

# The Ambassadorial Series

A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews



Ambassadorial Series

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES  
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## Introduction

At a time when dialogue between American and Russian diplomats is reduced to a bare minimum and when empathy and civility fall short of diplomacy between major powers, we are pleased to introduce the Ambassadorial Series. It is a compilation of conversations with eight outstanding American diplomats who served at various points of time as U.S. ambassadors to the Soviet Union and, after its dissolution, to the Russian Federation.

The Series provides nuanced analyses of crucial aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship, such as the transition from the Soviet Union to contemporary Russia and the evolution of Putin's presidency. It does so through the personal reflections of the ambassadors. As Ambassador Alexander Vershbow observes, "[t]he Ambassadorial Series is a reminder that U.S. relations with Putin's Russia began on a hopeful note, before falling victim to the values gap." At its heart, this project is conceived as a service to scholars and students of American diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia. The interviews, collected here as transcripts, form a unique resource for those who want to better understand the evolving relationship between the two countries.

We would like to express gratitude to our colleagues who collaborated on this project and to the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies staff members who supported it. Jill Dougherty is the face and voice of this project – bringing expertise, professionalism, and experience to the Series. Floyd Yarmuth at Rockhouse is a tireless partner – guiding the ambassadors through laptop adjustments and lighting tweaks – all over a Zoom call. Robert Legvold endowed our project with deep knowledge and provided the framework for the interview questions. Jarlath McGuckin provided expert support and good humor throughout the enterprise and kept us all on track while sourcing photographs and providing the voiceover for the podcast credits. We would like to thank Alina Kazakovtceva for her help with the project's implementation. Mollie Messick edited the transcripts for accuracy and punctuation and formatted them into this e-book. David Gibson and our colleagues at Middlebury College provided guidance and support on design and branding, as well as promotional assistance for the launch. Thank you to our new friends at Bluecadet (Kelly, Alyssa, Siji, and Andy) for their creativity and professionalism. Most of all, we would like to thank the former U.S. ambassadors to Russia and the Soviet Union who took part in this project for their time and their service to the United States: Jack F. Matlock, Thomas R. Pickering, James F. Collins, Alexander Vershbow, John Beyrle, Michael McFaul, John F. Tefft, and Jon Huntsman, Jr.

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The Ambassadorial Series is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Vartan Gregorian – our lodestar in bringing this project to fruition.

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## Ambassador Jack F. Matlock (1987-1991)

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*I sent my first message that the Soviet Union might break up in July 1990, 18 months before it happened. I didn't predict it then precisely. But I said it was possible, which I think came as a very great surprise to Washington.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador Jack Matlock, thank you very much for talking with us. It's a real honor, and a personal pleasure because we've seen each other over the years. I think we kind of met or got to know each other way back in the '70s, and certainly in the '80s. So, I'm eager to hear what you have to say.

*Ambassador Matlock*

Thank you very much for the opportunity.

*Jill Dougherty*

Thank you. You were the ambassador to the USSR from 1987 to 1991. You were also the ambassador to Czechoslovakia. And you go way back with Russia. I was thinking of that period, from 1981 to 1991, and all of the momentous events of that period. You saw it from the viewpoint of several different jobs. You were a Foreign Service Officer, then you were the senior White House official dealing with Russia. And then finally, as the ambassador. Is there any one particular event that was extremely important and made a very big impression upon you?

*Ambassador Matlock*

You know, looking back at that period, I think that the most important thing I would take from it is that toward the end of the 1980s, right through the end of 1991, the world went through three almost seismically important geopolitical events. When I say seismically important, I would compare them to the clash of continents and their geopolitical effect. The first of these was the end of the Cold War, which totally changed the nature of international relations, not just in Europe but the world over.

The second was the fact that the Communist Party lost control of the Soviet Union. And the third was the Soviet Union itself collapsed. Now, the thing about these three things is that almost no one expected them to happen at that particular time. They came almost as a surprise, and looking back, people tend to conflate the three, as if it was all one big event. You even have TV shows ending the Cold War when the Soviet Union collapsed. That is incorrect because these three events, though they did have interconnections, had different causes.

The end of the Cold War occurred because of negotiation between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union, and it ended on terms that benefited everybody. So, if there was a winner, it was everybody. The change of leadership in the Soviet Union, that is, the loss of control of the country by the Communist Party was something that happened internally and was led by the leader of the Communist Party – something nobody would have predicted – Mikhail Gorbachev. And it was not forced by the West. In fact, if the Cold War had continued, it could not have happened.

Then the third, the breakup of the Soviet Union, was something that happened against the will of the United States. It was certainly not a victory in the Cold War, but it was because of internal pressures pushing the country apart. These pressures would not have done so if the Cold War had continued, and the arms race, because that acted like the walls of the pressure cooker, keeping the pressure there, keeping the pressure under control. So those three things, and the fact that they've been misinterpreted by many people since then, are, I would say, the main conclusion I would draw from my experience in those years.

*Jill Dougherty*

Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned, with the fall of the Soviet Union, that it was against the will of the United States, if I understood correctly.

*Ambassador Matlock*

That is correct.

*Jill Dougherty*

Because, if you look at the narrative today, many people say, "Well, we wanted them to collapse. We forced them to collapse." So, you don't agree with that at all?

*Ambassador Matlock*

Well, obviously there were people that wanted them to collapse. I'm not saying that everybody in our country wanted to preserve the Soviet Union, but certainly, President Bush and Secretary of State Baker, the people at the top, were trying to help Gorbachev, if we could, keep the twelve republics of the Soviet Union – all except the three Baltic countries – in a voluntary federation. And actually, Bush made a speech in Kyiv, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1991, when he actually recommended that the Ukrainians, and implicitly the other non-Russian republics, adhere to Gorbachev's democratic federal system that he was operating. We would have preferred that. Obviously, our influence had little to do with it.

But the point is, this was not a victory for the West. We didn't perceive that at the time. And we certainly didn't cause it. In fact, the fact that the Cold War was over, the arms race was over, that we were actually pursuing the same ends internationally, meant that we would have preferred to deal with a country – once the three Baltic states were free, which we never recognized they were legally a part of the Soviet Union – we would have been very happy to deal with an increasingly democratic association of the twelve republics.

*Jill Dougherty*

Actually, you're making a wonderful point about the end of the Soviet Union. I'm thinking back to that period, and there was grave concern in the United States that Russia would literally collapse. That there would be loose nukes, that you would have civil war and destitution. That was a very difficult period, although there's a certain triumphalism now about it, but at that period, that was pretty frightening.

*Ambassador Matlock*

You're absolutely correct that many people have drawn that conclusion and have insisted on treating Russia as if it were a defeated nation and also exaggerating the extent of our power. Well, of course, we are a superpower in terms of our power to destroy. We can destroy the world if we so choose; I don't know why we would choose to do so. But nuclear weapons and the power of destruction do not give you the power to change other people's societies, to guarantee or help others establish a particular form of government. And, as a matter of fact, even during the Cold War, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was very successful at that. So, the whole idea that, somehow, we came out not only stronger than anybody else - we did. But the nature of that strength was grossly exaggerated.

*Jill Dougherty*

You know, I'd like to turn to Mr. Gorbachev, because he is such a, I guess, misunderstood in his own country, perhaps. But he's such an important figure in Russian history. And you were in Moscow as the ambassador for most of his time in power. So, I wanted to ask you, just in terms of your evaluation of him, let's say, as a leader, and then also as a man.

*Ambassador Matlock*

He was a true reformer in that he really tried to move his country in a more democratic direction. Now, when he first became General Secretary, he thought he could do so with the support of the Communist Party. But, as he began to introduce reforms, he found that the whole party apparatus was opposing him. So, he chose, in effect, to take them, step by step, out of power, and this was something that nobody would have predicted. Many would say, "Why in the world would the General Secretary of the Communist Party try to destroy the Party?"

Well, he didn't actually try to destroy the Party, but he did try to take it out - successfully over time - take it out of exclusive power in the country. That, of course, was a very idealistic thing to try to do. And he obviously was not successful eventually in achieving the ultimate end, which would have been, I would say, a democratizing, voluntary federation of the Soviet Republics. But the fact is that it was not, in a sense, his fault. His hostility between him and Yeltsin, and then Boris Yeltsin, once he was elected President of the Russian Federation, conspired with the others, actually, to destroy the Soviet Union. So, the irony is that the elected leader of Russia was really the key figure in destroying the Soviet Union. Something else that many people don't quite understand.

*Jill Dougherty*

And then as a man. You met him, obviously, many times. You observed him. What kind of a man was he? Is he? He still is, but when you saw him.

*Ambassador Matlock*

Well, obviously he, like any other human being, he had a number of characteristics. Some of them, one could say, were contradictory. I think if we really look at ourselves objectively, we'll find we all have certain contradictions. I think he became a true believer in liberating his country from the totalitarian control of the Communist Party leader. At the same time, I think, he also wanted to improve the economy. I think he never really understood a market economy very well. And he was oftentimes hesitant in taking some of the big steps that were necessary in that area.

He did also tend to trust some of the people who were with him at the time, but then broke with him, more than he should have. After all, it was his KGB chief, who had been his ally earlier and who had been named by Gorbachev, who led the conspiracy against him. And to that Gorbachev seemed to be relatively blind until it happened. But basically, I would say he was an idealist who genuinely believed in what I would call social democracy of the, you might say, the Scandinavian type and who changed his views on many things under the pressure of events. And he took enormous chances and, you might say, was only partially successful.

But his real success, I think, was liberating his country from the control of the Communist Party. And by the way, in interviewing him after all of this happened for my books, he has said that that is the proudest thing, that he destroyed the totalitarian system. Well, the fact that the Russians haven't been able to create an ideal democracy since then, that's really up to them because outsiders, or even Gorbachev, can't do it for them.

But I do see him as a liberator, and I think that though most Russians don't, at this point, see him because what happened after he left was so painful for them, the near anarchy, and so on, I do think that he does not deserve the reputation as a failure, and I would hope that, in time, Russian historians would also see him more as a liberator. After all, you might say, Moses led his people out of bondage, but he doesn't get blamed because he didn't reach the Promised Land, and I have much the same attitude for Gorbachev.

*Jill Dougherty*

You know, as you were talking about him, I was thinking of President Putin. And I know you have observed him as well, up close. And I'm just thinking, if Gorbachev seems, in your telling, and I totally agree with that, as kind of a man of the future who could take himself out of his circumstance and see something to which he aspired, President Putin, and I think there are many people who feel this, is still kind of locked into his Soviet-era thinking.

I mean, there was a period early in Putin's presidency where he did some economic reform, and it felt as if he were going to do something differently, but over the past decade or so,

we've just seen kind of stagnation into that old thinking. Is that correct? Do you agree with that? And could you compare the two men?

*Ambassador Matlock*

I guess that would be, I think, a difficult question. I think to be fair to Putin, I would say he started out being – hoping to be – an ally of the United States. He was the first to call President Bush after 9/11, he offered full cooperation in our invasion of Afghanistan, including overflights, intelligence, and so on.

What did we do in exchange? We withdrew from some of our most basic agreements with Russia. We kept expanding NATO, something that the first President Bush had promised Gorbachev we would not do if he allowed the unification of Germany and Germany to stay in NATO. Step by step we pulled out of even our most basic agreements and then, increasingly, are surrounding Russia, right up to their borders, right up to beyond their borders of the former Soviet Union, with a military alliance which they are not in.

Now, no leader of Russia, no leader of any other country could maintain a cooperative relationship and also a full democracy in their country under conditions of that sort. So that the problem in Russia, and it is a strong one, was without a certain amount of strong leadership, you get something close to anarchy, which they had in the '90s. And Putin pulled them out of that. They were bankrupt, and now Putin built up a sufficient fund, a foreign currency that they weathered the world recession relatively well. And yet, every time, increasingly, their policies differed from ours, we would try to intervene using our power in a way that put them down. And then we eventually got into a virtual demonization of him.

I would simply remind people, I'm not his advocate; he's done a lot of things that I think are damaging to Russia. But after all, the Russian people are entitled to choose their leadership, and though his popularity may not be quite what it used to be, it is still greater in Russia than any of our recent presidents have been in the United States. And I would suggest that, before we condemn him too much, we think about that.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, that's a good point. If I could return just for a moment to the fall of the Soviet Union because you left, if I'm correct, I think you left the Soviet Union just a few months before that actually happened. And I guess the question for everyone, but especially for you: did you see that coming? Did you have an inkling that anything like that was going to happen?

*Ambassador Matlock*

That is, the breakup of the Soviet Union? I didn't. You know, I sent my first message that the Soviet Union might break up in July 1990, 18 months before it happened. I didn't predict it then precisely. But I said it was possible, which I think came as a very great surprise to Washington. And I know later, now that these things have been declassified, I was told President Bush asked for an evaluation from the NSC. And the NSC evaluation said that, well, the embassy had been unnecessarily alarmist. But the thing is, what I saw in 1990 was the



development in the Russian Republic of a feeling that Russia would be better off independent of the other republics. And they would like to establish something like the EU instead of the Soviet Union. In fact, they would use that.

And I said, if the most progressive Russians no longer want to preserve the union, it's not going to be preserved because it was very clear that predominant opinion in many of the other republics wanted to leave the Soviet Union, wanted to leave the system. So, we were watching that. And, of course, one of the lessons for the United States, I thought, would be to speed up our arms reduction negotiations and create, as much as we could of, I'd say, a more peaceful world while Gorbachev could still deliver on these major agreements.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

So, if you were "unnecessarily alarmist" at that period, when it finally happened, did the Bush administration really grapple... Did they understand what was happening? It was very chaotic at the time.

#### *Ambassador Matlock*

Well, you know, they certainly understood that Gorbachev was under a lot of pressure, and there was fear that he would be removed. I think there was the assumption that if there was a coup against him, it would succeed. Now actually, my own opinion was - and I was, already had left Moscow, had retired from the Foreign Service, then the attempted coup occurred. But I said on television that first day that I thought it would not succeed, because I knew everybody involved, and I said, these people are not prepared for civil war, and therefore, I don't think this is going to be successful. Of course, two days later it was clear that it was not successful.

But it was successful in so reducing Gorbachev's authority and that of the Soviet Union that it allowed Yeltsin and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine to meet, and in effect simply dissolve the Soviet Union. So, now, another thing that I think we did understand, because I had been given a warning that there was a conspiracy developing against Gorbachev, I was given the warning to convey it to Yeltsin who was then in Washington. And then I was asked to warn Gorbachev. And I tried to do so without naming the people involved. He didn't take it seriously. But it turned out that the people we had identified a month before the coup were, in fact, the leaders of the coup.

An irony there, however, is that when we made that report, President Bush talked to Gorbachev on a telephone line that was maintained by the KGB and actually named my source that was the mayor of Moscow. And later, the mayor of Moscow told me that he thought that that leak was one of the reasons that full coup failed. Because Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB who was organizing it, suddenly realized he had a leak. And he had to stop planning. And, of course, the fact that it was so poorly planned - many of the people who were expected to do certain things, like arrest Yeltsin, simply refused to do it when the coup came.

So, you know, later the mayor of Moscow told me, maybe it's a good thing the leak occurred because it may have been the flaw that prevented the coup from taking place. So, basically, I would say, basically, we did understand what was going on. I think if there was any difference, it was the assumption, I believe, on most of the Bush administration, and it would not be an unreasonable assumption, was that if there was a coup, it would succeed in replacing Gorbachev and many of the reforms would stop.

My own feeling was that, at that point, it was unlikely to succeed because the country had changed to the point that they would rise up, and that people like the coup planners were not prepared to maintain a civil war. They were not the sort of people that the Bolsheviks were when Lenin and Stalin and their associates took control of Russia.

### *Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador Matlock, let me ask you a question that troubles me sometimes. Because right now, relations with Russia are very bad; there's no question. But it does raise the issue of, can we ever have normal relations with Russia? There's always something different. It's not Belgium. It is a very different country. And I think some people would hope someday that the United States and Russia could simply have a relationship as two regular countries, and not freighted with all of this history, and sometimes animosity. But what do you say to that? Is there a way that we can have stable, normal relations?

### *Ambassador Matlock*

I - absolutely. I think that many of the problems today are not only exaggerated, but quite distorted. Basically, U.S. interests and Russian interests are much more convergent than they are different. I mean, if we look at the real dangers facing us, well, first of all, we've got this pandemic. This is something we're all in together, this is not... We're either going to solve it as human beings, or we're going to have the problem and probably the COVID-19 problem is not the last of these. So, this is something that, clearly, it's in our interest to cooperate because, until you control it everywhere, it's not controlled.

Second, of course, nuclear weapons. If they are ever used, even partially of the ones now, it is difficult to see how mankind is going to survive. It is certainly in our mutual interest to make sure they're not used. And then global warming, climate change. These are problems that obviously affect us all. And these are much bigger problems than where you draw the line between Russia and Ukraine. I mean, that has never had any relevance to American security, and it shouldn't today. And, I think, if we understand that we do not have a formula that fits everybody. We say we must spread democracy, well, I like democracy, too. I think we should have it, but I know that people can only create democracy for themselves; outsiders can't do it.

And one thing, you don't understand another society enough. But the whole idea that if we don't like something Russia does, we have to sanction them, or we have to make them pay a price for something they're doing which they consider important in their national interest, that is not going to work. It's not going to work with Russia, it's not going to work with China or

anywhere else in the world. And what worries me today is that we seem to be reverting to the sort of competition as to who is going to control what part of the world that brought us to world wars in the 20th century. We know how they ended. We should understand that if we get into that frame of thought, all of us are going to lose.

The point is that if we solve the big problems – I've named some of them, others are the collapse of states; the migration of people, which is going to continue because of global warming and other environmental changes; failed states – all of these things are problems for all of us. And to start trying to, in effect, dictate what kind of government other people have, I think, is a losing strategy. And I do think, although I don't, by any means, approve of everything Russia has done. However, I do find that current hostility is in reaction to what they consider an American policy of treating them as losers, of humiliating them, of, in effect, demonizing their leaders. And we're doing this talking about corruption, which, of course, is there, while at the same time ignoring our own, and we've already seen from the latest election how divided we are, and how fragile our own democracy is.

So, you know, I really think we have to be a little more, I would say, objective about our own behavior, and certainly in, I believe, our own interest, we need to cooperate not just with Russia, but also to have a cooperative relationship with China. It will have competitive aspects, as any relationship will. But these should be kept peaceful, and we should begin to diminish our attempt, in effect, to police the world, or to transform it into the image we inaccurately have of ourselves.

*Jill Dougherty*

I have just a couple of more questions. Do you have advice for future ambassadors to Russia?

*Ambassador Matlock*

I have to say that an ambassador can do very little to improve a relationship unless the policy of his country allows him to, or her. The fact is, ambassadors represent their governments, their presidents, their secretaries of state – they cannot. Of course, they can advise, and I was very lucky that I had a president and a secretary of state that consulted me, listened to me. We had a wonderful relationship, but if the policies of your country are one that is trying to dominate or deny the country things that they feel are important to them, there's not much an ambassador can do to improve that. Given the fact that, if the ambassador is lucky enough to have a president and secretary of state who are, let's say, supporting good relations or resolution of problems with the country, obviously, the ambassador can do a lot and it helps a great deal.

Although it is not an absolute prerequisite, if you know the language of the country, if you understand its history, then you might say the psychology of many of the people, if you have at least the personal skills that you can become personal friends of the leaders, that they will confide in you, that also requires discretion. There were some things that I would be told by Soviet leaders that I wouldn't put in a telegram, because I knew it might leak. But I would do a

handwritten letter to the secretary of state and ask him to share it only with the president and the national security advisor.

So, I would say there are a lot of things, but an ambassador is able to, I think, much better able to interpret for his own government what is going into another country if the ambassador knows the people there. If you know them in sufficient depth that you can socialize with them and deal with them in their own language, you learn a lot more. So, I would say that preparation, you know, for successful diplomacy certainly means that you need to develop the skills that a diplomat, any diplomat needs anywhere. But if you add to that some in-depth knowledge of the country where you are accredited, and if you're able to go back there enough that you make actual friends, then, I think, that will certainly enhance the policy of any government.

### *Jill Dougherty*

Okay. And that leads me to the very last question. You've been very generous with your time. But it's a perfect introduction to what I wanted to ask, which is, if anybody knows Russia, and if anybody has a long history of being deeply interested in that country, it is you, because you started in college. Even before, perhaps even before, but I know you studied Russia. You've taught the Russian language. Throughout your career, you have really looked at that country very deeply and I'm sure that you have very strong feelings about it.

So, asking you to pull that together with your many years of experience, is there some concept, or idea, or understanding of Russia that you have? That could help us try to understand Russia in these difficult times? Is there a truth of Russia that you understand?

### *Ambassador Matlock*

Well, I think you have to, first of all, know something about their culture and their historical experience, and you have to have at least enough empathy to understand how they look at things. After all, this is a country that has been repeatedly invaded and occupied by outsiders. We haven't been, you know. We've been in wars, but not even the war of 1812 were we really occupied by the British. So, we have never experienced a neighbor invading us and occupying our territory for an extended period of time.

That, undoubtedly, leads to a different psychology into a number of things. And I'm naming just one of many characteristics, but also, I'd say Russia, like every other country, is full of contradictions. George Kennan once said that anytime you're confronted with two contradictory statements about Russia, the safest assumption is that both are true. But, you know, you can sort of laugh at that, but if you think about it, doesn't the same apply to us? If we're really being objective! So, the fact is that, I think, the basic thing in dealing with Russians or anybody else is not to forget that we're all human beings. Nations interacting with each other are not like billiard balls clashing, but they are human beings interacting, and common-sense skills in dealing with human beings, or the application of the classical Golden Rule, offer sometimes the best advice, I think, for a successful diplomacy.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, Ambassador Jack Matlock, thank you very, very much.

*Ambassador Matlock*

Thank you very much for the opportunity.

## Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering (1993-1996)

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*What I saw on that afternoon, perhaps mid-afternoon, was first a sea of aluminum shields moving towards the American Embassy and toward the Russian White House, which are opposite each other on the street, followed by the crowd from the front of the Foreign Ministry. So, I called the Embassy Marines and told them to get to the security officer and have the people who were residing in the embassy perimeter in the townhouses to go to our underground safe haven underneath the center of the embassy residence area because I was not sure in fact that we would not have firing and indeed other difficulties in that kind of confrontation as this crowd, which was headed in that direction, met the NKVD or the then KGB paramilitary force surrounding the White House.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador Thomas Pickering, you know, I think it was *Time Magazine* that called you the "Five-Star General of the Diplomatic Corps." That really is true with your enormous career. We're going to talk about Russia today, but, you know, you have served four decades in the Foreign Service for the United States, and I'm very, very interested in your perspective, that long-term perspective, on Russia and the United States. But thank you very much for being with us.

*Ambassador Pickering*

Thank you, Jill, very much for that kind introduction. Even for diplomats, a little bit of hyperbole goes a long way. So, I'm anxious to take your questions and look forward to speaking with you.

*Jill Dougherty*

Okay. Well, let's return to the time that you went to Russia as the ambassador, 1993. And I remember 1993, I wasn't posted yet, but I went there a lot. And there was hunger. There were people standing in lines. Politically, it was a very fraught time. You had the standoff that Yeltsin had with the parliament. You had the siege of the White House; you had more to come near that parliamentary election that apparently really worried the Clinton Administration and their support for shock therapy. So, if you could take me back, what were you thinking as you watched all of that unfold?

*Ambassador Pickering*

I arrived in Russia on May 22nd of 1993. The great news was it was still snowing. But the real news was that there was already engaged a standoff between the Parliament and Yeltsin and, principally, between people in the Parliament who, in one way or another, either wished to

replace Yeltsin or sought, in somehow, to maneuver him. They were relatively, in what were the political terms of the day, more hardline, more Communists, less reform-minded, less pro-demise-of-Communism.

Many of them were, in effect, in the Russian White House, which was, at that period of time, the Office of the Prime Minister, and some were high-up officials in the Russian hierarchy. What I learned when I arrived and what I saw afterward right through the October 3rd contention and deep face-off at the White House was a pretty constant effort of the Parliament elected essentially under Communism, in which there were two candidates, an unusual approach by the Communists, for each position. But each one of them was in one way or another a part of the Party, and many of them held their links with the Party.

They made, by someone's count, over 300 changes in the Constitution seeking, in one way or another, to promote themselves and to limit Yeltsin's powers. This brought about both contention verbally and politically, and really, that went on for quite a bit of time. I can recall that early in September, Andrey Kozyrev, the Foreign Minister, maybe later in September, called in me, together with my British, French, and German colleagues, and said that Yeltsin has now decided to prorogue the Parliament, in fact, to end them, and that he will, in return, carry out an election in January of 1994 for a new Parliament, and he intends to write a new Constitution. He can no longer operate in a situation in which the contention of powers is so great, the difficulties of rule are so hard, and the differences so vast.

And we, obviously, said there are dangers in dealing with the Parliament that way. We understand what he's going through, we will report back to our governments, and we think it is important that, if he does do away with the Parliament, he needs to have a free and fair election to carry it forward. So, this was an extremely interesting time, and it began a series of active events which began with the surrounding of the then-parliament building, the Russian White House, by the troops of the NKVD, their paramilitary organization, and that lasted until roughly October 3rd.

Those events were well known, and perhaps you'd like to discuss them. Throughout this time period, I was thinking what are the alternatives? The return to a communist rule in Russia and perhaps the effort to reconstruct the Soviet Union around a period in which, beginning in December of 1991, the constituent republics had separated, become independent states, were recognized, had become members of the United Nations, would be a throwback to reversion and recreation of a difficult situation, which actually had failed in August of 1990 [1991], when then-President Gorbachev in the Crimea had a short right-wing revolt against him, and it failed.

The alternative was to stay with Yeltsin. Yeltsin, in many ways, represented, at least, a reform element, not someone whose governance role was either steady, predictable, or necessarily conducive to where we thought Russia should go, but we thought Russia should go toward democracy, toward economic independence, toward relationships with the world community, and toward a different situation than the contention of the Cold War. These were all the ideas that, I think, were passing through our minds. There was no question at all, that some at least,

including some in my embassy, had concerns that the president was carrying out a coup against the parliament, quite rightly so, and that, therefore, he was in fact, disobeying the Constitution and the best of democratic imperatives.

If that were indeed the case, and there hadn't been all the changes to the Constitution introduced by essentially the remnants of the Communist Party, I would have had more sympathy with their points of view. But their points of view were expressed and sent to the State Department, at their request, in a dissent channel message. I offered, in fact, to collaborate with them in a message where we could both state our views and put those before the broader republic in the department. As far as I know, whatever reply they received from the dissent channel came after the confrontation at the White House, which was in many ways, the final physical manifestation of the contention between Yeltsin and his parliament.

*Jill Dougherty*

I'm thinking of you, at that moment, you were physically at the embassy, I presume?

*Ambassador Pickering*

Yes. The events of October 3rd were interesting because I had had a new grandson arrive, and my wife had left for the United States, I think, on Thursday or Friday, for the birth of that child and so, I was alone. It was a Sunday. I was sitting in my study on the second floor of Spaso House but looking down a street that, in fact, gave me a way of seeing the Garden Ring, the second major ring outside the Kremlin around the city of Moscow, on which the embassy is located. The embassy was to my right and the Foreign Ministry to my left. The Foreign Ministry had had a series of demonstrations for a week or two, in part in support of the White House, the non-Yeltsin crowd.

What I saw on that afternoon, perhaps mid-afternoon, was first a sea of aluminum shields moving towards the American Embassy and toward the Russian White House, which are opposite each other on the street, followed by the crowd from the front of the Foreign Ministry. So, I called the Embassy Marines and told them to get to the security officer and have the people who were residing in the embassy perimeter in the townhouses to go to our underground safe haven underneath the center of the embassy residence area because I was not sure in fact that we would not have firing and indeed other difficulties in that kind of confrontation, as this crowd, which was headed in that direction, met the NKVD or the then-KGB paramilitary force surrounding the White House.

Indeed, that's what happened next; there was shooting. We found, later, a number of our buildings had been penetrated by shots coming from across the street firing at the crowd coming up towards the White House by the people guarding the perimeter. They broke through the perimeter. People in the White House building were armed. They went next door and took control of a multi-story building, the mayor's office. In the meantime, one of the Russian uniformed armed security guards outside the embassy was shot. Our people at the embassy arranged to have him transferred to medical aid.



When it calmed, the next step was that this crowd that attacked those two buildings loaded themselves into the military trucks they had captured from the KGB paramilitary elements and headed to Ostankino in the north part of Moscow, the major television transmitter and the control for Russian national television. After they left, I was in touch by phone and started watching on CNN these developments, and then resolved to go to the embassy, and so I walked through back streets and around back corners and underneath the Garden Ring and came into the embassy, and then spent the rest of my time in an office in the basement of the embassy, which I had been using, and talking to the people, calming our embassy people and seeking which direction in which we and they might go to assure their shelter and safety, which was my primary responsibility.

We were in touch with Washington. Obviously, they were watching on television. It was interesting as I didn't know until after that it was the same week as Blackhawk Down in Somalia. So, we were not the only crisis Washington was dealing with at that moment.

*Jill Dougherty*

Extraordinarily dramatic and also volatile situation. In that situation, how did you even assess what was going on? I mean, I know you mentioned you were watching CNN's broadcast. Then how did you advise Washington? What did you tell Washington?

*Ambassador Pickering*

First, I was extremely conscious of the fact that we were, in a way, locked in. But I had a number of embassy officers in the political and economic sections who resided outside the embassy compound and who were able to set up a string of reporting arrangements to us by telephone, as well as we were hearing from other foreign embassies who were not, in one way or another, caught up in this ring. At the time, the crowd had left the Russian White House and the defending forces had dispersed. So, it was open, but it was dangerous. There were, at least we believed, to have received sniper shots from tall buildings on the Russian Arbat to the east of the embassy and a little bit south of it but overlooking my residence. So, I didn't want people in the embassy moving into that area in order to do reporting.

So, we depended upon the hard work and the presence and the vigilance of the people who resided outside. They began to provide us additional reporting, and I had an opportunity for a secure call with Strobe Talbott, who was watching things very, very quickly. Early on, Strobe's principal question to me was, "What should be our posture?" and I said, "We have no alternative. The alternative to President Yeltsin is so much worse that I don't believe we can do anything but reinforce and stick with him and do so in whatever way you at the Washington end are seeing and hearing this, but we'll keep you up to date and informed in terms of what we are doing." That was the situation as the evening progressed.

What happened at the television station was an effort to use the military trucks to break through the front doors of the facility at the bottom of the television tower where the control arrangements were managed and that was defended by Russian police and military. There was a crowd in the square outside; there was an American photographer working for the *New*

*York Times*, who was wounded at the time. He was, in some ways, covered by people around him who were seeking to avoid the shooting that they had gotten caught in, and with their help, he was transferred to the Kremlin Clinic for treatment. They were very successful in treating him there, but it was the first American I knew of who was caught up in the shooting. We had others later to follow, and we were, at the same time, wondering about whether we should attempt to evacuate our people or not.

