

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

Transcripts of the Interviews



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Ambassador James F. Collins

Dates of Service as U.S. Ambassador in Moscow: 1997-2001

PART 1

Hanna Notte

Ambassador Collins, thank you so much for talking with us today in this sequel to the Ambassadorial Series interviews. It's a real honor for me to speak with you. You had a long and distinguished career serving in the U.S. government, including as deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy in Moscow and then, of course, later as U.S. ambassador to Russia. So you were really engaged at the heart of American diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia during that fateful decade from the end of the Cold War leading up to President Putin's ascent to power. So, welcome today.

Ambassador Collins

Well, it's a pleasure to be with you, Hanna, and I look forward to talking with you. It was an exciting and challenging decade, and there's a lot to talk about.

Hanna Notte

Great. So let's get started, Ambassador. I would like to start our conversation in the year of 1990. You were then ready to go out to Moscow as deputy chief of mission. This is after the Berlin Wall had come down. The Warsaw Pact was coming apart; Germany was on the road to reunification. Nowadays, it seems to me that when we talk about these fateful events at the time - the end of the Cold War and associated developments, the end of Communism as a system of government in the USSR, and then the collapse of the Union itself - these events are often mixed up or even used interchangeably. And I want to ask you what, in your view, gave rise to this intellectual laziness, if you wish? Does it matter, and which misreadings of history, of these fateful events, have been most consequential to the trajectory of the U.S.-Russia relationship?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think I'd like to start with something my wife has observed any number of times, and it's in the book she wrote about our four decades of seeing Russia. And that is that when you're part of history, and you're in a historic event, you don't know how it's going to come out. In the coup in 1991, as we were sitting at the embassy, we didn't know that it was going to fail until it did fail. Hindsight is always 20/20, but I can assure you that in-time sight is far less certain, and it's very much like someone who's near and farsighted at the same time.

And so, I would say, the first thing about the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a phenomenon or as a historic event, is that not only didn't we see it coming, the Russians didn't see it coming either. The Russians understood that they had been going through half a decade of profound

change in the way the Communist system was working. Gorbachev's reforms had changed a tremendous amount in the way daily life was taking place and how it was evolving. But if they thought anything was coming as we approached the sort of changes that came in '91, it was, "Well, fine, maybe we'll have a change of leadership, or this will result in a restructuring of the way that Politburo works," and so forth. Nobody thought, frankly, that the Soviet Union was coming to an end or breaking up or disappearing as a unifying element of all of Eurasia. It simply was not thought about.

So, I am not too concerned when people ask me "Why didn't you see it coming?" We didn't see it coming because frankly, nobody saw it coming. And the reason they didn't, is yes, all of the Warsaw Pact broke up, but Poland didn't. Germany reunified. So there was no real seeming threat right there to the breakup of the Union. Now, there were some signs that were important. The nationalist movements in the Baltics, for instance, were challenging Soviet control over those previously independent states. You had problems in the Caucasus that were challenging Moscow's central control over the region. And you had plenty of nationalist sentiment in countries like Ukraine. But frankly, nobody at the time the coup took place in August 1991 thought it was the end of the Soviet Union. It simply didn't mean that.

So, did we miss a lot? I'm not sure we did. I think we understood what the forces at work were. We had heard rumors of coups, but we heard those all the time. And so, the judgment, I think, was yes, this is a difficult time, there are changes coming, Gorbachev was engaged in the next big challenge to the system of reorganizing the way the Union was structured in terms of its control from the center versus greater local autonomy, but nobody thought this was going to produce the end of the empire completely.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that. If we stay with the early 1990s for a moment, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 provided a first real test to the U.S.- and then still Soviet relationship under Gorbachev, especially if we consider that Iraq under Saddam had been a longstanding ally of the Soviet Union. And so, U.S. policy at that time, after the invasion of Kuwait, was driven by the assumption that Saddam wasn't just going to leave Kuwait unless he was confronted with overwhelming force and a credible threat of war. Hence, American diplomacy consisted in an attempt to isolate Saddam, to build a coalition against him, to pursue a military buildup. So I'd like to ask you, what was Moscow's position on this American approach as it was taking shape? What were the kinds of debates that you were having with Russian counterparts on this issue, and why do you think Gorbachev eventually decided to support the United States, to support the legal basis at the UN Security Council for what then became the first Gulf War? I mean, was it hard to convince the Russians to go along with the United States? Did specific individuals matter?

Ambassador Collins

Well, first, let me say that regrettably for this discussion, I was in transition at this time. So I was not traveling with the secretary of state, with Secretary Baker, as I had for the previous two years. I was off getting educated about how to be a DCM. I was more an observer than I

was a participant through all of this. A few things struck me as, obviously, more than an interested observer, I would say. First, the relationship between Moscow and Washington had gone a long way over the previous three, four years. I remember one major event took place in 1989 at the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution when Gorbachev and Bush met in Paris. It was the first time in which the Soviet government formally asked for international monetary loans. In other words, the Soviet government had, in a sense, implicitly joined the global economic system to the extent of being willing to take credit, build credits. That was quite a significant event. I remember people talking a lot about it among the Western alliance because it was unexpected, and it was a major shift in where things were going.

I think what happened after the invasion is, what I remember, was Secretary Baker was in Eurasia. He had been visiting – I think he visited Mongolia, and he was coming back into Russia and the Soviet Union. And at that time, he met with Gorbachev, after the invasion and so forth, and they agreed early on, I mean, almost at the time after the invasion, on an approach to the UN – a joint agreement that what Saddam had done was contrary to international law, and secondly, to go to the UN to try to get it resolved in some way. Now, I think that is where the Soviet Union remained. They did not, in any way, shape, or form want to see war break out because they knew, first of all, Iraq was going to lose, and secondly, they knew that if Iraq lost, it was going to endanger the relations they had with Iraq, which was one of their key allies in the Arab world. So preventing war but trying to get Saddam to see reason became their, I would say, policy, and they worked hard on that. They worked up to the very end, to the deadline for the outbreak of hostility. And in the end, they did not succeed.

Hanna Notte

Thank you very much for that. That's extremely interesting. I want to move slightly into the mid-1990s. Ambassador, you were senior coordinator and ambassador at large and special advisor to the secretary of state for the new independent states when the issue of NATO expansion became really acute in the mid-1990s. It seems to me that on the one hand, the U.S. administration was keen to develop these states' capacity to play their own role in the international system effectively, and getting them engaged in the Partnership for Peace and establishing working relationships between them and NATO was really part and parcel of that effort. On the other hand, however, you were also keenly aware of Russian opposition to any NATO expansion. I'd like to start by asking you how you were hoping to square that circle between those two conflicting dimensions. And why do you believe instruments like the Partnership for Peace or the NATO-Russia Founding Act ultimately proved to be insufficient instruments for diffusing tensions with Russia over the issue of NATO expansion?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think one has to look at the '90s and this issue from two perspectives. First, it was an evolutionary set of conditions that changed as we went through that decade. We were not in the same place at the beginning of the decade vis-à-vis Russian attitudes and our policy as we were at the end. But secondly, I think there was a more profound problem at the root of all of the challenges that I would say were not really successfully met. And that was that the United States and Russia had a very different idea about what Europe and the Euro-Atlantic world

was going to look like after the end of the Cold War. That essentially was, I would describe as follows: the American perspective usually, I would say, put most simply, saw it as the defeat of Communism and the Soviet idea, and the model that it represented as the outcome of the Cold War, and therefore, thinking in terms – as Americans often do – about wars that we've won, the idea was that we would then shape the future according to what we thought the agreed perceptions were among those who prevailed.

And remember, in many ways even Yeltsin and the Russian government, not very long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, more or less agreed that the Soviet Union was at an end, and that it had all become something different in the context of what Eurasia was to be. On the other hand, the Russian perception had one very profound difference, and that was they hadn't lost anything. They too had won. They had ended the Communist system; they had gotten rid of the Communist Party domination. They had also ended the empire in a peaceful way. They had also committed to the complete revolutionary transformation of their economy, to join the global economic system. What they didn't agree to was that they had lost. And Russia was still, from their point of view, the other great power in the Euro-Atlantic world, a power that was going to shape the future of a new system for the entire community as in something like an equal to the United States, as it had been before. They, after all, remained the nuclear superpower. They had not lost that position.

And so, we had two very different views about what had happened with the end of the Soviet Union in a way. More to the point, a very different view about how and who would develop, and I would say, constitute the new post-Cold War structure of the Euro-Atlantic world. Now, the Americans in the end, over time, opted for doing all of this restructuring in the context of the system of the NATO security system. The Russians, for their part, from the very outset, rejected that idea and were always looking for a way in which Russia and the U.S., and maybe some other great powers in Europe, would be the arbiters and developers of the new system. So they opted to push things like the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation, which was a full, where everyone was a member. There were no differences in memberships.

Now, the United States explored other options which were more attractive to the Russians in the beginning and first half of the '90s. The Partnership for Peace, remember, was joined by Russia itself. They became a member of the Partnership. They saw it as NATO was continuing to exist, but it was the NATO that had existed before the end of the Cold War, and then these other nations were having a relationship with that alliance. They were not members; they were all equal, so Poland and Russia were in the same place vis-à-vis NATO. All of these others were members of this so-called Partnership, and they were all, in a sense, working to develop a new set of arrangements with NATO, and NATO with them.

That worked quite well for a couple or three years. And I have to say, when I was ambassador-at-large and was going out to these other new states, it was a terrific thing to have as a tool in my kitbag, to say, "We are working with you to help you join this Partnership; to be an effective ally or partner of NATO; to be a partner in all that the new security system will help to make possible in the way of security and independence for all of these states in Europe." So

that was phase one. Phase two, I would say, came in sort of the middle of the '90s, and it was preceded by a couple of things. First of all, the war in Bosnia was something that evolved, in a way, from the standpoint of the U.S. and Russia, in a very interesting way. There was something called the Contact Group. It was kind of what the Russians, I think, always had in mind as the Security Council of Europe. It was the main powers; they met, they more or less talked about how to approach bringing the Bosnia thing under control and so forth. In the end, it produced also agreement that the Russians would provide peacekeeping forces under U.S. command in the post-conflict Bosnian situation.

In other words, Russia was willing to be a part of a security operation run under the NATO flag by the Americans, and take part in that. Now, at the same time, the whole movement and the pressures in the U.S. for bringing new members into NATO was building. The Russians were adamantly opposed to this. There was no question they didn't want it to happen. On the other hand, they also knew there was nothing they could do to stop it.

