

## U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

### **Interviewee: Daniel Fried**

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[Begin Transcription]

BEHRINGER: My name is Paul Behringer. I'm a post-doctoral fellow with the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

MILES: My name is Simon Miles. I'm an assistant professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

FRIED: I'm Daniel Fried. I am a retired foreign service officer. I spent 40 years as an American diplomat, serving overseas in what was then the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc and later free Poland. And I worked for both Democrats and Republicans at the State Department and in the White House on the National Security Council staff.

BEHRINGER: Thank you for joining us today, Ambassador Fried. Can you begin by describing a little bit more about your background on U.S.-Russian relations and your roles in the George W. Bush administration?

FRIED: I was a Soviet studies major in university and then went to the Russian Institute of Columbia University—now the Harriman Institute, one of the great then-Soviet Studies centers in the United States. I joined the Foreign Service and my first overseas assignment was in Leningrad—former Soviet Union—during a previous low point in relations, between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the imposition of martial law in Poland. I came back and worked in Yugoslavia for three years. After that I was on the Soviet desk of the State Department, the Office of Soviet Affairs, in the early Gorbachev years. So I had a sense of the Reagan

administration's—in particular, [00:02:00] Secretary George Schultz's—approach to relations with the Soviet Union. And it was, in my view, one of the best Soviet policies we ever had. I then was Polish desk officer in 1989 when communism fell, went to Poland for three years, worked in the embassy, came back and worked with the NSC on the NSC staff on Central and Eastern Europe, back out to Poland as ambassador, back home where I worked in the office of, basically, former Soviet Union affairs, then was in the NSC for the George W. Bush administration as the senior director for Europe and Eurasia, including Russia.

That's background. It's a lot of jobs, but you get the picture. It's all Eastern stuff—you know, Eastern Europe, former Soviet Union. And I came back to the NSC at the beginning of the Bush administration, came in the first day, was sworn in by President Bush all before 9/11—now, we could talk about what ifs. And we didn't know Vladimir Putin. He was new. Not brand new, but fairly new. His character, which I'm afraid we now know all too well, was not apparent.

President Bush made his first trip to Europe in June of 2001, almost exactly 20 years ago. And, like President Biden, he had a NATO summit. He had an EU summit. We didn't stop in the UK. We stopped in Spain. That was the first stop. So Spain, NATO summit, EU summit, then Warsaw, where he gave a speech on advancing freedom in Europe [00:04:00]—the Freedom Agenda without the Iraq War. And then we went to Slovenia to meet with Vladimir Putin. And I was there for that meeting. That's the one where President Bush says, “Yeah, I looked into his eyes

and I got a sense of his soul.” I heard him say that at the press conference. I was sitting right next to John Beyrle, who was from the State Department, basically the acting assistant secretary and in charge of Russia, later our ambassador to Russia. And both of us were sitting together behind Condi Rice, and we saw her just stiffen a little bit when President Bush said, “now I got a sense of his soul.” She knew that would be trouble. And later she said she was kicking herself for not preparing him for that question.

So this was a much more hopeful period. We are speaking now the day before President Biden prepares to meet in Geneva with President Putin—and let us say my expectations are under control—but that meeting between Bush and Putin went very well. You could see it when Putin was approaching us, his body language was open, friendly, positive. And I thought to myself, he's there to have a good meeting and lay the basis of a solid relationship.

The meeting went well. We thought the relationship would go well. And we, like Obama's reset with Putin, but even more so maybe, we got a lot of things done. So we'll discuss what went wrong later—I'm sure you want to know. But that's the background, taking you right up to that June meeting in Brdo Castle in Slovenia [00:06:00] in 2001, 20 years ago.

BEHRINGER: And was that your first interaction with President Putin?

FRIED: Yes.

BEHRINGER: Did you have something you wanted to ask, Simon?

MILES: Yeah, I was just a little curious—you mentioned that Condi Rice wished she had briefed Bush a little bit more for that one question, but, in general, you talked about Putin's body language in situ as the Bush foreign policy team was prepping the president for the meeting.

Could you characterize a little bit how you, and also perhaps to the extent that he made it clear, how he saw US-Russian relations at the outset of this of this administration, of this millennium too?