Once it became clear there was so much shooting at Ostankino, our access to the major airport north of Moscow was blocked. I had no interest in trying to find buses and putting several hundred people, including children, on buses and so told my team that they would have to bed down in a gymnasium that we had which was below ground and stay there, and we would do everything we could to secure their safety and to defend the compound and the people in it. There was never any attempt to take our compound and never any attempt of people to break in.

But at various times, including the next day, we were in the line of fire of the continued shooting, and so overnight, we had an approach from the White House people, the rebels, who wanted our help in contacting the government. We did what we could to do that without obviously taking any sides. In the arrangement, we were talking to the government, but they were, put it this way, extremely preoccupied with what they were going to do, and they were not interested in advertising what they might do for obvious security reasons. So, we knew very little until the early morning about what the reaction might be. If you'd like, I would go ahead and continue to describe the next day.

*Jill Dougherty*

Please do.

*Ambassador Pickering*

The next day I woke up after having slept on the floor in an office in the basement of the new embassy building. I woke up to the sound of armored personnel carriers coming down a narrow alley where the main entrance to the new embassy was located, and then watched on television as they deployed on a plaza in front of the Russian White House. We saw armed soldiers getting out of the armored personnel carriers and going into the front door of the Russian White House.

In the meantime, later, perhaps an hour or two, we observed on Russian and U.S. television, CNN, the approach of tanks from the direction of west of Moscow on the main Boulevard, Kutuzovsky Prospekt. CNN had a view from the fourth floor of a building that overlooked them. Two of the tanks were seen to be loaded with what appeared to be ammunition from trucks, and then they moved slowly onto a bridge over the Moscow River, where they had a clear shot at the Russian White House.

They aimed their turrets, and we could feel the ground shake with the shots that they put into the Russian White House. It appears as if they fired training ammunition of some type

because there were no detonations of shells. Although the shells penetrated into the building and apparently lit fires, the external damage to the building was not large, as one might have expected with explosive rounds, but they did this for some time, clearly, in order to drive the defenders of the White House out of it, practically, possibly because the invading troops were having trouble getting that done themselves. We later read in the newspaper that two or three hundred people were there; they were armed. Many of them took refuge in the basement and got access to an extensive tunnel system that exists under Moscow that, for one reason or another, can be used to move from place to place underground. So, some were killed, and some were wounded. I don't know that we ever had an exact toll.

But the building was recovered and the fires that were lit burned out by the afternoon or so, but it was a mess. We were, of course, across the street. At one time on that morning - it was a Monday - I had a need to get more people reporting to us from outside. Two or three, one of whom was Masha Yovanovitch, accompanied me in my armored Cadillac, such as it was, out of the embassy and over to the embassy residence. We had a portico so we could hide under that to escape any sniper fire, and they used my residence as a kind of base to organize continued reporting of what was going on.

During the time the tanks were firing, we saw on television large numbers, thousands of Russians on the streets and, indeed, some on the bridge, even as the tanks were firing at the building, watching what was going on. I had a sense in that whole process that Yeltsin was determined to retake the White House to assert his authority and by the end of the day, that, without question, is what happened. I gave interviews at the request of the journalist community off and on during that day. Some were available to move to places around the city where they wanted to do the interviews on television, and some were done on telephone, and so on. We stayed in regular touch with Washington as the events proceeded, and, by Monday, Washington had made statements in support of Yeltsin and what was going on at the Russian White House. The termination of that was pretty clearly, by Tuesday morning, Yeltsin fully in control of Moscow.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

An amazing story. And, you know, it raises in my mind this conundrum about Yeltsin, which is, he was depicted by many people, at least in the West, as a Democrat and fighting against the Communists, but you are really talking about the devil's dilemma of Yeltsin, that he did some things that could be construed, and some of your own people said that, as very undemocratic. I mean, standing back and looking at him, with this separation from that period, how do you define him in your own mind? What was he? Was he a bridge from one to the other or what, exactly?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

I think in historical terms, he was obviously a transition. At the time, we looked at him as someone who had the leadership qualities and the staying power to deal with the issue that, having inherited a system which was not yet fully disintegrated from Communism to something else, he had to contend with the hangover remnants, including the efforts to use

Constitutional amendments to try to take power. So, what we had was a Constitutional-type coup going on in one part of town, while he was trying to resist it in another part of town.

And so, force and violence broke out on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, to which he responded, perhaps, in some ways, prodded by his decision to send Parliament home. But the chain of events, in my view, was clearly not only in Yeltsin's favor, but what we had seen and heard from Yeltsin, despite the fact that he had resolved to dissolve the Parliament, was pretty much along the lines of one preserving a changed regime in power, on the one hand, and resisting what we believed to be the resurgence of people who wanted to reestablish the Soviet Union and Communism on the other side of the issue.

Therefore, it seemed to respond to public sentiment, and in that regard, I think probably it did. So, it was a complex situation and, clearly, one in which you didn't have, overnight in the week following Christmas in 1991, the marching of the Communists out in the public and everybody appearing the next day as full-fledged democrats.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

As I look at your career in Moscow, and then even before that, going back to last year, I believe 1996, in Moscow was kind of the run up to the expansion of NATO, and if you talk about another freighted issue, NATO expansion is it. Russia is still very angry about it. Here in the United States, to this day, there is debate among Russia experts and others as to whether it should have happened or it shouldn't have. Where do you come down on that issue of NATO expansion?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

I think I'll come to that in a minute. But I just wanted to add one more thing on Yeltsin because after the events at the White House on October 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>, we followed closely what he did, and I think a reasonable case can be made, with one exception, that on major decisions involving defense of democracy, he came out on the right side. And the one exception was the war in Chechnya, where seemingly, he was persuaded not only by the fact that the Chechens had adopted guerrilla warfare tactics against the Russian Federation, but that he was declining so much in popularity, that there were clearly arguments, at least the surface evidence is such that, in order to win the next election in 1996, he had to take back, by force, Chechnya.

And so, that led to another conflict, much more messy, much less clear. It was quite fascinating that during a visit, in the midst of the Chechen, early stages of the Chechen conflict, I had the opportunity to host Vice President Gore. I remember riding in the car from the airport. I gave him my advice that there were some who are already talking about the war against Chechnya as Abraham Lincoln's reaction to Fort Sumter. I said the two were not parallel and that in no case would it be, in my view, a good thing to make that comparison while he was in Russia in public. Of course, my advice was worth everything it cost him - it was free - and he felt totally free to ignore it and did.

*Jill Dougherty*

How ironic.

*Ambassador Pickering*

So, let's go to NATO.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yes, please.

*Ambassador Pickering*

I'd been in Russia long enough when this issue came up to be deeply concerned about what the Russian reaction would be. There was no question at all that, particularly those managing Russia in Washington, wished always to hold out the hope to the Russians that, expansion or no, at some point, they in their democratic progression and rejoining of the international community, might wish to become part of NATO.

Much of that was a hope over reality. If there had been anything that had been demonized on a regular basis equally with the United States under the Soviet Union, it had been NATO. NATO was seen as the manifestation of imperialism surrounding the Communist central state, the U.S.S.R., and few, if any, Russians gained any thinkingly useful feeling that NATO was really a reaction from the Red Army's long-standing presence in Eastern Europe, and the use of Red Army occupation in the defeat of Germany, in effect, to fundamentally, and forcefully in cases, communize Eastern Europe. Therefore, NATO was seen as an aggressive alliance, as portrayed by the Soviets in the U.S.S.R.

And we, despite significant efforts to try to look at that question in a different way and to portray it to Russian eyes in a different sense, failed. So, the Russian public reaction and, indeed, the Russian policy reaction were not so far apart at that period of time, despite the fact that the West and the United States was wildly popular in Russia and among many Russians because they thought there was a new opportunity to have freedom, economic prosperity, change, travel, all of the things that had been resisted.

But somehow, NATO presence did not occupy a positive niche in that series of explanations. So, once we began to get wind of the NATO enlargement as a serious policy option, certainly not in any way offset by the notion that we will keep a door open for you, Russia, we wrote back quite serious, quite strong telegrams to Washington, saying that they had to calculate the effect of NATO on the Russian policy. Rarely, if ever, did we get answers, and interestingly enough, Bill Burns, in his wonderful book produced last year, was able to rescue one of these cables from the archives and get it declassified, so it is published for you there to see both the thinking of the embassy and the arguments that we make. Could we have done it differently? And I say, yes, quite probably.

As the NATO question and enlargement expanded, and particularly related to Poland and, indeed, to other states where there were significant ethnic presences in the United States and,

thus, they had some electoral significance, we saw the beginnings of a different idea, but it, in effect, followed NATO enlargement rather than preceding it, and it was a thought attributed to General Shalikashvili, who was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that we should set up a Partnership for Peace and bring in people who might, one day or another, be headed toward NATO, but not necessarily limited, and that it should be what would clearly be a lighter touch in terms of how things would work, but it could follow.

That was something that I thought could have preceded NATO enlargement, been a kind of stepping-stone; not everybody who was in it would necessarily be considered for NATO membership at the same time. But it might have, particularly given the fact that there was Russian presence in it.

And we were beginning, for example, peacekeeping exercises jointly in Russia and outside of Russia, with Russian military forces at that time, to be able perhaps to palliate a little bit of the in-your-face nature of how the Russians viewed the NATO enlargement. That didn't happen. The Russians had their own theory and ideas. They felt that they had been promised, at the time that Germany was reunited, that NATO would not be extended.

They clearly felt they had been promised there would be no stationing of Western nuclear weapons, principally U.S., east of the then-West German/East German borderline as a kind of nuclear joint commitment that, in one way or another, was never a quid pro quo. But it paralleled the significant efforts we made with the Russians, in which they were, in my view, highly cooperative to recover Russian nuclear weapons stations in Belarus, in Ukraine and in Kazakhstan, something that took place and something that gave rise to the joint commitment that we would seek to defend Ukraine as an offset to their giving up the control they had over nuclear weapons, and which was later, obviously, a centerpiece of concern about Mr. Putin's moves in Eastern Ukraine.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

You're bringing up the name Putin, and although you were not the ambassador when President Putin was the president, it almost begs that question because of the, let's say, contrast between Yeltsin and Putin. I'd be interested in your views looking at them as leaders and maybe even as men, because certainly you've followed up to this day of what Putin is doing. Then also, you know, relations between the United States and Russia, this debate over the Great Man Theory, whether it's really the individual in the position of president who changes things or whether it's more systemic. So, I guess I've asked you two questions. But the first one would be Yeltsin vis-a-vis Putin and what kind of leaders they were and are?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

Let me begin a little bit and tell you that I had the opportunity to meet with Putin, perhaps once, because I paid often visits to St. Petersburg. The mayor, Sobchak, of St. Petersburg, had acquired quite a reputation as a constitutional lawyer devoted to Thomas Jefferson, leading the city, at least, into a more democratic way. Vladimir Putin was a deputy mayor and when Anatoly Sobchak was not there to receive me, I was received by Vladimir Putin, at least on one

occasion. I found him on that occasion very laconic, very tight-lipped, willing to listen, not seemingly very overly friendly, but not necessarily contentious or in any way pushing back on what it was that I had to say.

My staff at the consulate general saw Putin through two different visions. One saw him as generally helpful, particularly to the business community, hard-working, deeply engaged and approachable. Others, fewer, saw him as perhaps quite deeply in bed with the business community, maybe to the point, obviously, of realizing gains, defending them and in some ways responsible for some of the problems that the American and foreign business community had in St. Petersburg. I never resolved the differences between them. I was certainly aware of both of them and had analyzed Putin, to the extent that it made any difference at that point, in that context.

So, after that, I had opportunities to meet with him on a number of other occasions, particularly when he gained power, and saw him as someone who was highly confident of his own capacities, ready to make decisions, clearly engaged in the future of Russia, and I would say that my analysis of Mr. Putin has been now, for some time, that one needs to look at the question of his aspirations for the return of Russia to great power status, on the one hand, and how it affects his own situation as a survivor in the Russian political system, on the other, and the two go hand in hand; in one sense, his survival depended upon his ability to articulate and carry out nationalist policies that, in one way or another, centered around the idea that Russia had been, always will be, and is now returning as a great power to the world scene. Secondly, that it was his leadership that made that so and was important in building it.

And you can remember, in his early days, where he attempted to consolidate power through the appointment of seven governors general for the large regions of Russia to trump, if I could put it this way, the independence of the elected governors at that time. He took away the elections from a number of them, and in some ways, hounded a number of them because, in one way or another, they were establishing separate mini-economies in their own provinces from which they were clearly benefiting and under which the major Russian economy was suffering. So those are thoughts at least.

And Yeltsin, in many ways, was declining after 1996. I was around for his open-heart operation in which Dr. DeBakey played a helpful auxiliary role, although he didn't do the operation. But Yeltsin was, in those days, declining. Yeltsin clearly had shown, more often than any of us liked, the propensity to substitute alcohol for what would have perhaps been called protocol. But, in one way or another, he was, in that particular period of time, declining. Much of what Putin tried to change was his reaction to how Yeltsin, in one way or another, through weaknesses that were not necessarily his but of the system, became creatures of the large oligarchs who used the opportunity to take over the Russian economy, to develop control of television – Berezovsky for example – and has, therefore, played an enormously important role in the politics of Russia in those times because television was the single most significant medium of communication. Putin later saw that dominance by outsiders of television was something that he would not want to have continue under his leadership.

So, he tightened up things, from his perspective. He went through various manifestations of leadership changes. I think the Medvedev taking over the presidency experience, for what would have been otherwise Putin's third term, prohibited by the then-Constitution, was not the experience he wanted to continue with. We now see that today. So, Putin has, despite ups and downs in popularity, consolidated control, seemingly remains in firm control, has changed the Constitution so he will be clearly able to stay in power until something like 2036. What happens after that and what might happen between now and then are hard to see.

The Russian economy has not kept pace with what Putin, I think, would like to have seen. But he seems to have at least one tone-deaf ear on the economy and perhaps not as tuned in as he might be, and often, I suspect, may wonder why the street protests which have been a continuing phenomenon, off and on, at various times in Russia, don't stop or he can't finally and fully stop them. In part, I think it's because of his failure to understand and listen to useful advice that he can get from a number of important people around him about how to take Russia's enormous resources and turn them into something but a uni-crop petroleum economy.

*Jill Dougherty*

I did want to pick up on one issue, which is the relations between the United States and Russia. So many people have said they're never normal. These are two countries that, because of their history, their culture, etc., have not had what you would say normal relationships that we have with, let's say, any European country, etc. And I'm asking, Mr. Ambassador, why do you think that is? Can we have a constructive, organized approach and relationship with Russia, or are we always doomed to have some type of conflict?

*Ambassador Pickering*

I think it's a great question. Many will recognize that the use of the Russian word *normalno* [fine, normal] is designed to cover over any possible discussion of any problems of health or, indeed, of economic difficulties in personal relationships. But, put that aside, we went through periods between us in which contention, world events, and ideological differences of great significance, in one way or another, tended to hover over the relationship and cloud it. One could perhaps turn to periods in the past; were our relations normal when they began in the early '30s? Were they normal in the Second World War?

I would have to say a depression of consequence and world contention, and then the fascist expansion through '45 meant that was not normal. The immediate appearance of the Cold War within years meant that was not normal. We operated in an external environment, in some ways enhanced by our domestic political environment, of significant differences and contention.

I can remember very well, in what I would probably take back to 1954, my first year as a graduate student, a student conference at West Point in which they gathered people from across the country to, in fact, to sit down with cadets, and where almost every lecture, every presentation was super-hyped on the dangers of Communist expansion – much of what we



are seeing from a certain element in our population now, or a certain element in our political community now, about China and what to do about it. So, the collapse of Communism was not normal in any sense of the word, and we operated in a situation where even the best of economic development experts did not have what one could call a perfectly easy, fluid, highly-able-to-implement idea.

There's an old expression, Adam Michnik, a Polish economist, once said that going from Communism ... from capitalism to Communism... is like making fish soup out of a fishbowl, but the reverse we do not know how to do. There was much of that; there was also much resistance in Russia, obviously, because people had, for 70 years, been, in many ways, enthralled by the system that was going totally to change their lives and their position in the world.

The piece that many people remember most in parts of Russia is that, for the period of the Yeltsin time, the West was trying to steer Russia, didn't do it very well, that Russians were, in many cases, in their view, overridden by the political and foreign policy imperatives of the United States in the West. It was only when Mr. Putin came back that they regained some independence about this and it was only through his leadership, which attempted to do a certain amount of reforming both in the military, which had been very, very badly disintegrated, and politically, and in the international community to bring back what they had thought was the promise of change as they went out of Communism.

So, in a way, the expectation in the future that we will have perfectly, quote, "normal circumstances," in a world of constant change is something of a deception and a snare. What we need to do is to be able carefully to evaluate where we are, understand that we're never going to have perfect alignment, to seek out as we did, particularly in the Cold War middle period, how to control those mutual dangers which are existential. With the U.S. and the Soviet Union, it was a mistake that would lead to nuclear conflict, which would destroy the planet. And that's not hyperbole. Many of us see some of those conditions returning.

With Russia today, it may well be to put in place a new arms control regiment, to build the stability that we were trying to build in the Cold War, which has been torn up mainly by the Trump period, although Bush began it in doing away with the ABM Treaty, for what are clearly now national objectives, which in my view, are not thought through and are clearly not part of what I would call a significant strategy on the part of the United States, and without going into it in this interview, we have much the same problem with Russia - I'm sorry - with China, as we have with Russia.

What is it that might make a difference there? One of the things that might make a difference is together dealing with COVID rather than separately spitting at each other on the question or, even more importantly, as John Kerry has suggested recently, on climate change. So that's one way, I think, to take a look both at how to assess the current situation and what might be the new normal, and the new normal is not something in which we can cover over the differences or hide them, in which really active diplomacy will be of great significance.

We're not going to deep-solve that by military standoff, particularly if it allows us to get into an accidental conflict, although each of us will respect each other more for the military prowess that is out there and, more realistically, have to take it into account. So, it is not something where dreams of perfection are realizable, but it is something where deep, hard work, to borrow from George Shultz, "tending the diplomatic garden" intensively every day, is part of what can happen, and neither of us have done that. We've adopted falling back on demonology or demonization as a substitute for policy when there are plenty of things that we can work on together.

*Jill Dougherty*

You're talking about diplomacy. Do you have advice for future ambassadors to Russia?

*Ambassador Pickering*

Yes, I do. I think the advice is complex, but it is basically, one, develop as many as you can of contacts. Whether you find those sympathetic or not is irrelevant. You need to hear from a wide variety of Russians on a wide variety of views. Secondly, make sure that Washington knows and understands your best judgments about what's going on. Thirdly, look for opportunities. As an ambassador, you have a significant role to play in helping to formulate foreign policy. I always thought that what was best done to earn my pay was to make sure that Washington knew when things were not working, but never to tell Washington things were not working without trying to tell them how they could be repaired, refigured, repurposed, redone. That, in some way, is a strong quota for an ambassador.

But ambassadors also have to look at the question of how and in what way can I bring about a resumption of a better relationship in a time of great difficulty? With Russia, much of that depends upon the leadership and how they can be influenced to understand the need, to try to find a way to repair relations, and that's always much harder. If, in fact, the personality relationships between leaders has disintegrated, or gone south, without their significant involvement in bringing about repairs, that won't happen.

I think that the second period of President Obama when we thought that Medvedev, as the legal and indeed, constitutional president of Russia, deserved more serious treatment than President Putin was a serious mistake. Putin had become prime minister. He was number two on the ladder, but he was number one in the decision-making chain. Efforts on the part of the United States to deal with that in an entirely protocolary way sent the message that the U.S. was actually seeking to replace Putin with Medvedev and expected that to happen. That was obviously not the best approach to now-President Putin on the whole subject.

*Jill Dougherty*

I have one last question. I'm thinking about the people who will be watching and listening to this interview and getting a lot out of it and thinking of students, you know, students who, maybe they're in college, maybe even late high school, thinking about the Foreign Service or thinking about getting into Russian studies, studying the country that you yourself have looked

at so deeply for so long. What would you say to them? What's the advice? Why should they even consider the Foreign Service? Why should they think about Russia?

*Ambassador Pickering*

Well, I think that the Foreign Service offers huge opportunities. One, it still is a merit-based service where your advancement comes from your performance, where you don't get everything you want, always, in terms of assignments, but every one of them is a challenge, where I believe you have to have a deep-seated sense of public service to commit to that kind of a situation. You live in danger, your families are not always with you, you're asked to make sacrifices for your government, sometimes the most significant of those. On the other hand, the notion that you can play a role in shaping for the United States, in my humble view, still the world's leading country, despite recent declines, which I hope are momentary and repairable in the next administration and believe they are – that is an enormously gratifying proposition.

I always found that being able to help individual Americans who were in trouble was part of what my responsibilities were, and I had often great satisfaction from those small cases, reuniting a family around the children that may have been taken away by a divorced parent overseas to being able to make a considerable suggestion for how and in what way the next phase of our relationships with a country like Russia, or India, or in the UN should be developed. These are enormously valuable rewards, not measured in monetary terms, but measured certainly in personal satisfaction terms.

So, if you're interested, don't go to the Foreign Service to believe that it's just a useful stepping-stone to something higher. It may well be; on the other hand, you have to recognize that you're taking away a job from someone who, like you, would have to learn the job from the bottom up, and you can't substitute new people at mid-grade for those who have learned in the field what is necessary. But I also believe, obviously, we need more education and training of our Foreign Service officers, something that, currently, because they are all occupied on the front lines, freeing them up to do that education and training is a problem. But a number of us are working on that. But those are the things that I think people who are interested in the Foreign Service should look at.

We badly need people, particularly from the underrepresented communities in the United States. We do better on women, but terribly now on Black Americans, less well on Hispanics, quite well on Asian Americans, but we do need to have that kind of participation in our foreign service to represent not just the country and its many faces, but to represent all the methods and features of thinking about our foreign relationships on the basis of your own personal history, which is something you can never discard as you become a diplomat, but you always in one way or another, have to be sure is not distorting your view.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, they have an example to follow in you, Mr. Ambassador. And thank you very much, Ambassador Thomas Pickering, both for your time and your very deep thoughts about Russia and the relationship. Thank you.

*Ambassador Pickering*

Thank you, Jill. As always, a great pleasure to join you, and thank you for the wonderful questions.

## Ambassador James F. Collins (1997-2001)

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*I think it was around two o'clock in the afternoon. I was asked to come over and receive a message from President Yeltsin at that time. That was also a fairly exciting time because we were inside the barricades. There were crowds of people, and when I went in the car to the White House with the flag, I didn't know whether they were going to throw rocks or cheer. Well, they cheered. In essence, the message was asking Washington not to recognize these self-proclaimed authorities, and to stay with the constitutional order and support the rule of law and President Gorbachev.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador James Collins, thank you very much for being with us. It's really a pleasure. We've spoken so many times in Washington, in Moscow, and other places, so it's wonderful to be able to talk with you.

*Ambassador Collins*

It's great to be here, Jill, and it's terrific to do it with you. We've had many different experiences together, all of them enlightening and enriching.

*Jill Dougherty*

Thank you. I feel the same. As I was thinking about your career, you were really, and you have been up to this point, you're very actively engaged in what's going on. You had that unique vision of Russia and the former Soviet Union, but especially that time, kind of post-Soviet, the birth of a new Russia. In the mid '90s you were Ambassador at Large and Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for the newly independent states, as they were called at the time. Then from '90 to '93 you were DCM, Deputy Chief of Mission, and Chargé d'Affaires at the embassy in Moscow. Then our paths crossed in Moscow, 1997 to 2001, you came back as the ambassador. So, three postings in Moscow.

Going back to that early one, when you were DCM, you were DCM right during the dramatic events of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. I remember myself, and certainly many other people were really shocked by that, that it finally was falling apart. Were you shocked? Did you see any indication that it was crumbling at that point? And do you have any particularly vivid memories of that period?

*Ambassador Collins*

Well, it was hard to live through it without some pretty vivid memories, of course. I would say, first of all, that I don't think anyone I knew expected the collapse and disintegration of the

Soviet Union. When I went out as the then-ambassador's deputy in the fall of 1990, or end of summer, the collective wisdom of the intelligence community here that I received in my briefings was that within five years one of the Baltic state republics would attain a substantial degree of autonomy and, a year later, there was no Soviet Union. Now, I think that probably reflects reality.

Nobody, for reasons that are in retrospect rather surprising, expected the disintegration of the Union. Now, that didn't mean that the Union hadn't changed a lot and become a very different place under President Gorbachev from what it had been in the earlier times I had been there, in the mid '60s or the early '70s. It was a very different country, and it was changing rapidly. There was no question that there was change going on, but as I arrived in 1990, I don't think anyone expected it.

Frankly, when the coup against Gorbachev happened in August 1991, it was a surprise to everybody. It wasn't that we hadn't heard rumors of coup plotting and this kind of thing for months. We had, but you kept hearing them to the point when it was the cried wolf story. Nobody really had a sense that this was real, and so, when it happened, it was a shock, and it was a surprise. It also wasn't the end of the Soviet Union, by the way, it took another few months. The coup was a surprise and a shock.

What happened as the coup collapsed, and as President Gorbachev came back, was a series of rapid changes that really did spell what I would say was the end of the Soviet Union, as anybody knew it. The most singular move, I suppose, was the end of the Communist Party as the ruling party or even a party with any privileged position in the country as a whole. Without the Communist Party, it was no longer the Soviet Union, frankly. I think that was – the coup was the shock, it was a moment you could hardly understand or fathom at the moment.

My wife made one observation about it all in a book she's written about our years in Moscow, where she said, "When you're in history, you don't know what comes next, you don't know how it comes out. When you're a historian reading history, you already know the end, so it's a very different perspective." I have to say that in those days, those three days of the coup, there was great uncertainty about what the future held. Were we going to go back to the Cold War and a hardline Communist rule in the Kremlin, or was something else coming, and, of course, something else came. I mean, essentially what came was the end of the Soviet system. I think, you know, was it a shock? Yes, it was a shock, and nobody expected it, and it caused great uncertainties about what was coming next, but it was a fact.

I think the other point I would make is that the United States did a very good job under President Bush and Secretary Baker in managing that transition without upsetting the apple cart or causing greater uncertainties, much less bloodshed, than might have occurred. I think history's going to show that that was an extremely well managed diplomacy at a time of great uncertainty and great danger, when the other nuclear power was coming apart and nobody actually knew what was coming.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yes. In fact, I remember that very well. The fears were monumental, that the country would fall apart, loose nukes would be all over the former Soviet Union. There could be a civil war. There would be bloodshed. There could be nuclear problems, et cetera. It was a very frightening time. What did you advise Washington? What were you telling them at that time?

*Ambassador Collins*

Well, I said, one of the things about the coup itself that was interesting is that it took place, of course, early in the morning in Moscow, which meant everybody was asleep in Washington and, so, for several hours, the Embassy and I were basically alone. We had called our watch officers in Washington and let them know what was happening, but we didn't have any guidance.

So, I said that was one of the very few times that, as a Foreign Service officer, okay, I was in charge of the Embassy at that point, I actually made a decision without anybody telling me how the guidance should be implemented or whatever. It was that we didn't see it appropriate for the official representation of the United States to have anything to do with the people who had simply proclaimed themselves new rulers. We had not heard from President Gorbachev. We had not heard anything that suggested that what was being done in the name of constitutional order in the Soviet Union had any legal basis.

And, so, with my colleagues at the Embassy, for whom I have the greatest respect in terms of how they helped me make the decisions, we basically said, "Unless it affects the security and safety of American citizens or their property, we will have nothing to do with the people who were proclaiming themselves the masters of the Kremlin." And that, basically, was policy, at least as I made it, for several hours before anybody in Washington decided they had to make a decision about this.

In the end, the decision that we made was, I suppose, simply accepted as the way they should move. They should be very cautious, not accept or recognize any new government until they knew what the realities were about who was in charge or who was not, and what was right and what was legal and so forth.

At the same time, we had on that same day, and in those same hours, Mr. Yeltsin proclaiming that he was standing behind the constitutional order and President Gorbachev, that he did not recognize these folks in the Kremlin as his authority, and that he was not taking any orders from them, and set himself up as an alternative authority right half a block away in the so-called Russian White House.

He, too, I guess, took my position that he was not having anything to do with these new self-proclaimed leaders. We ended up sort of in tandem on the same side in support of what we both were claiming was the constitutional order and refusing to accept the idea that it was usurped by the people just proclaiming themselves leaders of the Kremlin, and that itself, of course, had its implications.

I think it was around two o'clock in the afternoon. I was asked to come over and receive a message from President Yeltsin at that time. That was also a fairly exciting time because we were inside the barricades. There were crowds of people, and when I went in the car to the White House with the flag, I didn't know whether they were going to throw rocks or cheer. Well, they cheered. In essence, the message was asking Washington not to recognize these self-proclaimed authorities, and to stay with the constitutional order and support the rule of law and President Gorbachev. That was where we ended up.

When I came back, I had a call from President Bush, who said, well, he hoped we were well and that we were safe, and what did I think? I think the words I most remember was telling him, there are many reasons that it's not at all clear this coup is going to succeed, and that we should be very careful and not jump to any conclusions or recognition, and we didn't, and I think history was on our side, or we were on the side of history, but also we were on the right side.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

That is true. What a dramatic moment. You mentioned President Bush and this, of course, is Herbert Walker Bush, the father. That period later, I think, has been interpreted as "the United States caused the end of the Soviet Union" because the United States outspent Russia on weaponry, et cetera. But, looking at President Bush and the way he handled it, and obviously with consultation with you, there was no triumphalism, at least as far as I can see, on the part of the Bush Administration. In fact, they went out of their way not to, say, rub it in, but to really be supportive. How do you see that period? Because there was such, to this day, misinterpretation or over-interpretation of the Americans' role in what happened in the former Soviet Union.

#### *Ambassador Collins*

I think, in a very general sense there is no question that, first of all, the Bush Administration and the United States, for the period of both the second Reagan term and the Bush Administration that followed it found, in the reforming Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev, a partner with increasingly important capabilities to, first, bring the Cold War to an end, which they did, actually, through negotiation in many ways, before the Soviet Union collapsed.

Then, as a partner, they believed, and I think they were committed to seeking the means to develop, as a new partner in that part of the world, in Eurasia, that was going to manage the reduction of nuclear arms, a peaceful transition in what had been the Warsaw Pact region, and I think, probably, also had a sense that the sociopolitical economic order in the Soviet Union itself was evolving in a way that was constructive. They had a stake, I think. I think they would agree, they had a stake in Gorbachev, and in what he stood for and what he was trying to do.

They also knew that the resistance to his changes was growing and, even before the coup, it was pretty clear that, you know, the changes that Gorbachev was pushing were increasingly being resisted, particularly as they began to affect who controlled what resources, who



controlled authority. Was it going to be devolved more to the republics, to Ukraine, to Kazakhstan, or was it going to continue to be highly centralized? The Communist Party hardliners, the real Bolsheviks, really were resisting what Gorbachev was trying to suggest. In fact, the coup came about because he had managed the negotiation of a new, essentially, constitution for the Union that gave much more authority and much more control to the republic, local regional governments, and the hardline Communists simply were resisting that.

