

TOM BOSSERT GIVES TRUMP THE ADVICE TRUMP REFUSED FOUR YEARS AGO

Almost exactly four years ago, at a time when (seemingly unbeknownst to Trump's incoming Homeland Security advisor Tom Bossert) Mike Flynn and his Deputy KT McFarland were secretly making asks of the Russian government, top Transition team officials discussed what to do about sanctions Obama imposed, in part, to punish Russia for interfering in the just finished election.

As part of that discussion, Bossert asked his predecessor Lisa Monaco how the Russians were responding to sanctions. At 4:01 PM on December 29, he reported back to Flynn, McFarland, Steve Bannon (at Bannon's personal email), Keith Kellogg, and Reince Priebus:

[Monaco] confirms the Russian [sic] have already responded with strong threats, promising to retaliate. [She] characterized the Russian response as bellicose. My thoughts, sans the Russia angle, on which I defer to Mike and KT: [redacted] : Cyber attacks by forcing [sic] governments or anyone else are unacceptable and must be taken seriously. The alleged Russian hack of US entities involved in the US political process is a problem. Of course we must separate their attempts to influence our election from the rash conclusion that they succeeded in altering the views of any American voter. We must be wary of escalatory retaliation to follow.

Immediately after receiving this call, Flynn called McFarland using the phone in his Dominican Republic hotel room. They spoke for 11

minutes.

Approximately eight minutes after Flynn and McFarland hung up, at 4:20, Flynn called Sergey Kislyak from that same hotel room phone to a phone at the Russian Embassy wiretapped by the FBI. The person who transcribed the intercept observed that it sounded like Flynn might be using his speaker phone.

On the call, Flynn raised the sanctions. He asked the Russian Ambassador not to box the Trump Administration in and further asked not to escalate things to avoid getting into a tit-for-tat.

Approximately 12 minutes after the end of Flynn's call with Kislyak, KT McFarland responded to Bossert's email, claiming Flynn would call Kislyak later than evening, yet quoting the phrases "tit-for-tat" and "box" Trump in directly from the call Flynn had just made to the Ambassador – the one the transcriber believed may have been made on a speaker phone.

On Dec. 29, a transition adviser to Mr. Trump, K. T. McFarland, wrote in an email to a colleague that sanctions announced hours before by the Obama administration in retaliation for Russian election meddling were aimed at discrediting Mr. Trump's victory. The sanctions could also make it much harder for Mr. Trump to ease tensions with Russia, "which has just thrown the U.S.A. election to him," she wrote in the emails obtained by The Times.

[snip]

Mr. Obama, she wrote, was trying to "box Trump in diplomatically with Russia," which could limit his options with other countries, including Iran and Syria. "Russia is key that unlocks door," she wrote.

She also wrote that the sanctions over Russian election meddling were intended

to “lure Trump in trap of saying something” in defense of Russia, and were aimed at “discrediting Trump’s victory by saying it was due to Russian interference.”

“If there is a tit-for-tat escalation Trump will have difficulty improving relations with Russia, which has just thrown U.S.A. election to him,” she wrote.

Either because Trump’s incoming Homeland Security advisor was, like Bannon, *also* conducting this discussion on his personal email (Kislyak would make a comment that may reflect knowledge of the email exchange in his next call with Flynn) or because he somehow had access to his Transition email later, Tom Bossert was able to share this very damning exchange with investigators before they obtained the counterparties to it using a warrant.

Between the time of the Kislyak call and the time when Bossert shared those emails with investigators, he would be involved in the alteration of the MemCon recording Trump’s first face-to-face meeting with Russia, in which Trump said he didn’t much care that Russia had interfered in the election.

Tom Bossert has seen firsthand, more than once, how Trump has refused to hold Russia accountable.

Which is very interesting background to this NYT op-ed Bossert wrote, trying to convince his former boss to put the national interest ahead of his own temper tantrum and respond with leadership and cooperation to the SolarWinds hack.

