

Former US intelligence chiefs urge Congress, executive to defy Trump

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In remarks that have no parallel since the emergence of the US national-security state after World War II, the two former leaders of the intelligence apparatus told a forum in Aspen, Colorado Friday that President Trump's loyalty to the United States was in question. They suggested that executive branch officials should refuse to carry out his orders.

The comments by former CIA Director John Brennan and former Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper came at an annual forum sponsored by the Aspen Institute that brings together the national security establishment. Present at the event were high-level representatives of the Trump administration, Congress and the media.

Brennan and Clapper were the featured speakers at a session moderated by Wolf Blitzer of CNN, a long-time conduit for the military-intelligence apparatus. The title of the session, "Under Assault," was meant to convey the position of the United States in relation to supposed Russian government hacking of the 2016 US presidential election, and the alleged collaboration of the Trump campaign with Russia in efforts to defeat Democrat Hillary Clinton, the consensus favorite of the national-security elite.

Neither Brennan nor Clapper offered any proof of Russian intervention or Trump campaign collaboration. Instead, they relied on previous declarations by four US security agencies—the CIA, NSA, FBI and DNI—and the media campaign that has been fueled by incessant leaks from within these agencies to paint a picture of the Trump White House as a virtual outpost of Moscow.

Both speakers condemned Trump's meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the recent G20 summit meeting in Hamburg, Germany, as well as the president's disparaging references to US intelligence agencies for their false claims that Saddam Hussein possessed "weapons of mass destruction," which were used by the Bush administration to justify its illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Brennan declared that Trump's statements and his

meetings with Putin "pose a serious question about how he is keeping safe our national security." Clapper went further, saying, "I sometimes wonder whether...what he's about is making Russia great again..."

Both officials suggested that the investigation headed by Justice Department Special Counsel Robert Mueller, former director of the FBI, should be looking into direct ties between Trump and Russia of a financial and perhaps even treasonable character.

Blitzer asked the two veteran spies to comment on a question posed by Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, "who asked this question, what do the Russians have on Donald Trump politically, personally or financially."

Clapper replied, "Well, hopefully, Special Counsel Mueller will get to the bottom of that." Brennan chimed in, "Yes, I agree. I would like to think that we all, all Americans want to get this behind us because it is hurting us."

In response to a question from Blitzer about his using the word "treason" to characterize relationships between the Trump campaign and Russia, Brennan said, "I think that's what the FBI investigation is looking at, who was going along the path wittingly or unwittingly and what they might have done to compromise the security of this country as well as to violate US law."

Brennan went on to declare that if Trump attempted to fire Mueller as special counsel, Congress should "stand up and say enough is enough and stop making apologies and excuses for things that are happening that really flout, I think, our system of laws and government." His ruling class audience gave him a round of applause.

Blitzer then asked what Congress could do about the firing of Mueller, since it is well within the powers of the president, and Brennan gave an astonishing response: "First of all, I think it's the obligation of some executive branch officials to refuse to carry out some of these orders that again are inconsistent with what this country is about."

He did not spell out which officials—including possibly the military brass—should defy the orders of their nominal

civilian superior, the elected commander-in-chief. Nor did Blitzer or anyone from the audience follow up on the open suggestion of insubordination.

But the call for officials of the executive branch to defy the orders of a president is an indication of the intensity of the conflict that is raging within the US ruling elite. In this no-holds-barred factional war, neither side is defending democracy or democratic rights.

Trump heads the most reactionary administration in US history, committed to a program of persecuting immigrants, destroying critical social programs such as Medicaid and pouring trillions into tax cuts for the wealthy and an accelerated military buildup. His opponents—in the national-security establishment, the Democratic Party and the corporate media—are seeking to oust Trump, or at least cripple his administration, through methods of intrigue and provocation that resemble a palace coup.

Brennan and Clapper embody the right-wing, antidemocratic character of the opposition to Trump within the US political establishment. In his three decades with the CIA and his tenure on the White House staff, where he was antiterrorism coordinator and organizer of drone-missile assassinations for President Obama, Brennan was responsible for countless crimes carried out in the name of US “national security.”

When the Senate Intelligence Committee conducted a limited exposure of the CIA torture program carried out under the Bush administration, Brennan not only opposed the investigation, he authorized CIA agents to break into the computers of the Senate committee that was tasked, under the constitutional division of powers principle, with acting as the overseer of the CIA by the elected representatives of the people (a function that in practice Congress has long since failed to perform).

Clapper oversaw the vast expansion of illegal spying by the NSA in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. In March of 2013, only three months before Edward Snowden’s revelations, Clapper perjured himself before the Senate Judiciary Committee by denying, in reply to a direct question, that US intelligence agencies were spying on the communications of the American people.

In their remarks at Aspen, Brennan and Clapper were speaking for powerful sections of the national-security apparatus whose objections to Trump center on two questions: that Trump is conciliatory towards Moscow, veering away from the campaign of military and political aggression against Russia embarked on under Obama; and that Trump subordinates the global interests of US imperialism to the financial interests of his own family.

Among those in the audience at Aspen were several leading Republican congressmen, including Mac

Thornberry, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Michael McCaul, chairman of the Homeland Security Committee. Several top Trump administration officials also addressed sessions of the weekend meeting, including CIA Director Mike Pompeo and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats.

None of these officials addressed the open call by Brennan to defy orders from Trump, or the statements by both Brennan and Clapper that Trump might be loyal to Moscow rather than Washington.

In Washington, the infighting within the ruling elite by means of leaks planted in the media continues. The *Washington Post* published a front-page report Sunday that all but indicted Attorney General Jeff Sessions as a perjurer. According to the article, Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak in messages sent to Moscow described discussions with Sessions last year, when Sessions was a senator from Alabama and a top Trump campaign foreign policy adviser.

Kislyak told the Russian foreign ministry that he had discussed the likely foreign policy positions of a future Trump administration with Sessions. But in sworn testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sessions said his discussions with Kislyak were limited to his role on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and had nothing to do with the Trump campaign.

As usual in such reports, the *Post* was not engaged in investigative journalism, but rather in transcribing leaks from high-level intelligence sources opposed to the policies of the Trump administration. The newspaper cited “current and former US officials” who were familiar with the intelligence intercepts of communications between senior Russian officials in the United States and their superiors in Moscow.

The *New York Times* carried a lengthy report on its uncovering of a 56-page document, held in the National Archives, that was prepared by Kenneth Starr, the independent counsel who investigated President Bill Clinton. Contrary to the conventional conception that impeachment by Congress is the only recourse against presidential misconduct, the document argues that a sitting president is not immune from criminal indictment.



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