We thought, I think quite simply, that it was moving in the right direction, and that Gorbachev had demonstrated that he was prepared to see an orderly devolution of the system of the old Warsaw Pact of the European order into something new in which the Soviet Union could be a constructive player, or at least a partner on whom we could count, and, in that sense, they felt the stake in the Soviet Union surviving. This was, I think, the origin of the famous speech in Kiev in July of '91 or, I guess, the beginning of August '91, which was very much criticized, for which President Bush was very much criticized. It was saying, in essence, to the nationalist movements, the movements trying to break up or challenge the authority of Moscow, "Be careful. Take your time." Not a popular message at the moment for the nationalists, but one which I think was genuinely felt.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

You mentioned, of course, Boris Yeltsin, who's one of the main characters at this point in Russian history, at that point. When you arrived in 1997, which is when I arrived in Moscow as a bureau chief, in '97, Yeltsin, and I remember so many times being called back from little breaks that I would take, that Yeltsin was either dying - he died many times - or he had fired yet another prime minister, but it was a very tumultuous time in that '97-'98 period. Why was it so tumultuous? Was it the time? Was it Yeltsin himself? And could you give me some of the impressions that you had? Because obviously you met him, and you were watching him very closely. What kind of a man was he, what kind of a leader?

#### *Ambassador Collins*

Well, let's take Yeltsin first. I happen to be someone who has the greatest respect for him and believe he will go down in history as one of the truly great leaders of a society. Now, I think it's true of Gorbachev as well, because both of them were in the business of managing extraordinary upheaval and change in a society that had been a very, very disciplined totalitarian structure. Converting it into something that was far more open and unable to isolate itself any longer from the rest of the world.

The impact of this across the society, and on the structures and everything else, that everyone who lived in the Soviet Union even in the early '80s took for granted, simply was something Americans can't possibly imagine. And so, as they managed the changes, I mean, Gorbachev was trying to control it to preserve the Soviet Union, frankly, and to convert it into something that was a modernized, more open economy, more structured in a way to allow control of the region, but in a way that would develop its economy and so forth.

Yeltsin was different. Yeltsin had, I think for all sorts of reasons, decided he couldn't stand the Communist Party. He wanted to see it out of power. The party had tried to destroy him, and it was a mutually understood position of what they were each about. In essence, what he did, it seems to me, was revolutionize Russia in three basic ways.

The first, political one, which I think was extraordinary, and very few people give him credit for this, but it's a reality, is that he truly established that the only legitimate political authority, or any future Russian leader or person claiming political authority, was going to be having been elected. There was no blood line that entitled you to authority, and there was no party - or, if you will, theology - that gave you authority. No priesthood that claimed authority by anything but the acceptance of the public.

That has survived, even though we have all sorts of arguments about how free or not free the elections are in Russia, or all that kind. The fact of the matter is, Mr. Putin cannot claim legitimacy except by being elected, and so he's got to figure out a way to do that. Now, you know, we can argue about whether he's very much of a democrat in the way he carries out his elections, but he has no other way of legitimating his authority.

The other was Yeltsin was committed to opening up the country to the rest of the world. He essentially threw it open to the outside world. He ended the effort to control, if you will, the Russian, or previously Soviet, information space. Now, it was already a reality that you couldn't control it as you had before. We were seeing the beginnings of the cell phone, the internet was just beginning and so forth, but he opened it up. I remember being in a room with him one day, with the Swedish ambassador, maybe in '98 or so, and we watched a man with a little box in the corner of this room (about the size of my living room) throw a switch on a box, and it opened up 64,000 telephone lines to the outside world, direct dial lines. There had only been a few hundred before, open to the public.

This was the beginning. This was sort of symbolic of what was happening. People from the outside were pouring in. People from Russia were traveling abroad like never before. And so, he opened the country to the outside world, and he made Russia, at this point, an integrated part of the global financial economic system, and, I would argue, the information system and the world's political system. Where it could no longer isolate itself from what the rest of the world was doing or create this alternative universe that the Communists had managed to do for most of the 20th century.

Then, thirdly, he also accepted something that no Russian ruler in centuries had even thought about, which was ending empire. That the direct rule by Moscow of all of these other republics simply was not going to be tenable. Over the time, first of all, he announced that was the case, he, and the others, when the president of Belarus and the president of Ukraine, when they agree the Soviet Union would no longer be a centralized, controlled government, he carried it further, and over his tenure he negotiated the border treaties and other kinds of issues with all of the other new states that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and said they will be accepted as independent states.

Now, that was a complete revolution for Eurasia as a whole, not just the Soviet Union, not just Russia. It was now market economics. They were integrated in our global system. It was an open part of a Euro-Atlantic community, and it was no longer an imperial system. Now, that was a pretty big set of reforms for someone to undertake or to carry out in the period of a decade. I think most significantly, also, from the standpoint of Washington, he did two things in accomplishing these objectives that were very important.

First, there was no major bloodshed. There were plenty of people who worried that we were in for a Eurasian-scale Balkans, and it never happened, and in great part, it did not happen because Yeltsin himself and some of the other key leaders were determined it would not happen. There were plenty of reasons it could have fallen apart.

The second thing he did, it seems to me, that was of absolutely critical importance to us was he worked with us to manage the nuclear issue. To bring all of the nuclear weaponry in the former Soviet space back into the Russian Federation, and then to pursue the reduction in the amounts of it in a way that essentially - probably - permitted us to say, "We have managed to come to terms on our single most critical objective with Moscow." That was the control and reduction of the nuclear arsenal. That was, believe me, in the first half of the '90s, was our key priority, and the one that we couldn't be sure was going to happen.

So, I mean, Yeltsin deserves, it seems to me, a tremendous amount of credit for leading a process that made it possible for Russians to have breathing space and to allow themselves to recover without immense pressures from the outside or the challenges of violence at home that could have really made a very different 1990s. Given, it made the end of his tenure look very different from what it in fact was when he left.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yeah. Speaking of which, a couple of years after you were there, we're into the end of 1999, Vladimir Putin comes on the scene rather unexpectedly. Nobody quite knows who he is, at least on the outside. He becomes a prime minister for President Yeltsin, and then - surprise - at the end of 1999, Yeltsin steps aside and names Putin as his heir. Then we have the election in March of 2000.

With Putin, can you, I know it's a big subject, but you obviously watched that. You've talked with him many times. You've seen him up close. What was the change? What was Putin like at the beginning of his tenure as president, just as he came in?

*Ambassador Collins*

Well, I think it's important to say a word or two about what Putin thought he was inheriting. If we look at the last years of the Yeltsin tenure, from '98, '99, those two years, they were tumultuous years. There were two particular events that I think shaped a great deal of the environment in which Yeltsin, first of all, decided totally unexpectedly by almost anyone in Moscow I talked to, that he would step down from his presidency six months early. Most of the speculation in Moscow was, how was he going to hold on? How is he going to go for

another term? Almost nobody thought he was going to give it up. When he gave it up six months early, it was a shock, but it also reflected his own understanding, I think, or his own sense that he was almost in an untenable position because his popularity had sunk to the lowest possible degree. He was really almost unable to govern effectively.

And he was suffering, I would say, the fallout from two critical issues. One was the financial collapse in the late summer of 1998, which was a tremendous blow to all Russians, essentially. Whatever thoughts of recovery and return to something like a new order had emerged during the mid '90s seemed to go up in smoke with the financial collapse.

It was also the moment, I think, which was critical for Russia's relations with Washington and Europe, because suddenly, Russia's economic transformation seemed not to be working, or Russia seemed to be turning away from responsibility. I remember very well that the press in the United States at that time, in August '98, turned from seeing Russia as a great success story for us to, "Who was guilty?" "Who failed?" "Who lost Russia?" started to emerge.

Well, I mean, the idea that we had Russia to begin with was kind of nutty. The idea was everything had been going fine until somebody made a huge mistake or somebody was so engaged in malfeasance that the Russian economy defaulted, couldn't pay its debts and so forth.

Now, at that time in Moscow what I remember most, and you may remember this too, Jill, was how absolutely paranoid the entire elite was at what might happen as a result of the collapse of the ruble and the collapse of the economy. I remember very well talking to, I remember visiting the head of two unions in the coal industry; one was the private union, one was the official sort of state-sanctioned union. Both of them absolutely beside themselves that the miners might basically explode, rebel. There were steps, I mean, there were miners in one of the great coal field areas putting, blocking train traffic and so forth. There was a real worry that there was going to be a huge uprising and chaos. Everybody from the farthest right to the farthest left in the political spectrum in Moscow at that time was out trying to keep a lid on things. I remember this was serious business.

It also had one effect that, I think, was unfortunate, because Yeltsin had named a man named Kiriyenko, at that time, to be his prime minister. He had done this some months before, and Kiriyenko was a very savvy, very intelligent man. He was, again, one of the younger generation people that Yeltsin kept turning to to try and bring the system along. He was a victim of this collapse because it happened on his watch. He'd only been there about six, seven months and he was responsible for the collapse.

And so, the recovery from the economic collapse, or keeping it under control, was something that weakened Yeltsin a lot, what happened from it, and I think that was a major problem. It was also a setback for what, I would say, was the reformist agenda, because the question was, well, *kto vinovat*, who's to blame? You could pick your best candidate. It could be the Americans, it could be Anatoly Chubais, it could be Yeltsin, but it was almost never the people

who were the conservatives or the people who were the nationalists, the people who were the critics of the reform people. So, the reformers got a bad name for that, and Yeltsin with them.

The second event that, I think, was also traumatic and damaged the Yeltsin team a lot was the Kosovo conflict. This had to do with what was happening in Serbia and the Serbs' effort to stop the Kosovars, and the war in Serbia, basically, in which we ultimately intervened militarily by bombing Belgrade.

Now, the result of that, for Yeltsin, was also a major setback. He had sought to keep us from any military intervention in Serbia, unsuccessfully. The result was, essentially, the most profound turn against Yeltsin and the Americans that I remember or experienced. It went deeper even than the economic issue and it went far down and became a cause for all of those critics of Yeltsin and the reform process, and those who thought that Yeltsin had done away with Russian greatness and the Soviet systems and all this kind of thing. It gave them their first real opportunity to have a popular cause, that the Americans were bombing their little Serbian brothers, and that was a very profound and deep emotion in the public.

I remember for two, three weeks it was pretty tense, and Yeltsin was on the defensive. He was continually trying to figure out how to do it. He joined in the criticism of the Americans and of the people who had allowed this to happen. What he said, essentially, was, "This is unacceptable." He got himself out of it essentially by appointing his former prime minister, Chernomyrdin, to be an envoy to try to stop the fighting in Serbia, and then, turning his gaze on the critics as war mongers and people trying to drag the Russian side into a war with the United States, which he said he would never allow. Well, I mean, it was pretty effective actually, and the war did come to a halt and so forth, but it left Yeltsin again weakened, it seemed.

And, so, by the time we go into the later '99, Yeltsin, his ratings are 5% or something, to the extent you could believe any of this, and so forth. In the period of all this, or in the process of all this, he found that he needed to move away from his crisis prime minister, Primakov, and he ended up picking Mr. Putin to take his place and to become the new prime minister.

Now, Putin was not unknown in the Kremlin, but he wasn't very well known by most on the outside. I had dealt with him personally when he was the head of the security service, which he was under Yeltsin for a time. He had been the national security advisor for a time, and then he became prime minister, and so he was in the position, essentially, which constitutionally was, of course, the one to succeed the president, should the president in any way be incapacitated, or not be able to discharge his duties, or resign. But, as I said, the critical point was that nobody at the late '99 thought that President Yeltsin was going anywhere. They all assumed he was going to hang on, so that Putin was, you know, another guy in the job. He'd be gone in a while too, and it wasn't ...

When President Yeltsin resigned, totally unexpectedly, on New Year's Eve '99-2000, it was a shock. People did not expect it. You probably remember this pretty well, and we suddenly had acting-President Putin. The reality was most people didn't know much about him. Not very

many people had worked with him at all. I won't say I knew him well, but I had dealt with him in different ways over the last two years of my time there.

I found him, first of all, very intelligent. Always well briefed. Never used notes in a conversation with me. I found him interesting because, unlike President Yeltsin, who more or less pronounced in a meeting, you know, Mr. Putin would discuss things with you. You would have questions, and answers, and discussion. It was a different kind of person. Then of course he was young, he was vigorous, he was sort of the next generation. In that sense, he fit Yeltsin's mold. Yeltsin never wanted his generation to succeed him, he wanted the younger people to do it.

And, so, you had this new, rather unknown man coming in to become acting president. For the first four or five months he was there in an acting capacity. Had to get himself elected, and so he was waging an election campaign as well as performing the duties of president in that first period.

Now there were a few things that I thought were interesting about him in that period. One was, I remember very well, his first meeting with Secretary Albright. While I'm not going to get into the details of everything that was discussed, one thing was very interesting to me. He said, in essence, to her, and this was, I think, in February, and I don't remember exactly how the question came up, but he said, "You know, I do karate, and I like Chinese food, but that's not who we are. We are a part of Europe. We are European. That is our culture. That is where we look. And, so, I may have arrangements with China, or Japan, or Asia, but we are part of Europe."

I thought it was interesting because it was a reaffirmation of, in a sense, the idea that Russia saw its future as linked into Europe and the Euro-Atlantic world. That was what he was saying. So, he was not challenging, in a sense, the premise that Russia belonged into that larger family, I'd say the Euro-Atlantic family. That was one thing I remembered very much, and I think it was a reassuring moment in some ways.

There was another event, however, that was of a different kind and I think, in retrospect, should have given us pause and attracted greater attention than it ever did. This was an event in the Kremlin on what is called Old New Year's Day, at the big Palace of Congresses, the huge amphitheater in which they used to hold their Communist Party Congresses. It was an evening event, a very Russian type event, that I always called sort of homily and Ed Sullivan show.

It was the theme that I thought was important, because the sponsor was the Patriarch, and the participants were Primakov, the former prime minister, foreign minister. Mr. Zyuganov [Mr. Zhirinovskiy], who was the head of the sort of new nationalist, populist party, a misnamed liberal democratic party, and Mr. Zyuganov, who was the head of the Communist Party. The theme of the evening was all about what makes Russia great. The author that was cited was the early Slavophile, a man named Khomiakov. The theme of the evening was what makes Russia great and, by implication, what causes our decline.

There were four or five different segments, four segments, I think, and each of these four men spoke, extolling the different things that made Russia great according to Khomiakov. One was its morals. One was beauty, and so forth. Another was faith, the Orthodox faith.

Essentially, this was all about the theme of, when we are together, we are great, and when we are at each other's throats, we are weak. And, so, the theme, by the end of the evening, said, and this was in the name of Putin, in a way, the new order, "We have a big tent. Everybody is welcome under it, and we are going to make Russia great again," to coin a phrase. "The theme on which it's going to be based is unity. If you're with us and you're with me in seeking this objective, you will be welcome and we will find ways to use all that you can contribute. But if you oppose us, then you will be outside the tent and you will have, by implication, a very difficult time as someone seeking Russia's weakness."

Well, we didn't, I think, fully understand what that was all about. I mean, we did then get *Yedinaya Rossiya*, United Russia, flowed out of that, what amounted to the new party. We then saw some of the early steps that Putin took, in a way, to deliver on this. You may remember, Russia had a national anthem, but it couldn't have any words. Well, they figured out how to deal with that. He took the old Soviet anthem and gave it new words. That satisfied both sides of the fight under Yeltsin.

The flag was a problem because the military wanted to preserve the flag of World War II, the Soviet battle flag, and the Yeltsin reformist people had all put up the new tricolor, Petrine flag. Well, he said, "Fine, we're going to use the Petrine flag as the national flag, but the military can keep its battle flag." There were a variety of different things like that, where he tried to unite the emotional, and the emotions of the two sides that were divided under the Yeltsin period, and bring them under one tent.

The few people who tended to be in opposition, including some who were running against him as president in his campaign, found themselves in difficult straights. So, Mr. Gusinsky was jailed for a time and ultimately exiled. He was a media mogul, someone who was actually a self-made man in most respects, who had created the one really independent television network, and it was taken away from him, in essence, and he was exiled for opposing many of the things Mr. Putin was doing. Later on, Mr. Berezovsky met the same fate.

Fundamentally, the steps that Mr. Putin took, both in that early time and then in his first year as I was there, were, in many ways, directed at uniting the country, pulling the country together. Creating conditions that were, for the most part, welcomed by people like the business community. Most of the people who had been reformers thought they were positive. He essentially moved, for instance, to have the rule of law uniform across the country, so that if you signed a contract in St. Petersburg, it would be honored in Vladivostok. Something that hadn't been the case for most of the '90s. He brought about, in this early period, a series of legal reforms that reformed the criminal judicial code, that freed thousands of people from preventive detention, and so forth. So, there were many reasons that people saw him as a constructive implementer, in many ways, of many of the reforms on the agenda that Mr. Yeltsin had put forth that he was never able to accomplish, in that first year.

Now, I think in retrospect it's perfectly clear that there were two sides to all of this. On the one hand, there was the unity side that didn't see a lot of room for people who were going to oppose the changes. On the other hand, the changes that were being made were, rather more than not, consistent with the kinds of reforms that everybody had wanted to see in Yeltsin's second term but Yeltsin couldn't get through.

As I left in the middle of 2001, I think the returns were out, really, on Mr. Putin. Where was he going? What was he going to do? And, I think, that lasted for considerable time. I guess what I would say, finally, in one respect, is that I thought a major point in our relations took place in 2001, after 9/11 when, as you may recall, he was the first to call President Bush and express his support and condolences and then he came to the United States in, I think it was November of 2001. If you go back and look at what he said with us, and said jointly, and documents he signed onto at that time, you would have thought we had a major opportunity to develop a new kind of relationship that would be cooperative and productive, albeit with problems, but the issues were not, I would say, 180 degrees opposite.

We lost that opportunity, I think, when we decided we had other priorities and we were not going to pursue it. I think we lost an opportunity. I don't know where it would have taken us, and I think it's unknown what might have been possible with Mr. Putin had we pursued a different kind of relations with him. But the Bush Administration, for whatever reason, decided that they were not going to attach particular priority to relations with Russia, and that we had other major issues, and that Russia was not a major factor for us going forward, and I think we paid a price for that.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

There are some people who believe that there is Putin one and Putin two. You're kind of alluding to that in a way, that there was this belief that he was a reformer, and that relations could improve, and all of that, and yet we're faced right now with a much more controlled environment in Russia, legally and every other way, internationally. Do you believe that there was some sort of turning point where Putin changed, or was that his plan all along?

#### *Ambassador Collins*

Well, I think it's sort of impossible to tell. I do think that we probably underestimated the importance of that meeting in the Palace of Congresses and what it suggested about the kind of Russia Mr. Putin and the people around him thought you needed to have, and I think there was no question that it was a kind of Russia where unity was defined as having relatively circumscribed possibilities for dissenting views or alternative views about priorities or ways in which things would be done.

So, I think there was certainly that dimension to this that was very significant and was seen as important. And I think one of the reasons Putin focused on that right from the beginning was he watched in the '90s as the presidency, Yeltsin's presidency, would go up and down, and up and down as people would ... He'd make a decision that was very successful, and then people



would chip away at him, and the criticism would grow, and then he'd be down again, and then something would happen, and he'd be up again because he took it up.

The presidency was never, I think, from the point of view of someone like the Putin people, I think they felt they had to have a steady high-rated presidency. One that was respected, one that was authoritative. Not one that anyone could disrespect. I think the idea to preserve that and then - to create that presidency and then preserve it against all comers was quite strong. I think that was sort of behind the message of that Palace of Congresses meeting. Now, the implications of that were pretty serious, I think, if you play them out. This didn't mean that we had exactly someone who was a Jeffersonian democrat coming into authority.

On the other hand, as I said, he did some rather remarkable things in his early period, while I was there, and well into 2001. One of the things that was remarkable, I think in a sort of negative sense, was the second Chechnya war, which he finally brought to an end with a deal, essentially, and it has held. You haven't had another Chechnya war, but it was brutal, and basically, what it did was turn the region over to what amounts to a pretty awful leader and give him control.

But, at the same time, we had a lot of changes that were quite constructive. As I said, things that had been on the Yeltsin agenda and could not get done under Yeltsin, and Putin brought them about, and he did it by pulling people together, by pulling the country together. Cutting the deals that were necessary. In many ways, presiding over what I always saw as a sort of series of groupings that he had to bring together and get to accept certain changes or certain directions he was setting. This was the military, the security services, the economic oligarchy, the regional elites, the bureaucracy, the intelligentsia and so on. All of them had these groups, and he kind of sat above them trying to orchestrate the way they would be brought together to buy into whatever the next step was. He was far from having, I would say, the kind of authority that people impute to him today, at that point. He was really presiding over and managing a complex political process that took a lot of skill.

I think where that changed, and I do think there is a change, was really at the period in which he begins to run for reelection for the second term. In that period, you have the famous arrest of Mr. Khodorkovsky, which was a signal, in a sense, that actual and real opposition was going to be a dangerous thing to undertake. I think, more to the point, as I watched it, what it meant was that he turned more and more to his colleagues in the security services as the one element in that whole panoply of different groupings that had not really had a very good place in the Yeltsin period, or had not been able to prosper in the Yeltsin period. He turned to them, essentially, to ensure that things went right in the election in 2004.

I think after that it was a very different world. The security service people at that point began to be discussed as the ones who were the critical players for him, and on whom he's depending. OK, was that his plan at the beginning? Was it the way he operated from the beginning? The security services, certainly, had a new role almost from the outset with Mr. Putin, but they didn't have the same kind of position that they came to have as the second term unfolded. I think, in that sense, there's a difference.

*Jill Dougherty*

You know, Mr. Ambassador, all of this is really fascinating to me, to think of you, let's say over your career, but also sitting in the embassy when you were the ambassador and previous times, and trying to, kind of like what your wife was referring to, to understand, in the midst of breaking news, and events, and confusing events, to figure out, where is this all going? And I know you studied history. In fact, your graduate work was in Russian history; you taught it at the U.S. Naval Academy, I believe. And so, there you are, and here you are now, and trying to understand that country, which is obviously very complex. How does your historical sense affect your understanding of Russia? And then, do you see new factors that you have to take into consideration to understand what's going on?

*Ambassador Collins*

Well, I think, if I look back on it, one of the things I would say that was certainly a part of the way I approached the country was that this was not suddenly the United States after 1991. There was a lot of, I think, peculiar thinking in the United States about what had happened in the Soviet Union in that period of the transformation.

Russia's more than 1,000 years old. It's a huge country. It has had a complex and rich history. It has peculiarities that have beset every Russian ruler in terms of issues that person has to solve. I thought, none of those things changed, really. What changed was how people decided they were going to try it this time. But the reality was that Russia remained a child of its past, and of its possibilities, and of its geography. Therefore, you couldn't assume that all of that was simply going to go away.

Now, I think there were a few things that I took away from that that many in Washington, I don't think, ever understood, and still don't, frankly. I mean, one is that the Russian approach to its existence is always predicated on the fact that it's huge. Governing it is tremendously difficult. It has no natural borders. Managing its economy and its resources is always a challenge because it has fewer people than it has resources. How do you deal with that? How do you develop its people and its resources in anything like a modern way? Always, seemingly, in a context where Russia's behind, or senses that it's behind.

Now, Russian rulers have dealt with that issue for 1,000 years, the Soviets were always dealing with it. Mr. Putin, today, is no different. I mean, he is playing a weak hand, essentially, and a complicated hand. He's trying to deal with these questions. How do I secure a country with no borders that are natural? How do I manage the economic rules for a country that is, I guess it's nine time zones in size today; it was 11 when I was there. How do you get decisions made that are going to be uniformly applicable, and what's the relationship between those and what the local needs, differences say in Kamchatka in the Far East from St. Petersburg on the Baltic?

All of these things are there, and they are challenges for any Russian leader, and Russian leaders have tried to deal with them in different ways. Usually, it has been, in the Russian

sense, a way in which the central authority tries to manage things in more detail, probably, than we in the United States have ever thought.

I think another thing that has always been true is that Americans, when faced with labor shortage as we were in much of our country in terms of the resources we had, turned to machines. The Russian pattern, almost all of its history – not all, but most of it – had been to bind labor to the thing that produced, whether it was land, or factories, or whatever. You had serfdom. Then you had in the communist system what amounted to, in a sense, tying the worker to his job. It's where he got his home, it's where he got his education, and so forth. You couldn't move around in the country in that way.

In the modern system, this is an unknown quantity. The disparity between labor available and resources to be exploited is huge. There's a labor shortage and the population issue is a major one.

So, Mr. Putin is trying to deal with these issues in his own way, as all of his predecessors have tried. Now, you know, this gives you a different perspective. Similarly, we've never been invaded, but the Russian people have lived under invasion, or been invaded, or lived under foreign authority, at least in major parts, for generations, if not centuries in its history. That is also something that leaves its mark. How do you defend and how do you provide security for a country in the geographic circumstances and economic circumstances that Russia finds itself?

Not too surprisingly, a major part of that has been to try to ensure that anybody to invade the heart of Russia has to go a long ways to get there before they make it. Hence, you had this obsession with what I suppose you'd call defense in depth, geographically. Today we're talking about a sphere of influence, but fundamentally, this is not a new ... This is one way of resolving a very old problem, in a sense. We don't happen to agree with that solution, but that's ... the way.

I think my historical sense, from having been there as a student in the '60s, in the '70s when I was at the embassy in a very different age, simply gave me an appreciation for the fact that this is a country with major challenges and problems and a tradition and history of resolving them in ways that are not quite consistent with the American way of doing it. And, so, we have to have a certain understanding of that, and try to figure out where you can put things together as two major societies or as two cultures in ways that will work constructively for both of us.

If we face the issue, for instance, today, of climate, what are we going to do? Because the views about what's good in the climate, or in climate change, may be quite different in Russia from what they are here. Yet we both face that issue. How are we going to deal with it? I don't know. If this is a priority, however, it ought to be getting attention for the two countries. We'll see.

*Jill Dougherty*

You and I have known each other actually now for quite a long time, and in your post-diplomatic serving career you have become very active in both think tanks at Carnegie, and then in organizations, let's say, Track II diplomatic groups, that have worked to keep the relationship going, to improve the relationship. I'm thinking just one is the Dartmouth discussion group that meets with Russian colleagues. So, you've really devoted a lot of your time to these organizations. Do you think that they do have an effect? If so, what is it? What can those organizations, that are not specifically government, do to keep this relationship on track?

*Ambassador Collins*

Well, first of all, I don't overestimate them in any way. I think the major institutions that define our relations at any given time are, first of all, our governments. Secondly, I think probably our economic relations, that is fundamentally the relations between our major economic entities, however you want to define them.

But I do think that the engagement of the societies, at a variety of levels and in different ways, is also important. It's not the kind of, I would say ... Let's put it this way. Any given organization or program probably has much less impact today than it did in the worst of the Cold War era, when any Soviet citizen meeting any citizen from the United States was an oddity and was a unique thing. That's not true today. Today Russia is part of our information space, as we're learning in many ways, not always to the best. Russians are free to travel. Russians do know a lot about the outside world, in ways that 35 years ago were unimaginable.

And, so, we're dealing, in that sense, in a different context, but, that said, it seems to me the reason I've stuck with this is that sooner or later the two countries have certain kinds of interests in common. It's important also for them to understand where we have interests that aren't in common. I think the discussion among different kinds of organizations, and groups, and citizens, and so forth, helps diversify the sort of idea that there's only a one-dimensional relationship, which is between our governments and the contests that we're having today, where relations are pretty bad.

It seems to me that it's particularly important, for instance, for us to focus on younger people. What's the next generation going to think about? I've been involved with a young generation group that has about 100 members from 28 countries that meets now Zooming all the time. It brings the Russians into a group that has representation from most of the Euro-Atlantic world. I think it's important for us to hear the other side out. May not agree with them. May find some of their views peculiar, I'm sure they think the same, but keeping these contacts alive, at different levels and through different ways, means that when opportunities arise, maybe you will be able to develop something new.

I also believe it's terribly important to keep these things alive because we had a huge program of exchanges and education and so forth in the '90s and thousands and thousands of younger Russian people came, and Americans went there. Well, all those people are now 30 years

older, and some of them who were 45 are history, they're like me, they're living history. Well, you need to keep replenishing that group. You need to keep encouraging the idea that the two societies have to continue to talk to one another. I think, in that sense, that's why I've stayed with it. I think it's important.

Do I think it resolves issues? Probably not. Does it contribute, perhaps, to the thinking about how people will view ways to resolve issues? Perhaps. The key thing is that Russia today is an open society. It is not isolated. It is not divorced from the rest of this information world that we live in, and so we need to be sure that the variety of views from the outside play their role in people's thinking in Russia. I think that's important, and that's why I've continued to push this.

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador Collins, we just have a few minutes left, so this will be my last question, but I think it's important. What would you recommend to the next ambassador to Russia? And ones in history, looking down at the future, what would you recommend? What is the most important thing that they should keep in mind, based on your own experience?

*Ambassador Collins*

Well, I guess, there are two or three things that I think are very important at this point. I mean, it seems to me that a critical issue for any ambassador going out at this point, and one I would hope he would resolve before he ever gets to Moscow, is what are we seeking to accomplish with the Russian Federation? I don't mean just the list of demands that we keep putting up, but what kind of relationship would we see as the objective we're trying to build? What would it look like? How would we know when we had it? We're not going to agree on everything. We're not going to have a world in which there are no differences. So, what is the right kind of relationship that would meet American interests and, probably, have to meet Russian interests to be stable and enduring?

I think anyone appointed to be ambassador, to go out, ought to insist he needs to know what the president's view about that is. Because if he doesn't have that sense, he doesn't know what he's trying to accomplish. He will have a laundry list of things to do, but he will have no sense of priorities, believe me, from Washington, because Washington will have as many priorities as today's headlines. So, you have to have a way to understand what your priorities are.

I was fortunate when I went out that I had that. I was able to have a pretty clear agenda about what our objectives were and what kind of relationship people were trying to build with the Russian Federation. I thought I was lucky in that regard, and it helped me to organize the Embassy.

Second thing I'd say is, if you have that, then you have to make the most of the assets you have in your mission. What I found, a man for whom I had the greatest possible respect and for whom I worked, was not actually a Russian hand, he was a Near East expert, Assistant

Secretary for Near East affairs when I worked for him. His name was Hal Saunders. Hal Saunders was an extraordinary diplomat and manager of bureaucratic work. He knew how to bring together all the pieces of the government to go after a certain objective. I learned a lot of that from him, and that's what I tried to do when I went to Moscow.

My second thing I think I would say to your ambassador is, be sure that all of your pieces in the Embassy know what the objectives are, trust them to contribute to them as they can, and assume that you have a very talented and good group to work with. If you do, you'll get there.

I think the third thing I would say is, you are going to a country with a complex, rich, difficult history, a culture that sees many things differently from ours. Understand that. Washington can only prosper in its objectives when you can explain to them how to get something done with this culture, which is different. You need to explain Moscow to Washington, and you need to explain Washington to Moscow. I think that was a very important part of the job. Certainly, promoting American interests and so forth was the key, but how you could do that most as an ambassador was essentially to be very effective in finding the places you could use commonality to move something ahead, as opposed to focusing on what divided us. That was probably important.

