

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 Thomas R. Pickering (1993-1996)

What I saw on that afternoon, perhaps mid-afternoon, was first a sea of aluminum shields moving towards the American Embassy and toward the Russian White House, which are opposite each other on the street, followed by the crowd from the front of the Foreign Ministry. So, I called the Embassy Marines and told them to get to the security officer and have the people who were residing in the embassy perimeter in the townhouses to go to our underground safe haven underneath the center of the embassy residence area because I was not sure in fact that we would not have firing and indeed other difficulties in that kind of confrontation as this crowd, which was headed in that direction, met the NKVD or the then KGB paramilitary force surrounding the White House.

INTERVIEW

Jill Dougherty

Ambassador Thomas Pickering, you know, I think it was *Time Magazine* that called you the "Five-Star General of the Diplomatic Corps." That really is true with your enormous career. We're going to talk about Russia today, but, you know, you have served four decades in the Foreign Service for the United States, and I'm very, very interested in your perspective, that long-term perspective, on Russia and the United States. But thank you very much for being with us.

Ambassador Pickering

Thank you, Jill, very much for that kind introduction. Even for diplomats, a little bit of hyperbole goes a long way. So, I'm anxious to take your questions and look forward to speaking with you.

Jill Dougherty

Okay. Well, let's return to the time that you went to Russia as the ambassador, 1993. And I remember 1993, I wasn't posted yet, but I went there a lot. And there was hunger. There were people standing in lines. Politically, it was a very fraught time. You had the standoff that Yeltsin had with the parliament. You had the siege of the White House; you had more to come near that parliamentary election that apparently really worried the Clinton Administration and their support for shock therapy. So, if you could take me back, what were you thinking as you watched all of that unfold?

Ambassador Pickering

I arrived in Russia on May 22nd of 1993. The great news was it was still snowing. But the real news was that there was already engaged a standoff between the Parliament and Yeltsin and, principally, between people in the Parliament who, in one way or another, either wished to

replace Yeltsin or sought, in somehow, to maneuver him. They were relatively, in what were the political terms of the day, more hardline, more Communists, less reform-minded, less pro-demise-of-Communism.

Many of them were, in effect, in the Russian White House, which was, at that period of time, the Office of the Prime Minister, and some were high-up officials in the Russian hierarchy. What I learned when I arrived and what I saw afterward right through the October 3rd contention and deep face-off at the White House was a pretty constant effort of the Parliament elected essentially under Communism, in which there were two candidates, an unusual approach by the Communists, for each position. But each one of them was in one way or another a part of the Party, and many of them held their links with the Party.

They made, by someone's count, over 300 changes in the Constitution seeking, in one way or another, to promote themselves and to limit Yeltsin's powers. This brought about both contention verbally and politically, and really, that went on for quite a bit of time. I can recall that early in September, Andrey Kozyrev, the Foreign Minister, maybe later in September, called in me, together with my British, French, and German colleagues, and said that Yeltsin has now decided to prorogue the Parliament, in fact, to end them, and that he will, in return, carry out an election in January of 1994 for a new Parliament, and he intends to write a new Constitution. He can no longer operate in a situation in which the contention of powers is so great, the difficulties of rule are so hard, and the differences so vast.

And we, obviously, said there are dangers in dealing with the Parliament that way. We understand what he's going through, we will report back to our governments, and we think it is important that, if he does do away with the Parliament, he needs to have a free and fair election to carry it forward. So, this was an extremely interesting time, and it began a series of active events which began with the surrounding of the then-parliament building, the Russian White House, by the troops of the NKVD, their paramilitary organization, and that lasted until roughly October 3rd.

Those events were well known, and perhaps you'd like to discuss them. Throughout this time period, I was thinking what are the alternatives? The return to a communist rule in Russia and perhaps the effort to reconstruct the Soviet Union around a period in which, beginning in December of 1991, the constituent republics had separated, become independent states, were recognized, had become members of the United Nations, would be a throwback to reversion and recreation of a difficult situation, which actually had failed in August of 1990 [1991], when then-President Gorbachev in the Crimea had a short right-wing revolt against him, and it failed.

