

# 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 F. Tefft (2014-2017)

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*Russia had also, in the third term of President Putin, really started to turn inward. There was almost a feeling of withdrawal from the world. There were sanctions put on, of course, that blocked visas and tended to isolate Russia. Russia was not accepted into the G7. But there was the Foreign Agents law, there was an aggressive FSB effort to intimidate scientists and people who had foreign contacts. And it became very clear and accelerated during my time there.*

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### INTERVIEW

*Jill Dougherty*

Ambassador John Tefft, it really is a pleasure to see you again. I think the last time that we spoke in-depth about Russia, it was in Moscow at the embassy. We did it over coffee and cookies, now we're doing it, I think, in kind of a different way. I want to really get into your background and your experience as the ambassador. And then also, more long term, historical issues with Russia and the United States. So, it's an honor and a real pleasure to see you again.

*Ambassador Tefft*

Thank you, Jill. I'm glad to be back with you.

*Jill Dougherty*

Okay. If we look at your career, you arrived in Moscow in the fall of 2014, and then you left in the fall of 2017, so you had approximately three years. And you'd have to say that that was one of the most difficult periods in the relationship between Russia and the United States, really, I think, in post-Soviet history. So, let's look at what happened. We had annexation of Crimea, civil war in Donbas, the NATO-Russia Council had been ended. There were sanctions by the United States and by Europe. When you arrived, what were your expectations? What did you think that you could accomplish as the ambassador, and how did you plan to go about that?

*Ambassador Tefft*

When I arrived, we were already six months, seven months, after the Russian invasion of Crimea and the subversion in the Donbas. We'd had the sanctions introduced and the relationship was, as you pointed out, already very, very difficult. I had some time in Washington to consult with a lot of the people in the Obama administration, from the president on down, and I think it's fair to say that there was not great expectations for much to be achieved by the time that ended, by the administration, the over, almost two years before they left.

I got to Moscow, and I found that, in fact, most of the Russians had that same very low sense of expectation. So, it wasn't as if I was going out, as I did when I was the deputy ambassador back in 1996, where we had the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission engaged via multiple cabinet secretaries and Russian ministers, a huge bilateral agenda. When we were there, there was very little going on at all. My approach, and what I shared with my staff, was that we had to be good, professional Foreign Service officers. In the Foreign Service, sometimes you go to a place and it's a time where the bilateral relationship is going gangbusters, and sometimes you go at a very difficult time and your job is to try to keep the ties of communication open to prevent worse things from happening, if possible, and to try to keep things going for another day.

In the broader sense, I think that's what I was trying to do. I would add one thing to your question, and that is that when I got there, it became pretty clear to me right away that I was also coming to a very different Russia. There was the post-imperial effort, as you mentioned, to take over the Crimea and to cause instability in Ukraine by supporting an insurrection and infiltrating people into the Donbas. But Russia had also, in the third term of President Putin, really started to turn inward. There was almost a feeling of withdrawal from the world. There were sanctions put on, of course, that blocked visas and tended to isolate Russia. Russia was not accepted into the G7. But there was the Foreign Agents law; there was an aggressive FSB effort to intimidate scientists and people who had foreign contacts.

And it became very clear and accelerated during my time there. And that also became a key factor during my three years as ambassador in Russia.

*Jill Dougherty*

Were you able to talk to Russian officials, or did they spurn you?

*Ambassador Tefft*

No. It was a mix. I was able to, of course, see Foreign Minister Lavrov, and my counterpart, just as for previous ambassadors, was Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov. I called periodically on Ambassador Ushakov, who was President Putin's foreign policy advisor. But at the same time, the Russian government refused to allow me to see people in the presidential administration. And it wasn't just me, it was the European ambassadors, as well, who weren't allowed to see the chief of the presidential administration and the deputies.

Even when we traveled, which I did a lot, and I'll come back to that, they usually blocked me from seeing governors. This was, if you will, pushback for the all the sanctions. Russia didn't have a chance to really push back economically, and the embassy and the ambassador, not just the American, but some of the major European ambassadors were punished by not having those kinds of meetings.