*Jill Dougherty*

Wonderful. I've always enjoyed and really benefited from what you have said over the years, and thank you very much, Ambassador James Collins. Really appreciate your talking with us.

*Ambassador Collins*

Jill, thank you so much. It's been a great opportunity, and I really appreciate it.

## Ambassador Alexander Vershbow (2001-2005)

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*We really saw opportunities, in the horrible tragedy, we saw opportunities to cement the kind of strategic partnership with Russia that we had been trying to build during the 1990s with Yeltsin. And of course we had, I think, tremendous public support for doing just that. I remember, I'll never forget, the outpouring of sympathy and solidarity by the people of Moscow. The whole country came converging on the old embassy building on Ulitsa Chaikovskovo with flowers, with candles, children leaving their precious teddy bears, all out of sympathy for our loss of so many Americans and other nationalities in the 9/11 attacks.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, thank you very much for being with us. Just looking at your history, 1997 to 2001, you were the ambassador to NATO and then, 2001 to 2005, ambassador to Russia. And I was very lucky to have worked that very same time in Moscow. I always appreciated your openness, and I learned a lot from what you said in our conversations. So, it's a pleasure to welcome you. Thank you very much for being here.

*Ambassador Vershbow*

It's my pleasure. I welcome this opportunity to reminisce and interpret what happened that we didn't see fully at the time.

*Jill Dougherty*

I'm glad you're saying that because that's exactly what I was thinking as I put together questions, and I was thinking how we could approach this. It really is, with the benefit of time, an opportunity to look back from this vantage point to see if there's something, as you said, that we missed or something that we could do differently or something that we could learn from. And I really appreciate this opportunity.

So, you know, that period, of course, was early Vladimir Putin. He comes in the year 2000. He had been around as prime minister previously, but all of a sudden, now he is president. And I was thinking back to that period, it was very promising. He was doing some economic reform. He looked like a man who had it together after a pretty chaotic period with Boris Yeltsin.

You yourself, I think, talked about an alliance with Russia. There was hope that there might be some type of alliance, but then by the time your tour was over, relations had really changed. I mean, we didn't have elections, obviously, difficulty with the United States view of those elections. We had the attack in Beslan and the way the Russian government handled that. We

had the war in Chechnya. There were many different factors but, looking back at that, why did it change and how much?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

Well, it was indeed an interesting time, and it did start on a relatively hopeful note. I arrived in Moscow in the summer of 2001 after having been at NATO and having launched the NATO-Russia cooperative relationship, which already had its ups and downs, including differences over Kosovo, but still, arriving in Moscow even before the events of 9/11, which were early in my tenure, we still had hopes that we were going to pick up where we left off, and even, maybe, do even better, because Putin was a much more stable character. He did seem to get it when it came to economic reform, he introduced a flat tax and generally began the process of nurturing a middle class in Russia. And he certainly did seem to be very pragmatic. Clearly, his background as a KGB officer was grounds for some wariness.

It was clear that he was a bit more nostalgic for the Soviet past than Yeltsin. He changed the National Anthem back to the Soviet Anthem soon after he became the acting president when Yeltsin resigned. So, we had our hopes of some continuing questions, but then 9/11 happened. And we really saw opportunities, in the horrible tragedy, we saw opportunities to cement the kind of strategic partnership with Russia that we had been trying to build during the 1990s with Yeltsin.

And of course we had, I think, tremendous public support for doing just that. I remember, I'll never forget, the outpouring of sympathy and solidarity by the people of Moscow. The whole country came converging on the old embassy building on *Ulitsa Chaikovskovo* with flowers, with candles, children leaving their precious teddy bears, all out of sympathy for our loss of so many Americans and other nationalities in the 9/11 attacks.

And of course, Putin was quick to seize on this, the first foreign leader to try to reach President Bush by phone, offering to help us and retaliating against what we're seeing as the perpetrators, Al-Qaeda, and, I think, at the popular level, I felt right from the beginning of my time there a feeling that the Russian people wanted a closer partnership with the West. They wanted to continue on the path of reform that had been started by Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and that part of my mission was to talk up the idea of a closer partnership, even an alliance, with a small 'a', we weren't ready to make it a treaty, but an alliance with the United States, an alliance with NATO, as the basis for the kind of strategic partnership that could make the changes at the end of the Cold War truly irreversible.

So, I gave lots of speeches. I was sought out everywhere I went by the media, invited all over the country to give speeches, and I was always accentuating the common interest, and even the common values, that could form the basis for this strategic partnership. But it was not too long after I started my tour of duty in 2001 that President Putin made clear that moving westward was not necessarily the direction he wanted to take Russia. I mean, right when I arrived in the summer of 2001, Russia was already in the throes of a battle over the independent TV media, and Putin was clearly moving to control and effectively muzzle the



more independent TV stations, including NTV. I gave lots of speeches on the importance of independent media, which I think caught the Kremlin's eye, that I was maybe a bit more of a campaigner for our values than previous ambassadors.

But the attacks on the media were just the first of a series of steps by Putin to begin to roll back a lot of the changes that had taken place in the '90s, to begin to put some pressure on the assistance and democratization programs that the U.S. government was running through our embassy. And it wasn't too long before I started to warn of a growing values gap between the United States and Russia, between the West and Russia, and that this could undermine the basis for the strategic partnership that both of our countries really needed and, I thought, both of our peoples really wanted.

So, started good; Bush and Putin, I think, had a reasonably good relationship when they first had their initial meetings. At the end of 2001, there was even this very warm and friendly meeting at Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, as well as an equally warm meeting on the margins of the APEC Summit and in Shanghai. But it was becoming clear that Putin was much more in a transactional mode. The idea of shared interests, shared values, he took as largely rhetoric, and he was looking for quid pro quos rather than thinking in a more lofty fashion about a strategic partnership with the United States and the West.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

It's hard, I think, to put your finger on exactly when things changed, and as you pointed out, there were a lot of different factors, but when you mentioned 2001 and 9/11, I was there at the time and I remember exactly what you're talking about, Russians coming up to the embassy, leaving little gifts, and there was real grief and I think solidarity with the United States.

But then, and this is before you came to Moscow, you were at that point the ambassador to NATO, but the ... NATO's bombing of Belgrade happened in, what was that, '99, and I remember the front of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in a very different situation. People were protesting. There was a lot of anger, and I even remember that period where there were a lot of Russian friends who, up to that point, had been, I'd say, maybe not pro-Western, but they were certainly open to the West and cooperation, and a curtain went down. It changed almost overnight.

So, I guess, what do you remember from your perspective at that time of the bombing of Belgrade and the Kosovo war, as you mentioned? And do you understand why Russia reacted so vehemently to what happened?

#### *Ambassador Vershbow*

I do remember that very well, though I was in Brussels. But working with the Russians was a part of my portfolio and how the U.S. and the other partners tried to work this Kosovo crisis. There was, remember, the Contact Group, with the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States and Russia trying to lead diplomatic efforts to solve the problem of the ethnic cleansing and the mushrooming humanitarian crisis with hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding

into Macedonia and other countries. So, I definitely was engaged on the Russian front, and we saw lots of visits by Madeleine Albright and Strobe Talbott to NATO, and looking back, it clearly was an important milestone in the downward evolution of the relationship, which kind of reached its nadir with Putin's speech in 2007 to the Munich Security Conference, where he basically made clear he was writing off cooperation with the West and moving to a much more confrontational stance. And we had the invasion of Georgia the year after and then the Orange Revolution, the Maidan in Ukraine and the invasion of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea.

But, at the time, I think we thought we'd kind of managed the Kosovo issue, maybe more than is seen with the benefit of hindsight now. The Russians clearly wanted to be part of the team as the crisis began to unfold in 1998. As part of the Contact Group, they were pretty much in full agreement with the diplomatic strategy, which was to put the pressure on Milosevic to end the ethnic cleansing, agree to a political solution, grant autonomy to Kosovo, and – here was the less agreed point – agree to an international peacekeeping force on the ground in Kosovo to enforce the deal.

So, the diplomacy went on for many months. It culminated in a final showdown at the French city of Rambouillet, and at that event, the Russians made clear they were not going to insist that Milosevic accept the peacekeeping force, and we, to our regret, parted ways. U.S. and the NATO allies went through with the threat to use force to compel Milosevic to accept the peacekeeping force, and Russia and we agreed to disagree.

And what was irritating for the Russians was the fact that NATO decided that it had no choice, given the humanitarian disaster that was taking place, to act even without the explicit authorization of the United Nations Security Council, which, of course, meant working around, circumventing Russia's veto in the Security Council. And they were clearly upset. Foreign Minister Primakov famously turned his plane around when he heard that the bombing had begun, and there was the protest outside the embassy in Moscow, as you said. But as I said, we thought we had it handled pretty well within a few weeks.

We assured the Russians that this was kind of an exception. We didn't disrespect their status as a Security Council member with a veto. This was extreme circumstances when hundreds of thousands of people could've died. And we pointed out to the Russians that they had voted on five or six other resolutions which did accept that this was a threat to international peace and security, which is the UN buzzword for justifying the use of force.

So, we said, you agreed implicitly that force was allowed, so let's look forward and try to find a solution together, and they did. Yeltsin, I think, still trusted Bill Clinton and agreed that Russia would actually help to try to persuade Milosevic to give in with the help of Prime Minister Chernomyrdin and Finnish President Ahtisaari we were able to bring the air campaign to a successful end in less than three months. And Russians helped with the diplomacy. They also then agreed to put their own troops under NATO command on the ground in Kosovo. So, it was a rough patch, but we thought we'd limited the damage and kind of were able to keep cooperation with Russia on track.

What I think happened in subsequent years, however, maybe magnified the negative view of these events in Russia, and certainly among the security elite that formed Putin's power base, because when we attacked Iraq in 2003, we did it again without a UN Security Council authorization and so it wasn't a one-off, as we had assured the Russian leadership. It was, in fact, becoming a habit to circumvent the Russians' Security Council veto, and so that, plus other issues that began to undermine trust, such as missile defense.

Of course, for me, the biggest watershed event was the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which is at the end of 2004, when I think Putin began to feel that all the West's talk of partnership was a smokescreen for a cynical plot to undermine Russia, to deprive it of its rightful domination over its neighbors, and even to bring about color revolutions all over the former Soviet space, including in Russia itself and ultimately topple the Putin regime.

So, Kosovo became part of this very hostile narrative, sort of the narrative of Western betrayal of Russia, and does, now, loom much larger in Russian rhetoric, right up to the present day. But I don't recall hearing all that much about it when I was ambassador, which was just two years after the bombing of Belgrade, so I think the passage of time has made them hate what we did even more than they did at the time.

*Jill Dougherty*

I don't think we can *not* talk about NATO expansion. That is something that has bedeviled the relationship almost since it happened. If anything, it's worse right now. Russia is furious, has been and still is, and there's division, even in the United States, among experts and Russia-watchers and others as to whether it was a good idea and you're the perfect person to ask about this because you were the ambassador to NATO. So where do you come down on this, really? And I know it's always a balancing act, but what do you say?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

Well, I'm a great believer that NATO enlargement was the right thing to do, particularly in the context of the events immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall, and I was very much involved in it before I went as ambassador to NATO, when I was working at the National Security Council in the mid-'90s, during the Clinton administration. And I was part of what was called the "Troika" with Daniel Fried, Nick Burns, who later was succeeded by Steve Pifer, a lot of familiar names who basically, at the direction of President Clinton and Tony Lake, the National Security Advisor, kind of developed a roadmap for NATO enlargement, which was a two-track strategy. It was about enlarging NATO to kind of rectify the wrongs of Yalta and bring the emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe into the Western family, into the institutions of the liberal order. "Europe, whole and free," all these wonderful slogans that have real historical meaning. But it was a two-track strategy which involved, together with NATO enlargement, a strategic partnership between NATO and Russia.

And the policy was worked out with our NATO allies and pursued quite deliberately to ensure that there was a place for Russia that would recognize its strategic importance. That was the

NATO-Russia Founding Act, signed in 1997. The creation of a permanent council, now called the NATO-Russia Council. And it was actually Putin who pushed for upgrading the NATO-Russia partnership during my time as ambassador when there was a NATO-Russia summit meeting in Rome, which issued a sequel to the NATO-Russia Founding Act and agreed that this permanent council would become not a bilateral, NATO-against-Russia, but a council of twenty sovereign states, equal states, trying to work together to address European security together.

So, I think the beginning of NATO enlargement, including the first round in the late '90s with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and the second round when the three Baltic States, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Slovakia came in, was handled very well, and while the Russians didn't like NATO, they didn't like NATO enlargement, I think they recognized we had gone the extra mile, even including assurances that we're not going to put nuclear weapons in the territory of new members, that we are going to limit the size of conventional deployments, and rely more on reinforcement and interoperability. So, I think we worked it out well.

Where I think we made mistakes was later on. And here, I think the Bush administration pushed the issue, not of actual membership but of just putting Ukraine and Georgia into the on-deck circle for membership in a thing called the Membership Action Plan. But pushing for that in 2008, so just a few years after the Orange Revolution, and the Rose Revolution in Georgia, and failing to get the rest of the allies to support what we were trying to do, just arriving at the summit saying we want this, and finding that the allies were just as opposed as Putin, who was in attendance at the summit meeting in Bucharest, I think that was very counterproductive, and it may have fueled Russian skepticism of, not just of NATO but of partnership with the West.

But I still think that if you're looking for the causes of the breakdown in relations, which are, indeed, at their lowest point since the height of the Cold War, no doubt about that, I point to other factors, including Kosovo, including Iraq, including our abrogation of the ABM Treaty and pursuit of missile defense, which we were able to show technically was not really directed against Russia, but we didn't do a very good job of handling the Russians, and it's still an irritant to this day.

I think NATO enlargement, particularly the early part of it, has become a central part of this revisionist narrative, but as I said, I think we handled it pretty well, and it was, in any case, strategically the right thing to do for countries that we had abandoned in 1945. It was important to bring them into the Western family, but to do it in a way that didn't alienate Russia. And I think for a time we succeeded in that regard.

*Jill Dougherty*

There is this theory, I think it's basically a Russian idea, which is, at the end of the Cold War, instead of expanding NATO or anything like that, that there should have been a complete rethinking of the relationship between Russia and the West and that there should have been some sort of an overarching security structure brought in. That there was no need for NATO

anymore because Russia was no longer a threat. You know, of course, this angle very well. What do you think of that?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

Well, I was involved in the decision and I think still it was the right one, that we had an organization that was very effective, which had shown in earlier periods that it was able to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances and that, given the fragility of the situation at the end of the Cold War and the potential for the Yugoslavias, where the opening up could become violent, including the breakup of the Soviet Union itself, that it was better to build on and adapt the institutions we had in a way that would be inclusive, would bring Russia into a common security architecture, as we like to say. And of course, it wasn't only about NATO. There were efforts in those days, in the early '90s, to adapt the Helsinki process, the CSCE, which was renamed the OSCE, to give it more of an operational character.

And this was the one organization where Russia and all countries in Europe all the way out to Central Asia were full members. And there was an effort to kind of energize the OSCE. Got off to a rocky start at the Budapest Summit in '94 when Yeltsin gave the infamous "Cold Peace" speech. But, I think, over the years, we did equip the OSCE to be much more effective in overseeing elections and doing post-conflict diplomacy and implementation of peace agreements and, of course, defending human rights and promoting open economies, since the Helsinki accords had three baskets. So, that became a useful adjunct, but I think the reformed and adapted NATO was essential. And we did everything to kind of turn the original mantra of NATO inside out.

Remember, people used to say that NATO was about keeping the Americans in, keeping the Russians out, and keeping the Germans down. Well, it suddenly became an instrument for bringing the Russians in and building a lasting security partnership. I still think that's a goal we should pursue, even though our relationships are so bad now; it's sort of just a vision beyond the horizon, but things could change. And I think ultimately trying again, maybe doing a little bit better with this NATO-Russia partnership could be part of a restoration of normal relations, even now with Putin still in power, or when he departs the scene.

*Jill Dougherty*

You mentioned human rights. And I know the Bush administration criticized the Clinton administration for too much attention to that issue, but how do you square that? How do you balance the respect for human rights, protection of human rights, and raw U.S. national security interests?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

It's a very difficult issue. And I've been involved in different times kind of trying to find the right balance because I started my career in the late '70s, I worked on the Soviet Desk, was involved in the defense of the rights of Soviet Jews to emigrate as things began to open up under Gorbachev. I was part of the human rights working group with former Assistant

Secretary of State Richard Schifter, trying to build a more cooperative approach to human rights, but it's always been difficult.

The Bush administration, when I was ambassador, did deliberately tread fairly lightly on human rights, more so than the Clinton administration; the Bush Freedom Agenda was several years into the future. I think the judgment was that with Russia also a victim of terrorism, homegrown terrorism in particular, although there were links to international terrorist networks, to the Chechen terrorists, that we should highlight the solidarity and the shared threats and challenges, and not harp too much on the brutality that they were applying in trying to end the Chechen conflict.

But, of course, it was not just what we said but what we were doing, and I think the Bush administration continued a lot of the programs – all the programs until the Russians turned them off – that had been launched in the 1990s, some by the Bush '41 administration, but mainly under Clinton, to promote democratization, rule of law, judicial reform, to help fledgling NGOs kind of learn how to organize and fundraise and, you know, promote their agenda, whether it was environmental protection or labor rights or women's rights.

And I think it was a very receptive audience when we started for those programs, even during the Putin years, and that's, I think, one reason why I felt it was my duty to continue to talk about democracy and human rights in my public statements and interviews because we had courageous Russians fighting for the Western values that we held dear.

I think it was the programs that ultimately began to get under the skin of Mr. Putin and Mr. Patrushev, who was the head of the FSB in those days. I think they began to view these assistance programs as an effort to undermine the Putin system, to promote opposition to Putin's leadership, and so, we saw, one by one, these programs shut down, in some cases, or the Peace Corps was told to leave Russia. It was a very sad moment because they were very popular, mainly teaching English or small business development in the hinterland, but the Russians said they weren't wanted anymore, not by the locals, but by Putin.

I think it's now clear that in today's relationship with this hostile view of the West as trying to undermine Russia, we have very little ability to influence events. We don't have these tools that we had in the '90s and the early part of the century, and we have to be realistic about how much we can accomplish. I think we have to be careful not to apply a strict linkage between negotiations on arms control, or trade and human rights, because we may end up tying our own hands much more tightly than is in our own interest.

But to the extent that we can still reach out through media, through social media, through what academic exchanges still do continue, sort of at a low level, even without the big U.S.-funded programs running any longer, we can hopefully get through to this younger generation, try to convince them that the West isn't Russia's enemy, that we're not trying to weaken Russia or deprive Russia of its status in the world, and that we have a lot more in common than divides us, whether it's dealing with pandemics or climate change.

There's plenty of things that Russians and Americans should be doing together, and maybe a younger generation, which may be showing a little bit of signs of restiveness, if you look at the protests in Khabarovsk or the support for Navalny, there may be a market for closer exchanges a few years down the road. So, we should try to keep the door open but be realistic about how much we can influence internal change in Russia.

*Jill Dougherty*

Let's talk about Putin a little bit because I think there are so many people, at least in the United States, who have this image of President Putin as running everything, he is the man in charge, and sometimes I think he wants to give that impression, but you've seen him, you've met him, you've observed him. You were there at the beginning of his presidency. How would you explain the power dynamic in Russia? How much does Putin actually control? If he doesn't control everything, who does? And you mentioned, early on in our discussion, his KGB background, security services, etc. Can you explain some of this dynamic?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

Sure. I'll give my version. There's a lot of theories. It's not a totally transparent system. But first, my impressions of Putin the man in those early years was when I would see him mainly during high-level visits. Ambassadors historically don't have real direct relations with the president, or with the general secretary, in earlier years, so I mainly saw him during high-level visits, but I saw him in public engagements and talked to people who did see him in different contexts, and I think he was impressive right from the early days with just how smart and self-confident he was in talking about the issues; he could kind of dominate the conversation, put his interlocutor on the defensive. He flaunted his knowledge, his superior knowledge, of the issues, but also, I think, it was clear that he relied too heavily on his intelligence services for information, a lot of which was fairly slanted.

But it was clear that he believed that Russia could only be ruled, could only be kept stable, with a strong centralized state, with a strong hand, that democracy wasn't suitable for a multiethnic, sprawling country like Russia. And he certainly viewed the West, I think, in zero-sum terms. There was a pragmatic streak to him. And he wasn't reckless. He knew his strengths and weaknesses. But as I was saying before, he did, I think, become convinced, certainly by the time I left Russia in 2005, that the West was trying to weaken and marginalize Russia, and that Russia had the right to strike back with any means available.

So, the system that he's put together is sometimes called a "kleptocracy" because, I think, having purged a lot of the oligarchs, the big business tycoons who exploited the chaos and the sell-off of the clapped-out Soviet economy in the '90s, having purged most of them, or tamed them, by setting the example of incarcerating Mikhail Khodorkovsky, he's basically assembled a new inner circle of new oligarchs who are all veterans of the intelligence services, old colleagues, who really form a kind of a directorate.

But Putin is clearly the decider. He's the first among equals. He plays, sometimes, rival power lords off against one another. He definitely doesn't trust his own people. He doesn't want to

have any real elections or real opposition. He believes, you know, "father knows best," that the strong leader and strong state basically decide what's in the interest of the people, will do enough to keep them economically content, and anybody who challenges the system will be dealt with quite severely, even with extreme prejudice as was the case with Boris Nemtsov.

So, it's not quite a single personalist dictatorship, but he's definitely the first among equals and calls the shot and uses the wealth of the nation, which is divvied up among these different cronies and clans, beneath each of these cronies as a way of kind of keeping everybody in check, playing them off against one another and holding the Sword of Damocles over them; if they misbehave, he'll do to them what he's done to Khodorkovsky and other enemies.

*Jill Dougherty*

I saw a quote from President Putin recently, where he said he believes essentially that the relationship will be bad for the foreseeable future. And as we know, he can be president legally until 2036.

*Ambassador Vershbow*

Mm-hmm (affirmative). At least.

*Jill Dougherty*

That's true. But when you talk with people in Moscow, many people say they have concluded that it's going to be sanctions, followed by more sanctions, followed by more sanctions, without any particular policy, but they're in it for the long run. And Putin, obviously, it appears, has concluded that he can get through that period. So, what is he thinking? Does he have a strategy, a long-term strategy?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

I'm not sure he has a strategy for getting out of this impasse. First of all, I think he's convinced himself, and a lot of the Russian elite have convinced themselves, that the West is to blame. They kind of don't do a very good job in looking themselves in the mirror when sort of looking at seminal events like the invasion of Georgia, even more so the annexation of Crimea, flagrantly breaking all the rules, changing borders by force and then lying about it, pretending that they don't have troops in Eastern Ukraine when there's thousands there, and the commanders are all Russian officers with their insignias peeled off.

So, they believe their own propaganda, but I think it goes deeper than that because I think given Putin's view that the West is really out to get them, the West is out to deny Russia its seat at the top table, that we're using democracy and color revolutions to undermine regimes in the former Soviet Union and in Russia itself, that we reject Russia's rightful claim to a sphere of influence in which it can dictate to its neighbors, that therefore, the West is to blame and the current deadlock is not going to be easily broken.

I think he actually uses this narrative that the Russians call the "Besieged Fortress" narrative as also a tool for maintaining his tight political control, for justifying the stagnant economy by



blaming the West for that and, of course, blaming the West for everything that has happened to Russia for the last 30 years, or going back even farther, with this whole revisionist history about World War II.

So, I think for reasons more on the Russian side than on our side, the current deadlock looks like it will go on for some time, and it might even be convenient to Putin. But I think there may be pressures from within, even in the next couple of years, to at least deescalate a little bit. As I said, the economy is stagnant; the sanctions haven't crippled Russia, but they've definitely hurt. There's very little foreign investment. It's all been compounded by the low oil price, but still, the Russian economy is in the doldrums and standards of living are definitely falling.

Also, his efforts to dominate his neighbors aren't going quite as well these days as they may have seemed to be going. Ukraine is still in a kind of stalemate in terms of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, but Ukraine continues to, more and more, orient itself towards the West, and I think psychologically, Russia has lost Ukraine; it's lost the Ukrainian people by its brutal treatment and propaganda and disinformation on top of that. Belarus is now an unexpected headache.

Russia doesn't want to legitimize another people's revolution, but it doesn't know quite how to steer events in a way that would keep Belarus under control or at least manageable. And now in the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, Turkey has staked out a strong strategic position. And while Russia got what it wanted in the short term with troops on the ground to separate the parties, it's perceived as having basically abandoned Armenia and let the Turks establish a strategic foothold in the former Soviet space, which is going to encourage other of Russia's neighbors to begin to look elsewhere for support than to Moscow.

So, a lot of reasons why he may be looking for a way to deescalate. He knows Biden isn't going to give him a free pass the way Trump did on interfering in our democracy. Biden will reunite NATO and probably forge a tougher policy on Russia, I think, if I read his statements correctly. So, Putin may be looking for a way out and that this could give a little bit more cover for the forces that are still there within Russia, kind of keeping their heads down, to start advocating a more constructive relationship with the West. So, it may not happen until 2036 - as you said, Putin could be president and he could be stubborn and not want to take any chances - but I think somehow, something's got to give a little sooner than that, and we should be ready for that. We should be showing Russia that sanctions *will* be lifted if the conditions that we set are met.

In the case of Ukraine, it's getting out of the Donbas, reintegrating that region into Ukraine, and agreeing to disagree for some years on Crimea. We're not going to solve everything at once, but I always say Donbas is the litmus test. But if he does that, we should be very quick, with our European allies, to lift the sanctions and show that virtue is rewarded, and over time, maybe we could start a virtuous cycle that would get us back to the good old days of the 1990s and the NATO-Russia partnership.

*Jill Dougherty*

I'm going to ask you about diplomacy in general, because your portfolio has been very heavy. I mean, these are the biggest issues, NATO, security, etc., and yet, I have an image of you at Spaso House, the Ambassador's residence in Moscow, and I think you were playing the drums, as I remember, at an event. And there were always ... the outreach to Russians always had to deal with culture, and so, I'm just wondering in your time in Moscow, how do you see the role of an ambassador balancing these very heavy and serious issues with the outreach to the people, the cultural understanding, which is so big and major between Russia and the United States. How did you personally balance that?

*Ambassador Vershbow*

Well, that kind of outreach is what makes the job a lot of fun, and I think it also makes an ambassador more effective, that makes an embassy as a whole, because it's not just one person; it's the whole team that can create a more positive impression of America, of America's role in the world. And just kind of find so many ways where our two peoples have points of contact that we might not even have been aware of.

So, I really enjoyed, first of all, traveling around the country, seeing the diversity of Russian culture and the splendors of Siberia and all these sorts of things. But meeting with the people, particularly with students, people who had traveled abroad, had been, perhaps, on one of our exchange programs, and loved to explain how it changed their perspective. Some people said it changed their lives. They decided to start a small business when they saw how mom-and-pop stores are the kind of engine of development in small-town America.

But also, the cultural opportunities were marvelous and having a resource like Spaso House through the ambassador's residence was too great to pass up. So, we had monthly concerts, mostly with Russian musicians, sometimes traveling American jazz artists would play there, even got my mother-in-law involved. She had a musical troupe in Boston that did cabaret and show tunes, and they came over, and they were a big hit.

But mostly it was Russian musicians, both jazz and classical, which created an opportunity to bring people from all different parts of Russian society together with all the different agencies represented in our embassy and in the wider American ex-pat community to get to know each other, to enjoy the same music, and then discover that somebody working at the Ministry of Justice and somebody from the American Chamber of Commerce had a shared love of opera, and then they became good friends, and this was a time when anything was really possible in this domain.

As I mentioned, I got invitations all over the country. I gave long speeches to universities. I visited small business ventures. I visited the secret nuclear sites that we were helping to clean up and prevent loose nukes. We took American artists and musicians on the road for tours in the Urals, and lots of things, and the whole embassy was very much involved in this.

And of course, for me as a wannabe-drummer to even play with the great Igor Butman Big Band at his club or at Spaso House was sort of gravy. And I think it puts a human face on the American ambassador. He's not just there telling them to shape up on the rule of law, but he likes to let his hair down and play some old Charles Mingus tunes with the Igor Butman Big Band.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, let's hope that there will be more of that in the relationship. And I want to thank you very much, sincerely, Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, it was really a pleasure, and as usual, I learned a lot and appreciate it very much.

*Ambassador Vershbow*

No, it was my pleasure. It's jogging my memory. We'll have to do this again sometime.

*Jill Dougherty*

Would love to. Thank you.

## Ambassador John Beyrle (2008-2012)

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*My dad is considered to be one of the few, maybe the only American G.I. who in World War II fought against the Germans in both the American and the Soviet armies .... He hid out for a couple of days until a Russian Tank Unit rolled into the small village, and then very carefully - my dad was a very shrewd guy - he found the right time to present himself to the Russian soldiers. He had a pack of Lucky Strikes cigarettes, and he knew a few words of Russian, two of which were amerikanskii tovarish, American comrade. Well, the Russian Soviet soldiers looked at him like he just dropped off of a Martian spaceship: "Who is this guy? Where did he come from?"*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador John Beyrle, thank you very much for being with us. Really great to be able to talk to you. I think the last time we had a big, long conversation was over chai and blini in St. Petersburg a few years ago.

*Ambassador Beyrle*

That's about right, yeah. That means it's too long.

*Jill Dougherty*

It is. Well, we'll get into it today, and I'm really looking forward to it. Just setting up where your career took you: you were actually the ambassador to Bulgaria, interestingly, from 2005 to 2008, and then July of 2008 until, I believe, January of 2012, you were ambassador to Russia. So, as I look at your background and I share some of this with you - you studied Russian, you were an exchange student in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad). You worked as a Russian-speaking guide on U.S. Information Agency exhibits in the old Soviet Union.

Then you have, I think, the most unique thing - and it's very personal - is your father's history. I want you to tell me about it, but he served with the U.S. Army in World War II, but he also served with the Red Army. So, you can tell me a little bit about that, and how did it affect you, as time went on, in your own career?

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, first, I'll tell my dad's story, and then we'll get into how it did or didn't affect me. My dad is considered to be one of the few, maybe the only, American G.I. who, in World War II, fought against the Germans in both the American and the Soviet armies. How did that happen? Well, he was an American, grew up in Michigan, volunteered after D-Day, joined the paratroopers. He was in the 101st Airborne Division, and he jumped into Normandy the night

before the D-Day landings on Utah Beach and Omaha Beach, but he was separated from his unit and he was captured about a day or two after that by the Germans.

He spent the next six months in a succession of German POW camps. He escaped three times; twice he was recaptured and returned to the camp. The third time he escaped was in January of 1945, getting close to the end of the war, last year of the war, and he was being held in a camp in what is now Poland, and the Soviet army was advancing towards Berlin. Berlin was only about 50 miles to their west. My father escaped for the third time, and he ran straight east because they were able to hear the cannons, the guns, they knew the Soviet army was close, and he knew that if he could link up with the Soviets, that he would be safe. He would be in Allied hands. Soviets were our allies, obviously, in World War II.