The alternative was to stay with Yeltsin. Yeltsin, in many ways, represented, at least, a reform element, not someone whose governance role was either steady, predictable, or necessarily conducive to where we thought Russia should go, but we thought Russia should go toward democracy, toward economic independence, toward relationships with the world community, and toward a different situation than the contention of the Cold War. These were all the ideas that, I think, were passing through our minds. There was no question at all, that some at least,

including some in my embassy, had concerns that the president was carrying out a coup against the parliament, quite rightly so, and that, therefore, he was in fact, disobeying the Constitution and the best of democratic imperatives.

If that were indeed the case, and there hadn't been all the changes to the Constitution introduced by essentially the remnants of the Communist Party, I would have had more sympathy with their points of view. But their points of view were expressed and sent to the State Department, at their request, in a dissent channel message. I offered, in fact, to collaborate with them in a message where we could both state our views and put those before the broader republic in the department. As far as I know, whatever reply they received from the dissent channel came after the confrontation at the White House, which was in many ways, the final physical manifestation of the contention between Yeltsin and his parliament.

Jill Dougherty

I'm thinking of you, at that moment, you were physically at the embassy, I presume?

Ambassador Pickering

Yes. The events of October 3rd were interesting because I had had a new grandson arrive, and my wife had left for the United States, I think, on Thursday or Friday, for the birth of that child and so, I was alone. It was a Sunday. I was sitting in my study on the second floor of Spaso House but looking down a street that, in fact, gave me a way of seeing the Garden Ring, the second major ring outside the Kremlin around the city of Moscow, on which the embassy is located. The embassy was to my right and the Foreign Ministry to my left. The Foreign Ministry had had a series of demonstrations for a week or two, in part in support of the White House, the non-Yeltsin crowd.

What I saw on that afternoon, perhaps mid-afternoon, was first a sea of aluminum shields moving towards the American Embassy and toward the Russian White House, which are opposite each other on the street, followed by the crowd from the front of the Foreign Ministry. So, I called the Embassy Marines and told them to get to the security officer and have the people who were residing in the embassy perimeter in the townhouses to go to our underground safe haven underneath the center of the embassy residence area because I was not sure in fact that we would not have firing and indeed other difficulties in that kind of confrontation, as this crowd, which was headed in that direction, met the NKVD or the then-KGB paramilitary force surrounding the White House.

Indeed, that's what happened next; there was shooting. We found, later, a number of our buildings had been penetrated by shots coming from across the street firing at the crowd coming up towards the White House by the people guarding the perimeter. They broke through the perimeter. People in the White House building were armed. They went next door and took control of a multi-story building, the mayor's office. In the meantime, one of the Russian uniformed armed security guards outside the embassy was shot. Our people at the embassy arranged to have him transferred to medical aid.

When it calmed, the next step was that this crowd that attacked those two buildings loaded themselves into the military trucks they had captured from the KGB paramilitary elements and headed to Ostankino in the north part of Moscow, the major television transmitter and the control for Russian national television. After they left, I was in touch by phone and started watching on CNN these developments, and then resolved to go to the embassy, and so I walked through back streets and around back corners and underneath the Garden Ring and came into the embassy, and then spent the rest of my time in an office in the basement of the embassy, which I had been using, and talking to the people, calming our embassy people and seeking which direction in which we and they might go to assure their shelter and safety, which was my primary responsibility.

We were in touch with Washington. Obviously, they were watching on television. It was interesting as I didn't know until after that it was the same week as Blackhawk Down in Somalia. So, we were not the only crisis Washington was dealing with at that moment.

Jill Dougherty

Extraordinarily dramatic and also volatile situation. In that situation, how did you even assess what was going on? I mean, I know you mentioned you were watching CNN's broadcast. Then how did you advise Washington? What did you tell Washington?

Ambassador Pickering

First, I was extremely conscious of the fact that we were, in a way, locked in. But I had a number of embassy officers in the political and economic sections who resided outside the embassy compound and who were able to set up a string of reporting arrangements to us by telephone, as well as we were hearing from other foreign embassies who were not, in one way or another, caught up in this ring. At the time, the crowd had left the Russian White House and the defending forces had dispersed. So, it was open, but it was dangerous. There were, at least we believed, to have received sniper shots from tall buildings on the Russian Arbat to the east of the embassy and a little bit south of it but overlooking my residence. So, I didn't want people in the embassy moving into that area in order to do reporting.