*Jill Dougherty*

I remember discussing that with you, that you were really a big person for going out into the field, going to a remote city some place, and really talking with people. What did you lose by not being able to do that?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I like to think, and I've been going over my notes, and before the pandemic started, I was actually reviewing some of the cables before the records office at the State Department closed down. I think we did a pretty good job, and I'm not just patting myself on the back; I had a wonderful staff in Moscow, just tremendous professionals. And, whether it was the State Department, or the military, or agriculture, we did trips around Russia, and we stayed in contact with people. We used the business relationship a lot. One of the main things that I've always felt in Russia is that I had a responsibility, both when I was the deputy ambassador in the late '90s but also during my ambassadorship, to do everything I could to help and protect American companies.

During the period I was there, many in the government tried to, if you will, screen or protect the American companies from being attacked, but there were attempts, in various regions, people trying to show, I think, show Moscow, that they were really tough, to put the squeeze on American companies. And I finally did get to the key people in the government to say, "Hey, stop this. If you want to build the relationship again," which is what they always told us, "you've got to preserve what we have and to try to build on that." But there's a lot of American companies ... I went up to Karelia, right on the border with Finland. The International Paper Company, which is headquartered in Memphis, has a huge factory up there. But I used that visit, that kind of visit, to not only show support for the American firm, try to understand what was going on in the region, but then we set up appointments with other people in other places.

For example, I went to Voronezh to see two huge farms. One for black Angus cattle, they brought in cattle from Texas and the South, and this became actually the best steak you could buy in Russia. But they had 6,000 head of cattle, and it was a wonderful operation, very Western style. They had a dairy operation, again, using American and European Holsteins. When I went to these places, I would do things, for example in Voronezh, I would see people who had gone to the United States on various educational programs, from Fulbright Programs down to the FLEX Program year in American high school and living with an American family, to the Open World program of James Billington and the Library of Congress. I visited synagogues, we visited all kinds of different people and in that way tried not only to, if you will, show the flag, but also to understand and get a better understanding for what was really going on in Russia outside of Moscow and to understand each of the regions better.

*Jill Dougherty*

So, what was the calculus of the Kremlin? I mean, were they just trying to punish you, as you said, to show that they were tough? Because it appears that, in a way, it kind of backfired. Did they accomplish anything? Gain anything?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I'm not sure they did. To give you another example of this, we went to Irkutsk, and part of this was to go to see Lake Baikal and, also, to see the NGOs out there who were working to preserve the environment. But this was also, at that time, the only governorship - if I remember correctly - in Russia that was run by, the governor was a Communist and, actually, was given pretty good marks by most of the people. Well, he had readily agreed to see me, but then two days before, the Kremlin called and said, "You will not see the American ambassador." I still saw not only the NGOs that dealt with Baikal, but I was supposed to give a speech at the university, and again the FSB intervened and told the rector, under no conditions will you let the American ambassador ... and something interesting happened. My staff, my political officer was with me who was arranging the schedule, got a phone call from one of the student leaders who had been due to see me at the university and said, "We know that the ambassador can't come there, but we're going to come down to see him at the hotel."

That day we had 15, I think, professors and students who didn't want to lose the opportunity to see the American ambassador, to have a chance to talk. And I'm sure they took a certain amount of risk by doing these kinds of things. But those kinds of personal connections, I think, vindicated our effort to get out and around. I learned something and, hopefully, was able to share things with some of the people.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, if you turn that around though, maybe not to the same degree, but in the United States you did have Russian diplomatic posts shut down, diplomats kicked out of the country, et cetera. It was all mutual. But the United States did some of that too, in order to punish Russia for Crimea, Ukraine, et cetera. So, what did the United States lose by doing that, or was it worth doing?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think most of the shutdown of the consulates came pretty much after my time there. But what I found was that, when I got to Moscow, that of course Ambassador Kislyak, the Russian ambassador in Washington, had been here for some time and had built up his contacts. Even though there was an attempt by the NSC and the State Department to try to enforce some reciprocity so that I could get appointments, there were, I'll be very diplomatic about this, there were members of the Obama administration who did not hear. They kept up their contacts and used their contacts to Kislyak, irrespective of what impact it might have had on me. Eventually, when the new administration, I'm sorry, when Ambassador Antonov and Ambassador Huntsman succeeded me, we got off to a much better start, and reciprocity was the name of the game. Jon Huntsman was able to get other appointments, for example, defense minister and others, who I wasn't able to get to see.