So, he hid out for a couple of days until a Russian tank unit rolled into the small village and then, very carefully - my dad was a very shrewd guy - he found the right time to present himself to the Russian soldiers. He had a pack of Lucky Strikes cigarettes, and he knew a few words of Russian, two of which were *Amerikanskii tovarish*, American comrade. Well, the Russian, Soviet soldiers looked at him like he just dropped off of a Martian spaceship: "Who is this guy? Where did he come from?" They found an interpreter. They established that he was an escaped POW, and they said, "Fine. Okay, well, POWs. We'll send you back to the collection point, and then you'll be going home."

My dad said, "No, actually I would like the chance to fight with you. I know you're headed towards Berlin. I never really got a chance to fight against the Germans. I spent my whole war in a prison camp and I have a few scores to settle. So, let me just ride along with you, and we'll meet up with the Americans in Berlin." Well, there was some discussion, obviously, but they did allow him to essentially join the tank unit. They actually gave him a Soviet machine gun, and he was riding on the back of a Soviet tank, but it was really an American Sherman tank. So, he was able to show the Russians the inside of the tank and help them decipher some things that they weren't able to figure out.

With that tank unit, he traveled with them, and they liberated the camp that he had escaped from. Most of the prisoners by that point had fled, but he was able to get into the commandant's office and get his identity papers, because he had nothing to prove who he was. The very next day after the liberation, he was wounded seriously in a German dive bomb attack. He was evacuated to a Soviet field hospital for about 10 days while he got patched up; he had serious wounds. During that time, Marshall Zhukov, who was the Supreme Commander of Soviet forces in World War II, was doing an inspection tour of the field hospital and he heard, obviously, that there was this crazy American who had volunteered to fight with the Red Army to Berlin.

And he came up to my dad, lying in the bed, and said, as generals do to sergeants, "What can I do for you, son?" My dad said, "Well, general, I'm too banged up to go to Berlin now. I think the best thing for me is to get home. But all I have are these German identity papers. This isn't going to get me very far. Could you give me some sort of document that will allow me to travel back to the American Embassy in Moscow?" Zhukov made some motion to his aide, and the

next day the aide colonel showed up and gave my dad a paper. My dad couldn't read it, it was in Russian. He described it as being a very thick, official looking paper. It had ribbons on it, and it said, in essence, "This is a passport for Joseph Beyrle, travel from this point in Poland to the American Embassy in Moscow." My dad called it the magic piece of paper.

He needed only to show this paper to someone in the Red Army, and they would immediately give him a seat in a convoy, give him a hot meal. He traveled on some trains and made his way back to Moscow at the end of February 1945. He was picked up by the NKVD, actually, and delivered to the American Embassy in Moscow, which, at that point, was located very close to Red Square. He turned himself in to the Marine guards, gave them his name, rank and serial number. They telegraphed back to Washington and discovered that, through a fantastic error, he had been erroneously listed as killed in action four days after D-Day. His parents in Michigan had gotten the dreaded telegram, which we still have in a scrapbook. They had served a funeral mass for him in the Catholic church where he'd gone.

The Americans at the embassy in Moscow said, "Who are you, again?" They weren't quite sure what they were dealing with. So, they actually held him in a different location under house arrest for two or three days because they knew they really only needed to establish his identity. They were pretty sure he was an American. So, in fact, the telegram did come from Washington establishing that this was indeed Joseph Beyrle, and he was repatriated back through Odessa, Cairo, Italy, New York, and he actually ended up back in the United States before the end of the war, and he celebrated V-E Day in Chicago. Remarkable story.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

It is almost beyond remarkable. It's incredible. When you went to Moscow, now you're the ambassador many years later, did people know about this story? Did you tell this story? I have to say, you know Russian, the *ruskii yazik*, better than anybody that I know. So, when you talked to them about this, did you talk about it as the ambassador? It must have been incredibly moving for Russians to hear this.

#### *Ambassador Beyrle*

Yeah. The Russians actually knew this story better than the Americans did. When I was in the Soviet Union, working on the exhibitions in Moscow in 1979, my dad actually came to visit me in Moscow, 1979. This was the first time he'd been back to Russia since that time when he turned himself in to the American embassy. A couple of journalists learned about this and wrote an article about him called "The American Soldier in the Soviet Tank." So, the story was fairly well known in Russia. It became better known in the United States after an author named Tom Taylor wrote a book about my dad called *Behind Hitler's Lines*.

But, by the time I got to Moscow as ambassador, the story was pretty well known. Some of the articles in the Russian papers at that point said - the headline was "Beyrle Appointed Ambassador." Then the subhead was "Father fought in Red Army against Hitler." So, this opened up a lot of doors for me early as an ambassador. I got in to see people probably that I would not have gotten in to see quite as quickly. People often asked me, "Is this the

reason that you decided to study Russian? Was your father's experience somehow behind your many travels to Russia?" The answer is no, it was really more of a coincidence, and we knew about my dad's experiences in the war, but it was really only after he came in 1979, and then after I joined the State Department, that this became a big deal. And it still is.

Right now, they're working on a possible screenplay for a film production of the story, in some way, so we'll see how far that goes.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

Fantastic idea. Yeah. So, going up now to your time: you get to Moscow and shortly after you arrive as the ambassador, we have the Georgian War, Georgia-Russian war. Brief but very significant. I wanted to ask you about that because there was, I think ... the debate always is, can the United States have an effect on Russia directly? Does it pull strings? But you actually did have some very serious diplomacy before that war really turned into a shooting war, where, as I understand it, Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, actually warned Saakashvili, the president of Georgia at the time, not to be tempted to respond to Russian provocations. He ignored it. He did it anyway, and I'd really be very grateful for some of your behind-the-scenes explanation of that diplomacy.

One other part of that too: in 2008, the Russian Army was not in very good shape. Weapons were not particularly great, even their uniforms, et cetera. After 2008, it appeared to be a wake-up call for Vladimir Putin to increase funding and reform the military. So, if you could give us some of that side of it, it would be very interesting.

#### *Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, you're right, I did arrive in Moscow as ambassador just about a month before the war broke out. I came in on July the 3rd to be at post in time for the big Fourth of July reception, held at Spaso House, the ambassador's residence. I wanted to be able to meet a lot of people in a short period of time, but I had come directly from ambassadorship in Bulgaria to Moscow. I mean, I'd made a quick stop in the United States, but I had not taken any vacation or any home leave for a long time. So, the understanding was that I would go to Moscow, I would have my initial meetings for a couple of weeks, and then I would come back to the United States, and I would have my home leave in August of 2008.

I should've known better. Anyone who's spent any time in the Soviet Union or Russia knows that August is often the time when unexpected and often catastrophic things happen. But what happened during that two-, three-week period that I was in Moscow having my meetings with Foreign Minister Lavrov, with journalists that I had known, other members of the Russian government. I had been the deputy chief of mission in Moscow just three years earlier than that, under Ambassador Sandy Vershbow. So, I already knew a lot of people in Russia, in Moscow, and as I talked to them, I very quickly picked up a sense of almost belligerence. There was a kind of militancy in the air that worried me, and a lot of it was directed against Georgia, against Saakashvili in particular.

I returned to Washington to start my home leave and I stopped in the State Department, and I talked to Dan Fried. Dan was someone I'd known for a long time. He was, at that point, the Assistant Secretary of State for European affairs. Dan said, "Well, how are things going in Moscow? What did you find?" I said, "Boy, Dan, they're really spoiling for a fight there." The exact words that I used for him; he quotes that all the time. And it was based on that, and a lot of other signals that we were picking up, that Secretary Rice and others in the Bush administration did contact Saakashvili and warned him that it looked as though the Russians might be setting a trap for him. Unfortunately, there's a lot of discussion, while we could do a program solely on the sources of that war, *kto vinovat* [who is guilty], who actually started it.

We'll leave that aside, but it's pretty clear that the Russians were not unhappy when Saakashvili attacked Russian peacekeepers that were in North Ossetia [South Ossetia], and that started in motion a whole series of events which led to the three- or four-day war. I was in Washington for most of that time, talking to Moscow via secure phone to my deputy who was still in Moscow at that point, and also attending a lot of high-level meetings, State Department and the White House. I actually attended the first meeting that President George Bush had after he returned from the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, which had taken place August 8th, almost the exact same day that the war broke out. He had spoken to Putin about this and warned Putin that this war, if it were going to break out, had better not advance very far.

Bush flew back then to Washington and, literally, the helicopter landed on the South Lawn, and he came into the Situation Room to talk about what had happened and, really, the first thing he did was to look at Condi Rice and say, "Who started this war, actually?" So, we briefed him, the intelligence community, Condi, various other people, the vice president was there, chairman of the joint chiefs, very high-level meeting, and there was a discussion at that point about how the United States would react. The war had already broken out at that point. The National Security Council had made up a list of potential actions that the United States would take, including sanctions, cutting off trade and, somewhere on that list, it said, "Recall the American ambassador from Moscow."

President Bush looked at that, and he looked across the table at me; he knew me because he'd come to Sofia when I was ambassador there. He said, "Recall the ambassador? Beyrle is here already." I explained to him why I was there. I said, "Mr. President, I think it's very important that I get back to Moscow as soon as I possibly can." There was still some discussion around the table about whether or not having me return would send a message. But at the end of the meeting, as we were getting up, I walked over to the president, and I said, "Mr. President, I feel very strongly. I need to be back in Moscow." He said, "You're right; you got to get back there."

The next time we had a meeting in the Situation Room at which the list was looked at, recalling the American ambassador from Moscow was off the list, based on what the president had said. So, I flew back to Moscow several days after that, and by that point, French President Sarkozy was involved in trying to effect some sort of peace agreement, which he managed to do, finally. But it was a very rough start for my ambassadorship. It looked as though, as someone said to me, "You really were handed the poison chalice here." It



looked as though I wasn't going to have much of an ambassadorship to get anything positive done.

*Jill Dougherty*

So, in 2008, you have the election of Barack Obama and, with it, the "reset" with Russia. I remember that very well when Hillary Clinton, then the Secretary of State, was at a meeting with Mr. Lavrov, who's the Foreign Minister, handed him that red button, which, unfortunately, was misspelled in Russian, but the "reset" began. So, I know it's been debated ad nauseam, that the critics would say, "Naive, you should never even have tried to do that. It will never work, et cetera." I want your opinion on it, but also, what was the, let's say, the strategy behind the reset, and is it at all possible that we could have another "reset," without that name, again with Russia?

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, we've had periods in our relationship with the Soviet Union and with Russia when the relationship goes from bad to better very quickly. I've actually been personal witness to this in my own diplomatic career. I arrived in Moscow in 1983 as a junior officer in the political section; at the time, Ronald Reagan had declared the Soviet Union an "evil empire," the Soviets had shot down a Korean civilian airliner over Sakhalin, walked out of the arms control talks. It looked as though the relationship was in terrible shape, and yet, two years after that, Ronald Reagan, deciding that he needed to work with Mikhail Gorbachev to lower the level of danger in the world stemming from the nuclear weapons that both the Soviet Union and the United States possessed at that point -

He decided it was time to work on a more productive relationship, at least in the area of arms control, and, obviously, with Gorbachev, he found a willing partner. Something akin to that happened in 2008- 2009 with Barack Obama and the then-President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev. The relationship between Russia and the United States at the end of the Bush administration was pretty bad. Although we did not levy sanctions against Russia over the invasion of Georgia, we certainly switched off a lot of the dialogue, a lot of the bilateral programs that had been going on and, as a consequence of that, we began to lose some of the visibility we had on the Russian nuclear arsenal through the agreements which allowed us to exchange data, to monitor their holdings, their movements.

And, I think, a large part of why President Obama decided that we needed to try a "reset" was that we seemed to be moving in the wrong direction with the Russian Federation vis-a-vis arms control, and especially nuclear arms control. So, I mean, it was very much, I think, tied to that, but, along the way, in President Medvedev, President Obama found something like a willing partner. He found someone who, I think, was much more simpatico to him just at the personal and professional level than Vladimir Putin would have been or was. At that point, I think Obama and Putin had not met. Putin, at that point, was already the Prime Minister. So, the administration made very clear that it was going to try to "reset" the relationship from the nadir, really, that it had reached at the end of the Bush administration.

As I said, these periods, whether you call them détente or peaceful coexistence, or the “reset,” they recur periodically in U.S.-Soviet, U.S.-Russia relations.

The problem is not that the periods don't produce results that are beneficial for the United States, for U.S. interests. Détente started the arms control program that we still have going on with Russia, certainly started space cooperation, and the “reset,” in addition to concluding the New START agreement, which was probably the main goal, also succeeded in a number of other ways. The Russians agreed to allow the United States and NATO to use Russian airspace and Russian air bases to resupply our forces in Afghanistan. We finally managed to get the Russians to do what they needed to do to get them into the WTO so that they would, at least, be within that rules-based organization.

We signed a 123 Agreement with the Russians, which allowed us to have a lot of cooperation in civilian nuclear programs, where our scientists really lead the world on both sides, and the more they can cooperate, or at least exchange information, the world is better; certainly, the United States' interests are better.

So, it's not that these periods don't produce things that are beneficial; the problem is that they don't last. The challenge is always, how do you make détente last? How do you make the “reset” into something which amounts to a fundamental change in the way Russia decides that it's going to have relations with the outside world? It's a very difficult thing to do.

So, the “reset” itself, I would say, succeeded. It didn't fail because it did all the things that I talked about, but it didn't last, and what happens, typically, when these periods that are productive and constructive end, is they're followed by a period with a lot of rancor, a lot of suspicion, a lot of hostility, and that's where we find ourselves right now. To your question, is it possible to have another “reset,” another period in which the United States and Russia find ways to cooperate in areas more substantial than those areas in which they differ (because we'll always have differences with Russia)? Of course, it's possible; we've done it many other times. It's never easy, but it often happens at the time when there's a change of leadership in one or the other country.

So, we're on the threshold of a new administration in the United States as we talk right now, December 2020. So, even though Russia is probably not going to have a new leader anytime soon, I think President-elect Biden is coming in, not with an idea of resetting the relationship, but of trying to find areas in which Russia and the United States can cooperate, despite the fact that we have large and fundamental areas of disagreement, which aren't going to go away.

*Jill Dougherty*

Speaking of that, again, things could change because we are right on the verge of the expiration of the New START agreement, which was the arms control agreement that was negotiated when you were the ambassador, and we don't know how that will turn out. It looks as if both sides might be able to reach agreement - we'll leave that for history - but it kind of

raises a broader question, which is, traditionally, the Soviet Union and Russia, with the United States, has always had its relations based on arms control or at least nuclear issues, even sometimes, let's say, enemies who were both armed with nuclear weapons, but it's always been the basis of the relationship.

Do you see that continuing right now? Because, even if New START is allowed to continue for the next five years, it's still the last remaining arms control agreement between the two countries. Do you think that arms control will remain the mainstay, or could the relationship go off into different directions and be based on different elements?

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, I think for the foreseeable future, nuclear arms control – arms control security issues – will continue to be a center of gravity for a long time, the center of gravity in U.S.-Russia relations, but the relationship has to be built on more than that to be sustainable. Two areas that I see as absolutely essential are the continuation of commercial and economic cooperation, trade, and the cyber realm. The cyber realm, in particular, is one in which Russia and the United States, I think, have a responsibility to try to work together to establish some sort of rules of the road, because the cyber realm, right now, is very largely unregulated; in terms of relations between nations, you simply don't have doctrines even in individual countries.

In our own country, I don't think we've quite decided yet whether we want to be *primus inter pares* in the cyber realm, or whether we're willing to negotiate with other countries so that we reach a kind of equilibrium the way we did in arms control with the Soviet Union. But Russia, as a major player in this field, has to be a part of that conversation, and, because Russia and the United States have a track record, have a history, have habits of cooperation in the arms control sphere, which has some similarities to what we're talking about in terms of rules of the road in the cyber realm, I think it's not inconceivable to think that Russia and the United States could work well together in a multilateral setting with other nations to help establish some of these rules of the road because, if we don't do this, we're going to have a very, very bumpy 21st century.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yes. You know, I wanted to return to Dmitry Medvedev, because it's a very interesting chapter in relations. So, Putin had been in office, I think, for two terms, he steps aside, he becomes the Prime Minister; Medvedev comes in, becomes the president for a couple of years, and then the switcheroo happens again. Now, you could say, ironically, or, let's say, you could make the argument that that was simply all planned in advance. That Medvedev was just kind of a figure that was there, a place holder for a while, and then Vladimir Putin comes back.

But it does, and you began to allude to this, it does appear that there was a budding relationship between President Obama and President Medvedev. They're both younger leaders; they were both interested in new developments, technology, et cetera. Was it naive

to believe that you could deal with Medvedev if Vladimir Putin was constantly lurking behind the scenes or was there really this brief moment where relations kind of changed, and then Putin returned to the scene?

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, I think it would have been naïve if indeed we thought that Putin was just out of the picture and we needed to deal with Medvedev and with Medvedev only. But the Obama administration, we in Moscow at that time, knew very, very well that Vladimir Putin was still very, very active, and that there were, probably, no serious decisions that Dmitri Medvedev took that he didn't check with Putin on, get a green light for. That said, I think it's pretty clear in retrospect now that, especially in the foreign policy realm, Putin did grant Medvedev a certain amount of autonomy to try to build this better relationship with the United States, which is something that Russia is always interested in. This is one of the points of leverage that I think we'll have with Russia for a very long time.

They're intensely interested, let's say, in not having a terrible relationship with the United States. They realized that's not in their interest, and I can imagine that Putin, in his conversations with Medvedev – Medvedev had some ideas on how he wanted to do this. He reported on the outreach that he'd gotten from Obama, and Putin probably said, "Do you want to give it a try? Go ahead, knock yourself out." But keeping a very, very close eye on what was happening, obviously. This made it very, very difficult for the Obama administration because he couldn't not deal with Medvedev. Medvedev was the de facto President of Russia. He was the man with the titular power.

And, if we had just looked over his shoulder and done everything kind of offstage with Putin, I don't think Putin even would have stood for that. He would have said, "No, you need to be dealing with Medvedev." In fact, there's a case that I remember where we were concerned about the fact that Putin and Obama hadn't spoken in a while and the idea came that, since, at that point, the United States was bidding on the Summer Olympics, Chicago was in the running, Putin had already succeeded in getting the 2014 Winter Olympics for Russia. They hadn't happened yet, but he was a success at that. So, the idea was, why don't we have President Obama call President Putin and just ask him for some pointers. Say, "How did you pull this off? How could I, Obama, learn from your success, your experiences in winning the Olympics for your country?"

So, we set up the call and he called Putin. Obviously, the purpose of the call was set ahead of time, they talked about it for a little while, but it wasn't too long before Putin said, "By the way, Medvedev is here. I didn't want this conversation to take place without the President of Russia knowing that it happened." So, we got some interesting signals from Putin on that score, too, that we had to deal with. But my own feeling on this, Jill, really, is that, I mean, there's a big question about, and you mentioned it at the beginning, how much of this was arranged in advance? My own feeling on this – and it really is just a guess as good as anybody's guess until either of these two men write their memoirs, if they will – my feeling is that Putin probably saw it in his interest to keep Medvedev guessing a bit.

If he had said to Medvedev, "All right, you're going to be president for four years, and then I'm coming back," he would have dis-incentivized Medvedev in a certain way. He might also have pushed Medvedev to try to do some things very quickly in the short window of time, because Medvedev was much more of a reformer, much more of a pro-Western mind than Putin was. And as long as Putin could keep Medvedev thinking that he might have a chance for a second four years, he would be able to exercise more control over him. I remember very well when I was in Moscow, when Putin announced that, in fact, there would be this switcheroo, *rokirovka* in Russia, using the chess term for castling, and you needed only to look at the expression on Medvedev's face, sitting in the audience, listening to Putin saying that this had all been arranged ahead of time, to make you wonder whether or not Medvedev was really in on all of this from the beginning.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

Those are the fascinating questions, aren't they? About how power works in Russia, how much control President Putin actually has? And I wanted to ask you, in fact, I think some in the West think President Putin is an extremely powerful leader. He's got his hand at the throat of everybody. He is the decider, he is the person, and yet there many times are these delicate balances that he has in continuing his power, making sure that he is manipulating or avoiding being manipulated by people. This is such a broad question, but how does that work? How does power work in Russia, and how much does President Putin actually have in his hands?

#### *Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, I think one of the mistakes that we make vis-a-vis Russia, especially today, is in casting the Kremlin as a kind of monolith of power in Russia. The presidential administration, the presidency...obviously, given Russia's history, the presidency is an extremely powerful institution, but it is not all-powerful. There are a number of power centers, in business, among the oligarchs, in the security services, in the military, that any Russian president, be it Medvedev, Putin, or whoever might succeed them, will have to deal with.

I saw this very clearly while we were negotiating the START Treaty. We had a really tough time getting some of the details of telemetry, I mean, very technical stuff having to do with monitoring and counting rules, and there was a lot of frustration in Washington, I remember. Maybe the Russians really don't want this agreement, maybe Medvedev really isn't being straight with us when he says, yes, this is a goal for him. I remember talking to Mike McFaul who at that point was President Obama's advisor on the National Security Council, and I said, "Mike, you know, it's very clear that the Russian military is not on board." It was very clear to me from conversations I was having with people in Moscow.

The Russian military is not fully on board with a redo of the START Treaty and we're going to have to take that into account. We're going to have to factor that in as we figure how quickly we can move on some areas, and people have to understand that Putin can't simply dictate to these people, that they feel this is their field, their area, and they're going to want to have a say. And I remember Mike saying, "Would you write a cable about that? Write a cable

back to Washington making exactly those points, because I need to be able to use those points in my discussions, not only with the president, but with the inter-agency in Washington," which was also getting a little bit restless as to whether we were just spinning our wheels on a potential New START Treaty.

So that's a very good example, I think, of how the sort of mythologized view of Putin as a dictator, as a Stalin, is just not really hitting the mark completely.

*Jill Dougherty*

Were there moments in your diplomatic career from Moscow where you warned off the administration from something? Because right there you were giving your very seasoned and deep understanding of what was going on in Russia. Were there moments where you said stop, this is not a good idea?

*Ambassador Beyrle*

You know, it's interesting. When you are the ambassador far away from Washington, sometimes the bigger job that you have is not managing your relations with the country you're accredited to. The bigger problem is managing your relations with Washington, and you have, sometimes, a better view of what's happening in Moscow and in the Kremlin than you do of what's happening in the councils of the inter-agency in Washington. This is a problem, maybe some of the other ambassadors commented on it, too, it's one of the trickier aspects of being an ambassador, but I was very lucky because I had in Bill Burns, who was Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs and my immediate predecessor as ambassador to Russia, I had an incredible wing man, because Bill was extremely plugged in to what was happening in Washington and he was also very aware, almost intuitively, on the effect this would have in Russia and what I, as ambassador, needed to know.

So, Bill and I were phone buddies on the secure phone a lot, and I think that probably obviated some of the cables that I would have written saying, "don't do this," because Bill and I saw the forces gathering and we were able to head them off before I needed to send in a front-channel dissent.

*Jill Dougherty*

Fascinating. Speaking of which, what advice would you give to future ambassadors to Russia from the United States?

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Oh, a couple of things. First, don't confuse the Kremlin with the Russian people. I think there's - because Russia is so vast, so enormous, and because an ambassador and an embassy can't be everywhere, can't be doing everything at once - I think there is a temptation, and there's an important reason for it, to focus on what's happening in Moscow, what's happening in the Kremlin, but you can't do that at the expense of the rest of the country. This used to be much more difficult than it is now because with modern communications, I was the first ambassador to have a blog.

Mike McFaul, my successor, tweeted quite a bit, all ambassadors since then, John Tefft, Jon Huntsman, Sullivan now, they use social media to communicate directly with the Russian people, and also - and this is really important - I hope, to listen to the Russian people, because when I had a blog, I would send out my blog in Russian talking about what I'd been doing, but I would stay up late at night, reading the comments that people would send in, reacting, and I learned an incredible amount about the Russian people. Maybe there weren't so many haters in those days; many of them were very, very thoughtful comments that gave me a different perspective.

So, one piece of advice is focus on the Russian people, try to understand how the Russian people feel, because sometimes, sure, maybe they're 70% in favor of Putin, but there's something else at work there, too, in terms of what their long-term aspirations for their country is. Probably, there's nothing more important than that, I would say.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

Your time in Moscow as ambassador really coincided toward the end, as you were preparing to leave, it coincided with that period of the end of 2011, the beginning of 2012, when you did have protests on the streets of Moscow, and you had the Bolotnaya Protests, as they were called, and that has continued to be a significant factor in Russia's present history right now. You have had, just over the past year, 2020, you've had a number of demonstrations scattered throughout the country, and they are on various subjects. It could be environmental issues, local issues. There was one about a church that they wanted to build in a park that people loved. So, people gather together and actually fight it and bring it to Moscow.

So, I guess what I'm asking is, and it picks up from what you're saying, listen to the Russian people and realize the government is not necessarily the people, but looking broadly at this down the years, where do you think we are going with this, what I would call, a nascent civil society in which people are really doing things for themselves. How do you interpret it, and where do you think it's going?

#### *Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, it's definitely one of the more positive developments in the last 30 years since the Soviet Union fell apart. There is a definite feeling on the part of many Russians that they can effect some change in their lives, but usually at the local and the regional level. People still go out and protest about their unhappiness about what's happening in the Kremlin, but I think the Kremlin, frankly, has become very adept at managing, controlling that to be sure that it doesn't grow, and certainly it has very little effect on what the Kremlin decides to do or not to do. But, at the regional and the local levels, governors and mayors do have to listen to the voice of the people much, much more than the Kremlin does, frankly. I mean, the Kremlin does a lot of public opinion polling, make no mistake, they are very tuned in to what the Russian people are grumbling about.

But it's on the local level that people can form associations, ecological NGOs, for example, and really make their government more accountable to them. This is something that is very, very unusual in Russian history. Throughout Russian history, the government has been many things, but almost never fully accountable to the people. So, if you have, over the past 30 years, a growing number of Russians who have had the experience of seeing their voice mean something at some level, and not just at some level, a level that actually is maybe more important to them than how the country as a whole is being run, then that has a very important, I think, transformative effect on the character, on the psyche of the people.

You know, I had a discussion once with a Russian journalist who put this to me in vivid terms that I've never forgotten through an analogy, which I think you'll be amused by. He said, "You need to think of Russia as an enormous opera house, and the Kremlin, the people in the Kremlin, are on the stage and they are performing for the people in the parterre, in the orchestra seats, the expensive seats, and that's the elite, and they're performing for the elite and the elite is clapping, but the elite is looking over its shoulder up in the third, fourth, fifth balcony at the people..." - this is not my word, this is the Russian journalist's - "at the people with the muddy boots, and they're paying attention, looking over their shoulder because they want to hear the first instance in which those boots start to stomp, in which people start to whistle derisively, because that is the real voice of the people that, because of the size of Russia, everyone in power, everyone in the elite, ultimately needs to fear and certainly needs to be paying attention to." Is that not an amazing analogy?

*Jill Dougherty*

It is!

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Muddy boots. Anyone who's ever been in Russia at a speech, I remember going to a speech once where Zhirinovsky was talking on stage and he talked, and he talked, and he talked and pretty soon that rhythmic clapping started, Russians call zakhlopivat'. They clapped him off the stage. That's what the people in the Kremlin and the Russian elite are constantly on guard for.

*Jill Dougherty*

Great analogy. Fantastic. You know, I have one more question, and you've been very generous with your time, but bringing it back to the United States and Russia, President Putin, I think it was last week or so, said, "I think these bad relations are just going to continue forever, for the foreseeable future." And you and I know that when we talk with Russian friends, many of them feel that the punishment that they're getting from the West, specifically sanctions, are going to go forever, that no matter what they do, they will never be able to meet the requirements, and that we are doomed, you know, to a very fraught relationship for the foreseeable future. So, do you feel that that really is true? I know we've had ups and downs over decades, but do you feel that we are really in for difficult times with Russia?



*Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, this is an incredibly cyclical relationship. It's hard to really think of a great power relationship over the last 100, 200 years, which has seen the ups and downs that Russia and the United States have, and this is a very consequential relationship, and I think both countries realize that at some level, that there is a global responsibility because, if only because of the nuclear arsenals that we both possess, that we need to manage the relationship in the most responsible way that we can. It's almost an obligation that we share with the Russians.

I think that with regard to sanctions, the Russians are not wrong to think that the sanctions that have been written into law in Congress will be very, very difficult to change over time. I'm sure many of my colleagues have talked about the famous instance of the Jackson-Vanik sanctions which were in place in Russia long after Jewish immigration towards Israel, which the Jackson-Vanik sanctions were designed to promote, long after those immigrations were happening, were a fact, in fact, there were more people coming back to Russia from Israel, and yet the Jackson-Vanik law was still on the books.

But I think there is an understanding that, for sanctions to be effective in changing the behavior of a country - because that is what sanctions are ultimately aimed at, getting the person you're sanctioning to do something different than what he's doing right now - I think there's a growing understanding that sanctions need to be tied to some sort of diplomatic dialogue. You are not going to get the other side to agree to do things differently until you sit down with them and explain to them how things are tied together, what one or two steps on their side might result in on our side. After all, we were sanctioning the hell out of Iran for many, many years. We didn't actually get them to agree to control their nuclear weapons program until we sat down and negotiated with them in a multilateral format.

So, I think, because of that, because we built up such a leverage on the sanctions front, that we'd be crazy not to try to use that leverage through some sort of dialogue. That dialogue will probably lead us to open up the relationship in other ways that have been shut for a long, long time, the civil-nuclear cooperation that I talked about earlier, for example. And that eventually will lead, I think, not to another huge peak, but to something that looks a bit less cyclical, a bit less oscillating than the ups and downs that we've all experienced over the last decade. Sometimes I feel like I've had the front seat on that rollercoaster, and sometimes your stomach feels a little rough.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, Ambassador John Beyrle, thank you very much for all of this. I have to say that, when I talk to my Russian friends, you have a very high, let's say, rating in Russia as one of the rare ambassadors who really personally understands the country, and many people respect you there and here. So, thank you very much for joining us.

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Well, thanks, Jill. I wish that were true. One of my predecessors once said, "There are no experts on Russia in the United States, there's only varying degrees of ignorance." So, if my level of ignorance is less than average, then I feel good.

*Jill Dougherty*

Thank you.

*Ambassador Beyrle*

Bye Bye.

## Ambassador Michael McFaul (2012–2014)

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*We said we're not going to check our values at the door in order to negotiate with the Russian autocratic regime. We were pretty blunt. If anybody knows me, they know that I speak pretty bluntly about these things, and it's not my first rodeo dealing with Russian officials, 2009, I've been at this for a long time. We didn't call Medvedev a democratic leader of the free world; we didn't praise him. We said, "We're going to do this deal here, and then we're going to talk about these other things where we have disagreements."*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador Michael McFaul, thank you very much for joining us for the Ambassadorial Series. It's great to see you again. I think we've seen each other in Moscow, and Washington, and probably a number of other places, but really good to see you. And you had a long academic career. Then you went into the government. You became an ambassador. And then, when you came out, you went back into academia. And you really, I think, you can definitely say that you are an expert in the Soviet Union and in Russia.