And so, you've asked about the Founding Act that was negotiated in the middle of the '90s. The Founding Act was in essence an effort to negotiate with the Russians the terms under which they would accept the accession to NATO and new membership of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary in return for assurances about what NATO would and would not do east of the old alliance boundaries, that is, east of Germany. And the terms of that talked about limits on the kind of deployment of any NATO forces that did occur in those new member states, on the way NATO could behave in them, et cetera, et cetera. In turn, while Russia was never willing to embrace the accession to NATO as something they wanted, they said that they would not oppose it. Now, this was, more or less, something they couldn't stop anyway, so fine. Now, the NATO Founding Act, in theory, created a new condition, and I know it was certainly the understanding of the Russians that, okay, we did this, that's where it is now, that's it. The new arrangement now exists.

And that was okay, reasonable for a while. The idea that Russia would meet with NATO allies in the NATO-Russia Council and so forth was founded. The Russians never liked it because they always said it was always 14 against one or 17 against one. It was never Russia as an equal member of the discussion. It was NATO versus Russia, et cetera. So it was never fully successful by any means, but it also, frankly, was always a fragile kind of arrangement, and one that, frankly, the United States side, I would say, found it difficult to keep up because there were pressures building, first of all, not to have that be the last word. Now we were going to begin to get the pressure to have the Baltic states join NATO. And there were pressures to have something that was testing the boundaries, let's say, of how the NATO forces in these new three countries would be deployed or not deployed, or what role they would have and so forth.

So, the reality was, once you had the first new accessions to NATO, I think the challenge for the American-Russian relationship simply grew ever stronger as pressures mounted for the NATO model to be the one that was going to be pushed to define the new security structure for Europe, and the Russian view that that was not the kind of model that they were prepared

to see as legitimate new structure for the whole Euro-Atlantic world. What they were clearly saying was, even in the middle of the '90s, "Baltic states maybe, but no further. No further into former Soviet space." And that, frankly, became the hard red line that we found was a real one two decades later.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that, Ambassador. That's incredibly useful. If I may, I'd like to ask you a slightly more conceptual follow-up question on what you just said. You outlined these very divergent U.S. versus Russian views of how the Euro-Atlantic space should be structured after the end of the Cold War. So essentially, America found itself with a Russian interlocutor in the 1990s which had formally renounced empire; the direct rule by Moscow of the other republics had ended, yet on the other hand, Russia effectively did stake out an entitlement or claim to a privileged sphere of influence in its neighborhood. So, from an American point of view, then, where are the lines between empire, hegemony, sphere of influence, and what is sort of an acceptable degree of Russian entitlement, if you wish, to have a say over the path of its neighbors - whether that's rooted in history, threat perceptions, or something else - versus a degree of undue Russian influence that should really be rejected? How does one judge what is acceptable versus unacceptable? Is it a case-by-case decision? How were you thinking about those questions in the middle of the 1990s?

Ambassador Collins

Well, first of all, in the '90s, I think up through the '90s, really, even into Putin's early years, the issues that you're sort of suggesting were not as stark as they become in the last decade and a half from where we are now, from the mid-2000s on. But I think the reality is - Russia was the great power in Eurasia, and that meant all of its neighbors had the problem of living with a big power, one that was tremendously bigger than any one of them. Now, I don't want to get myself into trouble here, but I mean, fundamentally, my guess is that Mexico and Central America and a number of other countries in the western hemisphere have thought similarly that it's not easy to live with that big thing in the north. We do have something called the Monroe Doctrine, and we've damn near come to nuclear war over the then Soviet Union trying to put military forces, including missiles, into a country in this hemisphere.

So, the issue of great power and neighbors is not unique to the Russian system. And I think the reality was even more complex because in the breakup of the empire, yes, the political boundaries were set, new governments emerged rather quickly and began to govern, but the residue of the divorce process between the center in Moscow and the successor to the Soviet government, which was Russia, and all of those neighbors was very complicated and very complex. They had to define boundaries, they had even more trouble in the context of developing national economies and relations of economy that were state to state rather than one big economy under a central authority. All of this was tremendously complex and difficult in the '90s and was not even finished even at the end of them. And so, Russian development of its relations with neighbors, it seems to me, has been an evolutionary process.

It's taken place over quite a period of time. And it began, I think, with probably an assumption, first of all, that, if you remember the initial breakup of the Union that was foreseen, was in the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Now, exactly what that was supposed to be, it was not clear, but it was essentially to be some kind of a unified community in terms of its past and kind of its interests, its commonwealth states. At the same time, it was independent states. And Yeltsin, from the very outset, was wedded to the idea that they would be independent. So he negotiated the borders, he negotiated issues that questioned anything about independence. Some issues were left never resolved completely, but they were working to try to get them settled. And I would say that Yeltsin's position throughout his presidency was that those states were independent, they were sovereign, but they were also Russia's neighbors, and Russia had interests at stake in how they behaved vis-à-vis the rest of the world. To put it quite simply, even Yeltsin, I think, with all of his readiness to support their independence and sovereignty, was never going to see as something that was acceptable the appearance of the U.S. First Cavalry Division on the Ukraine-Russian border, because that was a different question. That was an issue of security for the homeland.

I think the premise at the beginning was always that Russia did have a different relationship with these immediate new neighbors, the former republics. The question was, how was it going to be arranged and what was it. Now, in my experience during much of the '90s, those new states were very much concerned, most of all, in developing their own statehood, their own sovereignty, their own capacity to govern themselves. They had much more experience dealing with Moscow, frankly, than we ever did. They knew how to manipulate them in many ways and other things, and many of them defined themselves almost as not Russian, which I never thought was terribly healthy. You know, they needed to be either Ukrainians or Georgians or Uzbeks or whatever in their own right, not just 'not Russians'.

But I think it was also true that when I would visit the countries, and I did, it was clear to me that there were limits to what the United States was able to do to ensure the security and sovereignty and independence of those nations unless they were capable of doing a great deal of that work effectively themselves, because the idea that the United States was going to go to war over Kyrgyzstan with Russia was not real. It simply wasn't a fact, so the question was how could we assist them in developing their sovereignty and independence and independent existence. But I always thought we had to have a very realistic view about what the U.S. could and could not do, and what we needed to encourage those states to do to develop a working and rational relationship with their big northern neighbor. In that, I - sometimes, I was not fully understood in Washington, I think.

The idea was they're independent, they're sovereign, the Russians have no say in it. In fact, much of the way in which American thinking went about what was happening in that region was that our principal objective was to prevent the restoration of the Russian Empire. And that essentially meant that we were intent not so much on developing the countries around Russia and getting them to have a relationship with their northern neighbor that would work as we were in preventing Russia from having a future in those countries, which I think was unrealistic.

And the Russians, more or less, didn't pay a lot of attention to this for a considerable time. In fact, the Russian approach was, they were developing their own relations. They didn't think that they were having a problem with these nations, except possibly Ukraine and the Baltics. There was, I would say, not a major concern that the United States was going to replace them or that we were going to have problems. The "problem children" were Ukraine and Georgia increasingly, because they kept saying "We want to join those guys in the West, the NATO people." And for the Russians, that was just, I would say, a red line, and it was from the beginning. That, as I said, if you looked at it from the standpoint of security, I am sure the Russian General Staff was presenting the unacceptable idea of American forces ending up on the Russian border in Ukraine or in Georgia. Now, this may have been unrealistic, but it doesn't mean that they weren't capable of thinking the worst case. And, you know, they watched what we were doing in Poland and Czechoslovakia and Czech Republic, and Hungary, and development of anti-missile defenses - not in the '90s, but some of this was there. And they were concerned.

I think that was a position that existed from the beginning, and our efforts, frankly, to challenge it frontally were always, probably, going to produce an equally sharp rebuke. And that was, I think... That plays out very unfortunately in the last decade and a half.

Hanna Notte

Thank you so much for such a comprehensive answer. That's really useful. Russia maintained or retained a significant nuclear arsenal after the end of the Cold War, so I want to turn the conversation to strategic arms control for a second. When you were a DCM at the embassy in the early '90s, the United States and Russia negotiated the START Treaty which called for the destruction of immense numbers of nuclear weapons and opened up an unprecedented system of verification and transparency in the systems of strategic arms. First of all, I want to ask you: it's my understanding that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow played a role in support of these negotiations towards the START Treaty. How did that work? What is it that the U.S. Embassy in Moscow fed into the negotiations? And how did the different pieces come together in the U.S. inter-agency process in preparation for these negotiations?

Ambassador Collins

Well, let me begin with a slightly different question, because I think the background to it is extremely important. When the Soviet Union broke up, I would say there was no higher priority in the U.S. approach to that region, and I stress the region here, not just Moscow, but the whole kit and caboodle of the empire, than ensuring the nuclear arms that existed around that country were, first of all, protected and under competent control, and secondly, that we had as a strategic goal from the very outset a withdrawal of all such arms, both tactical and strategic, back into the Russian Federation or their destruction in place. Now, there was no higher priority than that, I believe, in the policy of the United States at the time of the Soviet breakup because the idea, first of all, that you could have the outbreak of civil war - and nobody took it for granted that was not possible - in a country where nuclear weapons were around was a frightening prospect, and one that no one could contemplate with any

equanimity. Now fortunately, I think the people in Moscow had the same view; really, the others in the rest of the country, the leaders also pretty much had the view that we had to find a way to get through that and get rid of it.

So the first priority that was on the agenda was to ensure that all the tactical nuclear weapons, to the extent we could verify it, had been withdrawn from the non-Russian republics back into the Russian Republic or into Russia after the breakup, and secondly, to negotiate the end of the presence of these strategic nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus. And so, strategic arms, in that sense, from the beginning, and in the earliest stage, were very much focused on that issue. Now, I have to tell you, it's very nice, you're very complimentary to DCMs and ambassadors and embassies and this kind of thing, but, frankly, when it came to the negotiation of something like the START Treaty, the embassy's role was a limited one. Sure, we did things to support the negotiating teams and all this kind of thing, and we reported on all of the questions and issues that were of relevance to the negotiations as they were ongoing. That was part of our contribution. But did I, as *chargé*, or the ambassador, even when he was there, have a direct input very much, or significantly, into the negotiating process? Not a lot, frankly. It was limited.

The arms control world had a dynamic of its own. They had a very competent, very impressive group of people who had their counterparts on the Russian side. Those were the people who did the negotiating and got the decisions made. Now, in the interim between sessions and so forth, yes, I carried the mail to the Russian negotiating side. Their ambassador carried the mail to our negotiating side. There was back and forth, and there were visits by senior people exploring issues, particularly as things moved, people like Strobe Talbott would come and have talks with counterparts about these issues, but did the embassy itself play a major role or did even I, in Washington as the assistant secretary equivalent, as ambassador-at-large for that region, have a strong voice? Well, I knew what was going on, I tried to be sure that what I heard made sense to me, that people weren't going off on what I thought was a tangent that was not realistic vis-à-vis what the Russians were saying or doing, but, you know, Washington is a very big place and there are lots of people with voices. I used to joke that I had about 85 ambassadors to Russia. So, there were plenty of voices.