*Jill Dougherty*

Speaking of President Obama, to this day, the reputation of President Obama is very low in Russia. He's the bogeyman in a lot of issues; he continues to come up even though he is no

longer the president. Why do you think that is? Why did he become such a hot wire issue for Russians, with a lot of animosity?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think a lot of it owes to Ukraine and to sanctions. You'll remember after 2014, the sanctions started to bite. Putin benefited, actually, from the annexation of Crimea. His popularity soared in this period. And Russians always have, but certainly in that period, demonized the United States, blamed the United States, and Barack Obama became the kind of poster boy for that demonization. Now, he made a statement early on after the sanctions were put in where he described Russia as a regional power with nuclear weapons or words to that effect. I think, probably, of any statement made by any American official during my time, that was, it was like pouring salt in an open wound. It just drove them crazy. We know from a lot of different people that it drove President Putin crazy. And they made a lot of that on the Russian television and then used it as a way to, again, pursue this criticism and demonization.

I think there was little expectation of any real change, as I mentioned before, in the administration. As the election campaign went on, there was also demonization of Hillary Clinton, who had been criticized by Putin early on for when she had been Secretary of State. There were lots of Russians who said to me, "We're hoping Trump wins," because they thought that the Republicans and President Trump and his administration would be better for them than the Democrats. It's a combination of those factors.

*Jill Dougherty*

If you were to evaluate the diplomacy of the Obama administration, generally, about Russia, where would you put it? And I know you were part of it, but if you can stand back, what was that moment? How did the president handle it, how did his administration handle that diplomacy?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think it's fair to say that there was no great expectation of much change and, I think, a focus at the White House on trying to use the last two years of the second term of the president to get what he could do. And I think they realistically looked at Russia and said, "There's not going to be much happening here." Two big issues that dominated bilateral discussions, especially Secretary Kerry, who made four trips to Moscow, spoke all the time on the phone with Foreign Minister Lavrov and then saw Lavrov in Geneva and in New York. You know, Ukraine and Syria were the two big issues. I think it was pretty clear to both sides that there wasn't much movement going to happen on Ukraine. John Kerry tried very hard; he proposed to Putin in his second visit there that they open up a new channel of discussion between Tonia Nuland and Vyacheslav [Vladislav] Surkov, who was one of the president's assistants, who everyone knew was the guy who ran the Russian policy in the Donbas. The Foreign Ministry didn't do that. That discussion opened up; it didn't, I think, produce very much because I'm not sure that Putin was ready to move forward, but at least there was some discussion.



Now, on Syria, there was a huge discussion. I'm in the process of trying to write a memoir of sorts, and this is one of the tougher issues because John Kerry tried very, very hard to try to push a political solution. The first visit he had to Russia, my term, was May of 2015, and he met Putin and Lavrov down in Sochi, and at that point, there was still, on the Russian side, they had supported the creation of the UN process of discussion to try to find a political solution to the civil war in Syria. That summer, the Iranians and the Russians found an accommodation. They were both worried that Assad was going down the drain in Syria, and the Russians, as you will remember, intervened seriously in the civil war. That really transformed things. John Kerry did not stop - I think he has written in his own book that he was frustrated because he didn't have leverage - he talked about some kind of an air zone over Syria and even possibly American bombing.

But President Obama was not prepared to go down that road. He was trying to pull the American military out of the Middle East. He was trying to reduce our profile. To a certain extent, Putin tried to exploit that, and I think we've seen that, long after I've gone, the Russians have moved forward. I have to say, I was kind of personally ambivalent about this in the sense that I didn't want to see us sucked into Middle Eastern wars any more than we were either. At the same time, you could see that Putin was trying to take advantage of this vacuum. We still have the battle for getting rid of ISIS, which proved successful. The whole issue of Syria ... we didn't get engaged as we once were.

John Kerry, again I'll say this, tried very, very hard, and I have respect for him doing that, but we weren't successful, and after I left, we, of course, saw the horrible bombing by the Russians in Aleppo and these other places that were just barbaric, I think, in my own opinion. And I'm sorry that there wasn't much there, but I think a lot of it came from the fact that President Obama did not want to get more deeply engaged militarily in Syria, or for that matter, anywhere else in the Middle East.

