

# The Ambassadorial Series: Deans of U.S.-Russia Diplomacy

Transcripts of the Interviews



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## Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering

### Dates of Service as U.S. Ambassador in Moscow: 1993-1996

#### PART 1

##### *Hanna Notte*

Ambassador Pickering, thank you so much for joining us in this sequel to the first Ambassadorial Series today. It's a real honor for me to speak with you. You had a long and distinguished career serving the U.S. government, including as ambassador to India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, and, of course, the United Nations. And you were also under secretary of state for political affairs. Today, however, we will speak about your engagement with one particular country, and that is Russia, where you served as ambassador in the early to mid 1990s. So, welcome.

##### *Ambassador Pickering*

Thank you, Hanna. It's a pleasure to be back with you. I'm looking forward to the conversation. Thank you very much for being the best and the other part of this conversation.

##### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you. Ambassador Pickering, let us start with the early 1990s. You served as ambassador in Russia from May 1993 until November 1996. Rather interesting and turbulent times, I should say. And you witnessed, among other events, the 1993 constitutional crisis, and indeed, you shared your precise and detailed recollections of events on the ground in the preceding interview in this Ambassadorial Series with Jill Dougherty.

Now, today, I would like to talk with you about the political implications of those events. We had the standoff between Yeltsin and the Parliament, the siege of the White House, and those events were perhaps the culmination of unresolved tensions that characterized this young Russian Federation. I mean, Gorbachev had attempted to convert the old USSR, if you wish, into a state based on the consent of the governed. He faced much resistance in doing so. That resistance then continued to brew, and then we get to 1993. I want to ask you, how were you reflecting on the political implications of events in Moscow in 1993, on the different possible scenarios of how this could turn out, and the repercussions, not just for Russia domestically, but also regionally and geopolitically? How were those things debated within the U.S. government?

##### *Ambassador Pickering*

It's a complex and challenging question, and in many ways reflects the complexities and the challenges that were present in Russia at that time. I think at rock bottom, and let me start there, Gorbachev was widely discredited in Russia, in large measure because of his withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact area, particularly Poland, and the removal of the group of Soviet forces from Germany, which meant, in effect, that he had given up the colonial empire to the west of

Russia, amassed by Stalin as a result of enormous sacrifices that he called upon Russia to make in defeating Nazi Germany at the time.

Secondly, this bred a natural outcome in which there was polarization in Russia. And, one could say, polarization between many different standards and many different outlooks, but primarily the poles were: one, Mr. Yeltsin's leadership of an uncertain direction, of an uncertain group of people, leaning toward what one could only characterize as a more democratic, more people-oriented, maybe more people-centered Russian republic, but with little or no idea about how to get there. The second major pole was essentially the return to Communist governance, Communist governance in a sense that everyone, in those days, over age 40 was still attached to - in large measure because of the very effective propaganda of the Soviet Union - and indeed, their sense that, as a group of people, they were better served by Communism than they were by the disruption and disasters that they saw occurring around them as Communism collapsed.

Gorbachev was an interesting man, because in my interviews with him, and I had a number, he constantly harked back to the view that Communism was really a good thing for Russia. It had good objectives, and it would bring good results. But a number of changes had to be made in how and in what way the Communists organized the economy. They were not technologically progressive enough. They were divided in their own visions of how to put things together, and they were uncertain, if I could put it this way, on the path to tread.

He had very little, I think, sense of the dis-utilities and the dis-economies that Communism, with a small group of bureaucrats making key economic decisions, which on the other side of the house were often controlled by the market and people's perception of the market, that large inefficiencies were resulting. And they, in many ways, brought about the economic collapse of the Soviet Union. It was, in that sense, as it is in the West as well these days, a struggle between how to achieve social justice on the one hand, and how to achieve maximum efficiency in the economy on the other. Efficiency does not naturally produce social justice, and social justice distorts some of the market pressures that often push entrepreneurs and capitalists in the direction of a more efficient economy.

This is a long explanation, but I think, in my view, it is a better depiction of what happened in Russia than the simple conclusions, which were widespread, popular, easy to understand, friendly to adopt, but perhaps as wrong as anything could be. And that was that there was some kind of Western world victory that came about, that in many ways destroyed Communism and made it, in a sense, a creature in their hands. And it was as a result that the West was going to take this creature and, like putty or like clay, mold something new that looked a little bit like Swiss democracy writ large, or Western European solutions to great problems, none of which was really in many ways understood or compatible with how Russians themselves and their leaders saw the issue.

Two just anecdotal comments: when I arrived in May of 1993, everyone I dealt with was a confirmed, committed Communist, put in service in the support of a Communist-elected

party. I'm sorry, Communist-elected Parliament and a Communist Party dominated government. And moving away from that was very hard for them intellectually. The second was a famous statement by a Polish economist called Adam Michnik, who once said, "Communism was tremendously effective at making fish soup out of a fishbowl, but the reverse is something that nobody understood. Making a fishbowl back out of fish soup was not a possible direction."

And so, that perhaps is more than you wanted to know in an answer to that question. But it's an attempt to describe what was in many ways the economic uncertainties, the economic worries, and the economic unpredictabilities of this move with the collapse of Communism almost overnight after Christmas of 1991, and the struggle, on the part of many, to re-erect something else that could work but would perhaps move closer to representing, as your question emphasized, the interest of the Russian people in the outcome and the need for them to be beneficiaries of it.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you so much, Ambassador, for these reflections on the changes that Russia was going through in the early '90s. I now want to shift the conversation to how the United States, in particular, was dealing with that new Russian Federation. We often hear today that Russians hold a number of grievances with U.S. policy vis-à-vis their country in the early '90s, and mid-1990s in particular, from America failing to assist Russia's "soft landing" economically, to NATO eastward expansion. I'd like to ask you, generally, do you see particular inflection points during the Clinton administration, and specifically the period that you were serving in Russia, for the U.S.-Russia relationship? And by that, I really mean any events or decisions taken by either side, the U.S. or Russia, that had significant implications for the trajectory of the relationship going forward.

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

It's a very good question, and let me try to address it. Were I to do this as a matter of informed analytical reflection, I would perhaps go back over that history, the period between May of '93 and the end of November '96, and pick out a lot. But let me, on the basis of my memory, which, at my age and at this time, is far from perfect, pick out a few things. In April of 1993, before actually arriving in Russia, I was privileged to attend and sit at the large table of a meeting between President Yeltsin and President Clinton in Vancouver, in British Columbia, in Canada. The meeting was an effort to have them introduce themselves to each other, to talk about a way ahead, and to try to begin the resolution of a number of the problems that were out there.

Clinton was very considerate of President Yeltsin, but one of the most interesting things was that an idea had percolated, in large measure with the support of Strobe Talbott, who was close to the president and then occupied the unique position in the State Department of being in charge of Russia and the former Soviet Union, and was in many ways my home base contact, sender of instructions, and principal contact for things. And sitting at the table with Strobe's briefing of the president ahead of time, and the president agreeing, there was a

suggestion near the end of the meeting that President Clinton would like to appoint his vice president, Al Gore, to be his principal point of contact with Russia at the Washington level, and suggested that the Russian side also reciprocate.

Yeltsin immediately thought that he would have to appoint his vice president, with whom he was deeply at odds, to this job. It was very clear almost immediately, when you heard him begin to speak, that this conclusion was in his mind, and he was going to seek to find a way to stop the process in order not to have to appoint his vice president. Strobe got it right away, gave a note to President Clinton, and President Clinton interrupted Yeltsin and said, "This is not necessarily something where you have to match the level and job of our appointment with your own. You can choose the person you think best equipped to do the job, and I will accept that person." He immediately switched to Prime Minister Chernomyrdin.

So, we had the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission set up. And it, over a period of time, did good work. It did good work on several levels. It did good work on the cabinet-to-cabinet meetings that were represented by those within the governments of both sides, who were chosen to meet with their opposite numbers in fields like health and defense and even foreign affairs, and finance and so on, and work out the individual problems. Not all were a success. And a number of the Russian ministers were less than cooperative because they were less than enthusiastic, and, quite clearly, were less than fully understanding of what it was that we were proposing to do to try to help them, and that many of those involved with some concern on our side for not being fully aware of political obligations that those ministers were not going to undertake, or be able to undertake.

The second piece of that was perhaps more important and more productive, and that was the bilateral contact between Gore and Chernomyrdin that had to do with dealing with a number of the harder subjects and doing it on their own. One of the subjects that they were very helpful in resolving was the sale proposed by Russia to India of a third-stage space maneuvering engine for a satellite program, but which would have given India the capacity to develop multiple independently targeted reentry vehicles. That was resolved, in part because Vice President Gore and his very distinguished assistant Leon Fuerth immediately realized that the Russians were also asking for an increased number of American space launches that we could not provide out of our own system. And so, we agreed to contract for those on the basis that the contract with India would not go ahead.

