

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 BEYRLE (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 Michael McFaul (2012–2014)

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

INTERVIEW

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

Yes, sir.

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador McFaul

Right.

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

Persona non grata.

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador McFaul

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador McFaul

Thanks for having me. Great conversation.