*Jill Dougherty*

Mr. Ambassador, you know, as I look at your career, I think what's extraordinary to me is the breadth of your knowledge about the former Soviet Union and then, after that, the former Soviet space because you were the ambassador not only to Russia, but Ukraine, Georgia, Lithuania. And so, I'm imagining now, you had been in Moscow before, but you come back, you're the ambassador. What did that knowledge of those other countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union, what did that knowledge do? Did it form your understanding of Russia? Did your ideas change? It's a very interesting prism.

*Ambassador Tefft*

I like to think that my experience in Lithuania, Georgia, Ukraine, as well as two tours in Moscow, helped give me a broader perspective on things so that, by the time I arrived in Moscow, in 2014, I had already gone through the period in Lithuania where they became members of NATO and the European Union. I had gone through the reform in Georgia and the war, the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. And then I'd gone through the period in Ukraine where Yanukovich was in charge, but you saw the seeds for what turned out to be

the Maidan demonstrations and the eventual change, Yanukovich leaving and the new government coming in. All of this was in my experience.

I came away from this feeling that people in Moscow, and I felt this acutely when I got there in 2014, they really didn't understand. The Russian leadership, the Kremlin, didn't really understand what had happened in these places. They understood maybe the Baltics, that had started to seep in. But Putin kept saying that Ukraine - well, this is one country, one nation, he told this very often in speeches. But Ukraine, they didn't see it that way. Now, there maybe have been a few people in the East and others who might have found that tie. But even in Crimea, I remember during my time, 2011 to 2013, the International Republican Institute was doing polling down there with a very reputable European polling company, and they found that the majority, or at least the plurality of the Crimeans didn't want to be a part of Russia. They really wanted to be part of an autonomous region within Ukraine, which is what they were.

I think the Russian leadership didn't understand that national feeling in these countries. I don't want to use the word nationalism, because that brings up a lot of negative connotations. But I think a rising national consciousness is the best way I can express it, and I think you see this particularly among young people. I spent a lot of time in Ukraine, working with civil society. We had a lot of USAID programs. And you can see the next generation of people coming to the fore who had a really strong sense of their own nation. They didn't have anything against Russia, per se, in the current situation, although the Russian invasion of Crimea then provided one for many young Ukrainians, but the sense of, they wanted to be a part of the West, they wanted to have a democracy, they wanted to get rid of the corruption. And this sense of, again, rising national consciousness, is the best way I can put it.

When I got to Moscow in 2014, I spent the first year talking to people about Ukraine and I just found, over and over again, whether the people were in government, in business, or even in academics, that they didn't get what really had happened in Ukraine. All the ideas about building a *Novorossiya*, a new Russia, to try to build a land bridge along the southern coast of Ukraine between Crimea and the Donbas. I'd been on a trip just in that area right before I left Ukraine in 2013, and there was nothing to this; these people didn't want to be a part of Russia. There was a myth or misconception.

Anyway, I used to try to say that to them in private, I'd say, "You're just wrong, I'm sorry. I've been there, I know. I talked to these people." I'm sure that didn't endear me to different people, but I think they were operating on a certain myth, and I think more broadly, they really didn't understand how much these other countries - what they considered the near abroad, what they considered their sphere of influence - how much these people wanted to be independent and to forge their own future as independent, democratic, market economy kinds of countries.

*Jill Dougherty*

I'm thinking of President Putin himself, who said that Ukraine really isn't a country. Do you think that it was coming from President Putin or was it, let's say, a foreign policy structure approach, traditional Russian diplomatic approach? Or is it really Putin?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think it's more the elites, the current elites in Russia have this sense of ... you know, I think Putin expresses this sometimes, but in many ways, they have not adjusted still, after almost 30 years of the end of the Soviet Union, to changes that are going on not just in the near abroad, as they would call it, but I think even more broadly. Earlier we talked about the Foreign Agent law and this really kind of pulling inward to kind of block people. A lot of young people, as you know because you've done good research and reporting on this in your career, I think a lot of the young people just didn't see a perspective for the future in Russia because they saw this inward turning by the Kremlin hardline group in particular.

They wanted to be more engaged. The result was, lots of young people left to go work in the United States for economic opportunity, for political opportunity. I think a lot of people in Russia, the demonstrations that we've seen over the last few years, you see younger people just saying, "Hey, this is not the Russia we want to see." But the current elite, obviously around President Putin, are really the ones who reinforce this. There are people in the elite who disagree with this but who don't express it in public. And you and I have both talked to those people and we understand they have different ... Eventually, things will change. I can't tell you exactly when, but that perspective will start to change.