We also helped to resolve some very interesting questions over Russian military equipment sales to Iran. And essentially, Russians agreed, after a short period of time, that they would terminate all the contracts that we were concerned about for tanks and armored vehicles, and for aircraft and things that would give Iran an increased military capability, something we saw at our expense, in the expense of our Gulf state Arab allies in the region. So it played an important role there. That commission was a framework for much of what happened in Yeltsin-Clinton meetings, to prepare subjects that would go to them to talk through the possibilities and options. And so, it was very instrumental.

A second important framing and, indeed, point of inflection of significance was, of course, what we have already been talking about, the outbreak of violence in the streets of Moscow around the Foreign Ministry and later the Russian White House, Mayor's office, on October 3rd of 1993, which we tracked and followed very closely. Which meant, in a sense, that Yeltsin was saying that the previous Communist-elected Parliament, elected with competing Communists for each of the seats, had done so much simply to change the constitution by majority voting, that the direction in which he wanted to take Russia and the capacity to get there were totally undermined by this set of activities.

And while prorogation of the Parliament was not in his power constitutionally, he did it extra-constitutionally, and he attempted to ameliorate that in a political sense – and we are talking politics now – by agreeing that while he prorogued the Parliament, the Congress, the Duma, after the end of September 1993, he agreed that he would hold elections for a new Parliament in January and open it up to all parties. That indeed took place, and it took place in a way that did not make Mr. Yeltsin very happy because he did not emerge with a sufficient number of seats, effectively, to govern through that new Duma. He had to contend with that for most of the rest of his political life in ways that he had hoped to avoid, and felt, in many ways, he could, by what he was doing.

A third inflection point was what I would call a rolling inflection point. The Russian people, beginning with the end of Communism in December of 1991, right through my time, for most of the time, paid a very, very high price in lacking food and other essential necessities, as well as healthcare, by the failure of the Communist system under Gorbachev and then under Yeltsin to be able to deliver those necessities. While workarounds were created, and they were interesting, they were not, in my view, satisfactory to a proud people who believed, in fact, that they had gone from perhaps the world's second largest, if not largest and most important, political power, to something on the scale of the Hungarian economy.

They saw it in the streets. The state shops, which were the only ones that existed at the beginning of this period, had nothing to offer them. Or if they had something to offer, it was – stand in line and be surprised at what you could get. So, there was suffering. Some of that was supplemented by the ability of the new government to recognize that some independent entrepreneurship had to be recognized. And so, the kiosks, which were quickly constructed, sprung up along many of the major streets without a lot of government supervision, and with quite high prices, but a way of providing basic necessities.

There was the introduction of foreign investment, of Finnish and Irish shops out of their own supermarket chains came to Moscow in very small numbers, again, at very high prices with foreign currency transactions only, to try to relieve the high-end people of some of the burden that they had. There was an immediate opening of state-owned apartments – they were all state owned – for absorption, if I could put it this way, by the people living there, as state guests in those apartments, against the payment over ten years of a very nominal fee. It began at 10,000 rubles.

And 10,000 rubles began at something like \$18,000, which was not something that Russians could easily manage to scrape together. But with a very high rate of inflation, the dollar then descended to something on the order of a thousand or more rubles to buy a dollar. And so people could collect, in effect, enough rubles that deflated exchange rates, particularly if they had access to foreign currency, to pay almost a pittance for what were, on the whole, at one end, at the high end, very nice apartments, and at the other end, adequate apartments with semi-adequate facilities – often shared kitchens and bathrooms, which we knew prevailed under Communism. But, nevertheless, they became independent.

Another effort was the opening of lands outside of the major cities for the construction of gardens and associated small houses, or dachas, with them. And that led to the creation of colonies for buildings. Often, retired military, who had some money, would join in these colonies, and construct buildings. The buildings were elaborate and quite impressive, and not architecturally controlled. But the utility systems were almost nonexistent. That made, in a sense, a strange arrangement. But much of this came because it was needed or wanted, and the system allowed it to happen. But in allowing it to happen, the system was clearly unable to look at things as perhaps we might in the West: zoning requirements for building construction; provision of central sewers, water, electricity, and other services that would meet a common standard and be widely available. As a result, it was like camping out in a mega mansion in some piece of property quite remote from the center only beginning to be served by transportation.

I think, finally, there were too many Americans working in too many different angles to try to find ways to be helpful, with too little concentration of effort and too little focus on what had to be done, and very little understanding, which we all shared, of how and in what way would be the best way to modify what was being done. Within the Russian system, you had people who were, in many ways, outstanding advocates, in one sense or another, that, well, we want to recreate the beauties of Communism, but in a more liberal fashion. Or, we are now free entirely to carry out economic activities with no rules at all.

And therefore, if there are no rules, we can do things that are palpably illegal in other countries in order to make sure that our own fortunes prosper in an economic sense. We can become wealthy, and quick, and have a great deal of influence in the political sphere, which was very debilitating. But there are, and still are, people we have come to term 'oligarchs,' who, in one way or another, are dominating big pieces of the economy and participating in the corruption that they fostered and allowed in order to line their pockets, to create a sweetheart relationship with the government, whether it was Yeltsin who fought against it, or Putin, who's obviously using and manipulating it as a way to assure his continued, if I could use the expression, service to the people of Russia.

*Hanna Notte*

Thank you. Wow. A lot there. I want to use that statement that you made – too many Americans working in too many directions, perhaps with too little understanding – as a sort of launching pad to zoom out, Ambassador Pickering, and ask you a slightly broader question,

which is about Clinton's foreign policy more broadly. One sometimes hears this contention that President Clinton had no clear foreign policy compass overall, that perhaps he was more reactive than proactive in foreign affairs, that he was more focused on U.S. domestic concerns, and that against this backdrop, he dealt with Russia as a country which didn't count for much anymore in international affairs at that time. First of all, I want to ask you, do you think that's a fair and accurate assessment of how Clinton looked at Russia? Or how would you characterize the Clinton administration's approach vis-à-vis this new Russian Federation and how that fit in within the United States' broader national security and foreign policy objectives at the time?

### *Ambassador Pickering*

It's a very important question, Hanna, and thank you for asking it. It's a question that brings pain to Americans who, in many ways, particularly in those days, seeing the end of the Cold War, and they left alone to make decisions in foreign policy by their lights - I think they were wrong in doing that - could freely make mistakes as rapidly as they could score winners.

Secondly, there was a clear view - my quote from Adam Michnik a few questions ago emphasized it - there was no settled set of ideas about how one could take a formerly Communist-dominated economy, and polity, and put it into the groove that would lead them to something that resembled Western Europe, northern hemisphere success in achieving how, in the liberal progressive order, states would do in this process. And even the Baltics, which had had both long experience and willing people to work hard in this popular direction, had their own difficulties and problems. And so, it was neither easy, nor was there a playbook or a set of formulas.

And so, people like Larry Summers, brilliant, emerging then through the chain of jobs he held in the Treasury to being secretary of the Treasury, worked very hard to try to build up a reliable process of American investment in Russia and American influence on Russian ideas. The Agency for International Development, formerly heavily experienced in the underdeveloped world, suddenly was given the opportunity to try to develop programs and ideas for a basket case of an economy that spread widely over all kinds of elements of success and failure.

Huge technological innovation possibilities in Russia. Indeed, many tried to persuade Russians to seek foreign investment in their continued R&D efforts as a way to take the lines of inquiry formerly sponsored under the Communist regime, often by the defense establishment in Russia, of various new ideas and outlooks and develop products and services, often, again, for the utilitarian purpose of supporting the defense of the Soviet Union, but often capable of being applied to the civilian structure as something that was useful. And they did this in biology and, unfortunately, in the course of doing so, failed to keep their commitments under the biology convention [Biological Weapons Convention] about not creating warlike substances which could be used for biological attack, in part because the biological convention was then unable to formulate any measures of inspection and control, which would give reliance other than assurances mutually that people were obeying its strictures about developing or not developing biological agents of warfare. So there was much out there



that, in many ways, contributed to the confusing welter of uncertain prospects about how to go.

The Clinton foreign policy, to touch on that aspect of your question, like almost all American presidents, were not going to negate American attention to domestic issues at their own peril with respect to future elections. American electoral processes are dominated by high attention to and, indeed, great dependence upon the contending parties being able to provide to the electors in the United States, the people who vote, convincing arguments about what they were going to do about handling the number of outstanding and important political domestic issues and economic domestic issues that were part and parcel of the responsibility, as people saw it, of governance in the United States.