So, we depended upon the hard work and the presence and the vigilance of the people who resided outside. They began to provide us additional reporting, and I had an opportunity for a secure call with Strobe Talbott, who was watching things very, very quickly. Early on, Strobe's principal question to me was, "What should be our posture?" and I said, "We have no alternative. The alternative to President Yeltsin is so much worse that I don't believe we can do anything but reinforce and stick with him and do so in whatever way you at the Washington end are seeing and hearing this, but we'll keep you up to date and informed in terms of what we are doing." That was the situation as the evening progressed.

What happened at the television station was an effort to use the military trucks to break through the front doors of the facility at the bottom of the television tower where the control arrangements were managed and that was defended by Russian police and military. There was a crowd in the square outside; there was an American photographer working for the *New*

York Times, who was wounded at the time. He was, in some ways, covered by people around him who were seeking to avoid the shooting that they had gotten caught in, and with their help, he was transferred to the Kremlin Clinic for treatment. They were very successful in treating him there, but it was the first American I knew of who was caught up in the shooting. We had others later to follow, and we were, at the same time, wondering about whether we should attempt to evacuate our people or not.

Once it became clear there was so much shooting at Ostankino, our access to the major airport north of Moscow was blocked. I had no interest in trying to find buses and putting several hundred people, including children, on buses and so told my team that they would have to bed down in a gymnasium that we had which was below ground and stay there, and we would do everything we could to secure their safety and to defend the compound and the people in it. There was never any attempt to take our compound and never any attempt of people to break in.

But at various times, including the next day, we were in the line of fire of the continued shooting, and so overnight, we had an approach from the White House people, the rebels, who wanted our help in contacting the government. We did what we could to do that without obviously taking any sides. In the arrangement, we were talking to the government, but they were, put it this way, extremely preoccupied with what they were going to do, and they were not interested in advertising what they might do for obvious security reasons. So, we knew very little until the early morning about what the reaction might be. If you'd like, I would go ahead and continue to describe the next day.

Jill Dougherty

Please do.

Ambassador Pickering

The next day I woke up after having slept on the floor in an office in the basement of the new embassy building. I woke up to the sound of armored personnel carriers coming down a narrow alley where the main entrance to the new embassy was located, and then watched on television as they deployed on a plaza in front of the Russian White House. We saw armed soldiers getting out of the armored personnel carriers and going into the front door of the Russian White House.

In the meantime, later, perhaps an hour or two, we observed on Russian and U.S. television, CNN, the approach of tanks from the direction of west of Moscow on the main Boulevard, Kutuzovsky Prospekt. CNN had a view from the fourth floor of a building that overlooked them. Two of the tanks were seen to be loaded with what appeared to be ammunition from trucks, and then they moved slowly onto a bridge over the Moscow River, where they had a clear shot at the Russian White House.

They aimed their turrets, and we could feel the ground shake with the shots that they put into the Russian White House. It appears as if they fired training ammunition of some type

because there were no detonations of shells. Although the shells penetrated into the building and apparently lit fires, the external damage to the building was not large, as one might have expected with explosive rounds, but they did this for some time, clearly, in order to drive the defenders of the White House out of it, practically, possibly because the invading troops were having trouble getting that done themselves. We later read in the newspaper that two or three hundred people were there; they were armed. Many of them took refuge in the basement and got access to an extensive tunnel system that exists under Moscow that, for one reason or another, can be used to move from place to place underground. So, some were killed, and some were wounded. I don't know that we ever had an exact toll.

But the building was recovered and the fires that were lit burned out by the afternoon or so, but it was a mess. We were, of course, across the street. At one time on that morning - it was a Monday - I had a need to get more people reporting to us from outside. Two or three, one of whom was Masha Yovanovitch, accompanied me in my armored Cadillac, such as it was, out of the embassy and over to the embassy residence. We had a portico so we could hide under that to escape any sniper fire, and they used my residence as a kind of base to organize continued reporting of what was going on.