I do think that in Ukraine, over the last few years, we've seen, with the Ukrainians pushing back against the Russian efforts in the Donbas, I think there's growing understanding that they miscalculated in the beginning. Now, they haven't changed, they haven't moved to adopt the Minsk or implement, negotiate the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, but I think there's an understanding that things are going to have to be changed at some point.

*Jill Dougherty*

I have to talk about Putin with you. Of course, it always comes up. We know that Russia is not Putin, Putin is not Russia, and yet. You saw him, and you saw him pretty closely. How would you evaluate him, both as a leader and then as a man? And before you answer, I'm just thinking of some of my first impressions of him, and I'm sure that you saw this happening at that period when he came in, there was great hope that, maybe, he would do some economic reform, and in the beginning, he did. Many people understood that he had to be a strong leader because there was a lot of ripping apart of Russia. There was a lot of chaos, quite honestly, under Yeltsin, albeit with a lot of good stuff, too. But again, putting him in context, leader and man, what would you say?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I've come very late to reading Steven Lee Myers' book *The New Tsar*, which was written in 2015, came out right when I got there. And I have to say, the first part of that book, which is

really, it's brilliant. He spent a lot of time going back and looking at Putin as a young man and then becoming a KGB officer, serving in Dresden when the Cold War came to an end and that his transition to actually leaving the KGB and becoming an aide to Mayor Sobchak of Leningrad. There's so much in that book that I saw reflected in the meetings that I participated in with Putin. He still is a man whose ideas of ... This isn't surprising that all of us are a result of what, the early experiences we have in life ... but he really is a man from the 1980s. His whole approach toward Russia, toward the KGB, but also toward foreign policy is there.

He very much still epitomizes what I learned when I was on the Soviet desk back in the 1980s. They wanted to divide Europe from the United States. They were willing to do arms control because they saw that was a way to not only show their superpower status, but to contain America, with all its money and technology, from developing systems that could possibly cut out their own. But I think also, it's important to understand Putin; you have to understand the different stages he's gone through in his life. And I've talked about this with a number of my former diplomatic colleagues but also academics. When he started, he tried really hard with George Bush to build a relationship, and there were some very positive moments there. As things went on, more and more he kind of went back to, I think, his authoritarian roots, and we've seen this growing over, particularly in the third and fourth terms of his presidency. It's getting tougher. The KGB, or the FSB, is getting more aggressive. It's becoming a true authoritarian society, as I said before; a lot of people are getting frustrated with that, especially young people.

It feels as if he's evolved, he's now an open opponent of liberal democracy. There's no accommodation there at all. And we can talk for hours about this evolution and track it. You could also talk about what influenced his change from the United States in terms of NATO enlargement. A lot of it accelerated after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine when he started to realize, my God, these people really aren't just the same as us. They're not one nation with us. And it evolved further after that. So, I think he's still got some big chips on his shoulder for the United States, in particular, one of which is, I think he blames the United States for the demise of Soviet power. Part of what he's tried to do is to rebuild some of that, and he's had some success doing it. But there's still huge economic problems. He hasn't moved forward on economic reform. I can practically give you the speeches that Alexey Kudrin, his friend and advisor and former minister, would give on economic reform and why Russia needed to do that. I heard over and over again, and yet, he has not moved forward. He's stayed with a pretty firm, I would say, authoritarian, no-reform economic policy.

#### *Jill Dougherty*

This raises such a great point, because I totally agree with what you're saying. It feels like Putin's dilemma - I think on a rational basis, he understands that there are certain things that you have to do to create a modern country. You have to open up, you have to create. You have a cyber world and an internet world and young people on TikTok and social media. And so, part of him, I would think - and, obviously, I want to hear what you're thinking about this - but he would appear to rationally understand that because you do hear him from time to time saying, "We're going to create an internet company and we will do biotechnology, et cetera."

But if he does that, if he takes those steps, he undercuts his control. And so, it's really a dilemma.

