

The Ambassadorial Series

A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews



Ambassadorial Series

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES
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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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Ambassador John Beyrle (2008-2012)

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

INTERVIEW

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

It is!

Ambassador Beyrle

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

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

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

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

Jill Dougherty

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

Ambassador Beyrle

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

Jill Dougherty

Thank you.

Ambassador Beyrle

Bye Bye.