And as a result, they, perhaps, could then diminish, or take unnecessarily, time and attention away from looking at these foreign affairs questions, which you identified, which I think were all important, and which were taxing America in more ways than I think we were comfortable with, but about which we had no capacity to avoid considering. As a result, that led to competition and confusion, a lack of what one would have called in physics a unified field theory of how to go about helping Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union emerge from Communism of the early 1990s, which was failing economically, into something a great deal more prosperous and effective, and hopefully politically kinder to electorate attitudes and votes.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Ambassador Pickering, thank you for that. I would like to turn the conversation now to what's considered one of the elephants in the room when we discuss the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship over the decades, and that is the question of NATO expansion. I recall that you mentioned in the first interview in this Ambassadorial Series with Jill that you felt U.S. officials were indeed making an effort in the 1990s to make the case to Russia, not only that NATO was no longer a threat to Russia, but perhaps even holding out the hope that one day Russia might wish to join the alliance, become part of NATO. I want to ask you, if these efforts were candid, why do you think they failed to resonate more with Russian counterparts in Moscow?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

It's a very good question. I'd like to begin with a story that will illustrate, I think, some of the factors that played the role, and then, perhaps, explain it a little bit further. After retiring from the State Department, I spent a lot of my time in traveling around the country speaking about Russia. I still do to some extent today, as an extension of that. And very often, the second or third question that I would get from American audiences speaking about Russia would begin, "The Soviet Union has just done this." The attachment to the notion of the Soviet Union, despite its demise years before, and its nonexistence, was still very strong and colored American views in ways that even the best of all information efforts would not have in any way effaced. But there was no such effort to deal with it.

The opposite number on the Russian side was equally strange but disastrous, which was that the steady drumbeat of anti-NATO propaganda, ideas, stories, explanations, and efforts, was a central part, long past the demise of Communism, of how and in what way the government, in fact, informed the Russian people about its views, and particularly when NATO enlargement became the problem. NATO was the common enemy. NATO was surrounding Russia. NATO was about to take over if they could. NATO was the obligation to use military force. NATO was unprovoked by Russia - not necessarily true, but that was their view - and the Warsaw Pact had to be created to stop it, and it was bad for Russia.

And so, that history on both sides, the enthusiasm of the Americans for continuing to look at Russia as if it were the Soviet Union, and the enthusiasm of Russia for accepting NATO - as clearly presented by the Kremlin - as an unadulterated, powerful enemy seeking to work its way on Russia and Russian policy, created what was then, without doubt, a great popular enthusiasm for the enlargement on the United States and the Western European side, and great popular opposition to this enlargement as something that presented a continuing and increased serious danger to Russia.

Those questions were in many ways buttressed by additional facts. Had James Baker promised not to deploy American nuclear weapons east of the Oder-Neisse Line or east of the former boundary of East-West Germany? Had the United States committed not to deploy forces into that area under NATO, and did it keep those commitments? Had Russia, in one way or another, accepted, under President Yeltsin, the expansion, but allowed the festering of popular opinion to torment the expansion so widely and so popularly as to have created an effectively new policy commitment in Russia against NATO enlargement as a highly dangerous, highly threatening affair?

You mentioned the notion, and I think it was an important part of the lamented late effort to convince the Russians that if NATO wasn't exactly good for it, it was not the abject enemy that the Russians described it as. And one of those was to keep the door open for Russian membership in NATO. It was never accepted, but in the early days, it was not totally rejected. And that allowed the U.S. to keep the door open without having to fear the consequences of what would happen were Russia to join NATO. Because Russian membership in NATO would have been a strong negative addition to NATO for people like the Poles, who, in many ways, saw their joining NATO as an absolute guarantee under Article 5 that no Russian military force would ever be used against Poland in any way to promote Russian interests at the expense of Poland. This was true of a number of East European countries, not peculiarly the Poles. But the Poles were perhaps in the forefront of this, given their long and different history, if I can be diplomatic at this point, with Russia.

And so, that's out there. It remains. It hasn't in any way improved. It is very clear that since 2000, and perhaps even before that, President Putin has maintained his popularity and leadership in Russia, which has not been increasing, but it hasn't declined to the point where he's lost anything. Certainly, the election a few days ago indicated either a continued large capacity to affect Russian electoral outcomes on the part of the Kremlin and him, or a

continued sufficiency of popularity to assure that he doesn't have to do that even if it's declining.

And so, the idea that Putin's pursuing a nationalist policy to continue to enhance his reputation among Russians is, in my view, an analytical factor that cannot be dismissed in terms of the relationship between the states. And, if one had to say, here are American presidents that I just said are tremendously wrapped up in domestic issues and resolving domestic problems for electoral purposes, and here is President Putin, tremendously wrapped up in nationalist issues, for a principal purpose of staying in power, the differences may be in degree. The differences may be institutional: in America, we limit our presidents to two terms; in Russia, they have the opportunity, with changes to the constitution and the present setup, to promote and have adopted, perhaps even popularly adopted, extended terms for President Putin in the Russian electoral system. So, from one set of measures to another set of measures, there are interlinkages and interrelationships that one cannot ignore.

It would be a mistake for me as a former American ambassador, devoted as much as I possibly could in my life to speaking truth to where I found it, regardless of the cost, and there were times when I knew it was best to save that truth for a later time, if I can put it that way. And I don't admit of absolute suicidal heroism as a primary determinant of my foreign policy advice. But there were times when we all had to say what it was we thought about questions. And, to some extent, we have, and should admit that we were not the best at helping Russia move from Communism to something else. And that left the door open for Russians to seek their own solution. And that much of what we did set the groundwork for Mr. Putin's continued popularity in Russia over the years, with its ups and downs, after Yeltsin, and supported Yeltsin as well.

Yeltsin, in my humble view - a final statement in response to this question, which is a bit far afield - in almost every decision he had that made a big consequence for the future of the country, made a decision that I think was defensible in the view of preserving democracy and some new openness. He made many smaller decisions that were less so. The one big error, in my view, was the 1996 war in Chechnya - the pre-1996 war in Chechnya - in part because he became convinced that a good war is always good for presidential reelection.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you, Ambassador Pickering. A lot of interesting moments here. The war in Chechnya, the difference between the American and the Russian polity, these are elements to which we will return in later questions. For the moment, I want to stick with the question of NATO expansion - for one moment. You shared your views of the apprehensions on the Russian side in the 1990s, the way that Russians were looking at that major expansion. And I want to ask you, I know that you telegraphed your sense of those Russian concerns back to Washington from Moscow at the time. And indeed, you were not alone. George Kennan warned at that time that enhancing NATO in the proposed manner would, quote unquote, "be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era."

I'd like to ask you, why were those kinds of warnings not heeded more in Washington? I mean, did this have to do with U.S. domestic politics at the time? You were mentioning earlier that NATO expansion was popular in the West. Was it about domestic politics, or was it purely conviction in the sense that the White House, perhaps President Clinton personally, simply felt that NATO expansion was the right thing to do? So if you could speak a little bit to the push and pull factors on that issue, NATO expansion in Washington, that would be most helpful.

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

I think NATO expansion had a core of very effective advocates, that much of it was popular in domestic political terms, as you've touched on in your question, among Polish Americans, Ukrainian Americans, Lithuanian Americans, who saw this as the willingness of the United States to step up and protect those countries, which had been absorbed after 1945 in the Soviet sphere and had become, in a sense, colonies of the Soviet Union. And that that should never be repeated, and we had a way of putting in place a guarantee. And that guarantee was NATO enlargement. Of course, the Russians saw this as a deep and directed argument against their interests in Eastern Europe. We differed clearly on it. But it was also clear that the Russian view was that the Eastern European region, as well as Central Asia and the Caucasus, were what would be termed, I suppose, natural spheres of influence of Russia. And we were fighting over that, and NATO enlargement was a contest over it.

It was popular in the United States because it had voter significance. It was popular in the United States because these people had suffered, come out from under what we saw as the Communist yoke, were now free and independent, electing their own governments, and they should have full support to go down the path that looked more like Western Europe than it did Warsaw Pact. And we were very much committed, and that was very popular in the United States. The Russian view was that this is a danger, and America's intruding in our space, that we, over a long period of time, had the right to protect ourselves against that kind of nefarious influence, that the post-World War II settlement was put together in our interests to keep us from having to suffer those consequences, and now it was all being undone.

And I don't know whether that helps or not, but that was the root cause of much of the differences. And the point you make, without having expressed it that way, was what is fair? What is equitable? What is democratic? What supports open market activity? What supports capitalist-based economic growth in that part of the world? And one would have to say the notion of NATO enlargement could be portrayed, particularly for those who favored it, as entirely in keeping with those objectives.

My own view at the time was that I had a duty as an ambassador to warn Washington about the impact on Russia. That warning was carefully put together with the help of a wonderful staff. Copies of at least one of those warning cables is in Bill Burns's recent book, so you could read it for yourself. At the same time, I had little expectation, given what I knew about the bulldozer and steamroller pushing this particular direction, that we would change in any way along the lines that our warning raised the problem that there was a halfway house that

emerged after NATO enlargement – a suggestion by the then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Shalikashvili, that we could create a Partnership for Peace with, not beginning with full membership in NATO, but working particularly with military coordination, peacekeeping operations, areas of common interest with the East Europeans, but include Russia from the beginning, which we did. And there was Russian interest, and the then commander of NATO went out of his way to do what he could to incorporate the Russian generals assigned to liaison with NATO, a role in understanding NATO thinking.