During the time the tanks were firing, we saw on television large numbers, thousands of Russians on the streets and, indeed, some on the bridge, even as the tanks were firing at the building, watching what was going on. I had a sense in that whole process that Yeltsin was determined to retake the White House to assert his authority and by the end of the day, that, without question, is what happened. I gave interviews at the request of the journalist community off and on during that day. Some were available to move to places around the city where they wanted to do the interviews on television, and some were done on telephone, and so on. We stayed in regular touch with Washington as the events proceeded, and, by Monday, Washington had made statements in support of Yeltsin and what was going on at the Russian White House. The termination of that was pretty clearly, by Tuesday morning, Yeltsin fully in control of Moscow.

Jill Dougherty

An amazing story. And, you know, it raises in my mind this conundrum about Yeltsin, which is, he was depicted by many people, at least in the West, as a Democrat and fighting against the Communists, but you are really talking about the devil's dilemma of Yeltsin, that he did some things that could be construed, and some of your own people said that, as very undemocratic. I mean, standing back and looking at him, with this separation from that period, how do you define him in your own mind? What was he? Was he a bridge from one to the other or what, exactly?

Ambassador Pickering

I think in historical terms, he was obviously a transition. At the time, we looked at him as someone who had the leadership qualities and the staying power to deal with the issue that, having inherited a system which was not yet fully disintegrated from Communism to something else, he had to contend with the hangover remnants, including the efforts to use

Constitutional amendments to try to take power. So, what we had was a Constitutional-type coup going on in one part of town, while he was trying to resist it in another part of town.

And so, force and violence broke out on the 3rd, to which he responded, perhaps, in some ways, prodded by his decision to send Parliament home. But the chain of events, in my view, was clearly not only in Yeltsin's favor, but what we had seen and heard from Yeltsin, despite the fact that he had resolved to dissolve the Parliament, was pretty much along the lines of one preserving a changed regime in power, on the one hand, and resisting what we believed to be the resurgence of people who wanted to reestablish the Soviet Union and Communism on the other side of the issue.

Therefore, it seemed to respond to public sentiment, and in that regard, I think probably it did. So, it was a complex situation and, clearly, one in which you didn't have, overnight in the week following Christmas in 1991, the marching of the Communists out in the public and everybody appearing the next day as full-fledged democrats.

Jill Dougherty

As I look at your career in Moscow, and then even before that, going back to last year, I believe 1996, in Moscow was kind of the run up to the expansion of NATO, and if you talk about another freighted issue, NATO expansion is it. Russia is still very angry about it. Here in the United States, to this day, there is debate among Russia experts and others as to whether it should have happened or it shouldn't have. Where do you come down on that issue of NATO expansion?

Ambassador Pickering

I think I'll come to that in a minute. But I just wanted to add one more thing on Yeltsin because after the events at the White House on October 3rd and 4th, we followed closely what he did, and I think a reasonable case can be made, with one exception, that on major decisions involving defense of democracy, he came out on the right side. And the one exception was the war in Chechnya, where seemingly, he was persuaded not only by the fact that the Chechens had adopted guerrilla warfare tactics against the Russian Federation, but that he was declining so much in popularity, that there were clearly arguments, at least the surface evidence is such that, in order to win the next election in 1996, he had to take back, by force, Chechnya.

And so, that led to another conflict, much more messy, much less clear. It was quite fascinating that during a visit, in the midst of the Chechen, early stages of the Chechen conflict, I had the opportunity to host Vice President Gore. I remember riding in the car from the airport. I gave him my advice that there were some who are already talking about the war against Chechnya as Abraham Lincoln's reaction to Fort Sumter. I said the two were not parallel and that in no case would it be, in my view, a good thing to make that comparison while he was in Russia in public. Of course, my advice was worth everything it cost him - it was free - and he felt totally free to ignore it and did.

Jill Dougherty

How ironic.

Ambassador Pickering

So, let's go to NATO.

Jill Dougherty

Yes, please.