FRIED: I remember in my job interview to be senior director at NSC, this is in early January 2001, you remember because of Florida and the delay, there was a truncated transition period. So they were putting together an NSC staff quickly—they had to. So I interviewed for the job, and one of the questions that Condi Rice and Steve Hadley had for me is what I thought of Putin, what I thought of U.S.-Russian relations. So we talked about it. And without going into too much detail, I think our operating assumption not knowing Putin, but seeing him in office for a little bit, is that he might be able to restore a more orderly sense of governance from what we regarded as the turmoil of the Yeltsin years, which now looking back was a great, missed opportunity for Russian democracy. And there are various reasons it happened, and things [00:08:00] have gotten obviously much worse with the Putin-esque kleptocratic patrimonial state. But we didn't know that at the time. So the thought was, we can have a good relationship with Vladimir Putin.

And what we did was essentially continue—some of the assumptions were different, but if you look at it in context, we were continuing Clinton's policy of trying to bring post-Soviet Russia into the community of free nations, the free world. Not punishing Russia, not humiliating Russia, not treating Russia as Weimar Germany was treated after 1918 and the end of World War One but welcoming them. The assumptions were different, right?

We understood that Putin was going to strengthen state capacity, which we thought, not knowing Putin and what that meant to him, might be a decent outcome for Russia. We thought that Putin might represent—might represent—a return to the—how shall I put this?—some of the strong advisors to the last tsar of Russia, whose policies, had they been implemented, might've prevented the Russian Revolution, if it weren't for the stupidity of Russia going into World War One. Everybody was stupid in 1914. We thought that Putin could be a state builder. Condi Rice and I even speculated that he might turn out to be a little bit like Pyotr Stolypin, the tsarist minister who was both authoritarian [00:10:00] but an economic modernizer and reformer.

Now, it didn't turn out this way, right? And the Bush administration, and President Bush himself, understood what Putin was sooner than many people realize. And I can tell you a bit about that. But at the time, this was a reasonable assumption. In policymaking generally, you're going to get some calls right. You're going to get some calls wrong. The call we made on Putin turned out to be wrong. But it was

worth a try to work with Putin. It was worth a try. And I'm not sorry we did try. In fact, I've talked to Mike McFaul, who helped design Obama's reset. Mike McFaul is a friend. He's a good guy. And honestly, I'm not sorry he tried. He had to try.

Obama had to try. Biden doesn't have to try and probably shouldn't. Obama had to try, even though after the Russo-Georgian War, where Russia attacked Georgia in August '08, there was less reason than we had. There was less reason. There was more reason to be wary of Putin. But the Obama people—I'm not going to criticize them for trying. And I'm certainly not going to look back and criticize the Bush team, myself included, for giving it a try.

But I will say this: For both Bush and Obama, the outreach to Putin failed. But it was what I would call an honest failure, by which I mean that when it had become clear that our assumptions were wrong—that Putin was not the person we thought he was, and that Russia was far more aggressive—rather than deny this reality or double down on cooperation [00:12:00] or make excuses for Putin, both the Bush and Obama administrations changed course. The Obama administration, often criticized for being too cozy for too long with Putin, in fact did more to push back on Russia's aggression after Putin's invasion of Ukraine than we did after Putin's invasion of Georgia. And in our defense, I will say we were out of time. It was August '08. And it isn't like we did nothing. Thanks in an interesting way to Senator Joe Biden, then running against the Bush administration as Obama's running mate—thanks to Joe Biden, the Bush administration put together a billion

dollars of assistance to save the Georgian economy after Putin's aggression and used that to leverage about three or four more billion dollars of international assistance. And we kept Georgia free.

And the reason I thank Biden for this is that, despite the politics of the time—for God's sakes it's in the presidential or vice presidential campaign, right?—he helps the Bush administration by publicly proposing the billion dollars for Georgia in the middle of the campaign and the Bush administration embraced it. Now we talk about partisanship. This was an example not only of bipartisanship, but selfless bipartisanship. There was no political advantage for Biden to do that. There was none at all. He did it because it was the right thing to do. [00:14:00] And in the Bush administration, we understood what he was doing, and we thought it was just great. That's our policy. That's where we're going, we all said to ourselves, and Biden led the way. I love telling this story because people don't know it. And it tells us something about Joe Biden. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was telling the Bush administration, "Go this way, boys and girls, and I and the Democrats during this course of this nasty political campaign, Obama versus McCain, we won't go after you. We won't go after you." Well, good for Joe Biden and good, frankly, for the Bush team. The Bush White House didn't think twice, they didn't come up for reasons to reject it because it was coming from a political opponent. They thought to themselves, this is the right thing and we're going to do it.