I think there was something that we could have done, which was a much earlier effort to adopt an idea that emerged after NATO enlargement became effectively put in place, and that was the Partnership for Peace. General John Shalikashvili, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pushed for it and sold it, and it was to bring in both NATO partners and potential future NATO partners, including Russia, into a cooperative arrangement built around how and in what way their, particularly, military forces would engage in international peacekeeping, would be ready to help in times of emergency by cooperating together in places like the Balkans and so on, as later happened, in order to prevent misunderstandings that were certainly clearly self-evident in the differences over NATO enlargement.

And I think it was too bad that, in effect, we didn't begin with the Partnership for Peace and then later slowly have that emerge into NATO membership in a way that could have involved people who were part and parcel of that cooperation and broader understanding. And a then supreme allied commander went particularly out of his way to assure that the Russian generals who represented the Russian Armed Forces in Brussels before NATO were as involved as he could make them, and had access to him and could talk to them in a short period of time, but a useful period of time, in trying to build up what was, I think, an instrumental and procedural counterpoint, if I could put it this way, to the negative Russian attitudes that emerged quite quickly over NATO enlargement.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you, Ambassador, for those additional remarks on the NATO question. I want to shift the conversation to Chechnya now, if I may. Your service in Moscow coincided with the outbreak of the first Chechen War. First of all, I'm just curious, how did you ensure, you and your staff at the embassy at the time, that you would receive accurate, objective, timely information on what was actually going on, on the ground? And then, once you had that information, how did you formulate your advice on the Chechnya issue for Washington? I mean, was there even interest in Washington in Russia's predicament at that time? Or was Chechnya really marginal for U.S. policymakers?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

It was not marginal for me, but it was clearly much more marginal in Washington. Over the period of time, because we had consular issues in Chechnya, I asked, and one or two of our consular officers went there to reside, to work on the consular issues but provide us with firsthand accounts of what they were seeing and hearing and doing. And that helped to expand our base of understanding. It was also possible for me to be in touch with the local

governor of a neighboring republic of Chechnya, who had had very extensive Soviet military experience, but was then retired but acting as governor. I worked with him. He worked, in an effort to try to be helpful to us, to find missing Americans who had disappeared during humanitarian work in Chechnya. Among them perhaps most famous and important was Fred Cuny, who was an independent operator, a man of great capacity and distinction, who was not afraid to go into dangerous areas, and undoubtedly lost his life as a result of that.

We were also able to stay in touch with the OSCE, which at various times provided support and assistance for peacekeeping and peace negotiations in Chechnya. And that helped. And then we had our usual contacts in Moscow, with the Russian side of the equation, that gave us a clearer view of how they were thinking and working to deal with the problem of Chechnya.

One of the most difficult and unmanageable parts of the problem was the Russian invasion of Grozny, where Russian armored forces lined up and went down the main street and were attacked by the Chechen insurgents from the basements of nearby houses with captured anti-tank weapons, and left a trail of devastation and a very important defeat.

Russia attempted to reverse this with the use of special heavy artillery attacks against Grozny and did a lot of destruction. It meant, at the end of the first Chechen War, Russia had little to point to in a way of success. A number of individuals, including the oligarch Berezovsky, played some role in facilitating negotiations to end the conflict at that stage. And while it picked up again some years later and another round was fought, Yeltsin was able to get it off the agenda, if I could put it this way, and out of the way enough to succeed in the next round of presidential elections.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you for that. I do want to ask a follow-up question on this first Chechen War, which is slightly broader and conceptual in nature, if I may. It seems to me that Russia's experience in the 1990s, with war and instability in the North Caucasus, generated this fear of centrifugal tendencies, fragmentation, a sense that there would be instability at the periphery unless there is a strong central state in Moscow. And it appears to me that all this has, to some extent, informed the Russian leadership's view on how you maintain or ensure societal stability ever since, whether it is in domestic affairs, in Russia itself, but we also see it in Russia's foreign policy to some extent, if we look, for instance, at how Russia has dealt with Syria. I'm just curious how you reflect on those questions and on the conclusions that the Russian leadership appears to have drawn from the first and second Chechen Wars. And I also want to ask you whether you think there's sufficient understanding of these Russian lessons learned in Washington.

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

You make a very good point, and I would take it back further. I think the question of sufficient understanding has to be also complimented by the question, is there sufficient attention given to it? Understanding precedes attention, and the understanding is larger than the attention. Let me, however, go back and walk this question forward a little bit. There's no question at all

that large numbers of Russians were extremely disappointed by the decision made the day after Christmas in 1991, in a sense to free up the constituent republics of the former Soviet Union and allow them each to proceed to independence.

And certainly, the continued problems over Ukraine are only one example of this deep question. In addition, when I was there before Chechnya became a problem, there were serious concerns that there had been traditionally in the Soviet Union, that the Far East somehow was going to pull away and operate itself in a more independent status. There was concern about the border republics of the Russian Federation, of which there are 22, who have the special status of republic. They have an anthem. They have a flag. They don't in any way have significant political authorities, but Stalin did this as a way to try to honor their sense of their differences. They're often linguistically different areas. There are a significant number in the North Caucasus, and there are others scattered around, including in Siberia. These worried the Russians.

I was there at the time that Yeltsin took a trip on the Volga River and met with Governor Shaimiev of Tatarstan. Tatarstan is a Muslim area right in the center of the Volga region, right in the center of the center of Russia. Yeltsin treated Shaimiev with a degree of independence that went beyond what, perhaps, most Russians were prepared to accord as a way of trying to satisfy him that the issues that he was concerned about would be dealt with in a careful way and in a considerate way by the Russian state. That meant that it became the pattern for the maximum that a Russian region could achieve within the Russian Federation of independent operation and reflected very much this view that Russians were deeply concerned by vociferousness, by the ability, the status, the capability of a disintegration, of its constituent units and to more independent acting arrangements.

And this played a role in Mr. Putin's ascent to power. Shortly after 2000, when he began to introduce ideas, he did two things that in many ways militated against this independence going too far. One of those was to provide that the elected governors of the Russian oblasts, the standard, if I could put it this way, provincial subdivisions of the Russian state, should no longer be elected but appointed by the central government. And this was in large measure to cut into the development that had taken place in the Yeltsin years and early Putin years. These local oblasts had created, in a sense, many economies of their own, in many ways, directed and operated by the governors. And the governors achieved a status inside the Russian Federation which, while not threatening Putin's leadership, he could see on the horizon is coming in that direction.

And the second thing he did is, he went back to a tsarist enterprise of governors general and, I think, appointed eight in major regions of Russia, who would, in one sense or another, make sure that the provinces under their control, mainly oblasts, would toe the line and be part of how and in what way the federal central government wanted to see things. These two steps were seen by many as anti-democratic, by many as further centralizing, but were popular among many Russians who feared the breakup and who thought that nothing could be worse for Russia than the recreation of the civil war of the '20s and how disastrous it was for Russia,

for Russian life and for Russian economics. And so, there is, across the spectrum in Russia, that problem.

When Russian tanks went on the bridge over the Moscow River and fired at the Russian White House on October 3rd of 1993, the first thing that popped into my mind was: are we going to have a civil war in Russia? And is it going to be as disastrous for the country as the civil war between the Reds and the Whites was after the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Communist state? I had a worry about that, that I don't think was misplaced. It was something that we all thought of as being a very damaging situation. We did what we could, in whatever ways that we could, to encourage Yeltsin and his advisors to be very careful of venturing too far down the road in that direction. And that's another reason why the elections of January 1994, which, as I noted, had not turned out the way Yeltsin had hoped they would, were helpful in taking some of the pressure off, as well as the new constitution drafted shortly thereafter by Yeltsin, which provided a stronger presidency and a stronger central government and a stronger role for Yeltsin himself in the future governance of the state, was important.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you, Ambassador Pickering, for such a comprehensive answer. I do want to shift to a different episode in your distinguished diplomatic career. Ambassador, you were at the United Nations representing the United States from 1989 until 1992. Of course, Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 provided a real test of the U.S. and then still Soviet relationship under Gorbachev, if we consider that Saddam's Iraq had been a longstanding Soviet ally. But, nonetheless, it turned out that Gorbachev instructed the Soviet ambassador at the United Nations to vote in support of the U.S. in condemning the invasion of Kuwait. But then the Soviets also supported the legal basis at the UN Security Council for what became the first Gulf War of 1991. I would like to ask you, could you share some insights, some anecdotes from your interactions with Soviet counterparts on that issue at the time? What were their apprehensions? What was their thinking? Why did the Soviets decide to support the United States in this instance? How did they look at the first Gulf War?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

It was very interesting because my service in Russia came after that, although I had spent, prior to the UN days, a significant amount of time in arms controls negotiations with the Russians. So, I understood some of the motivations, but not the complete panoply of motivations. But a number of things happened that were interesting. One was that the Russians withdrew, in the late spring of 1990, at the end of his term, the then Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, who was a very strong, very committed, very hard-line Soviet Communist, and left in charge his deputy, who was Ukrainian by nationality or in origin, and who was in many ways much more flexible in where things should go.