But the embassy's role, I would say, was important as reporter, as being a competent, capable, both reporter of what we were asked to convey but also what we thought would be important for Washington to understand. We were an important conveyor of messages to the Russian government from the Washington side when that was necessary. And, you know, we had a voice. We were the people on the ground; we did go around; we knew lots of people. And our voice was heard in the policy circles making decisions about the negotiation. But were we more than one voice? Not really. I mean, we were significant, but not dispositive in almost anything.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. That's very clear. I want to ask a follow-up question on arms control in the early '90s. We had this momentum with the START Treaty; we had the Nunn-Lugar CTR Programs;

we had negotiation towards the Chemical Weapons Convention at the time, but one area where perhaps more could have been done was on the question of tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. I mean, you had the pledges in the so-called Presidential Nuclear Initiatives from December 1991, but then no negotiation towards a verifiable agreement or treaty. And I'd like to ask you to elaborate on this a little bit. Why were the non-strategic nuclear weapons such a hard lift at the time?

Ambassador Collins

It's a hard question, and I'm not sure I've got a good answer to that, except that for the Russian side, remember that the border in Europe, the European border from the Baltic to the Black Sea isn't the only border. There was another big country out there that at this time had a relationship a good deal different from what it is now with the Russians. There were a lot of uncertainties about what the future of the relations with China and the Asian heartland was going to be. Russia was weak, was uncertain even about whether it could hold itself together, for sure. And so, I think tactical nuclear weapons may have had quite a different meaning for Russia's security establishment in terms of their ability to defend the homeland than just a question of whether, if we got ours out of Germany, they could get rid of all of theirs. I mean, it was just not, I think, the same question.

And I think in that sense, the strategic issue has always had a different meaning to the Russian side, and understandably. They are defending a territory where, for huge tracts of it, they don't have any people. They're defending borders that are humongous. And so the question of deterrence, I think, in that dimension is an extremely important part of the way they think about this. Secondly, I think it's just a reality that the Russian side, particularly after the breakup, has a population that doesn't even, you know, it's half of Europe, it's not even half of Europe's population, much less ours. We're dealing here with a country at a huge disadvantage, in almost every single way you could think, of actually being able to resist in the worst case. And so, I think tactical nuclear weapons were kind of the ultimate deterrent, that you didn't just have to go to war with the United States and end everybody, was the thinking, but you could make it awful hard for people who were trying to cause you pain or take a part of your territory if you had this kind of weapon at hand.

I don't know that I see well into the Russian mind; I'm not an arms control expert. I never professed to be. But to me, the problem on the tactical nuclear weapons always had to do with the disproportionate role I think Russia's security establishment saw them playing in their own capacity to defend the homeland. We didn't see it that way. We didn't have a nuclear threat, a tactical weapons problem. Europe did, but not the United States. And so, our mentality about this was, I think, just different from theirs. That said, there are all sorts of technical reasons about why it was difficult to come to any agreements or why they weren't willing to talk about it. It was a little bit like missile defense was to become. I mean, we said it's not a threat; they're, more or less, saying tactical weapons aren't a threat either. People see things differently that way. So, I think that's in great part the reason.

The Nunn-Lugar Program fundamentally had a very simple premise, and that is that United States would be more secure if you could get rid of the strategic nuclear weapons that were required to be destroyed or were in those other non-Russian states as soon as possible and safely. And that we would also be more secure if we knew that the nuclear arsenal of the Russian Federation, post-Soviet, was under secure and stable control. And so, the idea was the Americans would provide money and funding and, to the extent necessary, would support expertise and exchange and so forth, and to achieve that in the Russian Federation, which was broke. That's what this was all about.

There were basically two or three basic programs in it. One was to destroy and eliminate the nuclear warheads and the nuclear weapons as required under the START Treaty, and that was true in Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Belarus, as well as in the Russian Federation. The second was to try to ensure that any nuclear materials that remain, weapons and so forth, were going to be stored and secured in ways that ensured their security and close control by competent authority. And the third was to try to ensure that the build down of the nuclear industry across the board in all of those countries, but particularly in Russia, did not result in a lot of nuclear expertise and knowledge and personnel and so forth going off to other countries where it was thought they were trying to develop nuclear weapons, which would have been a big problem.

And so, really extraordinary programs were undertaken. I'm not going to get into the details. I would only say that for the '90s, almost for the entire decade, without a lot of problems, say for an often obstruction by security authorities, the Russian and American counterparts worked cooperatively and effectively to achieve all the ends that that program had set for itself. And it was really quite extraordinary because once you posited for the nuclear scientists in these, say, old, closed cities, the problem that they had to jointly achieve, they got to work and they did it, and they did it extremely competently. We built new nuclear storage sites with them; we helped them decommission nuclear reactors and nuclear weapons and warheads. All of this stuff, basically extremely competent cooperation between experts from both sides, and the political dimension was not an issue. Whatever the differences were, they got on with the job because the job had been agreed.

I think it was a lesson for what's possible when you get to the point where you can agree on the objective. So it was an extraordinarily, I would say, inspiring program, in many ways, for both sides. It was quite something to watch the way the nuclear scientists from both sides would sit down, and they exactly understood one another and knew how to approach, knew what the issues were, talked over the options they had, and would then recommend the decision about what to do. It was real professional work. It was a bit like the space station, which was the same kind of project.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for sharing that success story of cooperation. I do want to turn our conversation to the issue of Kosovo. You already touched upon the Kosovo crisis in the first interview of the Series with Jill Dougherty - the crisis of Kosovo in 1998. And you explained how this became a major setback for Yeltsin, who failed to prevent U.S. military intervention in Serbia, and how

this really led to an unprecedented turn against Americans in Russia. And I would like to dig a little deeper into the issue today, if I may. First of all, I'd like to ask you: could you characterize your interactions with Russian counterparts on this issue both prior to and after the U.S. decision to bomb Serbian targets to stop Milosevic's campaign against the Kosovars? I mean, what were the Russians saying to you, and was the United States prepared for the extent to which this really turned into a domestic issue in Russia, shaped the Russian public mood so strongly? Or did this come as a surprise to the United States?

Ambassador Collins

Well, we're going back more than 20 years, and I'm not sure my immediate memory is all that good about exactly what I was doing then on a day-to-day basis. So I'm not sure I can give you a good picture of what I was saying to the Russians, but clearly the Russian position is one that I understand. And I would also tell you that there was a good deal of direct communication between the Kremlin and Washington that I wasn't privy to during this time, but I know what it was about. It was about basically Yeltsin doing his utmost to prevent Clinton from going to the military option. He absolutely was adamant that he wanted the Americans to avoid doing that.

Now, I don't know for sure what the dynamics were inside the team, there, in the Kremlin. But clearly Yeltsin understood that it was going to be a defeat for him if he was not able to prevent his friends, the Americans, from going to war against an emotional brother of the Russian people. And believe me, there was plenty of propaganda about all of this, about why were the Americans standing up for the Muslims in Kosovo, why were they being anti-Serb, et cetera, et cetera. So Yeltsin was in a bit of a corner in all of this. Plus, I think he himself felt it was an absolute disaster to use a military option against Serbia. Now, were we prepared for this? Were the Americans, I think, sensitive enough to what this was going to mean? No, they weren't. I'm not sure we at the embassy even understood how deeply the reaction was going to go or how effective the people who were Yeltsin's critics were going to be in using what we did in Serbia against him and against, if you will, the Westerners, but they were, and it put them on the defensive, and it made it very difficult for the Yeltsin team for quite some time.

Now, Yeltsin is a shrewd politician, and he did manage to extricate himself by essentially, after a couple of weeks of being beat up over the issue, portraying his critics as warmongers trying to get the Russians into a war in the Balkans and at the same time offering to be the peacemaker, saying he's willing to send Chernomyrdin to see Milosevic, try to bring the fighting to an end, get a cease-fire, whatever, in other words, get this onto a negotiating track and stop the military action. Now, the run up to all of this had been troubled. We had a position in which we were basically trying to draw a red line for Milosevic. And Milosevic, just like Saddam before, wasn't paying much attention. And similarly, the Russians were trying to preserve their relations with an important ally, or important partner, and knew that he was in for deep, deep trouble if he got himself into a war with the West. And again, they failed in the first instance, but in the end, in some sense, Yeltsin pulled himself out of it by, in many ways, being the catalyst to get the fighting stopped and moving on to a negotiated outcome.

But the damage was very serious for the Americans because in a way, the Americans had been sold to... and I think the way the Yeltsin group has always presented us as, the Americans were not warmongers, they were trying to keep the peace, they were trying to make peace and so forth. And this undercut that position, that somehow, we were just using our military whenever we didn't get our way. That shook a lot of the confidence in the United States, I think. And it did go very deep because people did know about Serbia, and the idea that these were our Orthodox brothers. There had always been a special relationship with Serbia. It went much lower down into the population as an issue than most others had up to that time.

Hanna Notte

Thank you so much for that, Ambassador. Turning from Kosovo to another conflict, you witnessed both the first and second Chechen War, the first, I believe, from Washington, the second from Moscow as U.S. ambassador. Could you talk a little bit about the differences, if any, in U.S. assessment and perceptions of the two Russian campaigns in Chechnya and the impact those had on the U.S.-Russia relationship?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I guess first of all, I'd say that both of them had a negative impact. This was portrayed, rightly or wrongly, as the big ogre beating up on a little minority in the American psyche. Therefore, the little guy or the underdog had probably more supporters than even was necessarily warranted. But the issue was essentially whether the Russian Federation's territorial integrity was going to survive. And in the case of the first war, it was coming in the aftermath, or as decisions were emerging and being made that were, in fact, strengthening the unity of the Russian Federation, where the compromises and so forth required with local leaders and others were bearing fruit and creating a more effective central government, and where the questions about whether the Russian Federation was going to survive were being put to rest much more... And here, the Chechens are actually openly challenging that premise. So, there was no question about that.

Yeltsin, I think, must have explored a number of options. I think he'd been told by the security services, by the military, by others that they could take care of this and, you know, make sure it didn't happen. None of it worked. Meanwhile, pressures were growing on him about keeping the Union together, about the unacceptability of what the Chechens were doing in the area. And so, he, I guess he asked the then chairman of the Joint Chief Ministry of Defense, Grachev, to solve the problem. I think Grachev told him "Don't worry, I can deal with it in a couple weeks," and, of course, you had the outbreak of the first Chechen War, which turned into a disaster.

