Two former intelligence chiefs blast Trump over Russia comments

**Washington (CNN)**A pair of former US intelligence chiefs blasted President Donald Trump Sunday after he attacked them a day earlier while discussing his recent conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper said Sunday on CNN"s "State of the Union" that Trump's downplaying of the threat posed by Russia's meddling in last year's election was dangerous to US national security and allows countries like Russia and China to "play" the President. Former CIA Director John Brennan said Trump is allowing Putin to get away with Russia's efforts to disrupt the presidential election.

Speaking alongside Brennan, Clapper said: "The threat posed by Russia, as John just said, is manifest and obvious. To try to paint it in any other way is, I think, astounding, and in fact, poses a peril to this country."

Clapper, a CNN analyst, was responding to Trump's mixed comments about alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election.

### **'Giving Putin a pass'**

Brennan said Trump was in effect "giving Putin a pass," which invited other countries to seek to sway Trump.

Clapper concurred, saying, "I do think both the Chinese and the Russians think they can play him."

Brennan said Putin's apparent success with Trump was due to his use of flattery and Brennan's suspicion that Trump "for whatever reason" might be "intimidated" by Putin.

"It's either naiveté, ignorance or fear in terms of what Mr. Trump is doing vis-a-vis the Russians," Brennan said.

### **President clarifies his Saturday statement on believing Putin**

Trump, while speaking Sunday at a news conference in Hanoi, sought to clarify remarks he made a day earlier that suggested Russian President Vladimir Putin was being sincere in his denials that Moscow engaged in election meddling.

The President stressed he was not accepting Putin's denials at face value, instead saying he merely believed Putin was being genuine.

"I believe that he feels that he and Russia did not meddle in the election," Trump said. "As to whether I believe it or not, I am with our agencies, especially as currently constituted with the leadership."

But he again stopped short of stating explicitly that Russia was behind the interference in the 2016 presidential election, which US intelligence has determined [was conducted to help Trump.](http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/11/politics/mike-pompeo-cia-donald-trump-white-house-russia-meddling/index.html)

Trump on Saturday also [dismissed](http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/11/politics/president-donald-trump-vladimir-putin-election-meddling/index.html) former officials like Clapper, Brennan and former FBI Director James Comey as "political hacks."

The intelligence community [released](http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/06/politics/intelligence-report-putin-election/index.html) an unclassified version of its assessment in January, saying Putin ordered the election meddling to hurt Hillary Clinton's candidacy and bolster Trump's successful bid. Putin denies the accusations, and Trump has wavered publicly on his own stance.

Brennan said he considered Trump's attack on them as an attempt to undermine the credibility of that intelligence community report, which the former CIA director noted was written by intelligence and law enforcement officers, not himself, Clapper or Comey.

"He was referring to us as political hacks because he was trying to delegitimize the intelligence community assessment," Brennan said.

The Obama-era CIA chief added that he took the criticism from Trump with pride.

"Considering the source of the criticism, I consider that criticism a badge of honor," Brennan said.

Asked about his own knowledge of any potential collusion between Trump's associates and Russia, Brennan demurred, saying he had spoken with the congressional investigators, and went on later in the interview to praise former FBI Director Robert Mueller, who is leading the special counsel investigation.

Clapper said that although he had "no direct evidence of collusion" while still on the job, he did not know about former Trump foreign policy adviser George Papadopoulos' activities, which were [revealed](http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/30/politics/paul-manafort-russia-investigation-surrender/index.html) last month in unsealed court documents. Papadopoulos pleaded guilty last month to making a false statement to the FBI after he lied about his interactions with a foreign contact close to the Russian government.

Since leaving government, Clapper said more information had come out that raises at least "circumstantial questions" about potential connections between Trump's associates and Russia