You also were on the National Security Council. So, a lot of experience dealing with this country. Just for a note for our viewers, Mr. McFaul, Ambassador McFaul, was the ambassador from 2012 to 2014. And so, Ambassador McFaul, I have to say, anytime we hear the word McFaul, we think of reset, and I really want to get into that. You are the godfather, the creator of the reset. I think you can say that. What were the assumptions under that, underlying that approach? Did you think that there would be any fruits from it or any faults? Anything that you did not get that you wanted to get?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Well first, Jill, great to see you again. Thanks for having me. I love all the books you have behind you, by the way – a lot of Russia books there.

To your question about the word “reset,” let's first make things clear. It was President Obama's policy, not my policy, because there are no footnotes in government, that I learned very early on, compared to academia. The first time he used the word, by the way, I remember ... I know, I remember it very vividly, it was during the transition. It was in a television interview; I think it was *60 Minutes* in December 2008. And I was already working on the transition team, so I had helped to write those talking points. But when he said it, it rang true to us. Denis McDonough, one of my colleagues who's now back in the government, I remember getting an email from him. It said, "Hey, that word sounds like what we're trying to do." And it was after that moment that we began to use the word to describe our policy.

And the next big iteration of that, by the way, was Vice President Biden at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009 gave a major speech. And that was really the first outlines of what the reset, to our mind, was all about.

Conceptually it was pretty simple. The idea was this: that we're not going to cooperate with Russia on everything. There are issues that we are going to have radical disagreements. Number two, we were skeptical of the idea that Russia ... This is back in 2009, I want to remind people. We already then were skeptical that Russia was transforming internally to become more like a democratic society or eager to join the liberal international order. So those were things that other presidents thought about, as you know well, right? Those are things that Ronald Reagan thought about.

President Clinton was probably the most vested president in trying to help reform at home and integration abroad. But by the time we got to 2009, we didn't think there was much opportunity there. But there were certain issues where we believed, where President Obama believed, that through engagement with President Medvedev, you could achieve outcomes that were good for Russians and good for the United States.

It was never - I really want to emphasize this because I think it's oftentimes misunderstood, at least in my mind. I'll let Barack Obama speak for himself, although I just read his book and I know we agree. It was never about "improving" relations with Russia. I think that's a ... Sometimes people think this is our improving, or getting tough, or weak. I don't like any of that language, with respect to Russia or China, any other country. I think it's really misleading. It was about very concrete objectives that we thought we could achieve, principally through engagement.

So, for instance, what was the essence of that? The New START treaty. We thought it was good for the United States to sign a New START treaty with Russia, which President Obama did with President Medvedev in 2010, reducing by 30% the number of nuclear weapons in the world. And, by the way, we even got it ratified by the U.S. Senate. In many ways that negotiation was harder than the one with the Russians, but we got it done in 2010.

Northern Distribution Network, a more obscure outcome of the reset, but at the time, in 2009, we were seeking to increase our troops in Afghanistan, but we were heavily dependent on Pakistan for our supply routes. Ninety-five percent, as I remember, went through Pakistan. We thought that was dangerous, so we wanted a new route through the north, through Russia, and we agreed with President Medvedev to open that up. By the way, very important to us when, three years later, we violated Pakistani sovereignty to go kill Osama Bin Laden. It would have been very difficult to do that action without having an alternative supply route into Afghanistan.

Sanctions on Iran. We thought that, in order to get an Iran nuclear deal, the predicate for that was increased pressure, multilateral pressure. We were big multilaterals in the Obama administration. And so, we did that with Russia, and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, in

2010, was the most comprehensive multilateral sanctions against Iran ever. Could not have done that without cooperating with Russia.

And I could go through a longer list, but that was the essence of what we were trying to do when we launched the reset back in 2009.

*Jill Dougherty*

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And yet the critics ... When you say the word "reset," right now at least, it really has a pejorative connotation. I mean, most people, at least even if they support it, they would probably be a little skittish about using the word these days. And critics said it was "hopelessly naïve."

And then, I remember I actually was working with CNN at the time when Secretary Clinton met with Mr. Lavrov, the foreign minister, and presented that button, and Lavrov was kind of dismissive, as he often is, and it was not a high moment at that point. So, I know you have just made the argument, but make the argument to me again, why wasn't it naïve that things could change?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Well, I'd say a couple of things, to elaborate. In addition to seeking win-win outcomes with Moscow, and I want to remind, with President Medvedev, because I'm going to get to that very important distinction in a minute, we also said two other things that people forget. In fact, you can go back and read the vice president's speech, it's there. We said we're not going to trade our interests or our relationships with other countries in order to reset relations with Russia. And high on our list back then was Georgia and Ukraine. And the vice president said it very explicitly in the Munich Security Conference.

And, number two, we said we're not going to check our values at the door in order to negotiate with the Russian autocratic regime. We were pretty blunt. If anybody knows me, they know that I speak pretty bluntly about these things, and it's not my first rodeo dealing with Russian officials, 2009, I've been at this for a long time. We didn't call Medvedev a democratic leader of the free world; we didn't praise him. We said, "We're going to do this deal here, and then we're going to talk about these other things where we have disagreements." And on that list of disagreements were issues like Georgia, were issues like the unjust arrest of Mr. Khodorkovsky, were about human rights violations. When Mr. Navalny was unjustly charged, we called that out.

In other words, it was all of those things at the same time, and I think there's an analogy, he recently just passed away and was a really important mentor of mine for many decades, it was George Shultz. It was George Shultz. If you go and you read his memoirs, which I think is the bible of diplomacy, I highly recommend it for anybody wanting to know how to think about diplomacy, one of the best books ever written about diplomacy. Chapter 27, if I'm not mistaken, maybe it's 29, is called "Reengaging the Soviets," right? Doesn't that sound like "reset?" "Reengaging the Soviets."

And if you go back and you read what George said in that chapter, he was writing about 1982. He was not writing about the easy days in the Gorbachev era, when it was easy to engage Gorbachev. He was writing about the old days, the Brezhnev days, when he thought it was a mistake not to talk to ... remember, they called that regime the "Evil Empire." He said it was a mistake not to talk to them about interests that we had in common, and back then it was nuclear weapons, not unlike what it was in 2009. But, don't check your values at the door, and pursue other things not linked to that engagement with Russia and so that's kind of ... to me, that was the model of what we were trying to do.

Now, to those that say we were naïve, I would say you've got to run, what we call in academia, the "counterfactual." What would you have done in 2009, say, no engagement with Russia? What would that have meant? That would have meant no New START treaty because the old START treaty was expiring in 2009. That would have meant no supply routes through Afghanistan. Maybe we wouldn't have been able to take out Osama Bin Laden as a result of that. That would have meant no new sanctions against Iran, which I think was a necessary predicate for the Iran Nuclear Deal, which I think was very good for American national interests.

And, by the way, we were true to our words. We did not check our values at the door. The first summit that we went to Russia with ... by the way, modeled after Ronald Reagan's summit in 1988, very deliberately so. The president, of course, met with President Medvedev. He spent a whole day with him; he had dinner with him the night before. Government-to-government engagement. The next day we went first to go see Mr. Putin, he was the prime minister at the time. Had breakfast with him, so still engagement with the government and, for the remainder of the day, it was all engagement with non-governmental actors.

The president first gave a speech at the New Economic School. Then we went and met with business leaders. Then we met with civil society leaders. And he ended his day meeting with Russian opposition leaders, including people that have since been assassinated. Boris Nemtsov was there, Garry Kasparov. In other words, we weren't just talking that we were going to engage, what we called "dual-track" engagement. We did both.

And it ended, I want to be clear, not because we failed. We didn't fail. We got a lot of things done. Things that I think are good for the American people. And I haven't gone through the long list, by the way. Three-year multiple entry visas. I don't know, Jill, do you have one?

*Jill Dougherty*

Yes, sir.

*Ambassador McFaul*

Well, I did that. We did that! That's another consequence of the reset. We didn't have that before. Trade and investment went up by 40% or 50%. By the way, in 2010 at the peak of the

reset, 60% of Russians had a positive view of the United States and 55% of Americans had a positive view of Russians. And there were a lot of things that were happening.

What ended it was not anything we did wrong, in my view. It was that Putin came back to power, and Putin did not believe in win-win outcomes. It was very clear, from our first meeting with him, that the win-win days were over. He thought of the United States as an enemy. By the way, I think he still does. And he conceptualized bilateral relationships, especially with us, in zero-sum terms, not win-win outcomes, and therefore, that made it more difficult to do new cooperative ventures with him.

And then the second very important historical event that helped end the reset was Russians. They weren't interested in the reset. They were interested in free and fair elections, and in December of 2011, there was a stolen election, falsified kind of in the normal ways that previous Russian elections had been, but this time around, because of smartphones, and VKontakte, and Facebook, and Twitter, that falsification was exposed, and 500 people, and 5,000, and then 200,000 Russians went out on the streets of Moscow and Saint Petersburg demanding free and fair elections, and Vladimir Putin blamed us.

He said that we were fomenting this revolution against him, and against that backdrop, it was very difficult to find cooperative outcomes with President Putin after he came back in power in 2012. We did, on occasion, and I'm happy to talk about that, but for me, the reset ended in September of 2011, which was the day that Vladimir Putin announced that he was running for reelection.

In fact, I remember very vividly telling my boss at the time, Barack Obama ... I was working at The White House then, to remind your viewers. I spent three years, first at The White House before going to Moscow, and, you know, in a meeting I had with the president, I said, "You know, we had a good run. We got some good things done, but that chapter is over."

*Jill Dougherty*

And that chapter was over, and Mr. Medvedev, the old switcheroo was going to take place. Mr. Medvedev was going to go into the office of the presidency, occupy it for a while, and then Vladimir Putin would come back. So, it does raise that issue, and I just want to drill down on that - essentially you are blaming this on Vladimir Putin, even though technically Medvedev was the president. Is it fair to say that? That it was Vladimir Putin's fault?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Well, when President Putin came back to office in 2012, that's when the reset ended, to be clear. In Medvedev we actually had somebody that cared about the reset. In many ways, the reset was more Medvedev's policies than ours. I think that's frequently misunderstood in the West as well. You have to remember that Medvedev didn't achieve a lot as president. His biggest achievement, as president, was the reset. And the argument that he had back to his constituents at home, including the most important constituent, his prime minister, is that this was a good cop/bad cop arrangement that served Russia's national interests.

And remember, Medvedev was a very ambitious guy back then. He was not planning to leave the office of the presidency. We now know that he had to, but that was not his view. I met with Medvedev two dozen times, including right up until the old switcheroo happened. He was not planning to step down. He had all the intention in the world of running for a second term, and his biggest argument was that he was the guy that would engage with the United States. By the way, Europe too. We're just talking about U.S.-Russia relations, but it was also a reset with NATO and a reset with Europe, and that was his argument for why he should stay in power.

Over time, you know, my own assessment of this ... and, remember, I used to be able to read classified information, and we're really good at gathering information about the Russian government, and everywhere else, for that matter. Our assessment at the time was that it was very unlikely that Medvedev was going to run for a second term. We had no illusions about that. The idea that we had a bet on Medvedev, that's just silly. I mean, Medvedev was the president. You have to deal with who is the president. You don't get to choose.

By the way, Jill, we tried some crazy things. They were my ideas to try to engage directly with Putin. One of them was, just I'm remembering now talking to you, in 2009, we were bidding for the Olympics, and I had this idea; I floated it with Obama, and he accepted it. I said, "Look, protocol-wise you're not allowed to call the prime minister, you have to call the president when dealing with Russia, president to president." But Putin was a specialist on the Olympics, right? Because he had secured the Sochi Olympics. And so, I concocted this excuse for Obama to call Prime Minister Putin to talk about our strategy for getting the bid. By the way, we completely lost our Chicago bid. It was an embarrassment. I think we came in in fourth.

So, we did the call. I was on all the calls with President Obama in the Oval Office, and I remember it well. He started to talk; it was pretty friendly. And, by the way, Putin really was an expert on how to secure bids for the Olympics. He knew all the ins and outs, and he told Obama, "By the way, you have no chance, Mr. President. The Brazilians have this locked up." He was absolutely right about that.

So, they had a nice little chat about strategizing, and then Obama said, "Oh, by the way, I want to talk a little bit about Iran because here's our assessment on Iran," and Putin interrupted him and he said, "Mr. President, I don't know if you know our system well?" He said it a little bit jokingly. "But in our system the president is in charge of foreign policy, not the prime minister." But he said, "As it happens, I happen to be sitting here with the president right now, President Medvedev. *Ya peredam trubky*," you know Russian, "Let me hand over the phone to President Medvedev," and he did, and that was a very clear sign to us that, while President Medvedev was in power, he was our interlocutor in dealing with U.S.-Russia relations.



*Jill Dougherty*

I'm thinking of that period, 2012. In my mind, when I think 2012 to 2014, I think kind of bad news on many fronts. You had the so-called Bolotnaya uprisings, protests on the streets of Moscow. A lot of people arrested. Really one of the most powerful expressions of frustration by Russians at that period. Then, of course, 2013. Then 2014, you have Ukraine, Crimea, the annexation of Crimea. It was a very difficult period, and yet, if I read it correctly, you personally still had some type of hope that you could do something. Is that a correct reading? And if you really did feel that you could accomplish something, what was it? Because that was a very fraught period.

*Ambassador McFaul*

It's a great question, Jill. Remember, I had worked at the White House for three years, and that's an unusually long time for people at the National Security Council, and especially for academics. Usually, we go back after two years; that's kind of the normal protocol. And I was planning to go back and - this is 2011 - and I told my boss at the time, Tom Donilon, that, "We've had a great run, but it's time for me to go home." I'd promised my family that, too, by the way. And he said, "That's a mistake, Mike. We have too much momentum here with U.S.-Russia relations."

And then later he called me, and he said, "Hey, I talked to the boss, and he said you can't go home." And I was like, "Well, I have other people that matter to me besides President Obama." And, as a result of that kind of funny conversation, that's when they came up with this idea to give me a new job. By the way, a more family-friendly job. It was a much more family-friendly job to be ambassador than it was to work at the White House, but to keep me on the team. And that's how I ended up going to Moscow, or why I'm a bit of an accidental ambassador, right?

To go back to what I said earlier, when Putin announced that he was going to become president I had some second thoughts about whether I should go. This is before Bolotnaya, by the way, this is September 2011. And the reason is that I had a very good working relationship with Medvedev, lots of people around him through our time with Obama.

Putin was known to have a much more difficult relationship with the United States, and most certainly, someone with my profile from earlier times in Soviet and Russian history, having worked for an organization that was invited by the Russian government - I want to emphasize that - back in 1992, it's called the National Democratic Institute, to help consolidate democracy in Russia. And, by the way, that's when I met Vladimir Putin because he was working in the Saint Petersburg mayor's office, in charge of international relations, and that's when we first met. But I knew that he is much more skeptical about relations with the West.

And everybody determined, "No, no, that would be a huge mistake. That would be the wrong signal that we were pulling back on these kinds of issues. We're not going to do that." But, by the time I got there, I want to be honest, I had very few illusions that there was going to be many cooperative things that we could do. We tried. We tried especially in the economic

areas. We tried with partnerships between Silicon Valley, for instance, and something called Skolkovo, which is their rough equivalent of a tech ... Well, it's not an oblast, it's a small city outside of Moscow. And most certainly we invested a lot in society-to-societal contacts during my two years there.

But, on the big issues that you talked about, you know, we just encountered fundamental disagreement with Vladimir Putin because, at the end of the day, all of those big issues that you mentioned: what happened internally in Russia; what was going on in the Arab Spring at the time, especially in Syria, when you had mass mobilization against autocratic regimes; and then, again, in September of 2013 into the winter of 2014, mass mobilization in Ukraine against an autocratic regime there.

In all of those instances which, in my mind, had nothing to do with each other, they were very different, very different dynamics, but in Putin's mind, he saw a common theme. He saw the hidden hand of the United States of America fomenting what he called "Color Revolutions" in Syria, in Egypt, in Libya, in Russia, and in Ukraine, and because of that conceptual framework, it was just very difficult to find agreement on other issues.

And it became clearest to me, we were in Los Cabos, Mexico, of all strange places to be meeting. I flew from Moscow to Los Cabos to join President Obama for his meeting with President Putin. I think it was a G20 meeting, if I'm not mistaken, and so, a lot of diplomacy happens on the sidelines of these multilateral meetings, and we had a meeting that day with Vladimir Putin. By the way, he's 45 minutes late for his meeting with Obama. He was frequently late for his meetings with Western government officials.

And Obama could care less, just so you know. The U.S. government was freaking out, everybody's like, "Oh my God, this is such an insult to President Obama." And he just was sitting out enjoying the sun, looking at the ocean. Actually, I have a great photo from it, the two of us, courtesy of Pete Souza, and I said, "Mr. President I'm really sorry he's pulling this power play on you," and he looked at me, he said, "Come on Mike, you think I care? I love sitting in the sun next to the ocean. I'm grateful for the 30 minutes of downtime." And we talked about our kids and our basketball teams, just so you know.

But, back to the substance. In that meeting, this is the summer of 2012, things are really heating up in Syria and our approach was let's work together with the Russian government to negotiate a peaceful settlement of this ongoing struggle. This is before things had gotten really violent, and our idea was to model it not unlike what happened in Egypt, where we would negotiate a transition; Assad would retire, but he wouldn't be killed, he wouldn't be arrested, maybe even he would leave the country; we would work with elements of the Syrian regime to pact a transition between the opposition and the government and we needed Russia to be on board because they had the relationship with that regime that we did not.

And Putin made it very clear that he was not going to sign up for that. In his mind, that was regime change, and that, in his mind, there was a line that connected that, our proposition, to,

you know, all the way back to what happened in Iraq in 2003, and as a result of that, we just could not come to terms on some of those fundamental issues that you just described.

*Jill Dougherty*

And, you know, that actually leads perfectly into this question that I have, which is, I remember being on the street when you were a new ambassador, and you were meeting with an opposition figure. And I remember you were getting ... It was probably one of the first photo ops that you had, and you were walking into this meeting, and I remember seeing a Russian journalist. She was a younger woman, reddish hair, and I thought, "That's interesting. She's already in position and she has this question." She really, I will use a television term, laid into you. And I started thinking, "Whoa, this does not feel very good to me." It was a very tense moment. And you could see, because she was from NTV, that this was planned in advance.

*Ambassador McFaul*

Right.

*Jill Dougherty*

That you were not going to get a very warm welcome in Russia. So, I guess my question is you went in being an expert actually in, shall I say, "Color Revolutions," or at least democracy, democracy- building in other countries. And it feels to me as if you went into a buzzsaw because it was a very neuralgic theme and idea in Russia. So, tell me what you felt like, as the ambassador, walking in and, in essence, becoming kind of more of the story, more of the focus on you and your expertise, which was very disturbing for the Kremlin, as opposed to American policy?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Yeah. Great question, and a couple things I want to say for context. Remember the conversation I had with the president and his National Security team about becoming ambassador to Russia was at the peak of cooperation. This is in February 2011, March 2011. In fact, March 2011 may have been the peak of cooperation because that's when I traveled with Vice President Biden, now President Biden, to Moscow. We met with President Medvedev, and, shockingly to us - we were completely surprised by this - he agreed to abstain on a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Libya. And I tell you that because people forget that's how cooperative things were back in 2011.

Russia had never agreed to the use of force to meddle in the internal affairs of another country, nor had the Soviet Union, and I was there, in the meeting, in the Kremlin, when he told us he was going to do that, and sure enough, they did. UN Security Council Resolution 1973. That's the context within which Obama was saying, "Let's send Mike to Moscow because this is a great moment of cooperation between the two countries."

By the time I got there, everything had changed, right? Putin was back, Bolotnaya had happened, and they were extremely paranoid about "Color Revolutions" in their own country,

and for them, for NTV, for the Russia propaganda machine, I was manna from heaven. In fact, one of Putin's closest advisors at the time told me as much. I mean, remember, this is another paradox about my background, Jill. Putin and his propaganda machine had this very antagonistic relationship against the United States – Secretary Clinton, of course, much more important than me – but then me. We were all part of that story that they were telling.

But I had been in Russia. I made my first trip to Russia in 1983. I knew thousands of Russians, including many, many senior people in the Russian government, which is very atypical for a brand-new ambassador in Moscow. So, I had this very schizophrenic situation with the Russian government. Many of them met with me often, met with me privately, tried to meet where we were not going to be photographed. There was this one Russian in the government that didn't like to meet with me and, every time we did, made me extremely uncomfortable. He just happened to be the president of the country, Mr. Putin. But that was real, that tension, in terms of the way I had to do my job every day.

And one of his advisors told me very bluntly ... at the time, as you remember, Putin was still running for reelection when I arrived as ambassador, and I went to see this person. I probably shouldn't name him, but you know him, he's a very, very senior advisor to Putin at the time, who I had known forever and ever. And he said, "Mike, you know, all this negative stuff," ... and, you know, they were running this very horrible kind of anti- ... I mean, disinformation is the only word ... against me. And, by the way, well, before I even showed up for my first day at the embassy. The night before my first day in the office, they ran a 25-minute hit piece about how I had been sent by Barack Obama to coordinate the "Color Revolution" against Putin, right? So, "Welcome to Moscow, Mike!"

And I went to see this gentleman at the Kremlin a few weeks later and he said, "Look, don't take any of this personally. You know politics, politics are dirty, politics are hard. We're running a presidential campaign, we need this argument, we need this anti-American argument, and you're the poster child for this kind of argument. By the way, they literally put posters out about me during the campaign, with my face on them, so I wasn't just figuratively the poster child, I was literally the poster child. But then he said, "But Mike, it's all instrumental, it'll all fade away after the election is over." And I believed him.

And by the time I left Russia, I no longer believed him because I got to know Putin better, and we got to know him better, not just me but our government, and that paranoid streak was not just about winning elections; I think he really believes that the CIA is handing out money to the opposition to try to overthrow him. I think he fully believes that I was sent by Obama to try to coordinate the opposition. I think he fully believes that Secretary Clinton was sending a signal, as he said very famously in December 2011, for people to go out on the streets.

Now, I want to be clear, he's wrong about that. The CIA is *not* funding the opposition in Russia. It was not the policy of the Obama administration to foment revolution in Russia, and by the way, think of the paradox for me personally. I'm known as the "master of the reset," and that was a failure, and I'm also known as the "master of the Color Revolution," and that was a failure, right? So how could all those things be true?

But there's a more subtle thing that, I think, that Putin *is* right about, and that is the idea that, actually, liberal democracy *does* threaten him, openness *does* threaten him. You know, another one of his aides told me this, this is, you know, in my last year as ambassador, two things that really got my attention. He said, "There are two things that really drives Putin nuts about you, Mike." And there were times, just so you know Jill, when there was, kind of, you know, subtle threats that I might be PNG'ed, and become the first ambassador,

*Jill Dougherty*

Persona non grata.

*Ambassador McFaul*

Persona non grata, persona non grata. And I would have become the first ambassador since George Kennan to have that done, and there were little hints at that every now and then, just to keep me on my toes.

And one of his people said this to me, he said two things. He said, "Two things that drives him nuts. One, you're incredibly open. You're talking all the time, you talk with people you disagree with, you invite Zhirinovsky to your Fourth of July parties, you invite members of Putin's parties to dinners all the time, and you're tweeting about your activities, you're on television, you're on radio, you go and you speak at universities." I eventually got banned from speaking at universities because it was just too much to have that many hundreds of young people, you know, seeking to have my autograph. And he said, "That drives Putin nuts because that's not the way Putin lives his life." There are many, many facts we don't know about Putin's life, as you know better than I do. That drove him nuts.

And the second thing that drove him nuts, this person said to me, he said, "It's because you love Russia and you respect Russian culture, and you respect Russian history. It would be so much easier if you were just some classic Cold Warrior that hated Russia, and that you had some ethnic thing about the Russians," as many Cold Warriors did, "and you wanted to just destroy Russia. And because you don't do that, it drives him nuts, and that's why they have to contain you." And, I think, you know, that was kind of my fate as the U.S. ambassador to Russia.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yeah. Well, you were, I think, certainly one of the first ambassadors in Moscow to really go with social media, tweeting, et cetera. You did try to get out there and, I mean, that's a different style. I mean, it's past history, but would it have been easier just to be a little more, you know, traditional in your approach?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Yeah, I've thought about it, and I've written about it because it's a very ... it was a moment in history. Um, I want to be clear, it was not my idea for me to tweet, it was my boss's idea. Her name was Secretary Clinton, and at my last meeting before going to Moscow she instructed

me that, "Your job, Mike, is not just to engage with the Russian government. Your job is to engage with the Russian people." And she writes about it in her own book. She was the first Secretary of State that said, "We're going to use social media as part of the way we do diplomacy." And she even gave me a tutor, just so you know, Jill. Alec Ross is his name. I then had a session with him down at the White House, and Alec walked me through. I'd never used the platform before. I've lived most of my adult life here in the Silicon Valley and Twitter's just down the road, but I'd never used it before. I had a Facebook account with 200 Facebook friends. So, it was her idea, not mine.

And, you know, I have a mixed view of it, I would say, in retrospect. On the one hand, there's no doubt that diplomats have to use the new technologies available to communicate our policy, right? I mean, I'm sure they had this debate when radio first came along and when television first came along, and they were like, "Oh my gosh! Government officials can't be on television! That's not the way we do diplomacy." Because I encountered that a lot, just so you know Jill, both from the State Department and from other ambassadors working with me in Moscow. "That's not how we do diplomacy."

And now, everybody's on Twitter, right? I mean, the Chinese have hundreds of people tweeting every day, but back in 2012, I was, most certainly, the first ambassador in Russia to do it for the United States, and I was one of just a handful of ambassadors on Twitter at the time, and as a result of that, I made mistakes, right? When you're experimenting, you make mistakes, and I most certainly made some mistakes on Twitter that I regret.

On the other hand, I would say there was some very positive things that happened from ... and we're just focusing on Twitter, but I used VKontakte, I used traditional media, too, until I was banned, I eventually was banned from the Russian national stations... but I did Dozhd TV, which was opposition, and Ekho Moskv, which I still do, by the way, from Palo Alto here. I still engage in my very bad, deteriorating Russian, on those kind of platforms.

But what it did: a couple of things I think were important and useful. One, we were allowed, by using these alternative means, to communicate what our policy was. If you watched Russian television, controlled by Putin, they portrayed our policy in ways that were not accurate; they were false, they were lies. It was disinformation, and so, at a minimum, they were the ... this was an asymmetrical fight because they had these giant television stations and we had my little Twitter account ... but at least we got to get our ideas out there, and then other media would pick them up, and it had an amplifying effect.

At one point, in Russia, I became one of the top ten bloggers in the entire country in terms of my reach, because my Twitter account was popular. People wanted to know what we were saying.

And, number two, it was a way for me, which I still do to this day, to engage directly with Russian people in a way that's hard to do as an ambassador, you know? I don't need to tell you, Russia's a giant country. You know, if you made a plan ... I remember talking to Ambassador Baucus, he used to be our ambassador in China, and he'd bragged about he had

gone to so many provinces in so many years, and I calculated that up one time; it would have taken me ten years to go to as many provinces in Russia.

You can fly for 11 hours, folks, just so you know, from Vladivostok to Moscow, and still be in the same country in Russia. But on Twitter, I can be talking to high school kids in Vladivostok every night, and I did. And initially they were so shocked by it, they couldn't believe it was me. They thought I was some bot. And then I made enough mistakes in trying to write Russian that I made it clear that it was me.

But that was very different because that took away this bogeyman, "America is out to get us." When everyday people could interact with me because of social media, and I went out of my way, I didn't just interact with elites, I went out of my way to try to talk to as many people as I could. And that's the other great thing about that, right? Television is a one-way street; Twitter is a two-way street. And I know that we were, you know, we were reaching a lot more Russians as a result of using that platform than we could have done just in the traditional diplomacy.

*Jill Dougherty*

Mm-hmm (affirmative). I just want to get back to President Putin, kind of, to close a loop here. Recently, or over the summer of 2020, they had a vote on the Constitution and the Russian people agreed, among many other things, that President Putin would be able to run again, which, if he were elected, would allow him to stay in power until 2036. And if my math is correct, I think he'd be like 84 years old.

So, looking seriously at Putin and the situation that he has right now, there's this debate. You know, one part of it is can we, the United States or the West, have any type of a fruitful relationship with Russia when Vladimir Putin is the president? So, that would be question number one. And if you can, or you can't, comes the second part of the question: what do we do if he does run until he is 84? What do we do with the relationship with Vladimir Putin and the system that he has created?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Yeah, tough questions, Jill. I mean, with respect to the first question, I think it's very clear ... I worked with the vice president, now President Biden, for three years at the White House. I know his top team, they're all friends of mine, Secretary Blinken and Jake Sullivan over at the NSC, and others. I don't think they have any illusions about President Putin. I was actually at the last meeting that Biden had with Putin; it was a pretty tough meeting back in 2011. And, by the way, we practiced our reset policy. About an hour later, we went and met with the opposition after that, the vice president did. And that was just, that's the way he thinks, and that's their strategy. There will be no resets between Biden and Putin, that's for sure.

I do think it is important, however, that when it is in our national interest, we engage with the Kremlin to make Americans more secure, and more prosperous, and true to our values. And that's what we did during the Cold War, that's what Obama did with Medvedev, and I think

that's what President Biden should do and will do. And I'm delighted, for instance, that he agreed with President Putin to extend the New START treaty for five years. That's in *our* national interest. That's not some gift to Putin, as Biden's critics sometimes say. That's good for America. And any time there's another deal that can be done that's good for our security or economic interest, we should pursue them. I just don't think the list is going to be very long right now.

And that's another big difference between today and 2009. 2009, there was actually quite a few things where cooperation with Russia was serving our bilateral interests. We mentioned some of them already. That list today is a lot shorter. You try hard, you can come up with cooperation on terrorism, maybe. That's actually a lot harder than people think. Cybersecurity cooperation, that's extremely hard. Of course, on the multilateral issues, like nonproliferation, climate change, pandemics, it's my view that the Biden administration should cooperate, but that's with the international community. The bilateral agenda, I think, is pretty limited, and tragically, I think it's going to be limited for as long as Putin is in power, and I suspect he's going to be in power for a long time.

*Jill Dougherty*

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Let me ask you, probably the last question, which is, you follow events in Russia. As you mentioned you're on Twitter; I follow you, I know what you're up to (laugh). There have been a lot of very intriguing things going on in Russia. Obviously, there are protests, but beyond that, beyond these big protests, over the past year or two, you've had protests in regional centers, small towns even, across Russia on quintessentially local issues. Could be pollution, it could be a park where they wanted to build a church but the people wanted a park.

There have been, I guess I'd call them, kind of grassroots issues that have encouraged people to stand up for their rights and to change the situation that they're in. Do you look at this as just a fluke, you know, nothing too significant? Is it democracy in action? Is it Russians building democracy? And, dare I say, where is it going to lead? I know, nobody ever wants to predict where Russia is going, but watching these little, and not so little, changes on the ground, where do you think this is taking the country that you've studied for so long?

*Ambassador McFaul*

Very hard question, of course. But I, of course, expect hard questions from Jill Dougherty. I mean, first of all, Jill, let me say one thing that you know, but I want your viewers to know about Russia and one of the things why it was such a fantastic job to be the U.S. ambassador to Russia. I loved being the ambassador. And that is to say that Russia is a very complex society. It gets so cartoonized in our press right now.