Now, my main concern about that was the longer that it went on, the harder it became for the American government to keep it to the side and keep going on the other issues which were extremely important to us and not let the Chechen War overwhelm our ability to do things rationally with Moscow. So my sense was we had to get this stopped somehow. In that sense, I did advocate the outcome that was ultimately successful in getting the cease-fire after a

time, which was to use the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as a mediator, bring about a cease-fire and provide observers, in essence stop the war. That actually did work. The OSCE people managed to get it stopped. The issue, in a sense, was put on hold, if you will, I suppose. The military dimension receded as an issue, but nothing was really solved in terms of, I would say, resolving the fundamental issues that were challenging, the issue of relations between Moscow and Chechnya. But it bought time, and I thought it was a success because it did take it off the agenda as a front-burner issue and let us continue with pursuing the other issues on our agenda that were terribly important.

The second war comes after Putin is prime minister, and there is all sorts of stories about whether he had a role in bringing about things that precipitated the response of Russia to terrorist activities in Moscow and elsewhere. In any event, yes, I was there. We were opposed to the restarting, if you will, of the all-out Chechen War. I remember being sent into, after the initial invasion by Russia of Chechnya, sent in to ask Putin as prime minister whether or not there was going to be a halt of the forces at the big river boundary in Chechnya. I didn't really get an answer, although he said implicitly yes, and he basically lied to me because the objective, I think, with Putin was to put an end to this, to create conditions in which Moscow's interest in preserving the unity and territorial integrity was going to be preserved. And his solution to it in the end, because he wanted to end the fighting, he didn't want it to continue, was what I have always called 'Chechenization,' which was basically, turn the governance of that province over, more or less, to the leaders, Kadyrov, and basically tell them: you can pretty much have a free hand if you do not challenge our authority that you are in the Russian Federation and you basically, in a sense, behave reasonably outside Chechnya.

Now, I think that's more or less what was done. I think it is what has continued ever since. I think Putin's solution to it was not to have good governance in Chechnya, it was to have Chechnya remain a part of the Russian Federation, do certain things as a constituent part, but not ask much questions about what Mr. Kadyrov and his crowd were doing internally in that province. And they more or less run it as they see fit, so far as I can tell.

Now, did we accept that? Well, I guess so. It ended the fighting; it brought an end to the war in Chechnya. We no longer had to deal with the Russian military turning Grozny into Berlin 1945 and so forth, but did we leave the Chechens better off? I'm not sure we did at all. I think it kept the issue of Chechnya as a challenge for any sort of leadership, American or Russian, intact but on hold because we accepted a bargain, which was that Mr. Kadyrov would be in charge.

Hanna Notte

Thank you very much for that, Ambassador. I'd like to turn to a set of questions related to Russia's political and economic transition in the 1990s and the role played by the United States here. Starting with Russia's economic transition, the United States was quite active in supporting economic reforms in all sorts of ways through all sorts of programs, and the Russians were also quite proactive in asking for advice on how to establish a market economy in their country. Now, of course, this changed abruptly with the Russian financial crisis of 1998. I'd like to ask you, could the United States have done more to support Russia's

economic transition? Was this about more programs, more money, or actually do a better job at understanding realities on the ground, or, in fact, done a better job at managing Russian expectations? What do you think about this, and what do you conclude from this period, really, about any foreign government's ability to assist another country in such a fundamental transition?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think there are several levels on which to discuss that question. One simple level is to say that the Americans, and also our European allies because they also played a strong role in the transition, were very successful in taking what had been an unworkable command economy under the Soviet Communist Bolshevik system and turning it into a market system – because across the entire region of Eurasia today, we have a market economic system. It may be flawed in many ways, it may be a difficult one, it may be corrupt, it may be excellent. I mean, there are all kinds of things that are not necessarily what Americans would say is the ideal, wrong with it, but it is a market economy. And to have transitioned that in what amounted to about a decade was nothing short of almost miraculous, because it wasn't just Russia, it was across the whole region. So on the one hand, I would say there was tremendous success in what was done, and I don't think anybody ought to denigrate or deny – that's number one.

Now, in terms of other questions, were there things we could have done? Of course there were. I'm sure there were many things we could have done better, things that we could have understood better. I think one of the most difficult issues for all of the people dealing with the Russian transition was the almost impossibility of understanding how little most Russians, and I don't count the few experts that were dealing with the banking system or whatever, but most Russians understood about even fundamental basic concepts of the market economy, like money or how banks worked, or how personal property was regarded. I mean, none of this was in the genes, nobody had ever lived with this in the Russian Federation. So, I think the assumption that you could just go in and tell people or explain to people and they'd get it, often was misplaced. You had, often, a good deal of misunderstanding. I think in that sense, what I would say is we didn't listen enough. We didn't explore enough what we were being told by people. And I think that was a challenge, and remember, almost none of the people who ever came in to do the work from AID or the other European equivalents had any experience dealing with a Communist government and society that never had experienced a market economy. Remember, nobody in the Soviet Union ever lived under a market economy, virtually, unless they were 90 years old.

That was one big problem. I do think there was a lot of misunderstanding about how much they understood. And in that sense, I think you're correct. More, better explanation, better management of expectations and so on is something that could have been done better. On the other hand, I think it's also true that the Russian side had totally unrealistic expectations about what could happen. I remember, and maybe I mentioned this in the previous one, one minister asking me one day whether – and this was when I was DCM – whether I could send them a team to tell them how to make a market economy. What did they have to do? It was sort of

like, make a few decisions, or a few changes, well, I mean, no sense of the complexities or the deep challenges they faced. On the money side - I don't think it was a money question, frankly. I do think it was, and one mistake that we increasingly got ourselves tied into was in assuming that the Polish model, or the shock therapy model and so forth, was going to produce the same results in Russia that it did in a place like Poland because it became pretty clear, increasingly clear, I think, that it was not going to be that easy.

And that Yeltsin had a much bigger political problem on his hands in managing, showing his people across 11 time zones that changing from the old system, in which the government guaranteed everything even if you didn't get it, to one in which you were responsible, in a sense, for providing your future through your decisions about how you manage your family's finances and so on. I mean, this was a whole revolution in a society's thinking, and managing the transition to that adequately, giving greater weight to the social impact of the economic changes, is something I think we didn't do enough of. I remember, too, that to the extent Americans had tools to affect what was happening in Russia, it tended to be money. Well, money didn't answer a lot of the problems, and then we got into the idea that you were gauging whether it'd be successful or not by whether the interest rate was right or not. Well, this was all quite artificial in a way. It ignored the fact that much of the market economy was based on barter. A lot of people were making arrangements that had nothing to do with normal market systems, et cetera.

We, I think, could have paid more attention to the social transformative impact of some of the things we were doing and listening more to the Russian side about the problems they were having managing it than we did, but I don't think more money would have done much. I think we often gave very effective advice and support. I think there were times we didn't know when to stop, that also was an issue. I think there were times when having explained to them, it was time to get out of the way and leave them alone. We tend to not want to do that. AID never wanted to leave and...

The second thing I would say is that it wasn't just the government. When I went out as ambassador, I visited the banking community in New York to see what was their assessment of what they were doing, and they were happy as clams. They were making a lot of money in Russia, servicing Russian government debt and so forth. They were getting very good interest rates on it, and they were very upbeat about the whole picture and its future. And I think, you've asked about 1998. I think 1998, and I happened to be here when the collapse took place, just for a couple of weeks. What I watched was the newspapers turn 180 degrees from Russia is a success story to they are a bunch of no-goods who don't... who welch on their debts. Now, I read that as simply meaning that an awful lot of people who had been selling Russian debt and making a lot of money and making a lot of profit out of working on the Russian account had egg all over their faces because it didn't turn out well. And I didn't have a lot of sympathy for it. If you didn't know, getting the high interest rates that they were getting, that there were going to be some problems - even I'm not a banker, but I had my suspicions.

I think, you know, there was definitely a very negative impact from the financial implications and the way the media played it after that, that Russia was unreliable or that, even more absurdly, that the Americans were responsible for everything, we should have known who “lost” Russia. Well, we never “had” Russia of course, but this whole idea that somehow, we were responsible for the way everything turned out all over the place in Eurasia was just nonsense. Did we have a function and a role? Yes. Did we have some influence? Yes. But were we able to call the shots? No, of course not. I won't argue that there weren't people who should have seen something coming or whatever, but if Wall Street didn't, you know, they're the ones who had the money in the game, and they didn't see it. It's a bit like the collapse of the Soviet Union. If you don't see it when you're a participant, it's not too likely that everybody was going to see it who was an observer.

PART 2

Hanna Notte

Ambassador Collins, I would like to ask you what conclusions you draw from Russia's experience in the late 1980s and then into the 1990s regarding the relationship and sequencing of political versus economic change. It seems to me that, in Russia's case, political change, which was set in motion with Glasnost, moved at a faster pace than economic Perestroika. So already in 1990, you were kind of in a situation where the information space had opened up, there was an unprecedented degree of political competition, yet there was also economic drift and decline for the average citizen on a day-to-day basis. Then this continued into the 1990s. Do you think Washington properly understood the extent to which political and economic change were out of sync? And what lessons do you draw from this experience?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I do think you are correct that the political and economic dimensions of the transformation that was going on were out of sync. And that the political certainly was the precipitator and the earliest efforts to make profound change. That said, I think it's also true that President Gorbachev understood that you were going to have to have a very profound economic restructuring as well. I think it always has to be remembered that his purpose, I think is, his strategic goal was never to eliminate the Communist system. His purpose was to make it work, to modernize it, to bring it into the new era of new technologies, new economic realities. But he started with politics, I think, perhaps logically and sensibly, because he had to build the support for economic change.

Now he did get much further along in the political realm. There's no question. And I must say that when I arrived in Moscow in late 1990, we were really at the beginning of the serious efforts to make economic change work, and to approach the question of how you were going to restructure the economy. And it was essentially at that point that he met the strongest reaction, I would say, he had witnessed up to that point to what he was trying to do. And I remember very well, I can't remember whether it was just before or just after I arrived, a new prime minister was brought in, Mr. Pavlov. And he was seen basically across the board as

someone who was put there or was the man essentially responding to the hard-liners and the conservatives in the party, who were really dead set against any decentralization of the economy.

And that, I think, was the turning point, in a way, in the momentum for change and so forth, and it never really picked up again. Gorbachev was always fighting a rear-guard action against these hard-liners who did not want to see a true economic revolution and a decentralization of the economy which would have cost them their basic control over the whole system.

So I think the question of what came first and what came second may not be as relevant as how hard it was going to be to undercut the real core of what made Communist power work, which was the control over daily life, and the things that required the economy to work from a centralized, controlled system. And once you began to undermine that, you were truly undermining the whole system. And these guys knew it, and they were resisting it, and I would submit, in essence, that was where the coup came from in '91.