At the same time, as the war broke out in early August, in the Middle East, with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, there was, in the development of approaches here, a growing relationship both between George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev, one that it was hard for Bush to abandon



when Gorbachev left the scene and Yeltsin appeared, and a very important relationship between Secretary Baker and Foreign Minister Shevardnadze. And at the top, particularly on questions like the use of force resolution at the end of November 1990, which was the authority for American and other military participation in driving Iraqi forces out of Kuwait, beginning in January 17th, 1991, but ending in April, with a long air campaign and a very short military ground force campaign, the Russians were supportive.

I could remember one particularly difficult time at the end of November. I was president of the Security Council, and the Israelis had just had a big dustup on the Temple Mount. Arik Sharon [Yitzak Shamir] was, I think, running Israeli politics at the time, and because Palestinians had thrown stones over the Western Wall, on Jews praying at the site, Israeli policemen invaded the top of the Temple Mount and, in the course of dealing with those Palestinians, killed a number of Palestinians. This was an answer to Saddam's prayers because he felt that if he could say, "My invasion of Kuwait was only the first step on the road to liberate Jerusalem," he could somehow create and attract more Arab support than he had at that time.

And the Israeli actions and toughness did not sit well with a number of members of the Security Council. One Monday morning, after a long and difficult weekend, as president of the Security Council – and my total effort was, just weeks away from the use of force resolution, not to allow this other issue to intrude on the constant and laser-like focus of the Security Council, which we supported as a political asset of great significance to us, to be wasted away by what was going on in the Middle East.

I had no basis for canvassing for much support early on Monday morning other than what we had done, so we went cold into the meeting. My conclusion was that this is going to be make or break, and the chances are not on my side. But I'm going to give a talk to indicate how much we have all jointly invested in dealing with Iraq, how close we are now, both to the failure of sanctions, to achieve that objective, and the necessity that we take the next step up, which was the palpable threat of the use of military force. We knew by then that the resolution was going to contain a delay from the end of November to mid-January before any force could be used, and maybe negotiations could ensue. So, I made my speech to the Security Council. I said, "I'm your president. My decision as president is to wait and not consider the Israeli problem on the Temple Mount until we have more clarity about what happened and who did what to whom. And that may take several weeks. But we ought to be prepared, in light of everything we've invested and done together on dealing with Iraq, to do that."

And the first individual who asked to speak was Yuli Vorontsov, who had just arrived within weeks and had been ambassador in the United States when I was ambassador in Russia, and had been ambassador in India preceding my service in India. We knew each other, but not very well. Yuli, for reasons I could never fathom, stood up and said, in the Security Council informal meeting, "We in Russia support that view. We will join with the Americans and with the rest of you in considering the Israeli problem at the appropriate time. But it is not now." And that solved the problem for me, just out of the blue. I had no reason to suggest to him that that would be the appropriate course of action, because I had very little confidence that it

would be. But it was, and it did, and it made a big difference in how capably we could then deal with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

And all that followed is history. But it had an important role in the effort of Saddam, and perhaps others, to sidetrack the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and overthrow where the Security Council had come. And, without putting too fine a point on it, I had thought that the Security Council had acted in the two months and three months leading up to the use of force resolution precisely as the drafters of the UN charter had thought it should act. And it was an unusual circumstance and well worth considering as an important precedent, as well as a significant action to deal with a total violation of international peace and security with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Ambassador, thank you for those fascinating anecdotes, telling us about that meeting, that important informal meeting at the UN Security Council. I realize I'm asking a big question here, but if you could offer some reflections on why Russia, Russian diplomats, were reacting so differently as the United States was gearing up for the first Gulf War, compared to the second Gulf War, a decade or a bit more later.

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

I think, interestingly enough, Russia, and the Soviet Union, at the time, paid a great deal of attention to international law, particularly when it supported their point of view, or particularly when ignoring international law or operating to a different standard of behavior would have set precedents which were not in its long-term interest. And Russia was worried, as we were in our own way, about war breaking out over some pretense that would in one way or another end up with one country invading another. And so, cross-border invasions, in an aggressive sense, were no-no's under international law, and they should be dealt with. It didn't always happen that that was the case, and it didn't always happen that Russian interests were aligned with its view of international law to the extent that was the case. Russian diplomats, in my humble view, did not operate on their own. They operated in accordance with set policies, and the set policies were decisions taken at the top in Russia. One cannot help but understand that both Mister Gorbachev and Mister Shevardnadze had a common view of this situation and were prepared to be supportive.

The next question had to do, obviously, with Russian-American relations. Would having turned their back on us after spending a great deal of time speaking with them and talking about the importance we attach to the next step here, and how valuable it would be in calming an otherwise very disruptive Middle East, and that would be in their interests as well as ours, I think played a significant role in how they saw this. They didn't vote with us 'yes' on every resolution. But they eschewed the notion of vetoing resolutions and would abstain at times rather than leave the consensus. And on the use of force, that's what they did, as China did.

And those particular efforts were very much appreciated by the United States, and we attempted to, obviously, keep them well-informed. But it was, in the end, in my view, the high-

level contact between George H.W. Bush and Gorbachev, and Secretary Baker's unstinting efforts to meet with every foreign minister of every member of the Security Council and personally to do everything he could to assure that, one, they wouldn't vote against us, and secondly, those who had the veto would not use the veto, even if he couldn't persuade them to vote for us, but he hoped that he could do that. And he was quite successful in doing it. And his last meeting was in New York two days before the vote, and we together - I joined him - met with the Cuban foreign minister, who was not movable.

## PART 2

### *Hanna Notte*

Ambassador Pickering, I would like to turn the conversation to an important policy field in U.S.-Russia relations over time, and that is the field of arms control and nonproliferation. Now, it appears to me that after some initial progress on arms control in the early 1990s, with the START treaties, the Lisbon Protocol, or the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, the PNIs, somehow momentum on arms control was then lost during the Clinton administration. For example, there was no agreement negotiated on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe to build on the PNIs. So, why was that? Why was there not more momentum? And perhaps - you were in Moscow from '93 to '96 - what was your sense of Russia's appetite at the time to do more arms control with the Americans?

### *Ambassador Pickering*

Hanna, it's a great question, and I think my immediate reaction was that there were too many competing other problems of dissonance that allowed the parties to leave arms control a little bit behind in terms of how to move forward. After all, Russia and Yeltsin were struggling for control of the country. It was not a united enterprise by any means. The United States had an interest in it, but it is quite possible, in the Clinton Administration, that the opportunity that appeared on the horizon that can best be epitomized by the overstatement that having an opportunity to make a Swiss democracy out of Russia was an attractive, and indeed fetching, set of circumstances to absorb American attention. And as a result, the relationship with the former Soviet Union, with the new Russia, became a struggle in many quarters rather than highly isolated and focused mainly, but not exclusively, on arms control, and I think that had a role.

I think we were approaching a period of pre-polarization in American activities, and you know as well as I know that the horrendous problem of getting the Senate to agree, with a significant number from both parties to meet the stringent requirements of two-thirds vote for advice and consent to ratification of an agreement, was clearly imperiled by this polarization question that came along. And there were Republicans who had fantastic ideas - I can only call them fantastic because they were unreal, unsupported, unfactual, and certainly, uncooperative and uneasy - that informed or misinformed their judgment about what they should do. And it was that collection of circumstances, perhaps, that played something of a role. It may have been, too, a semi-source of satisfaction, if I can put it that way, that enough

things had been cobbled together in the better period to stand us in substantially reasonably good stead over the period of adjusting to the post-Communist situation in Russia.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you for that. And perhaps I could zoom out a little bit and ask you a broader question on arms control and nonproliferation. You are someone who has worked passionately to further the cause of nonproliferation, of arms control really over decades, even since leaving office and in various Track 1.5 or Track 2 capacities. And I do want to ask you, in the absence of a cataclysmic event, a real wake up call, like, God forbid, the type of a Chernobyl disaster of 1986, how can we reignite today, at the highest leadership level in our various countries, commitment to arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation, really beyond the level of commitment that we're presently seeing, generate the kinds of pressures that we do now see on climate change, for instance, at least among certain constituencies?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

Climate change is not the perfect example, but in some cases, one would consider it now moving ahead in a forward direction more readily than arms control. My answer to your question really falls into three particular baskets. Number one, and most important, we saw with the continuation of New START that there was not a total lack of interest on the part of either Russia and its leader, or the United States and its new leader, to move ahead. We had been through a period, rather devastating, of - unfortunately - Republican leads in tearing down the structure that had been built up over a period of time, with the ABM Treaty, with Open Skies, with INF, with a number of issues, including non-observance of things like incidents at sea and so on, that really spelled, in my view, increasing and creeping danger.