*Ambassador Tefft*

That's right. No, I agree with you completely. That's the fundamental dilemma. He understands it intellectually, I'm sure he has spent hours talking to the more reform-minded people who are his colleagues, Kudrin, German Gref of Sberbank, who was a reform economist. He understands what has to be done. But in the end, every time it comes down to push versus shove, he opts for control. He opts for maintaining this control. You know, I was rereading the other day an article that Andrew Higgins wrote from the *New York Times* in August of 2017, right as I was getting ready to leave. He'd been out in Novosibirsk to look at a young entrepreneur, he was actually a nuclear physicist who, with his friends, decided to create a company to build a better air filter, if I remember correctly. Low and behold, he went against the FSB, and he starts getting investigated. He probably offended somebody who controlled the market on air filters. But it was a classic example then, and I'm sure this has been replicated over and over again, of how the authorities were drawn in. This young guy was arrested, put under house arrest. Eventually, I don't know whether he ever built these things or not, but he challenged the old order.

The talk in Moscow was innovation, support small and medium businesses. Over and over again we hear the rhetoric and then the reality in Moscow, but actually in the regions, it was undercut by the actions, often of intelligence services, corrupt law enforcement, and corrupt judicial people, courts, and nothing actually happened. I remember reading this the first time and saying, "Now I understand why young people, who are smart and entrepreneurs, are leaving, because they see no future here."

*Jill Dougherty*

And yet you said, you're somewhat optimistic, eventually?

*Ambassador Tefft*

Yeah. I think eventually things will, it will change. I don't know how soon this will happen. President Putin has put forward these constitutional amendments which give him, in theory, the opportunity to stay in power until 2036. I'm not sure that that will eventually happen. Making predictions in Russia, as you know very well from your experience Jill, is a fraught endeavor. One doesn't make these kinds of things because no matter how much we know, there's an awful lot we don't know. But I think there's a dynamic here. Russia has not really grown economically, seriously, in 10 years. They never recovered from the 2008-2009 Great Recession. Then you have Ukraine and the sanctions, foreign investment doesn't come in. Now we've got the pandemic and the impact of COVID on the society. People's incomes have gone down. People just don't see a future prospective out there where things get better for their kids.

And in the end, I'm still convinced ... As one of my Russian friends said, "You know we're just like you, Tefft. What we want is, we want a decent life, a decent job. We want our kids to get a

good education. We want healthcare and we want them to be able to grow up and hopefully have a better life than we did." And, you know, there's lots of differences between Russia and America, but those fundamental human desires that we all have, those animate, and that's what I found wherever I traveled in Russia. Those are still fundamental there, and people will still push for those eventually.

*Jill Dougherty*

And yet, Ambassador Tefft, you know, I was talking with a friend. And she was saying, why can't Russia be like France or Belgium or another country, which is just kind of a normal country with which the United States has normal relationships. There always is an extra dimension to the relationship between the United States and Russia. And, you know, right now Russia complains about "Russophobia." "Russophobia." And you might ask, can we ever have a normal relationship with Russia? I think it's a serious question.

*Ambassador Tefft*

I agree with you completely. I don't mean to be naïve at all. I had discussions with our mutual friend, Angela Stent, whose great book *The Limits of Partnership*, I think, is a wonderful piece. I recommend it to a lot of younger people starting in this field that you and I have spent our careers in. It's too much to talk about here, but there's cultural, historical differences. A lot of water has gone over the dam over the last 100 years. And trying to build that relationship has been very difficult. We've had moments of success. We've had moments where there's greater hope, and we have moments where things just seem to be almost, I won't say hopeless, but pretty dire, and that's kind of where we are right now. We'll see. President-elect Biden is coming in very experienced dealing with Russia, and he's got some people who are also very experienced.

Now, I don't expect rapid changes, but I think there have been questions raised on both sides. How can we try to not only stabilize things, and that's certainly something I supported when I was in Moscow, but also how we can try to find some cooperative ways to build forward? I hope we can extend New START. I hope that we can find some cooperative ventures. One of the things that I always remember that I found out in Russia was that even after USAID and a lot of the projects they worked on went away before I got there, there were still lots of private connections in the health field. There were joint efforts to do research and understand cancer on both sides. And I tried to do everything I could to support that kind of effort. Not to give it any publicity but to do those concrete things. There's a lot of that stuff that's out there. It would be nice to think that we could find a way to have American and Russian and European scientists work together to deal with future pandemics and how we manage this, to learn the lessons of what we're going through now with vaccines and try to find a way to have cooperation, to keep the politics out of it and to try to do things that will help people on both sides.