Hanna Notte

Ambassador, you just mentioned the resistance that Gorbachev faced at the time, which is a perfect segue to my next question. So, I imagine with everything that was going on in Russia in the 1990s, the political and economic changes underway, there would have been very different, initially Soviet, and then Russian interests, bureaucracies, actors, institutions, with different priorities. In short, Russia was not a monolithic actor. How did the United States try to ensure that it properly understood, let's say, the lay of the land in Russia at the time? Then, how did that understanding translate into U.S. policymaking on relevant issues?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think the simple answer to that is that in the time I was there, which is the late '90s until 2001, the reality was that the Russian public increasingly had a much greater role in the definition of what was possible or what the options were the political leaders saw, or economic leaders, than had ever been the case before. In the Soviet period, when the Soviet Union was really working, the American embassy's approach to finding out what was going on was the art of Kremlinology: essentially trying to figure out what was going on inside the halls of power in the Kremlin. You read the newspapers and the press, you listened to the media, and you talked to the few people that were available, but fundamentally what you were trying to do was figure out what the men who were really making the key decisions were up to. What were they thinking, how were they doing it?

Then that was this whole art of trying to make something out of very little sketchy information, and very limited sources, and an art of building a picture from very little information. When the Gorbachev era reached its zenith, and in a sense, the '90s began, what happened was a total turnaround in the problem for the embassy or for anyone trying to figure out what was going on in Russia. Because suddenly everybody thought they had a voice, even if it was a limited one, and everybody was willing to talk to us. So the problem became not so much making a full picture out of a few little puzzle pieces, as it was figuring out which pieces

were actually part of the puzzle you were trying to solve. The amount in sheer volume of information was overwhelming in many ways.

So how did we deal with this? The embassy, first of all, had a policy that we would talk to anyone. That is, we were not limiting ourselves to talk to any particular group or set of political leaders or party or excluding anybody because in some sense it was pretty clear to us as the '90s emerged, everyone had a voice. Everyone's voice was in some sense relevant, so we talked to everyone wherever we could. There were almost no exclusions, with a few really nasty, objectionable characters.

The second was, it was geographically important to get out beyond Moscow much more than we had ever done before. In the Soviet era, of course, it was difficult to travel; the government, central government, wanted to contain you as much as possible. Now we could travel pretty much anywhere, go anywhere, talk to anyone. So I set up in the embassy, along with the support of the ambassador, a program that I called Circuit Riders, where I had my officers in various positions, particularly the junior officers, simply go out and travel as often as possible. Each of them, to the extent I could do it, were given a few regions, or in the Soviet era one of the republics, to get to know, to understand the leaders, to get to know what the citizens were about, what was happening in those regions. How was it different? What did they think of what was going on in Moscow and so on and so forth?

In other words, to try to create a picture for us, as best we could, of what was happening across the country and not just in the capital. And I think we were pretty successful at it, frankly. We cultivated relationships across the entire country. And we were very successful, I think, in establishing ourselves in Washington, if you will, as the man on the ground, the people who had the connections. We could give some sense of what reality looked like, not just in one city, but all across the country, which is, I think, quite an accomplishment. Thirdly, we continued to pay a great deal of attention to the vast amount and quantity of information that was available in media, or newspapers, the electronic media and so on. Remember, we were in an era here before computers, even before cell phones. I didn't get a cell phone of any kind until the very end of my time in 1993. So, I mean, this is a time in which I would say we expanded our reach very greatly, and we knew it was very important to talk to a wide range of people.

Now, then you had to sift this out, and that meant figuring out what was important for American interests. What we were trying to do, what was relevant to our policies and programs. Also, what was relevant and most important from the standpoint of the Russians we were talking to. Where did those coincide, where they differ? How did we have the same perceptions? How did we have different perceptions? Were we pursuing the same objectives or different objectives? I think the embassy did a good job in this because we were the one U.S. government entity on the ground. We increasingly had people in all aspects of Russian economic and political life talking to people or engaged in programs with them. Therefore, we were at least, in a sense, a source of ground truth for much that the American government was trying to do or sought to achieve.

So I think the simple answer is, we just talked to a lot more people. We had to develop the capacity, which I think we did well, of deciding what was important and what wasn't. Mind you, that was not something that made the embassy always work in sync with the media, or with other elements who had a singular agenda, or, you know, people who had differing views. The visiting firemen who would come in from Washington, make two or three stops and go home, left with an impression. It was a snapshot at best, and it was very limited. So we always had to deal with those who said, "I was in Russia, and I know what is true." Well, that, first of all, became irrelevant probably six months later, but also was always very much more limited than our effort to save a constant, I would say universal sense, of what was happening across the country. And that was a big difference.

Hanna Notte

Thank you so much for that, Ambassador Collins. I want to come in right here on the firemen who would come over from Washington for brief visits to Russia, as you put it. Can you talk a little bit more about the process of U.S. foreign policymaking vis-à-vis Russia, and some of the constraints and opportunities that present themselves to the ambassador on the ground as Russia policy is taking shape in Washington? I remember that in the previous conversation with Jill, you recounted the hours after the August 1991 coup in Russia, when there was not yet any clear guidance from Washington as to how the U.S. should position itself. Then you at the embassy took the decision that really, unless the security and safety of American citizens was concerned, you would not engage in any way with those who led this coup. So I'd like to ask you, beyond such rare situations of crisis, when the embassy has to react and act really fast, what are some of these opportunities and constraints for the embassy vis-à-vis those in Washington?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I always said that particular decision is probably the only one I ever made alone in my career, and I think that's probably still true. But I would like to make a point here about policy. Policy is, in essence, if one is looking at the question of what is the sought-for outcome in a given decision made by the leadership in Washington, policy becomes a two- or three-part exercise. First of all, there is the information question. How do you come up with a realistic decision about direction, or about the answer to a question? Let's take for instance, are we going to cooperate with the Soviet Union, and then the Russian Federation, on space exploration? All right. We had had times in the past when we did so. I was there in the '70s when we did. And the issue was again on the table.

I mean, what kind of approach was the American space program going to take to the Soviet space program, then the Russian space program, in this new era? All right. So the first question was, well, you need to get the information you can. So we've talked a little bit about how do you gather information, how you do this? So the embassy was reporting; we had people who followed the space program. We had visits from people like the NASA director, Dan Golden, who met his counterparts and so forth. We had lots of different scientists and other specialists who had some experience or some familiarity with and visits to various space

programs. So information, I would say, was not in short supply, and pretty good information gathered in many, in most cases, by people who really knew what they were talking about. So the information base for the question was quite good.

The question of then, "All right, what do we, as Americans, do?" was a question of, what is our objective, what are our interests, and in formulating the kind of answer, "What do we think Russian interests are? And how can we basically come to the best decision if the decision is we're going to cooperate with them?" Well, the decision was ultimately we're going to cooperate with them. I think it wasn't made by the embassy. I mean, frankly, the ambassador's role in that was probably absolutely minimal. But the decision to do so was made by those who assessed both that it was in the U.S. interest, both broadly and even financially to cooperate with the Soviet then Russian space program. And secondly, that there was everything to be gained because we could both achieve an objective we were after, which was to enhance the exploration of space, in particular create a space station and use the technologies available to both to advantage in producing a joint outcome. Then there was the third dimension.

The third dimension was implementation. Policy doesn't mean a thing, frankly, unless it produces an implementable and then well implemented outcome. For that, I think the embassy played always a significant role in everything from the simple question, do you get people visas on time, to helping people who had to engage Russians at various times in different ways, and in different places; to understand the people they were dealing with, help them achieve the goal they were after, to achieve an outcome. And that, I think, was an ongoing process. That's the policy part of policy that doesn't end with the decision - or the definition of what most people think of as policy - that is, how do you make it real? And there an embassy, and an ambassador and so forth, have a great deal of influence for the most part, because they are the ones who can help hold together the effort of, usually, people coming from the United States to work with their counterparts. They can help them solve problems, human problems, problems that arise in arguments, et cetera, because we have people on the ground there.

The American embassy's main strength, I think, in something like that is understanding the culture and the way in which the host institutions work, and their people, and understand how to explain to Americans how to achieve what you're trying to get done with those people. That is where I would think diplomats, and embassies, and the art of diplomacy, if you will, from all people comes into its real strength. And I would say here only that this is not just foreign service officers; this was people who worked in the embassy on the space program, who were agricultural experts, and so on and so forth.

This was a broad community of people who came to know Russia well enough to guide the people who were coming to implement a very complex and complicated program in getting it done, learning how to work with their counterparts and, in a sense, building a new joint community that was able to produce the space station. And the first pieces of it were launched while I was there as DCM. So I think that's the key. That's what policy is about. It's -

gather the information, so you have the right base. The people in Washington are going to make the decisions, and maybe the ambassador will have a voice and maybe he won't. But then comes the embassy's strongest role, in many ways, and that's implementing on the ground the kinds of outcomes, the programs that are trying to achieve a certain goal. There, I think the embassy has no equal in its importance on a day-to-day basis in ensuring that things work out.

Hanna Notte

Thank you. This is extremely useful. If you allow me, I'll ask another follow-up question on that final bit, the implementation of policy on the ground. Were there ever any instances that you recall where different U.S. actors, whether it's the Treasury, USAID programs, or political capacity-building programs, were operating somewhat at cross purposes in Russia on the ground? And then, how did you try to navigate that at the embassy?

Ambassador Collins

I wouldn't say I ran into many cases where they were working at cross purposes, but one of the greatest problems, I think, an ambassador has is in coping with the reality that the flow of information and requirements and requests for action and so forth that come from Washington have one universally always true quality, and that is that everything is first priority. And so, you are constantly faced with the question of how do you, as ambassador and chief of mission, overseeing the work of your team... And I had, remember, 1,600 employees at the U.S. embassy and a budget totally, when I was ambassador, of about a billion dollars a year. And it was working on countless U.S. government programs. I think we had 24- 28 government agencies represented at the embassy.

Now, the question then was, were they always working in sync or setting the priorities that the ambassador set? And the answer was, not if you listen to Washington, because each of them said, "My job is first priority; your job is to go get this accomplished." The Department of Agriculture had its own priority, the Department of Defense had another, the NASA people had their priority. Perfectly understandable, but what we had to do, in a sense, was make it work at the embassy, and how I did that was not to ever try to stop the conflict of priorities, because you couldn't - and yes, there were different times when people were working, I won't say at cross purposes, but at different purposes or at different paces - but rather to set up an agenda that allowed everybody in the embassy to understand how they would contribute to the mission's objectives: our priorities.

And one of the things I had to do in that regard was to, I suppose, assert authority as ambassador and say, "Look, you all get orders from your home agency and your budgets come from them, but let me tell you, right now you work for me. As ambassador, the chief of mission, I have a president's letter here that says you're responsible to me. So, we're going to work together and we're going to figure out how we approach setting these priorities." So what I did, essentially, was sit down with the team and we had a kind of six-part agenda. The idea was then each agency was there to help me understand what they could contribute to fulfilling each part of the agenda.