Ambassador Pickering

I'd been in Russia long enough when this issue came up to be deeply concerned about what the Russian reaction would be. There was no question at all that, particularly those managing Russia in Washington, wished always to hold out the hope to the Russians that, expansion or no, at some point, they in their democratic progression and rejoining of the international community, might wish to become part of NATO.

Much of that was a hope over reality. If there had been anything that had been demonized on a regular basis equally with the United States under the Soviet Union, it had been NATO. NATO was seen as the manifestation of imperialism surrounding the Communist central state, the U.S.S.R., and few, if any, Russians gained any thinkingly useful feeling that NATO was really a reaction from the Red Army's long-standing presence in Eastern Europe, and the use of Red Army occupation in the defeat of Germany, in effect, to fundamentally, and forcefully in cases, communize Eastern Europe. Therefore, NATO was seen as an aggressive alliance, as portrayed by the Soviets in the U.S.S.R.

And we, despite significant efforts to try to look at that question in a different way and to portray it to Russian eyes in a different sense, failed. So, the Russian public reaction and, indeed, the Russian policy reaction were not so far apart at that period of time, despite the fact that the West and the United States was wildly popular in Russia and among many Russians because they thought there was a new opportunity to have freedom, economic prosperity, change, travel, all of the things that had been resisted.

But somehow, NATO presence did not occupy a positive niche in that series of explanations. So, once we began to get wind of the NATO enlargement as a serious policy option, certainly not in any way offset by the notion that we will keep a door open for you, Russia, we wrote back quite serious, quite strong telegrams to Washington, saying that they had to calculate the effect of NATO on the Russian policy. Rarely, if ever, did we get answers, and interestingly enough, Bill Burns, in his wonderful book produced last year, was able to rescue one of these cables from the archives and get it declassified, so it is published for you there to see both the thinking of the embassy and the arguments that we make. Could we have done it differently? And I say, yes, quite probably.

As the NATO question and enlargement expanded, and particularly related to Poland and, indeed, to other states where there were significant ethnic presences in the United States and,

thus, they had some electoral significance, we saw the beginnings of a different idea, but it, in effect, followed NATO enlargement rather than preceding it, and it was a thought attributed to General Shalikashvili, who was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that we should set up a Partnership for Peace and bring in people who might, one day or another, be headed toward NATO, but not necessarily limited, and that it should be what would clearly be a lighter touch in terms of how things would work, but it could follow.

That was something that I thought could have preceded NATO enlargement, been a kind of stepping-stone; not everybody who was in it would necessarily be considered for NATO membership at the same time. But it might have, particularly given the fact that there was Russian presence in it.

And we were beginning, for example, peacekeeping exercises jointly in Russia and outside of Russia, with Russian military forces at that time, to be able perhaps to palliate a little bit of the in-your-face nature of how the Russians viewed the NATO enlargement. That didn't happen. The Russians had their own theory and ideas. They felt that they had been promised, at the time that Germany was reunited, that NATO would not be extended.

They clearly felt they had been promised there would be no stationing of Western nuclear weapons, principally U.S., east of the then-West German/East German borderline as a kind of nuclear joint commitment that, in one way or another, was never a quid pro quo. But it paralleled the significant efforts we made with the Russians, in which they were, in my view, highly cooperative to recover Russian nuclear weapons stations in Belarus, in Ukraine and in Kazakhstan, something that took place and something that gave rise to the joint commitment that we would seek to defend Ukraine as an offset to their giving up the control they had over nuclear weapons, and which was later, obviously, a centerpiece of concern about Mr. Putin's moves in Eastern Ukraine.

Jill Dougherty

You're bringing up the name Putin, and although you were not the ambassador when President Putin was the president, it almost begs that question because of the, let's say, contrast between Yeltsin and Putin. I'd be interested in your views looking at them as leaders and maybe even as men, because certainly you've followed up to this day of what Putin is doing. Then also, you know, relations between the United States and Russia, this debate over the Great Man Theory, whether it's really the individual in the position of president who changes things or whether it's more systemic. So, I guess I've asked you two questions. But the first one would be Yeltsin vis-a-vis Putin and what kind of leaders they were and are?

