

New Cracks in Russia-gate ‘Assessment’

Exclusive: President Obama’s ex-intelligence chiefs admit they limited input into the Russia-gate “assessment,” which was handled by “hand-picked” analysts, raising the specter of politicized intelligence, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

At the center of the Russia-gate scandal is a curious U.S. intelligence “assessment” that was pulled together in less than a month and excluded many of the agencies that would normally weigh in on such an important topic as whether Russia tried to influence the outcome of a U.S. presidential election.

The Jan. 6 [report](#) and its allegation that Russia “hacked” Democratic emails and publicized them through WikiLeaks have been treated as gospel by the mainstream U.S. media and many politicians of both parties, but two senior Obama administration intelligence officials have provided new information that raises fresh doubts about the findings.

On Tuesday, former CIA Director John Brennan told the House Intelligence Committee that only four of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies took part in the assessment, relying on analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under the oversight of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Brennan said the report “followed the general model of how you want to do something like this with some notable exceptions. It only involved the FBI, NSA and CIA as well as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It wasn’t a full inter-agency community assessment that was coordinated among the 17 agencies, and for good reason because of the nature and the sensitivity of the information trying, once again, to keep that tightly compartmented.”

But Brennan’s excuse about “tightly compartmented” information was somewhat disingenuous because other intelligence agencies, such as the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), could have been consulted in a limited fashion, based on their areas of expertise. For instance, INR could have weighed in on whether Russian President Vladimir Putin would have taken the risk of trying to sabotage Hillary Clinton’s campaign, knowing that – if she won as expected and learned of the operation – she might have sought revenge against him and his country.

The Jan. 6 report argued one side of the case – that Putin had a motive for undermining Clinton because he objected to her work as Secretary of State when

she encouraged anti-Putin protests inside Russia – but the report ignored the counter-argument that the usually cautious Putin might well have feared infuriating the incoming U.S. President if the anti-Clinton ploy failed to block her election.

A balanced intelligence assessment would have included not just arguments for believing that the Russians did supply the Democratic emails to WikiLeaks but the reasons to doubt that they did.

Pre-Cooked Intelligence

However, the restricted nature of the Jan. 6 report – limiting it to analysts from CIA, NSA and FBI – blocked the kind of expertise that the State Department, the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies might have provided. In other words, the Jan. 6 report has the look of pre-cooked intelligence.

That impression was further strengthened by the admission of former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper before a Senate Judiciary subcommittee on May 8 that “the two dozen or so analysts for this task were hand-picked, seasoned experts from each of the contributing agencies.”

Yet, as any intelligence expert will tell you, if you “hand-pick” the analysts, you are really hand-picking the conclusion. For instance, if the analysts were known to be hard-liners on Russia or supporters of Hillary Clinton, they could be expected to deliver the one-sided report that they did.

In the history of U.S. intelligence, we have seen how this approach has worked, such as the determination of the Reagan administration to pin the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II and other acts of terror on the Soviet Union.

CIA Director William Casey and Deputy Director Robert Gates shepherded the desired findings through the process by putting the assessment under the control of pliable analysts and sidelining those who objected to this politicization of intelligence.

The point of enlisting the broader intelligence community – and incorporating dissents into a final report – is to guard against such “stove-piping” of intelligence that delivers the politically desired result but ultimately distorts reality.

Another painful example of politicized intelligence was President George W. Bush’s 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq’s WMD that removed INR’s and other dissents from the declassified version that was given to the public.

Lacking Evidence

The Jan. 6 report – technically called an Intelligence Community Assessment (or ICA) – avoided the need to remove any dissents by excluding the intelligence agencies that might have dissented and by hand-picking the analysts who compiled the report.

However, like the declassified version of the Iraq NIE, the Russia-gate ICA lacked any solid evidence to support the conclusions. The ICA basically demanded that the American public “trust us” and got away with that bluff because much of the mainstream U.S. news media wanted to believe anything negative about then-President-elect Trump.

Because of that, the American people were repeatedly – and falsely – informed that the findings about Russian “hacking” reflected the collective judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies, making anyone who dared question the conclusion seem like a crackpot or a “Russian apologist.”

Yet, based on the testimonies of Clapper and Brennan, we now know that the ICA represented only a hand-picked selection of the intelligence community – four, not 17, agencies.

There were other biases reflected in the ICA, such as a bizarre appendix that excoriated RT, the Russian television network, for supposedly undermining Americans’ confidence in their democratic process.

This seven-page appendix, dating from 2012, accused RT of portraying “the US electoral process as undemocratic” and offered such “proof” as RT’s staging of a debate among third-party presidential candidates who had been excluded from the Republican-Democratic debates between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama.

“RT broadcast, hosted and advertised third-party candidate debates,” the report said, as if allowing political figures in the United States who were not part of the two-party system to express their views, was somehow anti-democratic, when you might think that letting Americans hear alternatives was the essence of democracy.

“The RT hosts asserted that the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham,’” the report continued. Yet, polls have shown that large numbers of Americans would prefer more choices than the usual two candidates and, indeed, most Western democracies have multiple parties, So, the implicit RT criticism of the U.S. political process is certainly not out of the ordinary.

The report also took RT to task for covering the Occupy Wall Street movement and

for reporting on the environmental dangers from “fracking,” topics cited as further proof that the Russian government was using RT to weaken U.S. public support for Washington’s policies (although, again, these are topics of genuine public interest).

Assessing or Guessing

But at least the appendix offered up some “evidence” – as silly as those examples might have been. The main body of the report amounted to one “assessment” after another with no verifiable evidence included, at least in the unclassified version that the American people were allowed to see.

The report also contained a warning about how unreliable these “assessments” could be: “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

In other words, “assessing” in intelligence terms often equates with “guessing” – and if the guessers are hand-picked by political appointees – it shouldn’t be surprising that they would come up with an “assessment” that would please their bosses, in this case, President Obama and his appointees at CIA, NSA, FBI and ODNI.

The timing and speed of the Jan. 6 report also drew some attention at Tuesday’s House Intelligence Committee hearing, where Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-New York, noted that President Obama requested the ICA on Dec. 9 and the last entry was dated Dec. 29.

“This report was produced in just 20 days in December,” Stefanik said, adding: “It’s of concern to me that there was a two-month lag” between when Obama’s intelligence agencies first alleged Russian “hacking” of Democratic emails and when Obama ordered the ICA.

Of course, the ICA’s flaws do not mean that Russia is innocent or that WikiLeaks is telling the truth when it asserts that the two batches of Democratic emails – one from the Democratic National Committee and the other from Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta – did not come from the Russians.

But the Jan. 6 report has served as the foundation for a series of investigations that have hobbled the Trump administration and could lead to the negation of a U.S. presidential election via the impeachment or forced resignation of President Trump.

The seriousness of that possibility would seem to demand the most thorough

examination and the fullest vetting of the evidence. Even just the appearance that the ICA might be one more case of politicized intelligence would do more to destroy Americans' faith in their democratic system than anything that Putin might dream up.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