I'm sorry—a digression, right? But I hope useful. I'll even tell you one more story about this. The then-deputy national security advisor was needing a meeting to get the money—to get agencies to figure out a way forward for this billion dollars that Joe Biden had come up with. And people were objecting—there wasn't enough time, we couldn't do it. He actually slammed his hand on the table and said, “We will not leave this meeting without the billion dollars. We will not let Georgia fall, not to Vladimir Putin.” That was Jim Jeffrey. There are very few cinematic moments in the situation room, despite TV shows and movies, but that was one of them. He slammed his hand on the table. So Bush’s deputy national security advisor, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey, insists that the U.S. [00:16:00] government get the money that Joe Biden, political opponent, had proposed. Biden was right. Jim Jeffrey was right. He obviously had the backing of President Bush, who was doing what was right. It's good to remember that thinking about Washington these days. I love that.

BEHRINGER: Absolutely. And I want to get to Georgia some more in a little bit. But first, if I could drag us back to 2001 and Slovenia for a moment. One of the things that President Bush was looking to communicate or talk to President Putin about was the withdrawing from the ABM treaty. And the Russians seem to have communicated their displeasure about this but were willing to work with the United States. I wanted to ask, why did the Bush administration still end up withdrawing from the ABM treaty and going ahead with missile defense?

FRIED: This was something that Bush came in with wanting to do.

He was convinced that the ABM treaty was a relic of a Cold War past, and they were focused not on Russian strategic threats. Bush kept saying—I heard him say this publicly. I heard him say it privately—"We're not worried about the Russian strategic arsenal. We are worried about North Korea and potentially Iran, and missile defense is designed to deal with those contingencies."

It is not directed against Russia. Now, you can make the case—I was in the Bush NSC, so I was making this case—and it is a defensible proposition. And [00:18:00] Putin accepted it. They didn't like it. They made clear that they disagreed with the decision, they disagreed with the premises, but they basically said, "Okay, this is what you're doing. We're still going to work with you. It's not going to wreck the relationship." And we made it clear that the fact that they disagreed and criticized it publicly didn't matter to us. We understood they had a difference of view, we respected their difference of view. That's fine. And we wanted to work on the Treaty of Moscow and strategic arms control with them. We wanted to make sure that they were comfortable with the strategic relationship. And I heard Bush, in the Oval Office, say, "We just don't look at you as a strategic threat anymore."

These days, I don't know that he would want to repeat that.

But the point was we were reaching out to Russia. And this became especially important after 9/11, when the Bush administration leaned pretty far forward in the War on Terror. In retrospect, yeah, we did a lot of really dumb things. But I was in the

White House on 9/11, so I have a sense of what generated a lot of reactions. But anyway, I mean, back then, to go back to your question, the early U.S.-Russia relationship under Bush survived a lot of things that might've derailed it. It survived pulling out of the ABM Treaty. And it survived a big tranche of NATO enlargement announced in November 2002 at the Prague-NATO summit, that was a big deal. That did not damage [00:20:00] the relationship. Bringing the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania—into NATO, which was considered by many Washington foreign policy people to be an absolute no-no, a red line, a terrible provocation. And you get some in Washington argument making that case today that it was a terrible mistake—Putin said he didn't like it, but he took it.

BEHRINGER: And since you brought up NATO, real quick, could you explain your own position on NATO expansion and the reasons behind the Bush administration deciding to go forward with the “Big Bang”?

FRIED: Yeah, well, look, full disclosure. In the Clinton administration, I was one of the architects of NATO enlargement. You can go look at the memo that I think Sandy Vershbow, Nick Burns, and I wrote to the president in the fall of 1994. It was declassified recently. I hadn't seen it in quite—decades. That's not a bad read. So I'm associated with that policy. Okay, so keep that in mind. So, remember the job interview I told you about? So Steve Hadley was one of the Republicans who supported the Clinton administration on NATO enlargement. Another one of those Republicans with Steve Biegun—future deputy secretary of state, we've been

friends ever since. The Clinton administration had help from Republicans on NATO enlargement and had opposition from Democrats. This was truly bipartisan. You couldn't have done it in the Clinton administration without the Republicans, like no way. And Steve Hadley didn't play a grudging role. He was really into it, [00:22:00] and Joe Biden was into it. So that's the Clinton administration.