And I think there is a deep feeling on the part of leaders in both countries that tearing up the final piece - Rose Gottemoeller's and Mr. Andropov's [Antonov's] close work together in putting together New START - would have opened the door even more to accident miscalculation and the horrors that might stem from that - the things that informed us both during the Cold War. And it was represented at the Geneva summit in June by the agreement to begin again strategic stability talks; to use that as a basis, perhaps, for returning the ambassadors; to open the door to other conversations that might ensue from that, and for the reissuance of the statement that had been issued by Reagan and Gorbachev, that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. And this means that there is, without putting too fine a point on it, some tilt at the top in the direction of the next stage, and the next stage will not be easy. It can be based very strongly on the monitoring, control and verification arrangements, which have been patiently worked out in a great deal of detail in New START, as a basis for finding ways to assure the next stage can be adequately controlled.

The second part of the next stage is perhaps the suggestion made by the Obama Administration that a thousand or 900 deliverable nuclear weapons may be the right ballpark for the Strategic Force. The third will be the useful and helpful suggestions of a number of... including my old friend and colleague Steven Pifer, that we look at tactical nuclear weapons, and one of the questions we might provide for is the freedom to mix: you could have a total of

X weapons; if you wish to have some of those tactical and some of those strategic, that's your choice. The final piece, and it's not the final piece, but the final piece in my exposition is that moving down from the 5- and 6,000 weapons currently held by the powers, down – I hasten to add – from 70,000 at the height of the Cold War, perhaps, on to something that aligns the deliverable weapons much more clearly with the number of reserved weapons and the number of weapons under dismantlement at a much lower level, would in itself be, I think, a useful step.

And finally, finally, the association of Britain, France and China with those negotiations; I think it's too early to try to pull them in. But one of the things I've always thought made a lot of sense was that Russia and the United States would undertake – if they didn't want to do so collectively, individually – frequently to brief China, Britain and France on their vision of where those negotiations were going and how they might end, intimately involving them, or more intimately involving them, in the back and forth of the negotiations and the problems that had been gauged, so that they would have some of the background and some of the knowledge and some of the thoughts and ideas about how to solve those problems.

The second set of questions is also extremely important, and that is the crying out need now, which I hope will be fulfilled, for a number of Track 2 dialogues between Russia and the United States. The NATO-Russian effort started by Sergei Rogov and Aleksei Gromyko which we've just been in touch with, you and I, would be a perfect example of how to evolve further bilateral conversations. And indeed, Sergei Rogov has played an unusual and creative, constructive role in arranging for the same over the past five or ten years, from time to time in Moscow, and these are significant and important.

And then I think, finally, there is, in the public kin, across the world, still a significant sense of concern that without careful management and without further work, the retrograde progress that has been made in the last ten years will become the dominant ethic in how things are done. And unfortunately, in the Trump-Putin era, we saw individuals at the top level, including those two individuals, speak about nuclear weapons as if they were just a larger form of hand grenade and could be engaged in with impunity, and that it was perfectly alright to threaten somebody else with nuclear use, and that that contributed to better things for the individual country and America First or Russian First objectives, all of which I think were dangerous, thoughtless, and needed to be corrected. And let's be hopeful that Biden and Putin can do so.

The first meetings around the question of strategic stability have not been breathtakingly successful. They have not been, in my view, totally without profit, and they have done the minimum, which is to lead on to further meetings, but more work and more effort can be put into those. The current posture of each country seeking to avoid doing anything that in any way at all enhances the position of the other country, and that includes closer relationships between them, is not the best cloud to have hanging over the strategic stability talks. And let us hope that creative work can turn that around, that that can lead to engagement on what would only happily be called New New START and that New New START can begin to pick up the pieces that I have set out in the first part of my answer to your question.

### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you very much for that, Ambassador Pickering. I'd like to turn the conversation to culture. You served as U.S. ambassador not only to Russia, but also to India, Israel, El Salvador, and Nigeria, countries with very different cultures, histories, social norms, concepts of honor and prestige, and related notions. Could you reflect for us a little bit on the importance to diplomatic service of understanding culture in the country that you serve to foster empathy and understanding with your interlocutors? And perhaps share some anecdotes from your own diplomatic career that serve to illustrate this.

### *Ambassador Pickering*

Thank you. It's an interesting question; you could add Jordan and the United Nations to that list. The United Nations is not without culture; indeed, it has 193 cultures. I found culture fantastically important and extremely interesting. I spent a great deal of my time in Jordan and in Israel, following, learning about, exploring, and indeed, visiting the archaeology of the region. I emerged as a historian with my undergraduate degree and never have put aside history as an interest of mine. I enjoy music, I enjoy dance. Russia was particularly rich in understanding that. The literature of all of these countries was very interesting. Wole Soyinka, among others in Nigeria, had begun to emerge as a famous author of renown, and reading what he was writing, as well as others of his counterparts, both in Nigeria and across Africa, opened the door a great deal to my interests.

I had the wonderful opportunity of spending four months in Washington studying the Swahili language before I went to Zanzibar, and then to Dar es Salaam. And the course was rich and very, very interesting and led by an especially gifted linguist who taught us in the first two weeks, without any knowledge of a single word in Swahili, the ten most difficult adaptations an English speaker must have to be able to manage the language. And I used it, in Zanzibar in particular, for all of my diplomatic work, because the then Revolutionary Council had only one English speaker, and he was not at the top of the Council.

I found travel, which is an amazing preoccupation for anybody, but it certainly hardened my interest, if I could put it this way, in culture writ large. And I made a number of long trips. When I was in Nigeria, it took a year of planning, but I and a small group of people drove from Lagos to Algiers, across the Sahara and back, and much of what we saw and paid attention to was of archeological and historical importance. And so, in the middle of the Sahara, we visited petroglyphs, which are drawn by humans, but many hundreds and thousands of years ago showed savanna grasslands, elephants and giraffes.

We found wonderful carvings in rock, in serious bas-relief, of cattle heads with long horns like the East African Ankola cattle. And so, this was, in many ways, a delight, and one had only to open one's eyes to appreciate the architecture around the world. India was an enormous resource, and I had two great trips in India in the short ten months I was there, one mainly in Rajasthan, and the other in South India, viewing and seeing much of what informed me about the historical background of people from those regions. So that's a brief canter over a very complex course, but a very interesting one. And it was much that the U.S. did in the field of

American culture, bringing dance from America – with a newly formed, Black American troop – to Tanzania was an amazing illustration of how the interest in Alvin Ailey, who ran that troop, not just in showing the best of what he could do for modern American dance, but going to the villages around Dar es Salaam, in Tanzania, and getting them to dance for and with him; to learn what they did and how they performed, and what they had to contribute, was extremely interesting.

I learned much about Islam because I spent most of my time in the early days in the Islamic world and more by accident than by plan. But nevertheless, that was significant and important. So, let me leave my answer there, but thank you for a question that is close to my heart, and thank you for pointing out that ambassadors are more than postmen. They are people who have a very avid intellectual life, and enriching that intellectual life while you are overseas is both a challenge and a huge reward.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you, Ambassador. Thank you also for sharing these anecdotes of your travel with us, and it seems to me that you've seen some amazing places throughout your career. Building on that, I want to ask you, you have dealt with Russia in very different capacities throughout your distinguished career serving the U.S. government. I mean, you were U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, so you dealt with Soviet and then Russian counterparts there. Then you were ambassador to Russia. And then, I assume that as under secretary of state for political affairs, you also had a fair share of dealing with Russia-related issues, and then subsequently in many Track 1.5 and Track 2 activities. So, you've really had the opportunity to formulate Russia policy from very different vantage points. And I'd like to ask you what your takeaways are from engaging with Russia from these different positions in the U.S. government? Did specific positions highlight specific opportunities or constraints when it comes to dealing with Russia, and did any of these positions afford you specific learning opportunities on how one best engages with Russia?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

I did, and I think, Hanna, without putting too fine a point on it, I learned very much to like Russians. They're in many ways like Americans. And while we had serious differences, particularly with Russians in the Soviet Union – and their diplomats were super competent, knew their briefs very well, pointed out all the areas where they found differences with the United States and where they could pick apart those differences and exploit them. And we were always put on our most careful approach to questions with them.