So, in that sense, I'm idealistic and I'm hopeful. But, you know, I come from Wisconsin, and we have that pragmatic idealism out there, which has animated me and my career for the whole time.

*Jill Dougherty*

And I wanted to ask, perhaps at the end of our conversation, about your book. I'm very intrigued. And I'm thinking, books about Russia or your career, I'm sure it's a lot broader, but books about Russia, it's such a wide issue, a broad issue that you can take sections of it you know, historical, you can look at Putin, you can look at a whole lot of things. But what kind of approach are you taking in your book? Is it a lot about Russia? And then, also, what is it about you, yourself, as an ambassador that you want to impart?

*Ambassador Tefft*

It's a terrific question and I've grappled with it. I really started working on this after I finished in Moscow three years ago and I've gone through a number of different approaches to this. I want it to be, not just, "I went here, I did that," just a chronology. I want it to have some meaning, something that I've drawn out of it. Some lessons, if you will. To do that, you also have to incorporate the ideas and things that you have learned from books and things. I mean, I've profited from some of the things that you have written in your podcast on Russian youth. We've talked about this; we share a lot of views about that. That's part of it.

The problem is, I want it to be, it's not just Russia, it's this whole perspective and to try to have each side. I have something like 35 chapters, either partially written or at least etched out, and the frustrating part is, when I start writing it, I never feel like I've achieved it. I read something, or I hear something and then I go, "That will make it much better."

The other thing I have to do is, when things become safer, I'm going to try to get back to look at the records at the State Department because there are things that we, we recorded things that we thought about back then which I may have to get some declassification done but that will at least help me deepen my feel, not just for U.S.-Russian relations but for our own policy, but also for Russia, the Ukraine, the Georgia, the Lithuania that I found at that time. And what they grappled with as they tried to become modern nations.

It's multilevel, it's hard. I'm never written a book before, and this is a real challenge.

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, maybe you could add a short chapter on advice to future ambassadors in dealing with Russia.

*Ambassador Tefft*

There's two conclusions at the end, Jill. One is about the policy in Eastern Europe, and there's another one about the Foreign Service, which gets into recommendations and some parting thoughts, as it were.

*Jill Dougherty*

Can you give us one takeaway?

*Ambassador Tefft*

I think one of the biggest takeaways I have from my own career is that I am a great believer in engagement, even when things are difficult. I joined the Soviet desk in August of 1983, and I thought this was going to be the opening of my career because I really wanted to get into this field. The week after I arrived, the Soviet Air Force shot down Korean Airliner 007 and the relationship went down with it. And I thought, oh my God. What am I doing? But I never gave up and I wanted to continue to do that. I've always come away, I guess the big lesson, saying America has an important role and we played a role over the last 80 years. But we should never overestimate our ability to influence another country. We can try, we can have some perspective. I lived, in my first time in Moscow, through the period of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, Al Gore. And then he ran for president in 2000 and all kinds of attacks went on; it was the first of the "who lost Russia" debates. The hubris of this, that somehow we think we were going to win or lose Russia.

You can push things on the margins, but it's ultimately the people, the elites in these countries that have to make it. I'll finish by saying something very positive about Lithuania and that is, I was always impressed with young leaders, many of whom studied in the West, who came to the fore after the end of the Soviet Union. And when I got there in 2000, you had these just enormously talented people as Foreign Minister, as the EU negotiators, businessmen, starting to come to the fore. But I always remembered that in the inter-war period, between World War I and World War II, the Baltics were actually independent and they had democracies of sorts and market economies. The Lithuanians sold more wheat to Great Britain in that period than anybody else. So, they had something besides unadulterated Communism for 80 years, which is what I found in Georgia and Ukraine.

And I came away with the feeling that those seeds were planted, and I saw some of the seeds come to fruit and it's still working. So, be patient, you can't expect to see things in your own lifetime perhaps, but you have to ask every day, and this is what I used to say to my staff, "What can we do today, in our own small, little way, to try to help make either this country better, our relationship with this country better, and to try to build for a better future."

*Jill Dougherty*

Well, Ambassador John Tefft, thank you very, very much. I appreciate it. It was a wonderful and very enlightening conversation. Thank you.

*Ambassador Tefft*

Thanks very much, Jill. Thank you.