Now I'm doing the interview with Condi Rice and Steve Hadley—the job interview. It's January 2001. Condi Rice asked me, “You supported NATO enlargement, so what's your view about the next steps?” And I said, “Look, you know I was for it. But, as an NSC staffer, you have to present the options to the president without putting the thumb on the scale. Pluses and minuses.” I said, “This is not going to be this is not going to be as easy as the first three. How big do you go? What do you do about the Baltic states? You have to lay it out and you can't jam the president.” That was probably the right answer. And in fact, I played it straight. I was known to be an advocate for NATO enlargement. I know all about the Big Bang. The Big Bang, as you mentioned, came from Democrats, including Clinton administration veterans, who, now on the outside—just like Steve Hadley and the Republicans during the Clinton administration—under Bush, these Democrats, including the leader, I guess, Ron Asmus—the late great Ron Asmus, died too young, he was a rising star Democratic Party foreign policy person and he was one of the conceptualizers of NATO enlargement back in the nineties. So he was pushing for the Big Bang as was a Republican—Bruce Jackson, who helped organize the

committee to expand NATO with Hadley. So there were various options. Zbig<sup>1</sup> Brzezinski—you think of him as bold, but he was proposing a much more modest option—Slovenia, [00:24:00] Slovakia, and Lithuania. To take one country from the Baltics, not too much.

So it's after 9/11, the things with Russia are going really well. We're upgrading the NATO-Russia relationship, strengthening it, bringing Russia formally into the G7 to make it the G8. And I can't remember when it was—I think it was the summer—I'm in the Oval Office. And by this time, Condi Rice knew me enough. I could be in the Oval Office alone with the president. It's fine. And I don't remember what it was for, but he turns to me and he says, "What do you think we should do about NATO enlargement at the Prague Summit and the Baltics, particularly the Baltics? What do you want to do?" And I started—a good NSC staffer—to lay out the various options. And he cut me right off and said, "No, I don't want to hear the options. I want to know what you think. What would you do?" I paused for a second. And I thought, he really wants to know. And I said, "I would do it. I'd bring in the Baltics. I'd bring them all in. We can do it now. I don't know whether we'll be able to do it later. This is the moment." And he looked at me and he smiled and he said, "Yeah, that's where I am. Make it happen."

Now, I did not convince President Bush to go this way. No way. He was already convinced. The reason he asked me my opinion was not because he wanted my

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<sup>1</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor under President Jimmy Carter (1977–1981).

wisdom—he'd made up his mind, pretty clearly. He wanted to know whether I was the guy to make it happen, whether I believed it. That's what he wanted to know. And I remember Bush used to say all the time, [00:26:00] "What do you think? Don't tell me what's in the memo. Don't tell me what the State Department thinks. What do you think and why?" Because he wanted people who believed in the policies they were implementing. "Do you mean it?" Very interesting. And so he says to me, "Make it happen."

So immediately I walk into Condi Rice's office and go, "Listen. I got new orders," and she nodded. She probably knew about this already, but she didn't let on. Never play poker with Condi Rice, like ever, cause she will reveal exactly she wants to reveal and nothing more. So she said, "Okay." Man, I could get in some trouble by putting my thumb on the scale. No, not at all. She said, "Okay, I got it." I have a feeling, you know, I'm only getting one piece of this. She knows more. But I'm giving you my perspective. And then we got it. We did it. And at Prague I wasn't nervous. I figured, if we don't get it this time, we'll get it next time for the Baltics. Man, had I known about the Iraq War, I would have been terrified because that was the last chance we had ever to do it. After the November '02 Prague NATO summit, there was the Iraq War and the terrible political fight in the West. And when we finally dragged ourselves out of that and were on better terms with the Europeans, Putin, for reasons I'm sure we'll get into, was it a much more actively hostile mode. That was the last time we could've done it. And I'll tell you something. [00:28:00] If

we had not brought in the Baltics into NATO now, instead of dealing with the so-called People's Republic of Luhansk and Donetsk as we are now—you know, Putin's little game in Ukraine—we'd be dealing with the People's Republic of Narva. Putin would've done the same thing—the same thing—with respect to Eastern Estonia and Latvia. And maybe worse.

