

IN DEFENSE OF [GULP] MIKE POMPEO

Let me say at the outset that I think Mike Pompeo is a totally inappropriate choice for CIA. I believe he is inclined to torture and engage in illegal surveillance. I believe he is among a long line of overly politicized Republicans appointed to this position. I believe he plans to criminalize journalism, if not my own journalism, specifically. And I believe it likely he's hiding requests from Trump to downplay the Russian investigation.

But I'm uncomfortable with critiques of him about this interview with Hugh Hewitt.

To be clear: I'm appalled that a CIA Director would choose someone so nakedly partisan for his first exclusive interview. I don't approve of the interview, generally.

But people are suggesting that this passage shows Pompeo denying known facts about the Russian investigation.

HUGH HEWITT, MSNBC HOST: Today, I bring to you my conversation with the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Mike Pompeo. This is his first interview with a news network since taking the job. I sat down with the former congressman, West Point and Harvard Law graduate at CIA headquarters in Langley. I started by asking him about Russia's meddling in last year's election, and what the administration is doing to stop it from happening again.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MIKE POMPEO, DIRECTOR, CIA: I can't talk about the details of the intelligence, but we have, the intelligence community has said, that this election was meddled with by the Russians in a way that is frankly not particularly original.

They've been doing this for an awfully long time. And we are decades into the Russians trying to undermine American democracy. So in some ways, there's no news, but it certainly puts a heightened emphasis on our ability to figure out how to stop them.

HEWITT: The news was actually that Putin personally directed. Do you think the Russian President did that?

POMPEO: I can't confirm the intelligence related to that.

Perhaps this is semantics, but Hewitt used a different word than the Intelligence Community Assessment that everyone complaining is pointing to. Hewitt used "directed," suggesting (to me, anyway) a hands on involvement. The ICA described Putin's involvement as "ordering" the operation, suggesting (again, to me) a delegation of direction.

We assess with high confidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election, the consistent goals of which were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency. We further assess Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump. When it appeared to Moscow that Secretary Clinton was likely to win the election, the Russian influence campaign then focused on undermining her expected presidency.

We also assess Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him. All three agencies

agree with this judgment. CIA and FBI have high confidence in this judgment; NSA has moderate confidence.

Add in a tolerance – by virtually all those complaining – for intelligence officials to defer public comments by refusing to stray from existing public comments. Indeed, even where Pompeo all but confirms something Hewitt raises – that the US and Russia continue to cooperate on counterterrorism issues – he engages in the tired charade of pretending not to confirm the confirmation.

POMPEO: I don't talk about the liaison partners that I speak with. But it is important that we continue to work in places where we can on intelligence matters to keep Americans safe. Counterterrorism is a perfect example. Americans fly on Russian planes, Russians fly on American planes, to the extent we can keep planes in the sky. All of those counter terrorism issues and places they overlap, where there are terrorists in Kazakhstan or Russia or other places where the Russians might have information, I certainly expect they'll share that with us. And by the same token, if we can help keep Russians or American interests in Russia alive by providing them with information, it's the right thing to do.

So I took, and take, Pompeo's refusal to confirm the intelligence related "to that" as a refusal to go beyond the ICA. Sure, perhaps Hewitt's question was orchestrated. Perhaps this is Pompeo's way of acceding to Trump's request to downplay the Putin role in the election operation.

But you can't pick and choose among public deferrals of answers. If John Brennan could get away with this kind of obfuscation (and he did, including with these journalists in particular)

then similar obfuscation should not suddenly become an object of suspicion.

The point is no CIA director should get away with this kind of parsing. But what Pompeo has done here is more of the same kind of parsing that all CIA Directors, forever and ever, have engaged in, with the indulgence of their favored press outlets.

That's not acceptable. But those who've permitted such indulgences in the past are in no position to demand more transparency from other CIA Directors.

By all means let's criticize Pompeo for helping Trump to downplay the Russian investigation. But let's apply the same standards we have to past CIA Directors, especially if we're those who've gotten privileged access in the past.