People use the word Russia and Putin interchangeably, but there are rich people and poor people; there's urban people, the most sophisticated, and rural people; there's all multi-ethnicity, multi-confessional society with deep, deep cultural traditions there; and just incredible variation of the kinds of people you'll meet. And, by the way, one of my jobs - it was



the best part of my job - my job was to interact with all those kinds of people. So, you know, billionaires, and opera singers, and schoolteachers, NBA basketball stars.

I mean, it was a fantastic job because Russia is a much more complex society than I think a lot of people in our country think. And if there's one message I would say to everybody, remember that any time you hear somebody talking about Russia. In the same way that it drives me nuts when people say, "America believes this, America thinks this." I never let any of my diplomats write cables back home that said, "Russia wants to do this. Russia thinks this." And I would always say, "Who is this Ms. Russia or Mr. Russia that you're talking about? I've never met that person." Russia's a very complex place and there is a lot going on in that society, as you just noted, that is under the radar and not easily captured. I think it's a pretty dynamic time in Russia today.

To add to your list, there's a lot of really interesting investigative journalists, many of whom I know, doing incredible work today. There's a lot going on in the cultural side of Russia today, really a vibrant time in Russia.

And then, I would say two other things, because of course I'm not going to be silly enough to predict the future, and I would just say, don't believe anybody that's silly enough to try to predict it. We political scientists at Stanford, in political science, we're really bad at predicting political change. But I'd also report, after five years in the government, so is the CIA. Pretty hard to predict political change in any country. But I would say two things. Well, three things.

One, amplify what you just said, bubbling beneath the surface there's lots going on and the fact that there were so many protestors that were arrested, after Mr. Navalny came back, in freezing cold and knew they were going to be arrested, those are people that know they're going to be beaten and arrested. That means that there are hundreds of other thousands of people that have their same preferences. This, actually, we do know from social science. It's called preference falsification. That's going on in society.

And the second thing I would say is about Putin. You know, he came along at the right time. He was very lucky to become president right as the Russian economy began to grow. He didn't have anything to do with that, oil and gas prices really drove that. But all presidents, including American presidents, get to take credit for things that happen on their watch, and I think that's understandable that he would have been so popular in those first four years, and then those first eight years. He helped to restore the economy and restore the state, and we shouldn't be surprised that he was popular then. But now he's been in power for 21 years. Many Russians have never known anybody but Vladimir Putin as president. That's a long time.

I loved working for Barack Obama, honor of a lifetime. I think he's one of the best presidents we've ever had. I have a photo of him on my wall here just to remind me of those great days. Yeah, we made mistakes. Yes, he made mistakes, but I have tremendous, tremendous admiration for my old boss. And yet, I think I would be getting tired of Barack Obama if he

were president for 21 years. I think the American people would be getting tired of Barack Obama in his 21st year.

And I think there's a lot of evidence to suggest that Russians are tired of Putin after 21 years. Doesn't mean there's going to be revolution overnight, but I'll just leave you with this, what's the more radical prediction? That Putinism, and that this regime, will be, kind of, the same as it ever was for the next 20 years, or that something will replace it, especially after Putin is no longer able to govern? I think it's unlikely the change happens while he's still able to rule but, afterwards, I don't see a lot of life for this regime. There's not a strong political party there, growth is rather anemic; the ideology of Putinism, you know, it's out there, but it doesn't inspire a lot of people.

Particularly, Jill, something that was already true when I was ambassador... That was years ago, but I see and I encounter it in my own life and I see evidence of it ... There's a lot of people, elites within the Putin regime, that don't really like the course that Russia is on today. Now, they're not going to get up and say that. It is irrational to express your real views about Putin in that system today. You do that and you end up like Mr. Navalny, unjustly arrested, and sentenced for two and a half years, for completely manufactured charges.

So, it's rational to keep your head down, but that doesn't mean that when it becomes safe to express different preferences, you won't see, I think, splits, not only within society but within the regime itself. And I'm not going to be silly enough to predict that, but it doesn't feel like a vibrant regime to me right now. It feels like a decaying regime to me right now.

*Jill Dougherty*

Okay. Well, I guess we'll both see in the future. But Ambassador Michael McFaul, thank you so much. I think our viewers and listeners had a chance to really hear, and see, exactly what you were like as ambassador, which is a very open, engaging person. Russians had a chance to see that, and now we're seeing it. So, thank you very much for sharing that with us.

*Ambassador McFaul*

Thanks for having me. Great conversation.

## Ambassador John F. Tefft (2014-2017)

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*Russia had also, in the third term of President Putin, really started to turn inward. There was almost a feeling of withdrawal from the world. There were sanctions put on, of course, that blocked visas and tended to isolate Russia. Russia was not accepted into the G7. But there was the Foreign Agents law, there was an aggressive FSB effort to intimidate scientists and people who had foreign contacts. And it became very clear and accelerated during my time there.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador John Tefft, it really is a pleasure to see you again. I think the last time that we spoke in-depth about Russia, it was in Moscow at the embassy. We did it over coffee and cookies, now we're doing it, I think, in kind of a different way. I want to really get into your background and your experience as the ambassador. And then also, more long term, historical issues with Russia and the United States. So, it's an honor and a real pleasure to see you again.

*Ambassador Tefft*

Thank you, Jill. I'm glad to be back with you.

*Jill Dougherty*

Okay. If we look at your career, you arrived in Moscow in the fall of 2014, and then you left in the fall of 2017, so you had approximately three years. And you'd have to say that that was one of the most difficult periods in the relationship between Russia and the United States, really, I think, in post-Soviet history. So, let's look at what happened. We had annexation of Crimea, civil war in Donbas, the NATO-Russia Council had been ended. There were sanctions by the United States and by Europe. When you arrived, what were your expectations? What did you think that you could accomplish as the ambassador, and how did you plan to go about that?

*Ambassador Tefft*

When I arrived, we were already six months, seven months, after the Russian invasion of Crimea and the subversion in the Donbas. We'd had the sanctions introduced and the relationship was, as you pointed out, already very, very difficult. I had some time in Washington to consult with a lot of the people in the Obama administration, from the president on down, and I think it's fair to say that there was not great expectations for much to be achieved by the time that ended, by the administration, the over, almost two years before they left.

I got to Moscow, and I found that, in fact, most of the Russians had that same very low sense of expectation. So, it wasn't as if I was going out, as I did when I was the deputy ambassador back in 1996, where we had the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission engaged via multiple cabinet secretaries and Russian ministers, a huge bilateral agenda. When we were there, there was very little going on at all. My approach, and what I shared with my staff, was that we had to be good, professional Foreign Service officers. In the Foreign Service, sometimes you go to a place and it's a time where the bilateral relationship is going gangbusters, and sometimes you go at a very difficult time and your job is to try to keep the ties of communication open to prevent worse things from happening, if possible, and to try to keep things going for another day.

In the broader sense, I think that's what I was trying to do. I would add one thing to your question, and that is that when I got there, it became pretty clear to me right away that I was also coming to a very different Russia. There was the post-imperial effort, as you mentioned, to take over the Crimea and to cause instability in Ukraine by supporting an insurrection and infiltrating people into the Donbas. But Russia had also, in the third term of President Putin, really started to turn inward. There was almost a feeling of withdrawal from the world. There were sanctions put on, of course, that blocked visas and tended to isolate Russia. Russia was not accepted into the G7. But there was the Foreign Agents law; there was an aggressive FSB effort to intimidate scientists and people who had foreign contacts.

And it became very clear and accelerated during my time there. And that also became a key factor during my three years as ambassador in Russia.

*Jill Dougherty*

Were you able to talk to Russian officials, or did they spurn you?

*Ambassador Tefft*

No. It was a mix. I was able to, of course, see Foreign Minister Lavrov, and my counterpart, just as for previous ambassadors, was Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov. I called periodically on Ambassador Ushakov, who was President Putin's foreign policy advisor. But at the same time, the Russian government refused to allow me to see people in the presidential administration. And it wasn't just me, it was the European ambassadors, as well, who weren't allowed to see the chief of the presidential administration and the deputies.

Even when we traveled, which I did a lot, and I'll come back to that, they usually blocked me from seeing governors. This was, if you will, pushback for the all the sanctions. Russia didn't have a chance to really push back economically, and the embassy and the ambassador, not just the American, but some of the major European ambassadors were punished by not having those kinds of meetings.

*Jill Dougherty*

I remember discussing that with you, that you were really a big person for going out into the field, going to a remote city some place, and really talking with people. What did you lose by not being able to do that?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I like to think, and I've been going over my notes, and before the pandemic started, I was actually reviewing some of the cables before the records office at the State Department closed down. I think we did a pretty good job, and I'm not just patting myself on the back; I had a wonderful staff in Moscow, just tremendous professionals. And, whether it was the State Department, or the military, or agriculture, we did trips around Russia, and we stayed in contact with people. We used the business relationship a lot. One of the main things that I've always felt in Russia is that I had a responsibility, both when I was the deputy ambassador in the late '90s but also during my ambassadorship, to do everything I could to help and protect American companies.

During the period I was there, many in the government tried to, if you will, screen or protect the American companies from being attacked, but there were attempts, in various regions, people trying to show, I think, show Moscow, that they were really tough, to put the squeeze on American companies. And I finally did get to the key people in the government to say, "Hey, stop this. If you want to build the relationship again," which is what they always told us, "you've got to preserve what we have and to try to build on that." But there's a lot of American companies ... I went up to Karelia, right on the border with Finland. The International Paper Company, which is headquartered in Memphis, has a huge factory up there. But I used that visit, that kind of visit, to not only show support for the American firm, try to understand what was going on in the region, but then we set up appointments with other people in other places.

For example, I went to Voronezh to see two huge farms. One for black Angus cattle, they brought in cattle from Texas and the South, and this became actually the best steak you could buy in Russia. But they had 6,000 head of cattle, and it was a wonderful operation, very Western style. They had a dairy operation, again, using American and European Holsteins. When I went to these places, I would do things, for example in Voronezh, I would see people who had gone to the United States on various educational programs, from Fulbright Programs down to the FLEX Program year in American high school and living with an American family, to the Open World program of James Billington and the Library of Congress. I visited synagogues, we visited all kinds of different people and in that way tried not only to, if you will, show the flag, but also to understand and get a better understanding for what was really going on in Russia outside of Moscow and to understand each of the regions better.

*Jill Dougherty*

So, what was the calculus of the Kremlin? I mean, were they just trying to punish you, as you said, to show that they were tough? Because it appears that, in a way, it kind of backfired. Did they accomplish anything? Gain anything?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I'm not sure they did. To give you another example of this, we went to Irkutsk, and part of this was to go to see Lake Baikal and, also, to see the NGOs out there who were working to preserve the environment. But this was also, at that time, the only governorship - if I remember correctly - in Russia that was run by, the governor was a Communist and, actually, was given pretty good marks by most of the people. Well, he had readily agreed to see me, but then two days before, the Kremlin called and said, "You will not see the American ambassador." I still saw not only the NGOs that dealt with Baikal, but I was supposed to give a speech at the university, and again the FSB intervened and told the rector, under no conditions will you let the American ambassador ... and something interesting happened. My staff, my political officer was with me who was arranging the schedule, got a phone call from one of the student leaders who had been due to see me at the university and said, "We know that the ambassador can't come there, but we're going to come down to see him at the hotel."

That day we had 15, I think, professors and students who didn't want to lose the opportunity to see the American ambassador, to have a chance to talk. And I'm sure they took a certain amount of risk by doing these kinds of things. But those kinds of personal connections, I think, vindicated our effort to get out and around. I learned something and, hopefully, was able to share things with some of the people.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, if you turn that around though, maybe not to the same degree, but in the United States you did have Russian diplomatic posts shut down, diplomats kicked out of the country, et cetera. It was all mutual. But the United States did some of that too, in order to punish Russia for Crimea, Ukraine, et cetera. So, what did the United States lose by doing that, or was it worth doing?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think most of the shutdown of the consulates came pretty much after my time there. But what I found was that, when I got to Moscow, that of course Ambassador Kislyak, the Russian ambassador in Washington, had been here for some time and had built up his contacts. Even though there was an attempt by the NSC and the State Department to try to enforce some reciprocity so that I could get appointments, there were, I'll be very diplomatic about this, there were members of the Obama administration who did not hear. They kept up their contacts and used their contacts to Kislyak, irrespective of what impact it might have had on me. Eventually, when the new administration, I'm sorry, when Ambassador Antonov and Ambassador Huntsman succeeded me, we got off to a much better start, and reciprocity was the name of the game. Jon Huntsman was able to get other appointments, for example, defense minister and others, who I wasn't able to get to see.

*Jill Dougherty*

Speaking of President Obama, to this day, the reputation of President Obama is very low in Russia. He's the bogeyman in a lot of issues; he continues to come up even though he is no

longer the president. Why do you think that is? Why did he become such a hot wire issue for Russians, with a lot of animosity?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think a lot of it owes to Ukraine and to sanctions. You'll remember after 2014, the sanctions started to bite. Putin benefited, actually, from the annexation of Crimea. His popularity soared in this period. And Russians always have, but certainly in that period, demonized the United States, blamed the United States, and Barack Obama became the kind of poster boy for that demonization. Now, he made a statement early on after the sanctions were put in where he described Russia as a regional power with nuclear weapons or words to that effect. I think, probably, of any statement made by any American official during my time, that was, it was like pouring salt in an open wound. It just drove them crazy. We know from a lot of different people that it drove President Putin crazy. And they made a lot of that on the Russian television and then used it as a way to, again, pursue this criticism and demonization.

I think there was little expectation of any real change, as I mentioned before, in the administration. As the election campaign went on, there was also demonization of Hillary Clinton, who had been criticized by Putin early on for when she had been Secretary of State. There were lots of Russians who said to me, "We're hoping Trump wins," because they thought that the Republicans and President Trump and his administration would be better for them than the Democrats. It's a combination of those factors.

*Jill Dougherty*

If you were to evaluate the diplomacy of the Obama administration, generally, about Russia, where would you put it? And I know you were part of it, but if you can stand back, what was that moment? How did the president handle it, how did his administration handle that diplomacy?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think it's fair to say that there was no great expectation of much change and, I think, a focus at the White House on trying to use the last two years of the second term of the president to get what he could do. And I think they realistically looked at Russia and said, "There's not going to be much happening here." Two big issues that dominated bilateral discussions, especially Secretary Kerry, who made four trips to Moscow, spoke all the time on the phone with Foreign Minister Lavrov and then saw Lavrov in Geneva and in New York. You know, Ukraine and Syria were the two big issues. I think it was pretty clear to both sides that there wasn't much movement going to happen on Ukraine. John Kerry tried very hard; he proposed to Putin in his second visit there that they open up a new channel of discussion between Tonia Nuland and Vyacheslav [Vladislav] Surkov, who was one of the president's assistants, who everyone knew was the guy who ran the Russian policy in the Donbas. The Foreign Ministry didn't do that. That discussion opened up; it didn't, I think, produce very much because I'm not sure that Putin was ready to move forward, but at least there was some discussion.

Now, on Syria, there was a huge discussion. I'm in the process of trying to write a memoir of sorts, and this is one of the tougher issues because John Kerry tried very, very hard to try to push a political solution. The first visit he had to Russia, my term, was May of 2015, and he met Putin and Lavrov down in Sochi, and at that point, there was still, on the Russian side, they had supported the creation of the UN process of discussion to try to find a political solution to the civil war in Syria. That summer, the Iranians and the Russians found an accommodation. They were both worried that Assad was going down the drain in Syria, and the Russians, as you will remember, intervened seriously in the civil war. That really transformed things. John Kerry did not stop - I think he has written in his own book that he was frustrated because he didn't have leverage - he talked about some kind of an air zone over Syria and even possibly American bombing.

But President Obama was not prepared to go down that road. He was trying to pull the American military out of the Middle East. He was trying to reduce our profile. To a certain extent, Putin tried to exploit that, and I think we've seen that, long after I've gone, the Russians have moved forward. I have to say, I was kind of personally ambivalent about this in the sense that I didn't want to see us sucked into Middle Eastern wars any more than we were either. At the same time, you could see that Putin was trying to take advantage of this vacuum. We still have the battle for getting rid of ISIS, which proved successful. The whole issue of Syria ... we didn't get engaged as we once were.

John Kerry, again I'll say this, tried very, very hard, and I have respect for him doing that, but we weren't successful, and after I left, we, of course, saw the horrible bombing by the Russians in Aleppo and these other places that were just barbaric, I think, in my own opinion. And I'm sorry that there wasn't much there, but I think a lot of it came from the fact that President Obama did not want to get more deeply engaged militarily in Syria, or for that matter, anywhere else in the Middle East.

*Jill Dougherty*

Mr. Ambassador, you know, as I look at your career, I think what's extraordinary to me is the breadth of your knowledge about the former Soviet Union and then, after that, the former Soviet space because you were the ambassador not only to Russia, but Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania. And so, I'm imagining now, you had been in Moscow before, but you come back, you're the ambassador. What did that knowledge of those other countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union, what did that knowledge do? Did it form your understanding of Russia? Did your ideas change? It's a very interesting prism.

*Ambassador Tefft*

I like to think that my experience in Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine, as well as two tours in Moscow, helped give me a broader perspective on things so that, by the time I arrived in Moscow, in 2014, I had already gone through the period in Lithuania where they became members of NATO and the European Union. I had gone through the reform in Georgia and the war, the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. And then I'd gone through the period in Ukraine where Yanukovich was in charge, but you saw the seeds for what turned out to be



the Maidan demonstrations and the eventual change, Yanukovich leaving and the new government coming in. All of this was in my experience.

I came away from this feeling that people in Moscow, and I felt this acutely when I got there in 2014, they really didn't understand. The Russian leadership, the Kremlin, didn't really understand what had happened in these places. They understood maybe the Baltics, that had started to seep in. But Putin kept saying that Ukraine - well, this is one country, one nation, he told this very often in speeches. But Ukraine, they didn't see it that way. Now, there maybe have been a few people in the East and others who might have found that tie. But even in Crimea, I remember during my time, 2011 to 2013, the International Republican Institute was doing polling down there with a very reputable European polling company, and they found that the majority, or at least the plurality of the Crimeans didn't want to be a part of Russia. They really wanted to be part of an autonomous region within Ukraine, which is what they were.

I think the Russian leadership didn't understand that national feeling in these countries. I don't want to use the word nationalism, because that brings up a lot of negative connotations. But I think a rising national consciousness is the best way I can express it, and I think you see this particularly among young people. I spent a lot of time in Ukraine, working with civil society. We had a lot of USAID programs. And you can see the next generation of people coming to the fore who had a really strong sense of their own nation. They didn't have anything against Russia, per se, in the current situation, although the Russian invasion of Crimea then provided one for many young Ukrainians, but the sense of, they wanted to be a part of the West, they wanted to have a democracy, they wanted to get rid of the corruption. And this sense of, again, rising national consciousness, is the best way I can put it.

When I got to Moscow in 2014, I spent the first year talking to people about Ukraine and I just found, over and over again, whether the people were in government, in business, or even in academics, that they didn't get what really had happened in Ukraine. All the ideas about building a *Novorossiya*, a new Russia, to try to build a land bridge along the southern coast of Ukraine between Crimea and the Donbas. I'd been on a trip just in that area right before I left Ukraine in 2013, and there was nothing to this; these people didn't want to be a part of Russia. There was a myth or misconception.

Anyway, I used to try to say that to them in private, I'd say, "You're just wrong, I'm sorry. I've been there, I know. I talked to these people." I'm sure that didn't endear me to different people, but I think they were operating on a certain myth, and I think more broadly, they really didn't understand how much these other countries - what they considered the near abroad, what they considered their sphere of influence - how much these people wanted to be independent and to forge their own future as independent, democratic, market economy kinds of countries.

*Jill Dougherty*

I'm thinking of President Putin himself, who said that Ukraine really isn't a country. Do you think that it was coming from President Putin or was it, let's say, a foreign policy structure approach, traditional Russian diplomatic approach? Or is it really Putin?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think it's more the elites, the current elites in Russia have this sense of ... you know, I think Putin expresses this sometimes, but in many ways, they have not adjusted still, after almost 30 years of the end of the Soviet Union, to changes that are going on not just in the near abroad, as they would call it, but I think even more broadly. Earlier we talked about the Foreign Agent law and this really kind of pulling inward to kind of block people. A lot of young people, as you know because you've done good research and reporting on this in your career, I think a lot of the young people just didn't see a perspective for the future in Russia because they saw this inward turning by the Kremlin hardline group in particular.

They wanted to be more engaged. The result was, lots of young people left to go work in the United States for economic opportunity, for political opportunity. I think a lot of people in Russia, the demonstrations that we've seen over the last few years, you see younger people just saying, "Hey, this is not the Russia we want to see." But the current elite, obviously around President Putin, are really the ones who reinforce this. There are people in the elite who disagree with this but who don't express it in public. And you and I have both talked to those people and we understand they have different ... Eventually, things will change. I can't tell you exactly when, but that perspective will start to change.

I do think that in Ukraine, over the last few years, we've seen, with the Ukrainians pushing back against the Russian efforts in the Donbas, I think there's growing understanding that they miscalculated in the beginning. Now, they haven't changed, they haven't moved to adopt the Minsk or implement, negotiate the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, but I think there's an understanding that things are going to have to be changed at some point.

*Jill Dougherty*

I have to talk about Putin with you. Of course, it always comes up. We know that Russia is not Putin, Putin is not Russia, and yet. You saw him, and you saw him pretty closely. How would you evaluate him, both as a leader and then as a man? And before you answer, I'm just thinking of some of my first impressions of him, and I'm sure that you saw this happening at that period when he came in, there was great hope that, maybe, he would do some economic reform, and in the beginning, he did. Many people understood that he had to be a strong leader because there was a lot of ripping apart of Russia. There was a lot of chaos, quite honestly, under Yeltsin, albeit with a lot of good stuff, too. But again, putting him in context, leader and man, what would you say?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I've come very late to reading Steven Lee Myers' book *The New Tsar*, which was written in 2015, came out right when I got there. And I have to say, the first part of that book, which is

really, it's brilliant. He spent a lot of time going back and looking at Putin as a young man and then becoming a KGB officer, serving in Dresden when the Cold War came to an end and that his transition to actually leaving the KGB and becoming an aide to Mayor Sobchak of Leningrad. There's so much in that book that I saw reflected in the meetings that I participated in with Putin. He still is a man whose ideas of ... This isn't surprising that all of us are a result of what, the early experiences we have in life ... but he really is a man from the 1980s. His whole approach toward Russia, toward the KGB, but also toward foreign policy is there.

He very much still epitomizes what I learned when I was on the Soviet desk back in the 1980s. They wanted to divide Europe from the United States. They were willing to do arms control because they saw that was a way to not only show their superpower status, but to contain America, with all its money and technology, from developing systems that could possibly cut out their own. But I think also, it's important to understand Putin; you have to understand the different stages he's gone through in his life. And I've talked about this with a number of my former diplomatic colleagues but also academics. When he started, he tried really hard with George Bush to build a relationship, and there were some very positive moments there. As things went on, more and more he kind of went back to, I think, his authoritarian roots, and we've seen this growing over, particularly in the third and fourth terms of his presidency. It's getting tougher. The KGB, or the FSB, is getting more aggressive. It's becoming a true authoritarian society, as I said before; a lot of people are getting frustrated with that, especially young people.

It feels as if he's evolved, he's now an open opponent of liberal democracy. There's no accommodation there at all. And we can talk for hours about this evolution and track it. You could also talk about what influenced his change from the United States in terms of NATO enlargement. A lot of it accelerated after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine when he started to realize, my God, these people really aren't just the same as us. They're not one nation with us. And it evolved further after that. So, I think he's still got some big chips on his shoulder for the United States, in particular, one of which is, I think he blames the United States for the demise of Soviet power. Part of what he's tried to do is to rebuild some of that, and he's had some success doing it. But there's still huge economic problems. He hasn't moved forward on economic reform. I can practically give you the speeches that Alexey Kudrin, his friend and advisor and former minister, would give on economic reform and why Russia needed to do that. I heard over and over again, and yet, he has not moved forward. He's stayed with a pretty firm, I would say, authoritarian, no-reform economic policy.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

This raises such a great point, because I totally agree with what you're saying. It feels like Putin's dilemma - I think on a rational basis, he understands that there are certain things that you have to do to create a modern country. You have to open up, you have to create. You have a cyber world and an internet world and young people on TikTok and social media. And so, part of him, I would think - and, obviously, I want to hear what you're thinking about this - but he would appear to rationally understand that because you do hear him from time to time saying, "We're going to create an internet company and we will do biotechnology, et cetera."

But if he does that, if he takes those steps, he undercuts his control. And so, it's really a dilemma.

*Ambassador Tefft*

That's right. No, I agree with you completely. That's the fundamental dilemma. He understands it intellectually, I'm sure he has spent hours talking to the more reform-minded people who are his colleagues, Kudrin, German Gref of Sberbank, who was a reform economist. He understands what has to be done. But in the end, every time it comes down to push versus shove, he opts for control. He opts for maintaining this control. You know, I was rereading the other day an article that Andrew Higgins wrote from the *New York Times* in August of 2017, right as I was getting ready to leave. He'd been out in Novosibirsk to look at a young entrepreneur, he was actually a nuclear physicist who, with his friends, decided to create a company to build a better air filter, if I remember correctly. Low and behold, he went against the FSB, and he starts getting investigated. He probably offended somebody who controlled the market on air filters. But it was a classic example then, and I'm sure this has been replicated over and over again, of how the authorities were drawn in. This young guy was arrested, put under house arrest. Eventually, I don't know whether he ever built these things or not, but he challenged the old order.

The talk in Moscow was innovation, support small and medium businesses. Over and over again we hear the rhetoric and then the reality in Moscow, but actually in the regions, it was undercut by the actions, often of intelligence services, corrupt law enforcement, and corrupt judicial people, courts, and nothing actually happened. I remember reading this the first time and saying, "Now I understand why young people, who are smart and entrepreneurs, are leaving, because they see no future here."

*Jill Dougherty*

And yet you said, you're somewhat optimistic, eventually?

*Ambassador Tefft*

Yeah. I think eventually things will, it will change. I don't know how soon this will happen. President Putin has put forward these constitutional amendments which give him, in theory, the opportunity to stay in power until 2036. I'm not sure that that will eventually happen. Making predictions in Russia, as you know very well from your experience Jill, is a fraught endeavor. One doesn't make these kinds of things because no matter how much we know, there's an awful lot we don't know. But I think there's a dynamic here. Russia has not really grown economically, seriously, in 10 years. They never recovered from the 2008-2009 Great Recession. Then you have Ukraine and the sanctions, foreign investment doesn't come in. Now we've got the pandemic and the impact of COVID on the society. People's incomes have gone down. People just don't see a future prospective out there where things get better for their kids.

And in the end, I'm still convinced ... As one of my Russian friends said, "You know we're just like you, Tefft. What we want is, we want a decent life, a decent job. We want our kids to get a

good education. We want healthcare and we want them to be able to grow up and hopefully have a better life than we did." And, you know, there's lots of differences between Russia and America, but those fundamental human desires that we all have, those animate, and that's what I found wherever I traveled in Russia. Those are still fundamental there, and people will still push for those eventually.

*Jill Dougherty*

And yet, Ambassador Tefft, you know, I was talking with a friend. And she was saying, why can't Russia be like France or Belgium or another country, which is just kind of a normal country with which the United States has normal relationships. There always is an extra dimension to the relationship between the United States and Russia. And, you know, right now Russia complains about "Russophobia." "Russophobia." And you might ask, can we ever have a normal relationship with Russia? I think it's a serious question.

*Ambassador Tefft*

I agree with you completely. I don't mean to be naïve at all. I had discussions with our mutual friend, Angela Stent, whose great book *The Limits of Partnership*, I think, is a wonderful piece. I recommend it to a lot of younger people starting in this field that you and I have spent our careers in. It's too much to talk about here, but there's cultural, historical differences. A lot of water has gone over the dam over the last 100 years. And trying to build that relationship has been very difficult. We've had moments of success. We've had moments where there's greater hope, and we have moments where things just seem to be almost, I won't say hopeless, but pretty dire, and that's kind of where we are right now. We'll see. President-elect Biden is coming in very experienced dealing with Russia, and he's got some people who are also very experienced.

Now, I don't expect rapid changes, but I think there have been questions raised on both sides. How can we try to not only stabilize things, and that's certainly something I supported when I was in Moscow, but also how we can try to find some cooperative ways to build forward? I hope we can extend New START. I hope that we can find some cooperative ventures. One of the things that I always remember that I found out in Russia was that even after USAID and a lot of the projects they worked on went away before I got there, there were still lots of private connections in the health field. There were joint efforts to do research and understand cancer on both sides. And I tried to do everything I could to support that kind of effort. Not to give it any publicity but to do those concrete things. There's a lot of that stuff that's out there. It would be nice to think that we could find a way to have American and Russian and European scientists work together to deal with future pandemics and how we manage this, to learn the lessons of what we're going through now with vaccines and try to find a way to have cooperation, to keep the politics out of it and to try to do things that will help people on both sides.

So, in that sense, I'm idealistic and I'm hopeful. But, you know, I come from Wisconsin, and we have that pragmatic idealism out there, which has animated me and my career for the whole time.

*Jill Dougherty*

And I wanted to ask, perhaps at the end of our conversation, about your book. I'm very intrigued. And I'm thinking, books about Russia or your career, I'm sure it's a lot broader, but books about Russia, it's such a wide issue, a broad issue that you can take sections of it you know, historical, you can look at Putin, you can look at a whole lot of things. But what kind of approach are you taking in your book? Is it a lot about Russia? And then, also, what is it about you, yourself, as an ambassador that you want to impart?

*Ambassador Tefft*

It's a terrific question and I've grappled with it. I really started working on this after I finished in Moscow three years ago and I've gone through a number of different approaches to this. I want it to be, not just, "I went here, I did that," just a chronology. I want it to have some meaning, something that I've drawn out of it. Some lessons, if you will. To do that, you also have to incorporate the ideas and things that you have learned from books and things. I mean, I've profited from some of the things that you have written in your podcast on Russian youth. We've talked about this; we share a lot of views about that. That's part of it.

The problem is, I want it to be, it's not just Russia, it's this whole perspective and to try to have each side. I have something like 35 chapters, either partially written or at least etched out, and the frustrating part is, when I start writing it, I never feel like I've achieved it. I read something, or I hear something and then I go, "That will make it much better."

The other thing I have to do is, when things become safer, I'm going to try to get back to look at the records at the State Department because there are things that we, we recorded things that we thought about back then which I may have to get some declassification done but that will at least help me deepen my feel, not just for U.S.-Russian relations but for our own policy, but also for Russia, the Ukraine, the Georgia, the Lithuania that I found at that time. And what they grappled with as they tried to become modern nations.

It's multilevel, it's hard. I'm never written a book before, and this is a real challenge.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, maybe you could add a short chapter on advice to future ambassadors in dealing with Russia.