Ambassador Pickering

Let me begin a little bit and tell you that I had the opportunity to meet with Putin, perhaps once, because I paid often visits to St. Petersburg. The mayor, Sobchak, of St. Petersburg, had acquired quite a reputation as a constitutional lawyer devoted to Thomas Jefferson, leading the city, at least, into a more democratic way. Vladimir Putin was a deputy mayor and when Anatoly Sobchak was not there to receive me, I was received by Vladimir Putin, at least on one

occasion. I found him on that occasion very laconic, very tight-lipped, willing to listen, not seemingly very overly friendly, but not necessarily contentious or in any way pushing back on what it was that I had to say.

My staff at the consulate general saw Putin through two different visions. One saw him as generally helpful, particularly to the business community, hard-working, deeply engaged and approachable. Others, fewer, saw him as perhaps quite deeply in bed with the business community, maybe to the point, obviously, of realizing gains, defending them and in some ways responsible for some of the problems that the American and foreign business community had in St. Petersburg. I never resolved the differences between them. I was certainly aware of both of them and had analyzed Putin, to the extent that it made any difference at that point, in that context.

So, after that, I had opportunities to meet with him on a number of other occasions, particularly when he gained power, and saw him as someone who was highly confident of his own capacities, ready to make decisions, clearly engaged in the future of Russia, and I would say that my analysis of Mr. Putin has been now, for some time, that one needs to look at the question of his aspirations for the return of Russia to great power status, on the one hand, and how it affects his own situation as a survivor in the Russian political system, on the other, and the two go hand in hand; in one sense, his survival depended upon his ability to articulate and carry out nationalist policies that, in one way or another, centered around the idea that Russia had been, always will be, and is now returning as a great power to the world scene. Secondly, that it was his leadership that made that so and was important in building it.

And you can remember, in his early days, where he attempted to consolidate power through the appointment of seven governors general for the large regions of Russia to trump, if I could put it this way, the independence of the elected governors at that time. He took away the elections from a number of them, and in some ways, hounded a number of them because, in one way or another, they were establishing separate mini-economies in their own provinces from which they were clearly benefiting and under which the major Russian economy was suffering. So those are thoughts at least.

And Yeltsin, in many ways, was declining after 1996. I was around for his open-heart operation in which Dr. DeBakey played a helpful auxiliary role, although he didn't do the operation. But Yeltsin was, in those days, declining. Yeltsin clearly had shown, more often than any of us liked, the propensity to substitute alcohol for what would have perhaps been called protocol. But, in one way or another, he was, in that particular period of time, declining. Much of what Putin tried to change was his reaction to how Yeltsin, in one way or another, through weaknesses that were not necessarily his but of the system, became creatures of the large oligarchs who used the opportunity to take over the Russian economy, to develop control of television – Berezovsky for example – and has, therefore, played an enormously important role in the politics of Russia in those times because television was the single most significant medium of communication. Putin later saw that dominance by outsiders of television was something that he would not want to have continue under his leadership.

So, he tightened up things, from his perspective. He went through various manifestations of leadership changes. I think the Medvedev taking over the presidency experience, for what would have been otherwise Putin's third term, prohibited by the then-Constitution, was not the experience he wanted to continue with. We now see that today. So, Putin has, despite ups and downs in popularity, consolidated control, seemingly remains in firm control, has changed the Constitution so he will be clearly able to stay in power until something like 2036. What happens after that and what might happen between now and then are hard to see.

The Russian economy has not kept pace with what Putin, I think, would like to have seen. But he seems to have at least one tone-deaf ear on the economy and perhaps not as tuned in as he might be, and often, I suspect, may wonder why the street protests which have been a continuing phenomenon, off and on, at various times in Russia, don't stop or he can't finally and fully stop them. In part, I think it's because of his failure to understand and listen to useful advice that he can get from a number of important people around him about how to take Russia's enormous resources and turn them into something but a uni-crop petroleum economy.

