

The two faces of Putin

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Trump and Putin take a ride on The Beast

Flattery, sports banter, and history lessons. These were the themes of [Vladimir Putin 's conversations with Bill Clinton](#) in 2000, during his first term, according to documents declassified by the [National Security Archive](#) , a non-governmental organization based at **George Washington University** . In light of [Putin's last summit with Donald Trump in Alaska](#) , twenty-five years after the start of his string of elections and re-elections and that one-on-one with Clinton, something has changed, beyond the passage of the presidencies of [George W. Bush](#) , [Barack Obama](#) , and [Joe Biden](#) , and Trump's first.

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

DECLASSIFIED
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KRM 7/25/2013

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: First Plenary Meeting with President
Vladimir Putin of Russia (S)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Secretary Madeleine Albright
Ambassador James Collins
Samuel Berger, Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs
Strobe Talbott, Deputy Secretary of State
Walter Slocombe, Undersecretary of Defense
for Policy
Stephen Sestanovich, Ambassador-at-Large for
the New Independent States (notetaker)
Peter Afanassenko, State Department
Interpreter

President Vladimir Putin
Ivan Ivanov, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Sergey Ivanov, Security Council Secretary
Sergey Prikhodko, Foreign Affairs Advisor
Georgy Mamedov, Deputy Foreign Minister
Yuriy Ushakov, Russian Ambassador to the
United States
Vladimir Chkhikvishvili, Director of North
American Department

DATE, TIME AND PLACE: June 4, 2000, 1:33 p.m. - 2:40 p.m. (local
time), The Kremlin, Moscow, Russia

President Putin: Mr. President, welcome once again to the
Kremlin. I believe our one-on-one meeting last night yielded
positive results. Under your leadership, it has been possible
to manage Russian-American relations even when problems arise.
That way, problems that might otherwise be insoluble can, in
fact, be resolved. (S)

I propose that we split the afternoon's meetings into parts.
The first meeting will focus on security issues, and the second
will focus on economics. (U)

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Reason: 1.5(b)(d)

Declassify On: 6/19/10

The documents, written by [Strobe Talbott](#), deputy secretary of state during the Clinton administration, show Putin at his most collaborative and pro-Western, "looking forward to **Russia**'s full integration into the European security system and even into **NATO**." He rounds off both aspirations with a striking phrase: "I am happy." Putin's aggressive approach to the [war in Chechnya](#) at the time, with its emphasis on force rather than negotiation, aligns with his [hardline stance on Ukraine](#)—coincidentally, among other differences—due to his flirtations with NATO.

Perhaps due to a lack of experience, deduces Talbott, who is fluent in Russian, Putin was trying to impress Clinton. A quarter of a century later, Trump tried to impress Putin at the [Alaska summit](#), taking him for a ride in **The Beast**. A rare occurrence among presidents. A shared trip of which perhaps no records remain as the exchanges with Clinton. Neither Secretary of State [Marco Rubio](#) nor the special envoy for peace in **Russia and Israel**, **Steve Witkoff**, a billionaire with real estate experience, not diplomatic experience, speak Russian.

CLINTON-PUTIN ONE-ON-ONES
MOSCOW SUMMIT, JUNE 3-5, 2000

Notetaker: ST (June 9 00)

First Session, working dinner, Kremlin private quarters (8:10-10:50 p.m.)

Opening banter about sports; Putin says he hurt himself skiing, really misses regular exercise when he injures himself... tries to be careful. POTUS asks if he's keeping up his judo. Putin says he has engaged in disciplined exercise all his life, was a judo champion in Leningrad, but finds it hard to keep it up in his current job, finds that frustrating. Will show POTUS later how he's got a gym nearby. POTUS says he's read Putin's book and noticed how much emphasis he gave to judo and martial arts. Can't he keep doing that? Putin says, no, because it's hard to find anyone who wants to be his sparring partner, and it's also hard to find the time.

Putin then shifts to asking POTUS about life in the White House, wonders if he has anyplace else he can go. POTUS talks about Camp David and how he hasn't been able to use it as much as he'd like. Mentions that HRC hasn't been able to get up there much lately because of her campaign, and how POTUS himself will be doing a lot of campaigning for Gore, which means not many weekends free.

- Putin: I've really been looking forward to our meeting. I remember our meeting in New Zealand very well — how kind you were, how friendly, how supportive when I was making my first steps in the leadership. I remember how after dinner you took me by the hand and led me to that gallery and we were applauded there together. I also paid attention to what you said during our election campaign here.

Of course, these aren't the only reasons I've been looking forward to our meeting. You're also someone who has served 8 years in the presidency of the most powerful country in the world. During those years, you've done a lot to build the relationship with Russia. You've still got some time left to you in office, and there's a lot we can do together.

While cameras come in, they go back to bantering about houses. POTUS talks about the house he and HRC will have in NY, as well as the set-up at the Clinton Library in Little Rock. Cameras leave...

- Putin: One reason I ask about your life in the White House is that I'm finding life here in the Kremlin very isolating.

As Max Boot wrote in [The Washington Post](#) , “Putin’s triumph was evident from the start of the meeting at **Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson** , where American troops literally rolled out the red carpet for a dictator indicted for war crimes by the **International Criminal Court** in 2023 and unable to travel to most countries around the world for fear of arrest. Trump seemed ecstatic. He greeted Putin with a broad smile and a handshake, then invited him into his presidential limousine, known as **the Beast** — a beast within a beast.”

The documents from the so-called "one-on-one" with Clinton reflect Putin's courtesy: "You've done a lot for your country [...], perhaps as much as any president since Roosevelt." He cracked sports jokes, complaining about the difficulty of finding a good judo opponent. And he reviewed history: the Soviet nuclear program, according to Putin, benefited from spies for **US** scientists . He, in turn, defended the [war in Chechnya , a Muslim-majority Russian republic, against "brutal and cruel people" who want to "kill all the Jews," while Clinton assured him that](#) **NATO** 's eastward expansion did not threaten **Russia** . Past coincidences.

Times change. So do men.

[Jorge Elías](#)