

# The Ambassadorial Series

A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews



Ambassadorial Series

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES  
MIDDLEBURY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
MAY 10, 2021

## Introduction

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

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

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

Special thanks to our colleagues at Carnegie Corporation of New York, whose support throughout the evolution of the project was crucial.

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

## Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
AMBASSADOR JACK F. MATLOCK (1987-1991)	1
AMBASSADOR THOMAS R. PICKERING (1993-1996)	11
AMBASSADOR JAMES F. COLLINS (1997-2001)	26
AMBASSADOR ALEXANDER VERSHBOW (2001-2005)	44
AMBASSADOR JOHN BEYRLER (2008-2012)	57
AMBASSADOR MICHAEL MCFAUL (2012-2014)	72
AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT (2014-2017)	88
AMBASSADOR JON HUNTSMAN, JR. (2017-2019)	101

This series was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

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

---

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

---

### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

*Jill Dougherty*

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

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Jill Dougherty*

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *Jill Dougherty*

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

#### *Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

#### *Jill Dougherty*

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

#### *Ambassador Collins*

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Jill Dougherty*

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

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### *Jill Dougherty*

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

#### *Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



*Jill Dougherty*

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Jill Dougherty*

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Jill Dougherty*

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Jill Dougherty*

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

*Ambassador Collins*

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