Jill Dougherty

I did want to pick up on one issue, which is the relations between the United States and Russia. So many people have said they're never normal. These are two countries that, because of their history, their culture, etc., have not had what you would say normal relationships that we have with, let's say, any European country, etc. And I'm asking, Mr. Ambassador, why do you think that is? Can we have a constructive, organized approach and relationship with Russia, or are we always doomed to have some type of conflict?

Ambassador Pickering

I think it's a great question. Many will recognize that the use of the Russian word *normalno* [fine, normal] is designed to cover over any possible discussion of any problems of health or, indeed, of economic difficulties in personal relationships. But, put that aside, we went through periods between us in which contention, world events, and ideological differences of great significance, in one way or another, tended to hover over the relationship and cloud it. One could perhaps turn to periods in the past; were our relations normal when they began in the early '30s? Were they normal in the Second World War?

I would have to say a depression of consequence and world contention, and then the fascist expansion through '45 meant that was not normal. The immediate appearance of the Cold War within years meant that was not normal. We operated in an external environment, in some ways enhanced by our domestic political environment, of significant differences and contention.

I can remember very well, in what I would probably take back to 1954, my first year as a graduate student, a student conference at West Point in which they gathered people from across the country to, in fact, to sit down with cadets, and where almost every lecture, every presentation was super-hyped on the dangers of Communist expansion – much of what we

are seeing from a certain element in our population now, or a certain element in our political community now, about China and what to do about it. So, the collapse of Communism was not normal in any sense of the word, and we operated in a situation where even the best of economic development experts did not have what one could call a perfectly easy, fluid, highly-able-to-implement idea.

There's an old expression, Adam Michnik, a Polish economist, once said that going from Communism ... from capitalism to Communism... is like making fish soup out of a fishbowl, but the reverse we do not know how to do. There was much of that; there was also much resistance in Russia, obviously, because people had, for 70 years, been, in many ways, enthralled by the system that was going totally to change their lives and their position in the world.

The piece that many people remember most in parts of Russia is that, for the period of the Yeltsin time, the West was trying to steer Russia, didn't do it very well, that Russians were, in many cases, in their view, overridden by the political and foreign policy imperatives of the United States in the West. It was only when Mr. Putin came back that they regained some independence about this and it was only through his leadership, which attempted to do a certain amount of reforming both in the military, which had been very, very badly disintegrated, and politically, and in the international community to bring back what they had thought was the promise of change as they went out of Communism.

So, in a way, the expectation in the future that we will have perfectly, quote, "normal circumstances," in a world of constant change is something of a deception and a snare. What we need to do is to be able carefully to evaluate where we are, understand that we're never going to have perfect alignment, to seek out as we did, particularly in the Cold War middle period, how to control those mutual dangers which are existential. With the U.S. and the Soviet Union, it was a mistake that would lead to nuclear conflict, which would destroy the planet. And that's not hyperbole. Many of us see some of those conditions returning.

With Russia today, it may well be to put in place a new arms control regiment, to build the stability that we were trying to build in the Cold War, which has been torn up mainly by the Trump period, although Bush began it in doing away with the ABM Treaty, for what are clearly now national objectives, which in my view, are not thought through and are clearly not part of what I would call a significant strategy on the part of the United States, and without going into it in this interview, we have much the same problem with Russia - I'm sorry - with China, as we have with Russia.

What is it that might make a difference there? One of the things that might make a difference is together dealing with COVID rather than separately spitting at each other on the question or, even more importantly, as John Kerry has suggested recently, on climate change. So that's one way, I think, to take a look both at how to assess the current situation and what might be the new normal, and the new normal is not something in which we can cover over the differences or hide them, in which really active diplomacy will be of great significance.

We're not going to deep-solve that by military standoff, particularly if it allows us to get into an accidental conflict, although each of us will respect each other more for the military prowess that is out there and, more realistically, have to take it into account. So, it is not something where dreams of perfection are realizable, but it is something where deep, hard work, to borrow from George Shultz, "tending the diplomatic garden" intensively every day, is part of what can happen, and neither of us have done that. We've adopted falling back on demonology or demonization as a substitute for policy when there are plenty of things that we can work on together.

Jill Dougherty

You're talking about diplomacy. Do you have advice for future ambassadors to Russia?