MILES: Can I ask you a quick just follow-up about Condi Rice? It's just interesting to me that here you have a first national security advisor then secretary of state who has really deep background on—I guess I was about to say Russia, but maybe I should more accurately say the Soviet Union, particularly military affairs. True also when Bob Gates comes into the administration, also sort of a really deep background on that and others obviously as well. For example, in the case of Condoleezza Rice, how do you think that long background in Russian affairs manifested itself in the Bush administration's policies towards and relations with Russia?

FRIED: In the end, it didn't matter. Obviously, her expertise is deep, and her judgment was sound because she knew what she was dealing with. But it didn't matter. And the reason I say that is because, as it turns out, Putin's condition for good relations with the United States were that we give him a free hand to be an autocrat [00:30:00] at home and a free hand to dominate the core countries of the former Soviet Union. And that doesn't mean dominate Western style, where your influence is economic and cultural and you're a dominant power, but everybody's happy with that. They grumble, maybe. But it's like, "good for you." It's good for

everyone. That's not Putin's way. Dominate means control them against even their own best interests. And I can get into that if you want, what I mean by that. But when the color revolutions occurred in Georgia and Ukraine, where either weak and corrupt or pro-Putin leaders were forced out by popular, pro-Western democratic movements, Putin thought that was us. It wasn't. It wasn't. We're not that good. Organizing revolutions? Come on. Don't be stupid. Like, we couldn't get Iraq right, for all that money we were paying? And then we're going to organize revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine? What, are you kidding? We're not that good, but he didn't think so.

And I think that was the turning point in relations with the Bush administration. It wasn't the Baltics coming into NATO. It wasn't the ABM treaty. It was the color revolutions and our objection to his deepening authoritarianism. He signed up for basically a sphere of influence [00:32:00] deal with the United States. And he was willing to accept that the Russian sphere of influence would be a lot smaller than the Soviet one. But, by God, he would have his control in his sphere. The trouble with their various problems and spheres of influence, but the particular problem with a Russian sphere of influence, is that because the Russian system is kleptocratic and authoritarian, it means that that system imposed on neighbors is not going to be very good for the neighbors. And, therefore, it's not stable because it's not in their interest. This notion, much beloved, of a certain kind of foreign policy academic or think tanker who doesn't have to live with the consequences is



that spheres of influence are stabilized. Bullshit. I won't argue theory, but let me give you an example of what I mean.

Yanukovych was a pro-Kremlin leader of Ukraine. He was elected freely. We were happy to deal with him. I remember Condi Rice sitting in her office, she shrugged and said, "Look, he was elected freely. Right, Dan?" I said, "Yep." And she said, "Let's deal with him. He's the one who's there." I said, "Yep, fine." We were happy to deal with Yanukovych. But what happened? Yanukovych promised his people he would sign an association agreement with the EU in the fall of 2013 and Putin snapped his fingers, Yanukovych won't sign, protests begin in Kiev. They grow, he represses them. They grow more. He increases the repression. They grow more and they turn violent. [00:34:00] And he's out. He flees the country, and he's out.

We didn't do that. We had a lot of sympathy for the Maidan. This is under Obama, not Bush, but I'm talking about principles that are common. But we didn't do it. The trouble is Putin's conditions for Ukraine were those that ran against the interest of Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian people knew it. So spheres of influence are not stable, not one that sphere is run by the Kremlin. I am sick to death of academics who are willing to consign 40 million Ukrainians, 45 million Ukrainians to subjugation and instability in that subjugation because it fits some goddamn theory that you think you learned in college about realism. How come it's always somebody else's country that gets sacrificed?

