brennan said he raised the matter with the White House and on August 4 gave a warning to his Russian counterpart, Alexander Bortnikov, head of the Russian intelligence agency FSB. The warning came at the end of a phone call in which the main subject was Syria, with Russian harassment of US diplomats in Moscow and Russian actions in relation to the US elections raised only at the end—an indication that the matter was not a high priority or considered a serious danger.

“I believe I was the first US official to brace Russia on this matter,” Brennan added, an assertion that makes the chronology even more curious. According to the semi-official narrative, the FBI learned of hacking attacks on the Democratic National Committee in the summer of 2015 and the attacks were supposedly linked soon after to two units of Russian military intelligence.

If that story is true, why did Brennan become the first US official to raise the issue with Moscow, a full year later?

Moreover, if Brennan’s call to Bortnikov on August 4, 2016 was an expression of great concern on the part of the Obama administration, why did Obama wait until December 29, 2016 to take any retaliatory action? The time sequence actually suggests that the White House regarded Russian actions around the US elections (if any) as a minor irritant, fully expecting a Clinton victory, until after the actual debacle for the Democrats on Election Day.

Significantly, Brennan seemed to downplay claims that Trump had committed a gross breach of national security by disclosing classified information about an alleged ISIS terrorist threat at a White House meeting earlier this month with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

He routinely shared classified information on terrorist threats with his Russian counterpart, Brennan said, although he added that Trump had apparently breached protocols on how such information was to be shared. But the former CIA director sided with the White House in condemning leaks about Trump’s discussions with the Russians as a greater danger to national security than the discussions themselves.

A second hearing on Tuesday brought another high-level intelligence official to Capitol Hill to be

questioned about the alleged Trump-Russia connection. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats refused to answer questions about whether Trump had pressured him, as reported this week by the *Washington Post*, to publicly deny that there was any evidence of collusion between the Trump presidential campaign and the Russian government.

Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Coats, a former senator, said he would not discuss conversations with the president at a public Senate hearing. He did indicate that he would be prepared to respond to such questions if they came from the special counsel.



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