So, one of them was support the political transformation to a more democratic government. Second was to transform the economic structure to a market economy. Third was to advance the U.S. economic interests and trade. Fourth was to do what we needed to do on the security side, carry out the security interest. But what I said to all of them was, "All right, each of you can contribute, or perhaps maybe not, to all of these objectives. I want to know what you're going to do to support the public diplomacy objective."

And I told my consular people, for instance, that nothing is more important than having a decent image in the Russian public mind about American visa policy and how we treat people. So don't tell me there isn't a public diplomacy dimension to the consular section; there is. Similarly, my defense people had to explain to me, or I had to make it clear to them, that I knew the money they were spending in Russia to accomplish their goals had an economic impact and the advancement of American economic interest, and the way in which Russian economy was developing.

So there was an effort here to help each of the agency representatives understand how they contributed to what we were trying to achieve as the mission. And those sets of goals were set pretty much by, I would say, the U.S. government, State Department, the president, and so forth. Now, I don't know whether that answers your question, but it was the way that I tried to approach the problem of everything from Washington, having its own uncoordinated set of priorities for the most part, come and hit the embassy as though they didn't have anything to do in Moscow except carry out the Department of Homeland Security's latest crusade. Well, you couldn't run an embassy that way, and I think we were quite successful in the way we did it. People were quite satisfied with the outcomes, and I think we did a good job.

Hanna Notte

It very much answers my question, thank you so much. And if I may, I'll ask you one more thing about the role of the embassy on the ground, because you, a few moments ago mentioned this notion of reporting ground truths from Russia back to the United States. Could you share a story or an anecdote from when the advice of the embassy on the ground was not really heeded in Washington, either because it went against the prevailing conventional wisdom in Washington on an issue, or because it conflicted with intelligence assessments that prevailed in Washington, and how you navigated that?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think it's fair to say that the American embassy's view rarely was the only view that was going to prevail, but I'll give you two examples. When the financial collapse took place in 1998, I set up the embassy to do, as a priority, a daily report on what we were seeing in Russia, as widely as we could report it, about the reaction to this, the impact of this and so on and so forth. We had one instance in which the media reported some particular incident about a run on a bank, and the fact was, it was what I used to call the atypical truth. Yes, there was the... this run on this one bank, but did it represent the collapse of the Russian banking system? Well, no, it didn't.

And so, I think it was a fair point that what we reported back was a broader picture that had its impact in the way people saw what was happening in the economy. A lot of the economic reporting that Washington depended on in the sense of traditional economic understanding – data, figures of bank deposits, interest rates – first of all just didn't reflect the economy necessarily in a true or a sensible light, because there was a huge amount of barter going on. People made their way economically and to survival in ways that didn't have much to do with money, in many ways.

So the picture, I would say, was better given by us, in some ways, because we were about the only ones who understood that or who wanted to report that. And I think we had an impact there. Not always, people would ignore us at times, they wouldn't pay attention at times, but it was important that we did it. I think the most frustrating case of a specific incident – maybe you read this in something or not – had to do with the famous Y2K period.

Hanna Notte

Yes, yes.

Ambassador Collins

This was the period of transition of the computer dates, or dates used on computers, from the 1900s to the 2000s, and the fear or great concern in the technology world and the world of those who watched, what might happen if you had a breakdown in technology of the computers, which were relatively new to the world, when you changed from 19s to 2000s. Now, there was all kinds of worst-case thinking going on in the United States, including that in the Soviet Union, and Russia, really, at this point, the change was not being prepared, and they were not doing enough to prepare adequate safeguards. So, there were all sorts of wild theories about how, if things went wrong and the computers went crazy as a result of the date change, they might accidentally launch strategic missiles. Or more to the point, that the power grid would collapse or things like that, and you would have chaos in the streets and a total breakdown of the whole system of order.

Well, they finally gave up, fairly early on, the idea that we would launch missiles from Russia; that wasn't going to happen. But the power grid question had a life of its own. And apparently there was a study done at the order of the intelligence community that concluded that this was something with a significant degree of possibility, if not probability. And so, the embassy was getting wind of this, and the practical question was, what were we going to do about the safety of Americans and American property if there were a collapse of law and order because of the date?

Well, the information I was able to obtain – I went and saw a man named Anatoly Chubais. Anatoly Chubais at that time was a senior official, and I gave him the problem, and he said, "Look, you don't need to worry. Russian Federation has precisely two power stations that rely on computers to control their power generation and distribution. Rest of it is just analog, you know, the men are there twisting the dials and flipping the switches, so it's not going to

happen." I reported this back from a very authoritative source, and it was clearly ignored completely, because what I got, not too much later, was an order that I had to prepare for a power collapse. And secondly, that I had to allow anyone at the embassy who wished to leave to take voluntary leave over the holiday period when all of this was going to happen, and essentially ensure their safety if they weren't comfortable being there.

Well, I mean, of course, I spent the time of New Year's Eve with friends from the embassy. We went down to Red Square, but we already knew six hours ahead of this that nothing was going to happen because in Vladivostok all the lights were on, and everybody was having a grand old time for New Year's. And by the time it came to Moscow, we went down to Red Square, all the lights were on, and everybody was having a grand old time. So it was one of those cases where, I'm afraid, ground truth was disregarded.

It was interesting because I asked then later for an assessment of what had happened; wasn't this an intelligence failure? And I never heard anything. But the reality was, this was the kind of situation where embassies could be very frustrated: when they are ignored, when they know the information in Washington is not accurate. But I won't say that's the norm. I mean, I think that it happens from time to time, and a professional embassy knows how to manage it and take a deep breath and move on to the next question.

Hanna Notte

Thank you so much for sharing this story, Ambassador Collins. We've talked a lot about politics, and we've talked about the economy. I would like to talk about culture a little bit. If I understand correctly, it was actually Russian music that was the spark that generated your interest in learning the Russian language at a relatively young age. There was a particular man, Dr. Herbert Zipper, who was a music director and a conductor in Chicago, and at one point he got you and your brother involved in Mussorgsky's opera Boris Godunov. He asked you to play the church bells, which obviously occupy a very important place in Russian music, and then you decided to learn the Russian language. So, I'd like to ask you, could you reflect a little bit on how your appreciation for Russian culture, art, music, literature, has helped you as an ambassador, as a diplomat? Can you reflect on the importance of understanding culture and related notions to foster empathy and understanding when it comes to conducting diplomacy?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I would simply start with one short phrase and that is that culture is context. Any diplomat serving abroad lives in a context that is not the American context; it is a different one. And that context, in many ways, I suppose, is best defined as culture, or culture plays perhaps the overwhelmingly important role in the way in which you can understand your environment and your context. So Russia, for instance, in this case, there are all sorts of reasons you would begin to get pieces of understanding of Russian context from everything from its literature, from its history, from its music, from its arts, from its village life, et cetera.

And I think the point of this is that a diplomat's job is to represent effectively the interests and the policies and the objectives of his government, in my case of Washington's government. And the critical question before any ambassador, or anyone, really, in any position at the embassy, is how do I get something done here in this cultural context, in this context? How do I talk to people? When people tell me something about efficiency, for instance, what do they mean? Do they have the same understanding of the word as we do? When you come to the question of security, what is the understanding historically, after the invasions from East and West over centuries and so on, of Russians about security? Is it the same as an American understands it, where we live in a culture 200 years old plus, and have never been invaded by anybody?

So, I guess my first basic starting point is culture is absolutely essential if you're going to be an effective interlocutor with your host culture, and you're going to be effective in trying to achieve the agenda or the objectives that your government wants you to achieve in the place to which you're assigned. I think culture in that sense is absolutely vital. If you don't understand the host culture, it is going to be very difficult for you to connect effectively, to identify your opportunities for when things are shared interests, or interests in common, or understood the same. Find ways to address issues where you do not understand things in the same way but come to a central point where maybe you can reach that objective of understanding.

Being able to explain to your own government, that is to Washington, what is possible and what isn't at this time, with this group of people. And how can you achieve maybe a part of what you want? All of those things are, in one way or another, enhanced to the degree... are resolvable, in a way, to the degree that you understand and can make a part of your approach putting yourself in the other guy's shoes, as the phrase goes. Understanding the culture he's coming from, and therefore what he's really telling you when you talk to him.

So I think in that sense, I don't think culture can be overestimated as vital, but it's not just arts and literature and so forth. I mean, it is the context, the socioeconomic, political, environmental context, within which your hosts are living, and how they make their decisions. And then what that means for your objectives in trying to get a decision from them. And I can assure you, it's very important.

I would just say a word about efficiency, for instance. It was always my sense that Americans have a very simplistic idea about efficiency in economic terms. It's kind of, if you can produce two widgets, three cents cheaper by taking a decision to fire one employee, that makes sense because you're making more money, you're being more efficient. In the Russian case, I was never sure that was the case. They seemed to think that, well maybe you had to start with an equal measure of thinking that keeping everybody in a job was important, and everybody had to work. And maybe it wasn't just a matter of whether it was less economically beneficial if you did that. But efficiency might have had a different meaning.

So, that kind of thing was a very important matter to have in mind. And most Americans who come, who don't have the experience of anything like understanding the culture there in Russia, simply don't understand. They assume Russians see it the way we do.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that, Ambassador. This learning about Russia, about its culture, but also the socioeconomic context, history, you've done it over the span of a lifetime. You went there as a student, you then served there in the 1970s, then, of course, again in the 1990s and as ambassador in the late 1990s. And then subsequently also through think tank activities, Track 2 activities you've been engaged with Russia. You've also experienced very different parts of the Washington bureaucracy from the inside, of course, at State in Washington, at embassies abroad. I believe you did a stint at the NSC. You worked with Capitol Hill; you had exposure to the intelligence community.

And I'd like to ask you, given this wealth of experience, what are your main takeaways from engaging with Russia, with Russians, from such different vantage points? And did any of these periods come with specific opportunities or constraints, or afford you specific learning opportunities about how to best engage with Russia?

Ambassador Collins

Well, certainly when I worked as an official representative of the U.S. government in whatever capacity that was, I had a rather specific context within which I worked. When I was a student, we were a really odd group of people there. There were 18 of us in the whole Soviet Union, and we were seen as pretty odd characters. Tremendous interest in us, tremendous amount of curiosity, because the Soviet Union at that time worked. I mean, there really was very little information that came in from the outside that wasn't filtered, and so a living, breathing American was a pretty odd thing to have around. But it certainly gave me a sense of reality about the generation that was my generation, Gorbachev's generation and so forth, their school, what these students, who were the elite – these were the best educated people they had – how they were thinking, what they knew and so forth, and it was very revealing.

I mean, I learned a great deal. I mean that there was a lot that in some ways they kind of shared with us, but there was a tremendous difference in the whole upbringing and approach to their careers and their professions and what they knew that was very intriguing to me. For instance, I could never quite get over the idea that I, as an American, knew all about kinds of things, I mean, I'd grown up on a farm, I knew about farm machinery. I knew about electricity. I knew about finance, and so on. I would talk to Russian students, counterparts, and I would be talking about one of these things, and they would say, "Well, when did you study that?" It was almost like if you knew something, you had to have studied it, you didn't grow up with anything sort of innate. Now, that obviously wasn't true for them, they all knew how to get on in their own culture and so forth.