But, over a period of time, particularly in my time of service in Russia... When I began, everybody had been, in one way or another, a serious and loyal servant of the Communist state, the Soviet Union. And in 1993, they were still in positions of importance and power, and much of what they knew was not going to be washed out of their brain cages by any changing circumstances. And to make an impression, we had to prove that we were right. And we had to do our best to show that we were open to change as well, and that this was not a re-fighting of the Cold War in a new guise, and that took a great deal of time, and it didn't succeed

everywhere, either with Americans or with Russians. But I had a number of particularly fine interlocutors. I won't mention their names because they deserve the anonymity they had when we spoke together on many occasions in Moscow. But one of the values of that set of relationships was that I could meet with a senior official, that we could in some occasions when it was useful, retire to a separate room, the two of us together, to work together on the solution to a particularly difficult problem; that often my Russian colleague would want to hear what my proposal was first, that was okay, I didn't mind it. I think the hand that holds the pen sometimes has an advantage.

But I wanted very much to provoke a reaction from my Russian colleague under those circumstances, and hopefully that reaction would open the door to how I could adjust, and he could adjust, our proposals and thoughts and ideas to bring things closer together. And that would always result in what I consider to be some of my useful telegrams written back to Washington saying, I met with so and so today; we agreed to talk one on one. We agreed that the following problem needed more attention, was not in good shape. The suggestions that came out from me were the following, from him - the following. The result was we modified in the following directions, and hopefully this is something you can work with, and let me know that we can carry on the dialogue and see if we could come to some useful conclusion. Didn't always work, but it worked often enough for me to have a kind of satisfaction with that relationship, which, interestingly enough, was rare, even in places where I was working with friendly interlocutors who were either close allies or close coalition partners. And that was unusual.

I learned to appreciate Russia's culture; we've just been talking about it. I learned to understand Russian Orthodoxy. I had the opportunity quite frequently to meet with the Patriarch Alexy at the time. I talked to him about issues that were important. We talked rarely about religion, although he was clearly motivated by religious inspiration, and he brought that religious inspiration into his conversations with me. But at the same time, we talked about things that were of great importance to the future of Russia, often domestic problems that Russia was struggling with that, in one way or another, he or the Orthodox Church had reason to believe could be important.

He was concerned by outside proselytization of Russians by mainly of evangelical Christians from outside, including from the United States. And it was a bit of a struggle going on in that area. But he represented, early on, perhaps one of the most esteemed, if not the most esteemed organization in Russia by Russian citizens - perhaps the army ranked at various times up there with the Orthodox Church among these - and I found that extremely valuable. I think that over time, it was also possible for me - and I think today about those days - to visit the house of Pasternak, to visit places where the great Russians, Pushkin and so on, had lived both in and around Moscow and in the countryside, and to see how intensively the Russian state continued to honor these great accomplishers in the field of literature and poetry and in opera and in music and in composition, and the esteem that they were held in. These were all important because they gave you a better sense of how Russians' thinking had become



shaped by their own history and by their knowledge of what Russia was, what Russia had been, and what Russia could become.

### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you for that, and thank you for those reflections on meeting with various interlocutors in Moscow personally, and then writing telegrams back to Washington. This is a perfect segue into my next question, which is about the process of foreign policymaking in the United States, particularly vis-à-vis Russia. That process, to an outside observer, seems to be a complex one with a crowded actor landscape. So, when it comes to foreign policymaking, how can we understand the role and the relative weight of the president, the secretaries of state and defense, Congress and other constituencies? And where does the role of the ambassador fit it? I mean, when the Washington bureaucracy is also in direct contact with Moscow, then what precisely is the role of the ambassador, and what are some of the opportunities and constraints within which he or she operates?

### *Ambassador Pickering*

Let me begin with the ambassador, which is something I'm most familiar with, having worked for ambassadors and then having to perform as an ambassador. My sense has been, long before I was an ambassador, that the ambassador's role in American foreign policy was multifarious, many facets. That one of the key roles, if not the key role, was to know and understand American policy, to know and understand when it was working, but also to know and understand when it wasn't working. And then to have the wisdom, particularly through contacts with people in the country that was concerned with that policy as well as contacts with people carrying it out in the American embassy, of where it might be deficient or moving toward deficiency. And then using the platform that ambassadors had of writing a personal message to the State Department, sometimes to a special individual in the State Department.

I had the great joy and pleasure of working with Strobe Talbott. And Strobe knew and understood Russia as well as anyone. And Strobe was open to listening to ideas and frequently asked me for my reactions to thoughts and ideas about what was going on and where things might move or which we should be doing. This was a rich and, I think, valuable dialogue between us, but it allowed me, as I had done in other places, not to become a postman, delivering messages in two directions, but to become a policy advocate for change when it needed to come, and how it needed to be made. And this, in course, involves a certain sense of care, because the person I was working with was primary in having made the decisions to institute the policy we are now seeking to change in the first place.

And that individual, often an assistant secretary of state, but in Strobe's position, he occupied the position of assistant secretary of state for all the former Soviet Union. But there was never any question about, "You're seeking to spear my greatest achievement without giving it a chance to work." It was rather, I had to be careful, obviously, in explaining why I thought the policy needed some polishing, if we could put it that way, and he had to explain what he thought we could do to move in that direction, but he was very good. On a number of occasions, not too many, but a number, Strobe and I would be in touch – we had the

opportunity of having a secure telephone line, or what we believed was a secure telephone line, to speak over – and he would suggest to me, "The president's coming in a week. He's extremely interested in the following question. Could you give him no more than two paragraphs on what he should know about it and what he should be thinking about doing about it?" And that was absolutely unusual.

No assistant secretary had ever suggested that to me before. I don't think I had ever approached the question of writing the president of the United States a personal message from overseas. But Strobe believed that my judgment would be useful to the president; that was in itself an honor. But the messages that I sent would be heeded and listened to and absorbed. And I always did that; I always worked very hard on that message. A two-paragraph message is a lot harder to write than a 20-paragraph message. You have to get exactly in those things that are important, and you have to do it in a way that neither bores the president, nor in any way moves the president's thinking in a direction where you don't want the president to go. And it has to have the balance of presentation that makes for its credibility. And that was extremely interesting.

On a number of occasions, I had the privilege and the honor, both in Russia and elsewhere, but often in Russia, briefing the secretary of state, briefing senior State Department officers, deputy secretary occasionally, under secretary for political affairs on what was going on, often in visits back to the United States or visits when they came to Moscow. Strobe had with a senior Russian a strategic dialogue that big pieces of which took place when he visited Moscow, and I was always welcomed as a participant in these meetings and thought that that was, from my perspective, an unusual opportunity to explore in depth some of the same kind of questions that we explored bilaterally when there wasn't a visit going on in Washington, which I just explained. So, that all played a role. Secretaries of defense I got to know. I accompanied William Perry on a visit to northern Russia to see Russian efforts at breaking up missile submarines that were being retired as a result of arms control agreements to reduce the size of that fleet.

Those were always interesting and important, and they provided opportunities and side conversations during that travel to talk to the secretary of defense about questions that were on my mind as well the questions that were on his. And Bill Perry was, and still is, an old friend and a man whose judgment and capacities I esteem highly, as was Bill Cohen – we both attended the same school college in Maine many years apart, but that connection has always meant something important to me, and, I believe, to him, and we have continued from time to time to be in touch with each other.

So that covers much of what we were engaged in, but the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission was a very useful enterprise because it brought a wide range of American cabinet officers together with their Russian cabinet officers. It presented a large variety of opportunities to manage the relationship in a way that got close to the decision-making center in each of our countries, and as a result, we could do things more expeditiously and maybe more effectively by moving in that direction. It was something that was not a competition with the embassy so

much as a further instrument for improving the effectiveness of a relationship with the country, and the relationship with Russia was, and I believe remains, important. And a singularly most significant aspect of that was that as a result of the nuclear developments in both countries, we had the capacity to destroy each other, and perhaps most of the planet. And it was, therefore, a tremendously important issue that we conduct our relationships in a way that could be fully aware that no mistake should ever be permitted to go on long enough to have threatened that kind of activity.

And then I was acutely aware, as many of us were, that nuclear deterrence was singularly important. That if a nuclear exchange ever started, there wasn't anybody we knew who could give us a surefire way, to put it that way, to end such an exchange and to preserve humanity and the viability of our countries in the face of that kind of unmitigated disaster.

#### *Hanna Notte*

Thank you for that, Ambassador Pickering, for this comprehensive answer on how the role of the ambassador looked like, certainly when you were performing in Russia, and then also on the Bilateral Commission. I suppose an attempt was made later under President Obama and Medvedev to revive a similar format with the Bilateral Presidential Commission, though unfortunately that has long been dormant. But I want to shift slightly to the role of U.S. domestic politics in all of this, the role of domestic politics in enabling versus inhibiting, determining opportunities versus setting constraints for U.S. foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis Russia. And I do want to take one example to illustrate this question. In 1994, while you were serving in Moscow, the Democratic Party lost control over Congress. How instrumental was this shift for Clinton's leeway internationally, and what were some of the implications for the President's ability to navigate the relationship with Russia, if there were any implications?