After describing what a dangerous time a Presidential transition is for such a compromise, Bossert lays out the significance of the SolarWinds hack, explaining that the US government has no idea which of its networks Russia has control over.

The magnitude of this ongoing attack is hard to overstate.

The Russians have had access to a considerable number of important and sensitive networks for six to nine months. The Russian S.V.R. will surely have used its access to further exploit and gain administrative control over the networks it considered priority targets. For those targets, the hackers will have long ago moved past their entry point, covered their tracks and gained what experts call “persistent access,” meaning the ability to infiltrate and control networks in a way that is hard to detect or remove.

While the Russians did not have the time to gain complete control over every network they hacked, they most certainly did gain it over hundreds of them. It will take years to know for certain which networks the Russians control and which ones they just occupy.

He then explains that with that access, the Russians could alter data (at Treasury, among other places) or impersonate people, potentially using official credentials to sow disinformation.

The actual and perceived control of so many important networks could easily be used to undermine public and consumer trust in data, written communications and services. In the networks that the Russians control, they have the power to destroy or alter data, and impersonate legitimate people. Domestic and geopolitical tensions could escalate quite easily if they use their access for malign influence and misinformation – both hallmarks of Russian behavior.

Bossert provides some steps the government must

take to respond – including replacing entire networks – and then turns to advising his old boss. He starts with soft-pedaling, the way one has to when advising a President who is a narcissist, suggesting that Trump's threats to veto an NDAA that broad majorities of both parties support because he's mad at Twitter are instead a partisan dispute.

The National Defense Authorization Act, which each year provides the Defense Department and other agencies the authority to perform its work, is caught up in partisan wrangling. Among other important provisions, the act would authorize the Department of Homeland Security to perform network hunting in federal networks. If it wasn't already, it is now a must-sign piece of legislation, and it will not be the last congressional action needed before this is resolved.

Then Bossert gets more direct: Trump has to rebuke the Russians in a way he refused to in December 2016 and refused to do again in May 2017 and refused again in July 2018 in Helsinki (though Bossert had been fired before Helsinki).

While all indicators point to the Russian government, the United States, and ideally its allies, must publicly and formally attribute responsibility for these hacks. If it is Russia, **President Trump must make it clear to Vladimir Putin that these actions are unacceptable.** The U.S. military and intelligence community must be placed on increased alert; all elements of national power must be placed on the table. [my emphasis]

Bossert then gets close to, without actually, describing how Trump could be blamed for this if he doesn't punish Russia.

President Trump is on the verge of leaving behind a federal government, and perhaps a large number of major industries, compromised by the Russian government. He must use whatever leverage he can muster to protect the United States and severely punish the Russians.

And, finally, the guy who got sent out to report back on President Obama four years ago to prepare Flynn for a call that Bossert probably had no way of knowing would undermine sanctions designed to punish Russia for the last attack, tells his former boss, who from start to finish has refused to cooperate with Democrats, that he has to cooperate now.

At this moment, the two teams must find a way to cooperate.

President Trump must get past his grievances about the election and govern for the remainder of his term. This moment requires unity, purpose and discipline. An intrusion so brazen and of this size and scope cannot be tolerated by any sovereign nation.

We are sick, distracted, and now under cyberattack. Leadership is essential.

Tom Bossert is trying to convince his former boss to serve the good of the country when Bossert never managed to do that when he actually was Trump's direct advisor.

He would do better to threaten to make it clear the degree to which Trump has been "colluding" with Russia all along.

Update: Relatedly, Trump's White House tried to gag IC leaders from reporting on how bad this is to Congress.

Rubio's counterpart on the committee, Vice Chair Mark Warner (D-Va.), said the government is "still assessing the

extent of the penetration,” but lamented that “the current president of the United States has not said a word about this.”

Despite the series of briefings, there are signs that the White House was trying to muzzle top officials seeking to fill in lawmakers on what they know.

During a National Security Council meeting on Tuesday night, national security leaders were instructed not to reach out to Capitol Hill for briefings on the massive hack without explicit approval from the White House or ODNI, according to people familiar with the episode.