But the idea that you would know about electricity, for instance, which was a big deal for me at the university, because I became the one who could keep the lights on when they would blow the circuit breakers. It was really quite extraordinary. So, I learned something there. I learned a lot about the way the students thought and how they viewed the... And of course, very little of it had much to do with the portrayal in the media of the Soviet Union, either by the Soviets themselves, who were putting out the propaganda, or our side that was writing about it as being the exact opposite. It was really much less dramatic. And the same was true in the embassy. When I was there, you learned all kinds of different things from working with people. But I think what I learned, perhaps, that is most significant, I took away lessons that I think are valid all the way through all of my experience, were two or three important things. One, that Russia has its own culture, history, interests, values, and so forth.

And they are not Americans. They are different from America. Their experience is different. Their geography is different. They face different issues. They have different aspirations in many ways. And that one has to start with the premise that you respect that. You have to listen to people about that, because if you don't, you're simply trying to impose on them a framework for the future of relations with either an individual or a culture that simply isn't going to work. You're trying to see them as just us in different clothing, and that's not true. It's just not correct. Second thing I think I took away from my experience was that we have many things that we share with the Russian people, with Russian citizens, even the Russian government, in terms of objectives or the way we see the world or interests. But we also have areas in which we see things very differently, don't approach things in the same way and have different interests.

And the question about how we as Americans or as individuals see those differences is very important. And I'm afraid that all too often in the United States, Americans tend to want to see anything that Russians have as an interest, if it doesn't coincide with our view, as illegitimate, or as not valid. Well, I won't argue one way or another about that, but that's a religious question. I mean, the real issue here is it exists as a difference, and one is going to have to manage it, and deal with it, and probably not be successful if the idea is that we have to make them change, or we try to ignore it. So put another way, accepting that Russians have legitimate interests, and that there are often views that they may hold that we do not, is simply part of reality. And it doesn't do us much good to try to deny these or to refuse to accept that there are legitimate reasons for people to see things differently.

And the third thing, I think, is how do you achieve outcomes that are desirable in dealing with that society? My experience is that you are not going to get very far if your approach is to define an outcome that is not accepted by them, and then try to impose it on them one way or another, whether it's through the famous tool today, a sack of sanctions on the economy, or trying to punish people or whatever. I mean, I have to say as an American that were the Russians or the Chinese to try to do that to us, we wouldn't succumb. We wouldn't give up our interests or our values. And why we think that others will do so has always been a bit of a mystery to me. And so, the idea that you can, in some cases, achieve a goal by compelling the

other guy to see it our way or to do it our way, whether he likes it or not, has, I think, proved itself pretty ineffective and hardly ever successful.

Everybody throws up on sanctions the idea of what happened in South Africa. The problem with that model from this point of view is that the global community almost unanimously agreed that they were going to isolate and sanction South Africa if they did not deal with apartheid. We don't have that kind of arrangement vis-à-vis the other kinds of sanctions we've tried. It didn't work with Cuba. It, I think, doesn't really work with Russia if the idea is that we want to force them to change their policies and so forth. And the third thing, I think, that's very important in all this is that it also is no way to deny Russia's legitimate interests.

I happen to think, after many years, that one of the critical issues we have not dealt with effectively is how to accommodate - or maybe accommodate isn't the right word - but how to cast our own objectives in terms of security, in the broad sense of the word, in a way that recognizes similar interests on the Russian side that may be seen as very different and pursued in very different ways. Because they sense a different idea about what security means, what it takes to assure it. And I think that's where we have come up into some very difficult times with their whole arrangement, or their whole view, about their near neighbors. We have, simply, different views. And in some ways, the question is not whether one is right or wrong; it is simply the fact that we have different views about this and have not done a good job in finding a way to accommodate them.

I think you have to understand what Russia's interests are. You have to understand how they view things. You have to understand where it's possible to define common objectives and goals and pursue those. And above all, you have to keep engaged. You have to continue talking to one another. If you don't, you simply run the risk of losing all ability to understand what the other fellow is about. So, either you are pursuing, in a realistic way, common objectives and goals and standing by your values, but pursuing them in a way that is potentially going to give you positive results, or you end up trying to impose a worldview on others that simply is not going to work. And it hasn't worked, really, for us pretty much anywhere.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that, Ambassador. There's a lot there. And this notion of compelling the other side to behave as we, America, want, whether that's through sanctions or other means, it's something I'll come back to in a later question. But for the moment I'd like to ask you something else. You talked a little bit about your time spent in the Soviet Union. And at this point, the country, of course, was still remarkably isolated from the outside world. With Glasnost, it became much easier for Americans to build relationships with Russians, with institutions and with citizens - really unthinkable for an earlier era.

And then, of course, you had the arrival of the digital world in Russia. You already talked a little bit about this, the internet, and then, later, the advent of social media. So it really meant that there would be an abundance of information available to Russians from the outside world.

So we could say that today Russia is a much more open society and not divorced from the information space in which we navigate. Yet it seems to me that this greater connection and proximity, if you wish, both virtual as well as real, has not really fueled greater understanding on the core issues that divide Russians and Americans to this day. Would you agree with that? And then, if yes, how would you explain that?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I think it's fair to say that simply removing the barriers to communication, which has certainly happened – I mean, we share a universal global information space now, travel is possible if you forget the COVID period and so forth, but basic travel is open, et cetera – has removed the artificiality of the vision that each country had of the other for much of the 20th century. Now, it's kind of perverse that in some ways, in the Soviet case, from my experience there as a student and in the '70s and then dealing with it in other ways, the image that the Russian or Soviet citizens tended to have of the United States was absolutely amazingly positive. It was kind of, "This is the country where the streets were paved with gold and where everything was possible, and life was better."

I mean, everything was better over there essentially. Now, I can't swear that that was the view most people had... everybody had, because I didn't get to travel much and you couldn't do very much, but in my experience, that was the case. Now, it didn't mean they necessarily liked a lot of the policies of the government of the United States, or that they didn't think we were doing bad things, but that had nothing to do with their image of the society. The society was at the same time wholly unknown to them, except through the filter that the Soviet Communist Party propaganda machine presented them. And they didn't believe that. The one thing that was truly revelatory, I think, when I got to Moscow the first time as a student, was the degree to which nobody believed the propaganda. I mean, nobody believed the stuff that you read. What they read in the newspapers, however, was very important to them because it told them what they were supposed to think. And that was important for survival and making sure you didn't step wrong or whatever, but did it reflect what they really thought? No.

So, when we had things going on like the Voice of America's jazz program. Now, the Voice of America's jazz program was a phenomenon there. I mean, it almost created Soviet jazz – who learned instruments, who learned to play, and so on just from the jazz program on VOA. And that was a huge deal, I mean that you could get that kind of information. So, put quite simply, the Soviet isolation of its... the Communist Party's isolation of its population created, in a sense, an opposite effect. Everybody thought it's got to be better out there than it is here, because it's not so great here. Now, I'm not talking about the Party leaders and so on, but I mean the average person. I think what happened then, when all of those barriers were taken away, to begin with, everybody wanted to go see those streets of gold or to understand how everybody was perfect over there, where things were wonderful, and they found out, well, no, not always. That this is another society that's got problems. They've got poor people. They've got crime, or, you know, a lot of the things that they've been telling us are the greatest things about America aren't always true.

In other words, a sense of reality has set in over the last couple of decades about the nature of American society and Americans and so forth based on experience rather than an artificially structured view that it has got to be better over there than it is here, but never having any experience of it. And I think the same is true on the American side. Our effort on our side to assume that all Soviet citizens were out to destroy the United States and so on and so on, were atheistic communists and so on, was totally unreal. And Americans, too, came to understand that it was more complicated than that. It was a lot different than that. There were all kinds of people who held very noble views, et cetera, et cetera. So I think familiarity, I would say, you know, there's the old idea that familiarity breeds contempt.

Well, not necessarily. It breeds complexity in view. It breeds reality of understanding about the other side's way of life, et cetera. That it's neither 100% heaven, nor is it 100% hell. And I think the reality is that's the world we now live in because there are very few Russians who think it's all great in America or Americans who think it is all horrible in Russia, if they know anything about it. But that doesn't mean we don't still have our differences and understand that. So, I think the problem we have is that each of us formed an idea when the Soviet Union came to an end and the Cold War ended about the future, and the future of the relationship between us. And in some ways, that, as I think we've mentioned before, was based on the idea about what was the real outcome of the Cold War. And put quite simply, from the American's point of view, we won.

And therefore, the model that we should be pursuing was the one when we won the last war we won. We haven't won one since 1945, but we did then. And when that happened, Japan and Germany sort of said, "Okay, we lost, we get it. We're changing the way we were structured and how we lived, and we're going to be good democracies and good global citizens." The problem was that the Russian side didn't see it that way at all. They didn't see they lost. They saw that they got a way to get rid of the Soviet Communist system, changed their society, as we said, got rid of the empire, but they expected to be a part of the decision-making process about the future. And we didn't, you know, they just didn't agree that the Americans won and we're going to set the terms, and it took time for the bloom to go off that rose pretty significantly, to the point where, I think, when Mr. Putin came to his second presidency, he had already concluded that it was not going to be possible to work with the idea of integrating Russia into the Western Euro-Atlantic model. That it was going to have to go its own way, and that's what he's been doing since 2012.

And it's not pretty, I think it's tragic, but I think, you know, there have been moments when we lost opportunities possibly to have shaped the development in different ways. I'm not naive that it could have been all roses, but the reality is: neither of us ever resolved this issue of how the American and Russian role in this broader Euro-Atlantic community is going to work. And the United States and Russia both have not done very well at getting over the outcome of the Cold War, which is seen in very different ways.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that, Ambassador. You just evoked this notion, this American notion of, "We won the Cold War." Now, George H. W. Bush avoided evoking that notion. I believe you have characterized U.S. foreign policy under George H. W. Bush in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union as a policy of restraint and strategic patience. The U.S. did not try to force events at the time, make things move faster than they did. And I think you believe that the U.S. could have ended up contributing to some serious problems in Russia at the time had it acted otherwise.

And now, this brings me to a slightly broader, conceptual question here about foreign policy and diplomacy. There will be moments when it is necessary to act decisively, fast, take the initiative, engage in resolute action. And then there will be moments when patience, restraint, letting things play out is simply the wiser course of action. Could you reflect on examples for these two different courses of action, or I should say action versus inaction, in the context of the U.S.-Russia relationship? And perhaps even give some guidance to future diplomats regarding how you learn to develop a good intuition for when you should act and when you should be patient and wait?