And in the end, remember when I said the Bush policy was an honest failure? What I mean by that is, when the consequences of Putinism were clear, the Bush administration would not abandon Georgia or Ukraine for the sake of Vladimir Putin. And this was Bush. This was coming from Bush. I mean Rice, Hadley, Colin Powell—yeah, right, absolutely. But ultimately it came from Bush, and I know that, because I heard it, and, God, one may weep for the thought of Bush’s Freedom Agenda without the Iraq War. [00:36:00] Oh my God. Oh well, you can't really rerun the tape. I get a lot of people mad at me, but the arc of relations with Russia under Bush and under Obama actually had a lot of similarities. Very different presidents, very different ways of looking at the world. But ultimately both of them, in their own way, were grounded in a good American tradition. And they drew conclusions from the failure of their policy toward Putin. And, you know, the Bush administration folks, myself included, and the Obama administration folks—and I’m thinking of Mike McFaul—who can say, “Yeah, we got it wrong. But in the end, it wasn't dishonorable.” I've said that to Mike.

MILES: I sense that Paul is going to want to keep us going forward chronologically, but I just want to pause. And of course, we're coming up to a transition for you professionally as you move from the NSC staff to the State Department, but before we—

FRIED: Second term Bush, yeah.

MILES: Yes. So before the reelection, we obviously can't go on without directly talking about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. So, as you witnessed it, how did those issues intersect with the Russia portfolio? That is to say, 9/11, the invasion of Afghanistan, the invasion of Iraq—intersect with the Russia portfolio? And then, as a follow-up, what impact did [00:38:00] the birth of those issues have on the Russia portfolio? That is to say, how did it rack and stack with the other big priorities that the Bush administration had?

FRIED: Yeah, right. That's the right question. Putin reached out to Bush very early on 9/11, called him from the plane, I mean when Bush was on the plane. And they allowed us—allowed us—they didn't object to our establishing military bases in central Asia on a temporary basis to go after the Taliban. That was a big deal. That was a tangible result of Bush's outreach to Putin. That was seriously good. The U.S. Russia relationship might've developed in a very different way. They had their own problems with the Taliban, the Russians, obviously. So we thought that counter-terrorism would bring us together. And that was a reasonable assumption. And the bases in central Asia, they were fine with that. Overflights across Russia, they were fine with that. We thought that this was going to be a common strategic project. Again, that is a reasonable assumption.

Didn't turn out that way for various reasons. Then there was the war in Iraq, where Putin goes against it and he's with Chirac and Schröder. And this was not U.S. versus Europe. Europe was divided. Tony Blair, Spanish President Aznar, Poland's

President Kwaśniewski were all with us. France and Germany [00:40:00] were against. I think the Danish prime minister was for it. Europe is divided and we go into Iraq and it turns out bad, not right away, but slowly and increasingly. The French and the Germans were right. But the way they went about it was seen in the Bush White House as unnecessarily hostile.

And Putin joined them. But the Bush White House, we weren't mad at Putin over this.

We weren't going to make it a U.S.-Russia issue. We knew he was siding with them, but he was not—this was Chiraq and Schröder, and of course, in retrospect, they were right. On the other hand, Schröder—and I can't resist this. Schröder we know because he originated the Nord Stream gas pipeline project as chancellor and then leaves government and takes a Russian seat on the board overseeing it.

Oh yeah? Ethics like that, he could be in the Trump administration. I mean that's just disgraceful. But there's something else not known about Schröder that I will tell you. He came to Washington, met with Bush. They met in the Oval Office.

Then they go from either a lunch or a dinner to the White House dining room in the residence, a big deal. And I was there. I was note taking. And Schröder says, "If you go into Iraq, do it hard, do it fast, make it work, and I won't oppose." In other words, he lied. Bush complained about that later and I told President Bush, "Yes, [00:42:00] sir. Your memory is accurate. I was there. I was a witness." Chiraq never lied. He never said, you know, he never whispered, "Yeah, just do it. I'll oppose you publicly, but not hard. Just go in." Nope, nope. Chiraq was consistent. Now

German ambassador in Washington, Wolfgang Ischinger was consistent. So was the French ambassador, Jean-David Levitte. They were straight up all down the line. And boy, did they take flak from the Bush people. Not from me personally, I stayed on good terms with them, but this was a mess. This was a mess. It did not damage U.S.-Russian relations per se, but it divided the U.S. and Europe and Putin later saw an opening.

Now, what was happening in U.S.-Russia relations? We were beginning to see Putin get his grip on the country by destroying independent Russian media, starting with television. He started squeezing them. This is 2002, 2003, when things are going fine, for all relations, but we watched him doing it. And the Bush administration really wasn't too concerned, but you know who was concerned earlier than Condi Rice and Colin Powell was George W. Bush. So in October '03, we go to London, meet with Tony Blair. There were anti-Iraq War demonstrations in London—and that's what tapped out. And then if you need media, that's what's there. But the two leaders start having a discussion of Russia. And they, let us say, were ahead of their talking points.