Ambassador Pickering

Yes, I do. I think the advice is complex, but it is basically, one, develop as many as you can of contacts. Whether you find those sympathetic or not is irrelevant. You need to hear from a wide variety of Russians on a wide variety of views. Secondly, make sure that Washington knows and understands your best judgments about what's going on. Thirdly, look for opportunities. As an ambassador, you have a significant role to play in helping to formulate foreign policy. I always thought that what was best done to earn my pay was to make sure that Washington knew when things were not working, but never to tell Washington things were not working without trying to tell them how they could be repaired, refigured, repurposed, redone. That, in some way, is a strong quota for an ambassador.

But ambassadors also have to look at the question of how and in what way can I bring about a resumption of a better relationship in a time of great difficulty? With Russia, much of that depends upon the leadership and how they can be influenced to understand the need, to try to find a way to repair relations, and that's always much harder. If, in fact, the personality relationships between leaders has disintegrated, or gone south, without their significant involvement in bringing about repairs, that won't happen.

I think that the second period of President Obama when we thought that Medvedev, as the legal and indeed, constitutional president of Russia, deserved more serious treatment than President Putin was a serious mistake. Putin had become prime minister. He was number two on the ladder, but he was number one in the decision-making chain. Efforts on the part of the United States to deal with that in an entirely protocolary way sent the message that the U.S. was actually seeking to replace Putin with Medvedev and expected that to happen. That was obviously not the best approach to now-President Putin on the whole subject.

Jill Dougherty

I have one last question. I'm thinking about the people who will be watching and listening to this interview and getting a lot out of it and thinking of students, you know, students who, maybe they're in college, maybe even late high school, thinking about the Foreign Service or thinking about getting into Russian studies, studying the country that you yourself have looked

at so deeply for so long. What would you say to them? What's the advice? Why should they even consider the Foreign Service? Why should they think about Russia?

Ambassador Pickering

Well, I think that the Foreign Service offers huge opportunities. One, it still is a merit-based service where your advancement comes from your performance, where you don't get everything you want, always, in terms of assignments, but every one of them is a challenge, where I believe you have to have a deep-seated sense of public service to commit to that kind of a situation. You live in danger, your families are not always with you, you're asked to make sacrifices for your government, sometimes the most significant of those. On the other hand, the notion that you can play a role in shaping for the United States, in my humble view, still the world's leading country, despite recent declines, which I hope are momentary and repairable in the next administration and believe they are – that is an enormously gratifying proposition.

I always found that being able to help individual Americans who were in trouble was part of what my responsibilities were, and I had often great satisfaction from those small cases, reuniting a family around the children that may have been taken away by a divorced parent overseas to being able to make a considerable suggestion for how and in what way the next phase of our relationships with a country like Russia, or India, or in the UN should be developed. These are enormously valuable rewards, not measured in monetary terms, but measured certainly in personal satisfaction terms.

So, if you're interested, don't go to the Foreign Service to believe that it's just a useful stepping-stone to something higher. It may well be; on the other hand, you have to recognize that you're taking away a job from someone who, like you, would have to learn the job from the bottom up, and you can't substitute new people at mid-grade for those who have learned in the field what is necessary. But I also believe, obviously, we need more education and training of our Foreign Service officers, something that, currently, because they are all occupied on the front lines, freeing them up to do that education and training is a problem. But a number of us are working on that. But those are the things that I think people who are interested in the Foreign Service should look at.

We badly need people, particularly from the underrepresented communities in the United States. We do better on women, but terribly now on Black Americans, less well on Hispanics, quite well on Asian Americans, but we do need to have that kind of participation in our foreign service to represent not just the country and its many faces, but to represent all the methods and features of thinking about our foreign relationships on the basis of your own personal history, which is something you can never discard as you become a diplomat, but you always in one way or another, have to be sure is not distorting your view.

Jill Dougherty

Well, they have an example to follow in you, Mr. Ambassador. And thank you very much, Ambassador Thomas Pickering, both for your time and your very deep thoughts about Russia and the relationship. Thank you.

Ambassador Pickering

Thank you, Jill. As always, a great pleasure to join you, and thank you for the wonderful questions.