Ambassador Collins

Well, let me say, I think maybe the question is better... maybe recast slightly in the way I would approach it. And that is, how do you deal with the facts as differences arise? And it's clear your objectives are running up against opposition, or the interests of the two parties involved are simply at odds in a way that does not present any special outcome that you can divine at the time. And first of all, context is very important. It is simply a fact that the United States and Russia cannot go to war. We will destroy each other and the rest of the world, probably, if we do. And so that is just not an option. So that's kind of off the table, and therefore, everything that we do has to be constructed to address our differences and our issues or our joint objectives in that context.

And it has been the case, since the end of World War II, that that's true. So, we have a context, and therefore there's always going to be an element of restraint inherent because you cannot risk war in the sense that any rational person would ever do so. But setting that then as the framework that I just gave as a given, the question is how do you manage opportunities or challenges? But I think the first thing that's very important is that it is a constantly important factor to understand what the interests of the other side are. How do they see them? How do they define them? And so forth. It doesn't mean we agree with them, but we have to understand what they are. I think we also have to have two other dimensions of our understanding of interests. One, which interests are such that we would call them red lines? These are not interests that are, I would say, negotiable in the sense that they are seen by the other side, and same with us, as not crossable lines.

Warfare, going to war, is one, obviously, but there are some others about security and so forth that change from time to time and get... And the third is that the other side's interests are legitimate because that's how they define them. We may not agree with them, we may not

think they are something we will accept, but they are interests and many of them are legitimate. And therefore, simply denying them is going to be a problem. So, if you start with that premise, then, it seems to me, you always begin with the question of, "Okay, what do we have in common? Is this an area... If we're faced with an issue, does this issue contain area elements in which we see things the same, or could easily define things in the same way?" And if so, you try to identify those, and you work to build from them. Where else can you defer things? Are there things that are not all that important to have done at a particular moment?

Can you buy time with... in not having to deal with those? Are there elements that are subject to compromise? Yes, we have interest. Yes, they have interest. Can we find something where nobody gets 100%, but everybody has enough to leave? I mean, this is the essence of getting to deal with issues in a way that don't become almost politicized to the point where you can't deal with them right away, but you have to approach them in that way, and the problem we have in many ways today is that nobody's trying to do that on either side. We are, rather, trying to demonstrate that we're not giving in to the other fellow, that we're not giving in to any erosion of values we have set out or whatever we want to say.

And so, everything becomes political almost right from the beginning, and discussing any issue on its own merits has become more and more difficult. So you have to depoliticize it and begin, to the extent you can, to define your issues and deal with them on their merits rather than as linked to something else or as a test of your capacity to defend yourself in your values. That's one thing, I think, that's very important.

The second thing, I think, that's important is that you have to understand things have a time. Issues mature, things come in a time of context. Leaders in both countries either face elections, in our country, face change of regimes in Russia. Timing matters, and understanding that you have to approach issues when they are mature or when you have come to the point where, in a sense, the door opens to discuss them.

And we don't always do that either. I mean, my best example of that, where I think we missed a huge opportunity with the Russian Federation, was right after 9/11 and after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Mr. Putin came here, and he essentially put on the table the opportunity to cooperate against the terrorist activity, and he also, in Texas, signed a series of documents which, in essence, committed Russia to pursuing further economic reform, political reform, integration with European institutions and so on and so forth. And he went home, and I think he had, in his mind, taken substantial political risk in putting all this on the table from the standpoint of his position within the Russian Federation.

Unfortunately, the George Bush administration simply didn't pick up that opportunity, from my point of view. They didn't explore what might have been possible, they didn't use the openings to see what could have been achieved in the many different ways in which we might have approached the Putin government at that time. Instead, they focused on very different priorities and within six months, as I recall, they withdrew from the ABM Treaty, which

completely undercut Mr. Putin's entire idea that he could demonstrate the ability to cooperate with the Americans on strategic issues, that they were being taken seriously as a partner and so forth. And I think we paid a big price for that.

It did reflect what I heard when I came back to the United States in 2001, in July, from talks with Mr. Cheney and Mr. Rumsfeld as I did my outbriefings. They simply indicated that they were not terribly interested in the Russian relationship as a critical element of our future going forward. They had other objectives, saw other dangers and other priorities, and that was, I'm afraid, reflected in the fact that we simply ignored the opportunities that Putin might have put on the table, had they been developed or explored, and we just didn't take advantage of it.

Hanna Notte

Thank you for that, Ambassador Collins. This lack of interest on the part of Rumsfeld and Cheney to use this opportunity with Russia that you just mentioned, I want to come in on that. It appears that already as the Cold War ended and the other superpower threat simply seemed to evaporate, the main problem on the U.S. side – whether it's government or academia or think tank – really became to find someone who still cared to look at Russia.

And I'd like to ask you, do you think this is an inevitable side effect of having a grand strategy, overarching organizing principles that structure foreign policy? I mean, it seems to me that we go from the Cold War as the overarching frame to the post-9/11 global war on terror, to great power competition with Russia and China today. And do you think these kinds of organizing principles are a useful way to focus American intent and strategy, or would you say that the resulting reduced bandwidth to pay attention to other, seemingly lesser issues, comes at too great a cost for America overall?

Ambassador Collins

Well, I have my own view about where we are and how we have brought ourselves to our current situation. I do think that during the Cold War, we were thinking in very 20th-century terms. We had not yet come to the digital revolution, we had not yet come to accept this idea of massive globalization and so forth. I mean, if you think about it, the cell phone is a new phenomenon in the mid-1990s. The computer is not really available and used widely until the late 1990s. So, the digital world and the globalized world is something new, and it comes upon us at the same time that the organizing principle for all of our international priorities, in many ways, was the rivalry with the Soviet Union and the ideology of Communism. I mean, it was partly religious war, and it was partly great power war.

Now, the problem is, when the Soviet Union collapsed, all that ended, of course. It ended, really, before the Soviet Union collapsed in many ways – I agree with Ambassador Matlock that the Cold War was over in a negotiated end sort of in 1989 or so – but the organizing principle for our definition of our place in the world essentially ceased to exist. So I'd say the same was true for Moscow, for the leadership in Moscow. And Moscow in the 1990s had a traumatic decade, that was over my time, trying to redefine itself, trying to make itself anew into a society and a state with borders it had never had before, in a context that was totally

different, with new neighbors. In short, it was totally disoriented. And to boot, that was just the international dimension. The domestic dimension was even more so because all of the value system, all of the legal system, all of the economic system, everything that you organized your life to accommodate or to take advantage of for four generations, disappeared.

Now, culturally, many things stayed the same, I understand that, but you woke up on January 1st, 1992, and suddenly private property was a good thing. It had been almost illegal the day before, et cetera. So, the profundity of the change that was going on in Russian society was tremendous and almost unimaginable to Americans. That was the nineties. That was the time of total transition in... Maybe I'm overstating, but fundamental transition in the political, economic, social, international security structures and so forth, system that Russians in Moscow had to live with and use as governing.

In the United States, on the contrary, for the decade of the '90s, I would say, we had a holiday. We basically took ourselves as having won. Yes, the terrorists brought home some problems to us, we're going to build to them, but in the '90s, that hadn't hit yet. And so we were, I would say, quite confident that our idea had prevailed. We were number one, nobody was our equal, and we were dispositive in most respects when it came to the international order. And in Europe, in the Euro-Atlantic world, our model was the one that was being pursued, the NATO system and so on and so on.

Okay. Come to 2001, and suddenly things begin to change. And I am simply going to make the case that the terrorist attack on New York and all that followed that, the financial collapse in the third quarter of the 2000s, that essentially began our 1990s. Our system ceased to be so infallible. Nobody thought we could be attacked. You know, we had defeated the last people who tried that and turned them into a different society. Our economic system let down millions of Americans, and the American ideal of, if you will, the Reagan era's picture of how America works best, was suddenly open for question.

And so, we begin our 1990s, from my point of view, in the 2000s. A decade later, we are equally disoriented, and then in the 2010s, we suddenly find out that we're not the only superpower anymore. I mean, the Russians are still a nuclear superpower, but suddenly you've got China. Now that has left us, by the time we come to the end of the 2010s, in a position where the United States hasn't really come to any real decision about how we fit in the world anymore.

We started our international role, if you will, in the 1890s, and for the 20th century, America, frankly, never had a challenger that was our equal. We were dispositive in the non-Communist world. We had the money. If you go back and look at the amount of global trade we controlled at the end of World War II, it was absolutely astronomical. I mean, we were setting the agenda, people were following us. And then in the Cold War, because we were the power that could, if you will, stand up and prevent the Soviet Union from asserting its authority, everybody else was sort of falling into line, and this thing called the Third World was kind of not relevant. You know, we did proxy wars and other things, but I mean, it was not a big deal.

Suddenly, starting in 2001, all of that is beginning to crumble. The Americans no longer are the only economic power, and we cannot be dispositive in the economy globally. We are no longer the only global player that can claim superpower status. Yes, we have the best military in the world, but if you look at it, we haven't won a war since World War II.

So, what is our role? And I would submit that today, the biggest problem we have is that we don't know. It's not a matter of a grand strategy. It's a matter of understanding what is an effective role for the United States now in the global context to protect our interests, work with people who think like us to enrich and enhance our lives and safety and deal with those who are competitors and are adversaries when we do not have an obvious overwhelming superiority in economic terms, in technological terms and in any number of other ways. And that is a huge challenge for Americans, and we haven't even developed the vocabulary to begin to talk about it that way.

If you listen to Congress or you listen to the way people talk about our role in the world, it's as though we're still in charge, and that is, frankly, not the case. The Russian side understood it in the 1990s and Mr. Putin came to power with the agenda of restoring Russia's position as a global power. Not the only one, but a global power. The American problem is defining its position as a global power and giving up the idea that we're the only one that matters. And we have got some serious work to do in that regard.

So grand strategy, well, I'm not so sure it's grand strategy that's the problem. It is having a realistic and fully capable capacity to understand our strengths and weaknesses, our limits and our possibilities, and our role in the global system as one of the great powers, maybe the most economically wealthy, maybe militarily powerful, but not to the point where we alone can shape any agenda. And that is our real challenge now. And it's the one that Mr. Biden is grappling with, and I think future presidents after him are going to be grappling with for some time.

Hanna Notte

Wow, what a comprehensive answer and, I think, perfect way to end this fascinating conversation today. It's been so enriching and interesting. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation, and I believe that future generations of scholars and of diplomats who take an interest in Russia and the former Soviet Union will really benefit greatly from this account and treasure it, so I want to thank you so much for joining us today.

Ambassador Collins

Well, it's been my pleasure, Hanna, to be part of this, and I look forward, actually, to seeing others' comments and to maybe even having a look at my own.

Hanna Notte

Thank you.