They both agreed that Putin was not the person they thought he was, and his [00:44:00] authoritarianism was going over past lines that, in the end, we would find it hard to accept. They didn't say they were going to change policy, but they did say, let's watch this space. That's early. And they were ahead of their own staffs. This was a moment where the leaders started agreeing with each other, and the staffs look

nervous. Now I personally had come to that conclusion, but I hadn't briefed the president on it. That was him. I mentioned this because people don't understand how George W. Bush really did a lot of thinking and was not simply guided by staff. He was right. He and Blair were straight up right. Of course, Condi Rice gave a speech in October '08 after the Russo-Georgian War, which was dang spot-on perfect—and it makes for depressingly good reading right to today, many years later—nailing the consequences of Putinism, but in '03, she wasn't there yet.

Oh, by the way, as long as we're doing the Bush administration and Russia, you should know that Sandy Vershbow, my colleague at the NSC, and then ambassador to Russia, was right about Putin also—and prematurely right. He was right before Washington and even Condi Rice was ready to hear it. Remember when I said I was already there in October '03? That's because I was reading Sandy's reports.

BEHRINGER: And we're [00:46:00] talking to Ambassador Vershbow in August.

FRIED: You tell him, you make sure, ask him, how did you know? Cause we heard that you were right before the Bush administration was ready to accept that. He'll probably know I put you up to it because I always say that Sandy was prematurely right about Putin.

BEHRINGER: We will do that for sure.

FRIED: Great. He's a friend, full disclosure. We went to graduate school together. It was wonderful.

BEHRINGER: Moving to the second administration now—you just talked about how in 2003, already Bush is concerned about Putin's authoritarianism, and in 2005 Bush and Putin meet in Bratislava and have a somewhat famous exchange where President Bush expresses some concerns directly to Putin.

FRIED: Ok, that was the Freedom Agenda summit. I was there, but the person who gets credit for that is Damon Wilson, who was then the senior director for Europe—my old job. And for the past bunch of years, he's been executive vice president at the Atlantic Council, where I work. However, as you probably heard, he's going over to be president of the National Endowment for Democracy. That's a big job. That's only the second president in the history of that organization, but they've had one guy for over 30 years who made it, and Damon's going there. And the reason I mentioned it is because he's always been a freedom guy, a democracy guy. Nobody knows his politics—and I do, but I'm not going to reveal them—but he's worked for Democrats and Republicans, mostly Republicans. And he's all about democracy as the strategic core of [00:48:00] America's grand strategy. So he conceptualizes this. You go to Bratislava. They had an authoritarian leader, but now they have a kind of liberal Christian democratic government. And Damon arranges a meeting to bring together basically former democracy activists from Central and Eastern Europe, all over the place. So it's a real Freedom Agenda thing. Remember, 2005, the Iraq War is going as well as it ever goes. It's before the collapse that leads to the surge. But the Freedom Agenda looks like it's got some legs. So we do a

Freedom Agenda event and we meet with Putin. So that's the context for this meeting. And it's all after the Orange and Rose Revolutions. So Putin's already pissed at us, but he has not given the screamer at the Munich Security Conference in February '07. But I already—I know where this is headed. You could see it if you're up close. All right. Sorry. Sorry for the digression.

BEHRINGER: No, that's great. That's great scene setting. So how did Putin react to the criticism then at the summit?

FRIED: Honestly, I can't remember. Dammit. You should ask Damon. I don't think well.

BEHRINGER: Was there a concern—well, let me follow that up with the July 2006 visit to the G8 in St. Petersburg, where President Bush actually meets with some civil society leaders in Russia. And I believe you were also attending a conference during that time put on by the opposition leaders as just as an observer. Were you at the meeting between Bush and the civil society leaders?

FRIED: I don't think I was. [00:50:00] The person you need to talk to about the St. Petersburg G8 is Tom Graham. He was originally working for me as director for Russia, and then the importance of the Russia relationship and Tom's own stature, his ability and knowledge—he got a promotion, became senior director for Russia, but only for Russia. So he carried this relationship forward at a time when we had already passed the peak. But he didn't know it. We didn't know it. It's not like he didn't know, nobody knew. And he tried his hardest to make it work, and it didn't work, and that's not his fault, it was not his failing. But you should talk to him.