#### *Ambassador Pickering*

Let me begin with that, and then talk a little bit about domestic and international issues and how they, in one way or another, affect American policy. I think the shift in the houses of Congress early in the first administration is a phenomenon that's not unusual in the United States, that presidents are elected in a wave of enthusiasm. They are given two years to perform miracles; that rarely happens. There is a buildup of backlash, and that takes its toll in the by-elections for the Congress after the first two years of the first term of an administration. And that, in many ways, is too short a time to be effective; much of it is in learning. And as a result, this kind of semi-automatic shift is difficult.

What's happened now, with the increasing polarization in the American Congress, is that that kind of a shift has become from an adverse set of circumstances to a disastrous division. And we need to be very concerned about it, and certainly, facing 2022, the American administration should and will have to do its very best to convince the American public that it should stay in control of the Congress, and this will be a very challenging activity for it.

But in 1994, it didn't become a fatal flaw. And there were people in both houses of the Congress, even with the change in leadership, that could get together on things, and that

Russia, in those days, despite differences about how tough to be with Russia, was more of a bilateral consideration. I can remember during my years in Russia, that it was Senator John McCain and the Republicans who always came out for election monitoring. The Democrats paid almost no attention to it. It was an enormous advantage for me to greet Senator McCain and his delegation. And he always made time for me and for him and his wife to have dinner together, a quiet, long discussion of what was going on in Russia. And I found him very broadly interested in Russia. He knew and understood both the upsides and the downsides of that relationship, and how important it was, and I found his advice, particularly on what to do regarding the Congress, was inordinately valuable. But the example of his leadership and coming to Russia for those numerous elections was very significant, and my pattern was always to accompany this delegation during the morning period, that is the A.M. period, of Russian elections and then – I would go with my interpreter because my Russian language, while I was studying it, was not nearly capable enough to deal with the complex situations that election monitoring required – we would go and walk around my neighborhood.

And I knew where the polling places were – and often, because we were close to the Russian Ministry of Defense, we would find military voting taking place, and talk to the election observers from the Russian parties, and understand how they were seeing things, and understand from the election officials, who were always welcoming, what their problems were and how they were resolving them. And it was very valuable because it gave one the sense, at least in the administration of an election, in terms of bringing the votes to the ballot box and then counting them at the end at the ballot box, it was done with considerable transparency and with considerable legitimacy. And as a result, one had a better sense that Russian elections, in those days at least, were being conducted with an effort to try to reflect a popular choice rather than Kremlin advocacy, if I could put it that way. And so, that part was important.

Domestic and foreign policy issues have increasingly blended together. Someone has coined the word 'intermestic' to describe the overlap between foreign policy and domestic issues. And much of that is true, that traditionally, American approaches in an electoral context have always been that domestic issues always outweigh foreign policy issues in part because many of them are bread and butter economic issues, and those are things that Americans choose to evaluate in their decision about voting for a candidate or not. And I think that's still important. There is also an old American tradition, now almost completely abandoned, that foreign policy differences stop at the water's edge, that we are one, united behind the government in its decisions as to how it will go in foreign policy. Now, much of the divisions on foreign policy creep well beyond the boundaries of the United States and play a role in other people's thinking and how they work. Election interference is unfortunately a seeming order of the day. Countries have to be as assiduous as they can be in stopping foreign interference where it begins, at the source, in the foreign country concerned, but recognizing that even overwhelming pressure and influence doesn't have the vocal capability to affect or block such intervention, and that you need defenses at home against that kind of intervention taking place.

The most insidious is obviously information operations which, in one way or another, tend to try to provide information to American voters in the multiple channels that are now available to do that, particularly using the internet, in ways that prejudice their voting outcome by pandering to prejudices that are known about, and which highlight and amplify those prejudices by adding false information into the mix. And people are much more likely to trust information, unfortunately, that panders to their prejudices, than somehow runs against them. And so, these questions exist.

Over time, with rare exceptions, I don't think any American election has been won on a particular foreign policy issue, but we do see debates that have turned or almost turned. Gerry Ford was unwilling to admit that Poland was a Communist country at the time. That Chinese Communist shelling of the little islands of Quemoy and Matsu, which were, in effect, under the control of Taiwan, was a particularly influential feature of an election in the early 1960s. We don't often find them; they're not replete in every election but many of them appear. And one would think that now, with the pandemic, with economic activities, the interrelationship between the foreign affairs aspects of both of those questions, and the domestic aspects, should be clearly apparent, understood and evaluated, even if, in fact, some of the earlier thoughts about the dominance of the domestic issues will still hold true and, perhaps, needs to be carefully evaluated as we get close to our next election.

*Hanna Notte*

Thank you, Ambassador Pickering, for these extremely comprehensive reflections on the domestic-foreign nexus. I want to come to the last question of our conversation today.

*Ambassador Pickering*

I'm sorry to hear, I really enjoyed talking about these things with you Hanna, thank you. Thank you too for the quality of your questions; they're important.

*Hanna Notte*

The big question that I reserved for the end of our conversation that we had, to bring it all together, and I do want to ask you, you have observed and been involved in your country's relations with Russia over decades. If you now reflect back on the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship from the 1980s until the present day, where do you see the most consequential inflection points, misunderstandings, perhaps lost opportunities in that relationship over time?

*Ambassador Pickering*

Writ large, grosso modo, I would say the end of Communism on December 26, 1991, was a huge inflection point, the ramifications of which lasted quite a bit of time. The Boris Yeltsin choice of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to assume a major position of national leadership in 2000 marked a serious inflection point. I would seek another inflection point, but pointing a date on it is harder, and that's the period where Putin began to feel increasingly that his own continuation in office depended very heavily on exploiting the American relationship and those pieces of the American relationship to which he objected and which he felt in an appeal to Russian nationalism would carry significant weight with the Russian voting public. And

perhaps that was two, three, four, five years into his first term when that began and represented the beginning of something that moved beyond a sense of suspicion and weariness to a sense that the future of his leadership of his country depended very heavily on being able to find ways, both true and false, to pick apart the American relationship.

Now, I've said nothing about America's response to any of these questions, and that figures deeply into the mix and adds complications, because the American response, as responses of almost any country to any major foreign policy issues, are often far from perfect and do not, in fact, comprehend all of the aspects of the problem. And even more difficult, the solutions do not present themselves in ways that, you could say, totally resolve every aspect of a problem; you take risks. President Biden took a serious risk in getting out of Afghanistan. But in my view, it was worth taking, because even after 20 years, there was no palpable end in sight, and a constant running on the deleterious treadmill of Afghanistan and getting nowhere, which is essentially where we were, required a president of stature and determination to take the obvious invidious risks of getting out.

And they were compounded by what took place, which was an energized and speeded up collapse of Afghan government authority in the aftermath of U.S. withdrawal and the uncertainties of the situations with respect to Afghanistan, and in light of the endemic corruption which had always plagued serious portions of the Afghan government in its effort to support and serve its own people.

Secondly, I would say, and I'm talking about current time, the willingness of President Biden, very early on, to take on three major pieces of legislation, to institute programs so expensive that they represented multiples of the regular American congressional budget were in that particular context also acts of high risk and high courage. And whether he will get all of that legislation or not, and whether it will emerge in perfect form or not, is uncertain. What I hope is that he will get a sufficient amount of that and a sufficient amount of success in that, and at days that seems to be a formidable mountain to cross to assure that continuity change and policy shifts that have been needed for 20 years will take place in the American system, which will do their bit in reinforcing the drop, we all know, that has taken place in foreign countries: esteem for, admiration of, and attachment to the United States.

No country continues forever to be the darling of other countries. Every country has to make mistakes or take risks, which have downsides. You cannot please all the people all of the time, as Abraham Lincoln wisely told us, nearly now, several hundred years ago. And as a result, an American president has to have courage and a deep sense about risk taking. And Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt, and hopefully Joe Biden will represent the kind of president who sees the absolute necessity for change and the risks associated with that as part and parcel of what they must do to be fully supportive of their country and its interests.

*Hanna Notte*

Thank you so much, Ambassador Pickering, for this yet again very comprehensive answer. I think today we learned so much, not only about your time spent in Russia, but also about

foreign affairs, U.S. foreign policy, and what makes for diplomatic service and leadership more broadly. And I believe that our viewers, future scholars, scholars of Russia but also of foreign affairs more broadly, future generations of diplomats and ambassadors will hugely benefit from this conversation today. So, thank you so much.

*Ambassador Pickering*

Thank you, Hanna, very much. Let me thank you for your questions; they have been thoughtful and incisive and very useful. Let me apologize for the length of my response. Let me say how much I've enjoyed this; I've been honored to have been asked. I have had a special pleasure with deeply advancing age to reflect back on my career and my life, and hopefully to leave behind in this series of discussions some useful lessons - without too much encumbrance of other impedimenta in my responses - for those who would come forward. And if so, I've done what I hope to be another step in a public service career that has not ended. Thank you.

*Hanna Notte*

Thank you, Ambassador.