*Ambassador Tefft*

There's two conclusions at the end, Jill. One is about the policy in Eastern Europe, and there's another one about the Foreign Service, which gets into recommendations and some parting thoughts, as it were.

*Jill Dougherty*

Can you give us one takeaway?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think one of the biggest takeaways I have from my own career is that I am a great believer in engagement, even when things are difficult. I joined the Soviet desk in August of 1983, and I thought this was going to be the opening of my career because I really wanted to get into this field. The week after I arrived, the Soviet Air Force shot down Korean Airliner 007 and the relationship went down with it. And I thought, oh my God. What am I doing? But I never gave up and I wanted to continue to do that. I've always come away, I guess the big lesson, saying America has an important role and we played a role over the last 80 years. But we should never overestimate our ability to influence another country. We can try, we can have some perspective. I lived, in my first time in Moscow, through the period of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, Al Gore. And then he ran for president in 2000 and all kinds of attacks went on; it was the first of the "who lost Russia" debates. The hubris of this, that somehow we think we were going to win or lose Russia.

You can push things on the margins, but it's ultimately the people, the elites in these countries that have to make it. I'll finish by saying something very positive about Lithuania and that is, I was always impressed with young leaders, many of whom studied in the West, who came to the fore after the end of the Soviet Union. And when I got there in 2000, you had these just enormously talented people as Foreign Minister, as the EU negotiators, businessmen, starting to come to the fore. But I always remembered that in the inter-war period, between World War I and World War II, the Baltics were actually independent and they had democracies of sorts and market economies. The Lithuanians sold more wheat to Great Britain in that period than anybody else. So, they had something besides unadulterated Communism for 80 years, which is what I found in Georgia and Ukraine.

And I came away with the feeling that those seeds were planted, and I saw some of the seeds come to fruit and it's still working. So, be patient, you can't expect to see things in your own lifetime perhaps, but you have to ask every day, and this is what I used to say to my staff, "What can we do today, in our own small, little way, to try to help make either this country better, our relationship with this country better, and to try to build for a better future."

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, Ambassador John Tefft, thank you very, very much. I appreciate it. It was a wonderful and very enlightening conversation. Thank you.

*Ambassador Tefft*

Thanks very much, Jill. Thank you.

## Ambassador Jon Huntsman, Jr. (2017-2019)

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*We missed the one element of diplomacy that is absolutely critical in balancing some of these very sensitive relationships, and that's a level of connectivity and dialogue that allows both sides to frame the priorities and to get working toward some shared outcomes and solutions. So, in that empty environment, Russia and China came together, each having different interests in coming together.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

So, Ambassador Jon Huntsman, thank you very much for being with us. I think the last time I actually saw you was in Moscow. It was at Spaso House, the beautiful residence of the ambassador there, and it was for a cultural event with your family. It was really wonderful, a lot Russian guests. And so, thank you for that, and thank you for joining us today.

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Well, thank you, Jill. It was a pleasure then and it's a pleasure now. Thanks for bringing your great professionalism to the table.

*Jill Dougherty*

Thank you. Well, today we have kind of a broader historical perspective, I think, because what - in this series - we are trying to do is have ambassadors look at the time that they spent in Russia, and some of them have very long careers. You certainly have a very long diplomatic career. Russia, China, Singapore, and a lot of experience, two big countries, Russia, China, that are in the center of attention. So we're going to try to get to that perspective, and I'm just putting myself back into the time that you arrived in Moscow. I believe you've described it as a historically difficult period in bilateral relations. Could you describe, what was it like when you arrived? What were your expectations of what I think you'd have to say was a pretty fraught relationship, even at that point, and do you have any vivid memories from that period?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Well, thank you, Jill. It was, in a sense, managing adversity, if I could just put it in a phrase, managing downside risk. There were some who felt optimistic that we could strike up a new dialogue with Moscow. I was less sanguine about that possibility just because I've tracked big power relationships and I followed resets and redos by both Republicans and Democrats from administrations past and had studied Vladimir Putin and his style of leadership and tried to understand his aspirations for the country, the region, and Russia's place in the world.

So, I was less sanguine about the ability to strike up, maybe, new and optimistic lines of communication. And then, the events leading up to my arrival in Moscow were absolutely



terrifying from a diplomatic standpoint. Of course, we had the election meddling in November, the run-up to November of 2016, and the assessment by the intelligence community, which was uniform – it's very rare that you'd get a uniform assessment from the intelligence community because you've got so many players who make up that community – was that the Russians were behind it and certain elements of the Russian security services, and the evidence was pretty clear.

I remember one of the first things I did once I got my security clearances back was to read the consensus by the intelligence community. In the aftermath, of course, as you'll remember, Washington responded by booting out about 35 Russian diplomats. This would have been December of 2016. Then the aftermath was in the spring and summer of 2017 – this was while I was in training, preparing to ship out to Moscow. Congress came up with a package of sanctions that were quite punitive, but I would say appropriate, given Russia's role in the election of 2016.

That was signed off on by the president. I remember getting a call from the president the morning that Congress voted on this package, saying, "Your job just got a whole lot more difficult," and, in fact, it did. Well, in the aftermath of that congressional sanctions package, Vladimir Putin announced that he was cutting 755 people from the United States Embassy, effectively capping our overall staffing at about 455.

You'd really have to go back, Jill, to 1986, I'm guessing, where, in the aftermath of the Gennadi Zakharov-Nicholas Daniloff affair, the Embassy was basically capped at about 251, 252. It was a devastating hit then, as it was in the follow-on to 2016 and the sanctions of 2017. So, my arrival was literally weeks after that cut announced by Putin, and it was a very difficult, very solemn time for the staff in Moscow.

Of course, you had all kinds of people who were packing their bags, getting their personal effects organized. The impact on families, on kids in school, on the overall operations of the Embassy and our consulates, which we were managing. So, that's where it fell to me. So, how do you take a much slimmed-down staff, slimmed-down by 70% if you want to put it in numerical terms, and try to keep the same output going for the consumers in Washington and those who rely upon your work, whether it's movement of people, whether it's political reporting, whether it's the commercial side of our relationship? There's just so much that goes on between the United States and Russia and, of course, that all had to be reorganized under a much smaller footprint, which was a very, very difficult thing to do.

So, that's what I walked into, early on, which is something that I had not experienced before. I had experienced big power relationships, certainly with China, and I've spent decades involved in the U.S.-China relationship and, of course, was first exposed to Russia in early visits to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, even worked on a joint venture there. So, I had a perspective of Russia pre-'91, and of course it followed in government and business work had visited there, and of course found a new reality, at least diplomatically, in 2017 when I arrived. So, it was difficult.

But what I remember most from that period were the personal aspects within the U.S. mission of how this played out, because I watched some of the finest men and women in diplomacy and in other aspects of international affairs work, who had dedicated their lives to Russia, to language, to regional studies, to politics, economics, and history, who were being booted out and probably would never have an opportunity to return. So, for them, it was quite catastrophic, and for the mission, it was something that caused us to reel for weeks, if not months, trying to find the right management structure, such that we could basically keep the lights on.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yeah. Very difficult challenge. You know, if you back up and look at the policy that seemed to be implemented at that period, there are some who say that there were actually three different policies in play with the Trump administration. One was what we heard from President Trump himself, which was, "We should be able to get along," or "Wouldn't it be nice to be able to get along with Vladimir Putin?"

Then you had officials in his administration who took, in some cases, a much harsher view, and then you also had Congress. You mentioned sanctions. Congress doing its thing, often very critical and introducing sanction upon sanction. I want to talk about sanctions later, but just that policy, do you agree that there actually, in reality, were three different policies? And do you agree that the Russians were confused? How would you describe how the Russians looked at American policy?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

I think the Russians read us pretty well. Those who I worked with at the top levels of the Foreign Ministry and beyond, they're professionals; in fact, they're some of the best I've ever worked with, from a professional standpoint. They read the United States well, they stay year after year, they understand Congress, the executive branch, even local government, to some extent. So, I'm not sure they were terribly confused by it, particularly when you experience what I have, and what many others have, which is to say, it's not uncommon for a newly elected president of either party to try to rebalance a difficult relationship. I certainly saw it in China where a newly elected president will try to warm up and to offer an embrace and to look forward to engagements of various kinds, and I think that's been the case in Russia as well.

If you look back, at least certainly back to President Clinton, and if you were to bring it current, newly elected presidents try to throw a bouquet out to get the relationship on an optimistic and solid footing, and then the reality of the relationship begins to set in. So, in this case, we had the carry-over from Russia's invasion of Ukraine back in 2015 and their regional geographic meddling, trying to expand or solidify their sense of regional security. And then you overlay that with, of course, the election meddling and what we thought to be very bad behavior in other regional conflicts around the world. No one would have thought that it would be anything other than very difficult at a professional level, and certainly, for those of us who were working it on the ground, day-to-day, I found more of a unified approach to dealing with

Russia, which is, we have to address, we have to answer, on some of these egregious and outrageous policies coming out of Moscow.

And we were all unified behind that. The president was unified behind the congressional sanctions, which were extremely punitive sanctions. I don't remember a time where the White House or the National Security Council was not in favor of what came later, and it only exacerbated with the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2017 along with his daughter Yulia, when then we, along with 29 other countries, worked to kick out Russian intelligence operatives. So we had the first election meddling row, and that was followed up shortly thereafter by the Skripal poisoning and we booted out probably sixty intelligence operatives from the United States, ended up closing two consulates, Seattle and then San Francisco, and, of course, the response, on top of what we already had the year earlier, was sixty more that were booted out of the Embassy, and the closing of St. Petersburg.

So, there was no way in this milieu, in this environment, that anything good could come. It was, again, managing adversity and managing downside risk, for me, almost the entire two years. But all the while, you had to establish a rapport, relationships. We had to communicate on things that represented our ongoing shared interests, whether that was space or whether it was Syria, Libya, Venezuela, Afghanistan, or just a lot of things that we were in discussions on, where we didn't agree, obviously, but we had enough in the way of shared interests to keep us together at the table. For me, it was really a combination of managing our shared interests where we had them, which wasn't a very a fulsome menu of things, and at the same time, trying to manage the degradation of our diplomatic presence, which was really unprecedented,

When you look at the election meddling and its aftermath, the Sergei Skripal poisoning and its aftermath, and the effect that it had in terms of personnel and diplomatic properties overall in the U.S.-Russia relationship, trying to make sense out of a much-reduced footprint and ability to do what needs to be done to protect U.S. interests and to get a better understanding of where Russia was, in terms of their own decision-making, and where they were likely headed, that became a very, very difficult task for the much slimmed-down staff that we had in Moscow.

*Jill Dougherty*

You mentioned China, and as everyone knows, you were the ambassador to China, also Singapore, so you have a lot of Asia experience, and I think you're uniquely positioned to help us understand that relationship between Russia and China. Based on that experience, how would you describe it? What *is* this relationship?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Well, it's a marriage made of convenience, based upon shared interests. It's a marriage that is fueled by an antipathy toward the United States. It's a relationship that should not exist, I would argue, if the United States had played its diplomatic cards a little more adroitly. But we

provided a huge opening for Russia and China to come together, and to my mind, there really was no excuse for that, but...

*Jill Dougherty*

Could you go into that just a little bit more because that really would be interesting. What was wrong with the previous policy?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Well, it was wave after wave of sanctions with inadequate dialogue. So, sanctions, if they're targeted, if they're focused, if they achieve a foreign policy outcome, is something that I believe should be part of your arsenal of weapons as a country, but while you're managing sanctions, you have to have some sort of thoughtful dialogue that is ongoing, that speaks to the sanctions and speaks about how, ultimately, we get away from sanctions, which aspects of the relationship need to be focused on. But, almost in both cases, both in Russia and China, we've been punitive without the ability to communicate and to connect, and so, it's an incomplete relationship, and I think it, therefore, begins to drift, and the drift in both cases can become strategically very dangerous.

So, while both countries are punished and sanctioned for the things that are perfectly understandable, and, I think, absolutely in America's interest, we missed the one element of diplomacy that is absolutely critical in balancing some of these very sensitive relationships, and that's a level of connectivity and dialogue that allows both sides to frame the priorities and to get working toward some shared outcomes and solutions. So, in that empty environment, Russia and China came together, each having different interests in coming together. Certainly in the case of China, which does not have a lot of trust toward Russia. I know that from my decades of experience there. All you have to do is pull up to the *Renmin Dahuitang*, the Great Hall of the People, which is right next to Tiananmen Square, which was a gift by the Soviets on the tenth anniversary of their friendship, after liberation in 1949, so, this would have been 1959.

The relationship between Russia and China was so strained a year or two thereafter, 1960, 1961, that the Russians left China and left this building unfinished. It was a Stalinesque piece of architecture from the bottom all the way to the roof. There was no roof, of course, because the Russians weren't there long enough to finish it, so the Chinese put a Chinese roof on the Stalinesque building and, every time I'd pull up there for meetings, I'd be reminded of the difficulty in that relationship between Russia and China. It was never meant to be, certainly, an easy one. They've got a shared border, probably one of the longest shared borders between any two countries in the world. They had, at that time, of course, late '50s, early '60s, an ideological disconnect between Mao's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism and what Khrushchev expected him to follow.

So, it was a very, very bitter rivalry that took them all the way to almost a nuclear encounter by the late 1960s. So, all you have to do is trace back a few decades to see where the Russia-China relationship goes if left to its own devices, but we, somehow, gave them reason to come

together. The Chinese, of course, were looking for an energy relationship from the Russians. They signed big ambitious contracts. I don't think much of those have come to fruition. And, of course, the Russians were looking for legitimacy, being seen as something other than the junior partner in the game of superpowers. They were also looking for funding from Chinese banks and Chinese sources for their oligarchs and for business expansion and development which, of course, really didn't happen because of the lack of trust between them.

But what I'm most concerned about is the fact that you've got Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin actually meeting together; their teams are sharing intelligence. They actually have started, two or three years ago, engaging in military exercises together, which would be a first, not that they're integrating or inter-operating at all – they're really watching each other more than anything else – but the fact that they're on the same playing field, doing that kind of thing, should set off alarm bells in Washington.

*Jill Dougherty*

I think we got into sanctions, but just one more point about that. You know, I've talked with a lot of Russians about sanctions, and right now there seems to be the conclusion in Moscow that sanctions will never end. This is going to be a fact of life forever, and so, some people say that the Russians interpret that as, we might as well do what we were going to do because we will just be punished with more sanctions, ergo onward. Do you agree with that? Is that a correct analysis of what's going on?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Well, I think... so, I'm all in favor of sanctions that have a specific target, a specific life and an intended outcome that is understood by both sides but, when you get into the hundreds, if not thousands of sanctions between two countries targeted toward individuals and entities without fully understanding why they are there, as opposed to just punishment or punitive measures, then you see the market begin to correct in ways that build around sanctions, where black markets are created, where access to capital is available through the non-traditional sources and means, and you find new alliances that grow out of that kind of environment, like the one we just talked about between Russia and China. So, there are sanctions, and sanctions do play a foreign policy role.

And I do believe that, without some understanding of why they are there, which gets right back to the importance of dialogue – sanctions plus dialogue really would be the most appropriate approach – then you do, probably, run the risk of countries engaging in more audacious behavior because there's nothing to lose at the end of the day. What will a couple 100 more sanctions do that 1,000 haven't done already? So, sanctions with a cause, with a target, with an intended foreign policy purpose, sign me up for that. But when they become watered down and ambiguous and less defined and just part of the landscape – and then of course the Foreign Ministry in Moscow was smart enough to conclude that there probably aren't a lot of people in Congress on Capitol Hill who were going to want to, anytime soon, stand up and say, "Okay, time's up. We ought to take away these sanctions and get on with a more normal bilateral relationship."

That isn't exactly a politically intelligent thing to do, and because of that, we are stuck, just because it is not a politically expedient thing to do to lift sanctions. It's very politically expedient to apply sanctions. That'll get an applause line every time you talk about it at a town hall meeting, but you'll get things thrown at you at a town hall meeting if you talk about lifting sanctions.

*Jill Dougherty*

I'm intrigued very much by your take on Vladimir Putin and I was just thinking in China, you have seen Chinese leaders, historic movements of leaders and then also in Singapore with Lee Kuan Yew, a great leader, actually internationally. You've had a chance to really watch three men in operation. What's your take on Vladimir Putin? I know this is almost unfair because it's a common question. But what would you say is driving him? Is there an aim? Does he have a strategic aim in mind for Russia?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Jill, I think he's fueled by a sense of inferiority, in where Russia finds itself today versus where it was pre-1991. He was very active, of course, in the intelligence services after finishing college in Saint Petersburg. He went on to work for Mayor Sobchak in Saint Petersburg, actually doing economic development work before he went on to the security services in Moscow. So, it's often been said that Vladimir Putin's worst day was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and he's yearned all the while to recreate that sense of empire. I think it was a catastrophic event in his life. And, so, he's fueled, therefore, by the Russia that is today versus what was yesterday's Soviet Union.

It has half the population, it has half the geographic mass, it has half the economy. It doesn't have the sense of unity, of course, that existed under the old system. So, I think what drives him is to rebuild empire, to ensure that he keeps Europe and NATO weak, because there's no way that he can begin to rebuild an empire and, at least, weaken the nation states around him that would represent the old Soviet geography with a strong NATO and a strong Europe. Therefore, he's fixated almost maniacally on disrupting events in Europe, on engaging in all kinds of policies that will destabilize countries that are fairly weak in Europe, and doing what he can to stand in the way of a strong U.S.-NATO relationship.

What I find unique about Vladimir Putin is he's been in office for over 20 years. He's seen every head of state come and go. He knows every negotiating style. He brings to the negotiating table his intelligence and operations background, and he runs the country with a very small clique of elites, mostly from the security services. When you take defense, when you take two or three of the security services, that's pretty much the decision-making body right there. You might throw in a few oligarchs, but it's a very simple system for him to use, as compared and contrasted to the system in Washington, which has endless checks and balances and, of course, is transparent and open to the media.

So, he's able to meddle in ways that no one can compete with. He does it on the cheap, he does it with a very simple plan, but he doesn't need much in the way of sign-offs to get it done. And he's able to come into countries, let's just say Venezuela, for example, just to take one in our hemisphere, with a menu of things that he can provide. Whether it is intelligence support, whether it's oil, whether it's logistics support, whether it's funding for different things, he can operate in ways that I've seen no other head of state be able to operate. He is singular and unique in his power, and Russia, today, is where it is and absolutely reflective of one man, and that is Vladimir Putin, and I would argue that the prevailing ideology in Russia is Putinism, and it's heavy on Russian Orthodox Church; it's heavy on being a proud Slavic, and it's heavy on supporting and standing behind Vladimir Putin and his desire to want to recreate greatness in a lost empire.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yeah, there's a sense of frustration, I think, among some Russians, when you get to the side that should be a natural - business, and that's, your family comes from that background, public service certainly, but a lot of business and experience in business. I have noted, over the years, President Putin is always coming up with new ideas: Russia projects, build the economy, make it a modern country with the IT industry, et cetera. I'd be interested in your perspective on that as well. Is it that he's just, kind of, talking a good game but he's never going to do it? Or how do you square what happened to him in the beginning when he was doing some economic reform before you came?

Twenty years ago, he was doing some economic reform. Then he stopped, and now it would be very hard to find any evidence of true reform. So, I guess, my question boils down to, how do you evaluate his quandary as a person who needs to develop business in Russia, talks a good game, but he's not doing it?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Well, it's a great question, and you could spend the rest of the day talking about economic development, say, for example, in the early '90s when there was a brief moment of euphoria under Yeltsin. I know because I was part of that, working on a joint venture in Moscow, and then the reality of Putin taking over. What's also interesting, and we ought to note this, Jill, is that we and the rest of the world did not see the collapse of the empire coming, nor did we see the rise of Vladimir Putin, and he's been there for over 20 years. So, what does that say about our own analytic capabilities and where we might have some deficiencies and holes? But there was a moment of euphoria when there was capital and brainpower moving into Russia in the '90s. That came to an end when, I think, Putin argued that too much openness and giving away too much to the outside was going to threaten their hold on power, and that all came to an end.

Meanwhile, you had a lot of friends of his who were buying state assets at pennies on the dollars, and they became billionaires overnight, and that remains the cadre of oligarchs that he turns to for advice and who actually have a seat at the table of power. So, we talked about Vladimir Putin versus Lee Kuan Yew, versus Xi Jinping. So, Lee Kuan Yew's approach was just

the opposite: If we don't have policies that bring in brainpower and capital and technology, we will lose. We're surrounded by, sometimes, unstable countries, we're a small island population with no natural resources, and we have to rely on inputs from the rest of the world. If we can't manage that, we're done. So, he's managed that openness, even with an authoritarian hold on political power, now with his son Lee Hsien Loong, who's been a long-time prime minister.

In China, I think China looked very closely at the Singapore model and, of course, they looked at the Russia model along about 1991 and what happened internally to cause that failure, that implosion, and then since, Russia's economic journey, which has not been a happy one. I think China learned a lot of lessons from that, and I think their takeaway was, at the end of the day, we have to have enough capital, technology and brainpower associated with our economic development, but in the end, we must own these national winners so that we have our own Google, our own Apple, our own Disney, our own AT&T, you name it, and that has taken them more toward a much different economic model today than they had just a few years ago.

What is disconcerting for Vladimir Putin, and what I used to comment on regularly is, here's a country of 150 million people, spread out across eleven time zones, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. Brilliant, beautiful, capable people, some of the great entrepreneurs of the world, and, as I used to tell some very senior people in Moscow, "Thank you for giving us a few Sergeys in the United States because they've added enormously to our own economic wellbeing." But what you find in today's Russia, based upon the policies of Vladimir Putin, which have not been friendly to economic development, with the exception of those immediately around him, is that you have brainpower now moving outward.

So, the young, tech-savvy, smart entrepreneurs are leaving, they're going to Europe, they're going to Israel, they're going to the United States and moreover, when you look at the capital outflows, I think that most people would be surprised at the dollars or the rubles that are leaving Russia in pursuit of investments elsewhere. So, these are exactly the things that you don't want to have happen if you want a strong, stable, 21st century economy, yet that's exactly what's happening in today's Russia. So, as that happens, you really look more and more, as Putin I'm sure does, at your balance sheet, and your balance sheet says you have a lot of oil and gas, which is most of the balance sheet, and you've got some capacity to sell arms on the open market, even on the black market; that brings in revenue.

But, in terms of economic diversification, like you've seen in China, for example, where there's been enormous economic diversification, you don't see that in Russia, and this bodes, I think, very poorly for the future of the Russian people. I think it's, in large part, why Putin's numbers continue to creep downward, because people get that in Russia. They get the fact that they're on the losing end of economic development and the winning aspects of economic development in Russia are going into the pockets of just a handful of the oligarch elites, and that's called corruption. I think most people are onto it, and hence you have the rise of Navalny and the many tens of thousands, if not millions, across the country who are very open and sympathetic to what he's trying to do.



*Jill Dougherty*

You were the ambassador from 2017 to 2019, and I'm just thinking, in the midst of all these diplomatic problems with staff, et cetera, did you have a chance to travel outside of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, the big cities, and get across that gigantic nation?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

I did, and I traveled from end to end and top to bottom and never ceased to be amazed by the beauty and the brilliance of the Russian people. I was captivated by Russian literature and history and music. I mean, I've heard Tchaikovsky for years from my daughter, who's a piano player, and I've read Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn in the past, but it takes on new meaning when you're actually there in the areas where they actually lived or may have suffered at one point. The country is just so magical in so many ways, and I really do miss it in deeply profound ways. The government, of course, is holding it back. It's holding back the aspirations and the power of its very people who, I think, are some of the smartest, most ingenious and creative people on the face of the earth.

There's so much in the way of human power that once unleashed... I think that's what gave the world a sense of optimism in the post-'91 period, for at least a part of the decade of the 1990s, is, wow. This is a country that no one was paying, could not pay any attention to under communism that now is freeing up its natural capacity, and people liked what they saw, and I think the Russian people liked the ability to engage with the outside world when it did last. There's a sense of serious suppression of the aspirations, the yearnings, and the talents of the Russian people, and I find that terribly unfortunate.

*Jill Dougherty*

Yeah. I remember one encounter that I had in a town that you might have gone to - it's right on the border of Russia and China - called Blagoveshchensk. It's like the river divides China and Russia. Talking to a Russian businessman, he said with kind of a big grin on his face, "Moscow is very far away." His reality was the workers on the other side of this river, from China, who would come over and do construction and not Moscow, which was thousands of miles away. I think that reminds me, you reminded me of that because he had a lot of entrepreneurial spirit. He was really a doer, but he seemed very frustrated because in order to do what he wanted to do, he literally had to import Chinese workers, which he didn't want to do. He wanted to use his own Russians. Please, go ahead.

*Ambassador Huntsman*

No, I was reflecting on your comments, and I was thinking about how porous that border has become between Russia and China. In fact, a natural marketplace has been created between China and Russia. People crossing the border, people trading. It's not regulated of course, so it's hard to know what passes the border, but, you know, in a state where people are going to be entrepreneurs, where they're going to build things, where they're going to want to trade, that activity is going to go on. You may as well harness it and use it for good and build it into a legitimate marketplace, because I would find corners of Russia where these markets had been

created, where borders had become porous, and people just started trading on their own, without any sense of direction from an overall economic development strategy.

*Jill Dougherty*

You know, in the beginning of our conversation, you were talking about when you arrived, and you were the ambassador from 2017 to 2019, so two years. Is there anything in the positive column on this? Do you feel that you accomplished something?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Jill, that's a very good question, and I think about that a lot, and I also reflect back on a very difficult time in China. My answer is always, I'll let the diplomatic historians make sense of it because a lot of things that you do and a lot of the programs that are done are not necessarily apparent at that moment in time. That's just the nature of diplomacy. It's slow, it's incremental. You build and make decisions for the long term, but listen, for me, it was managing adversity. It was managing the downside risk in the relationship, and we kept lines of communication open at the highest levels of the Russian government. We protected our diplomats and all of those affiliated with the Embassy. We transitioned hundreds of people out who had catastrophic events befall them with the PNGs [persona non grata] that occurred, unprecedented in history.

So, if you look at all of that and you say, okay, it could have been worse. It could have been truly catastrophic on a number of fronts, but we kind of held the foundational framework together such that we could not only deal with the people side, the management side, the bilateral relationship side, but we were also able to get out and talk to people and engage in social media that, I know, impacted many people who otherwise wouldn't have had access to it. I was able to get around and see groups of Russians to give speeches, to get in different forms of media; that, I think, was important. But it was a difficult, difficult couple of years, and I'm not sure that we're going to see that again anytime soon just for a number of reasons, one event after another. But I'm proud of what we were able to do.

I'm particularly proud of the professional staff at Embassy Moscow and our consulates that survived, Yekaterinburg, of course, and Vladivostok. We had to close St. Pete's, which, of course, was a very historic property, and one that many Americans had experienced on their trips to Russia. The professional staff were just absolutely outstanding, and I know what a blow it was to them. For me, I knew my time would be up eventually. For them, they were in it for the long term as professionals. But we all pulled together as an embassy family and made the most of it, and we were able to get many of our professionals on their feet as Russia watchers in countries in the region, some of our best and brightest, and that gave me great joy, to see some of our great men and women who really are the best in the business. They were able to get through it all, rebalance, and find really important positions doing similar work on the periphery. So, that was good.

*Jill Dougherty*

Is there advice that you would give to future American ambassadors or diplomats dealing with Russia?

*Ambassador Huntsman*

We have to deal with Russia in circumstances that are less politically charged. So, having a long-term strategy is always a good thing. We don't do strategy very well as a country, and sometimes, when we have tried, the strategies are short-lived. We're up against countries like Russia and China, which I would consider to be the two great powers in the world today. They develop strategies, they stick to them. They've got very few people who are involved in developing and executing strategies vis-a-vis the bilateral relationship with the United States, and they're very good at it.

We, in turn, are very episodic and up and down and inconsistent, and, as it relates to both Russia and China, we need to bring to bear a sense of consistency. We need a better understanding of what our national interests are, and we need an overlay that allows us to articulate and put forward our traditional American values because, although they're not liked in Moscow and they're not liked in Beijing, I think they still represent the yearnings and the aspirations of so many people in both countries, and that is to have a greater say, a greater ability to participate in the political affairs of their countries, a greater respect for human rights.

So many more things that need to be part of our agenda, and oftentimes it's crowded out in the cacophony, the yelling and screaming that goes on based on the *politics* of the bilateral relationship. So, a strategy plus a level of strategic dialogue that we are committed to, even when times are tough.

What I used to reflect on and tell members of Congress and others is, even in the very difficult days of the Soviet Union, we were able to carry on meaningful dialogues, specifically, I would point out, in arms control where, now, the Biden administration has made, I think, the correct call to extend the New START agreement another few years, which is probably the most important issue we have between the United States and Russia.

So, a strategy and ability to connect, to carry on important, delicate but strategic discussions in a consistent way that keeps us at the table. We've been estranged for too long, and the very thought of doing what we did in the Soviet days is almost anathema. It's almost like you're a Russia apologist if you even make such a recommendation. But this is just simple diplomacy as it's been carried out for hundreds of years. You can't rely on technology and algorithms to solve your diplomatic problems; that takes people. There's a human element and a human dimension that relies on relationship building, understanding one another, and staying consistently at the table, even when you're not agreeing to a whole lot.

*Jill Dougherty*

That reminds me, and perhaps this is the last question. You're summing this up so well, the focus on diplomacy and the importance of sustained dialogue, and I actually found a quote from you. I'll read it. You said, "No set or restart with Russia is going to help, just a clear understanding of our interests and values and a practical framework for sustained dialogue."

I was thinking of a person whom you may know, and I had the luck and honor to meet, Harold Saunders, Hal Saunders, who was the Assistant Secretary of State who actually created a system for sustained dialogue, and part of that was not only talking but listening. So, I think a lot of us will take encouragement from your words about the process, and that we do not know always where it's going to lead, but in the midst of it, you have to do it.

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Hal Saunders was a legend, and several in his generation were mentors to me coming up. They understood diplomacy from the post-World War II period, how we rebuild the world, how we engage with our rivals and our adversaries, and it's traditional diplomacy as envisioned hundreds of years ago when diplomacy was created along with the advent of the nation state. It's no different today.

We sometimes let tweets and social media get in the way, and political speeches that are driven by emotion and passion stand in the way of our dialogues. But we need to remember that the work of diplomats is extremely important. If diplomacy fails, heaven forbid, war then becomes an option, and that should never be the case. You should never be in a situation where diplomacy has failed.

It means we have not been creative or strategic enough or engaged enough in our dialogues around issues that really need to be resolved. And shame on us, but we've gone way too many years without simple aspects of diplomatic engagement playing out in ways that... You don't need to agree on everything, you don't need to come up with sound bites and smiling photo ops in the aftermath. But you do need to stay consistently engaged for purposes of understanding one another and confidence building and having a broader understanding of where the relationship wants to go, and we, unfortunately, have failed at some of those basic elements.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, Ambassador Jon Huntsman, thank you very much for reminding us of that. It was an inspiring talk, even though I think we began with a very difficult job that you had when you arrived in Moscow. But thank you very much for this interview.

*Ambassador Huntsman*

Thank you, Jill. Great pleasure to be with you, and keep up the good work.