MILES: So zooming out then, on the one hand you have some promising evidence in the relationship of cooperation. On the other hand, you have pushing back on human rights and democracy, moving forward with missile defense, supporting independence for Kosovo, which was also not popular politically in Moscow—

FRIED: I was involved in that too.

MILES: —and NATO expansion, continuing NATO expansion. Just taking stock, how did you assess the risk of these various policies to the health of U.S.-Russian relations or am question-begging here. Maybe it was just decided that these are what matters, and if we sacrifice the relationship in the name of that then that's what's best for the United States. [00:52:00] Could you talk a little bit about that a pro-con kind of cost-benefit analysis?

FRIED: Yeah. The specific case where your question is the most interesting is on Georgia and Ukraine and the debate at the Bucharest Summit about a Membership Action Plan, because that was a U.S. decision to push for that. We could have decided otherwise. In general, I've explained the thinking behind the Big Bang NATO enlargement at the Prague Summit. And that to me is, in retrospect, the only right thing to do. The argument that the Russians are upset over that means that you are building a post-Cold War Europe by perpetuating the line of division by saying, well, you know, Stalin conquered it, so it really belongs to him. And there are a whole bunch of people—I won't name any names—who make that case today, that NATO enlargement was just beastly to the Russians.

Well, I have little time for that. How much do we owe Moscow when Poland liberated itself? And are you familiar with the nature of Soviet rule in Poland? You know, mass murder of Polish officers by the NKVD. Like, seriously, how sorry are we? I had a Polish friend, an ambassador, who once said to me—who once blew up at an American. He almost never blew up at anybody. But an American was telling him, “We have to understand how psychologically difficult NATO enlargement is for Russia.” And he said, “Psychologically? [00:54:00] If they have psychological difficulties, let them see a psychiatrist. Why is my country sacrificed on the altar of their psychological hang-ups? Who occupied whom?” Yeah. A united Europe is in America's interests. A divided Europe is not in America's interest. So I'll push back hard against the NATO enlargement debate in general. But when you get to Georgia and Ukraine and the Membership Action Plan, it becomes more complicated. Now, there's a real interesting issue. And the consequences are playing out today. There was a little Twitter—a little media frenzy yesterday about the same issue, which shows that people don't understand it.

Okay, so a Membership Action Plan is just a device that NATO created. I think we let the Baltics join it. It was a way of offering countries a process when you couldn't make a membership offer. So it was supposed to be a tool. It's turned out to be a barrier, but we didn't know that. So Georgia and Ukraine are led by pro-Western democratic governments that Putin hated. I mean hated. Now, both of those governments had huge flaws. Saakashvili, the Georgian president, is a man of huge

pluses and equally huge minuses. And Yushchenko, the president of Ukraine, basically didn't succeed in maintaining a reformist, democratic pro-state-of-law [00:56:00] direction for his country—it fell apart in a lot of infighting. But these were still pro-Western democratic leaders and they made the pitch to us, “Give us the prospect of NATO membership.” They didn't say, “Let us in now.” They said, “Give us the prospect. It'll help. We need this.” I remember that Yushchenko said it to Condi Rice. We were at Davos, and this was January '08—January or February—anyway, it's snowy—you can look it up exactly when it was. And we're meeting with Yushchenko. And he says, “We need a Membership Action Plan.” She starts to use her talking points—you know, moderate, and then they get complicated, whatever stuff I had written down for her. And then he stopped her and said, “No, no, no, no, I'm serious. We need this. We need this.” And he was speaking to her as the head of the democratic forces in Ukraine. And she heard that. That had an impact on her.

And Bush, you know, he didn't do things by half measures. His government was divided about whether we should do that, but he made the call. “Do it.” Now we thought we could overcome French and German objections. And that was wrong. We thought that, because in second-term Bush, we had patched things up with France and Germany—which we largely had—it would be able to make this work. We couldn't. And critics have said by forcing the issue at Bucharest before we had prepared the ground, we risked allied disunity and signaled to Putin our disunity.

And, you know, the NATO summit in Bucharest is in April of '08 and in August '08 [00:58:00] Putin invades. We're still in '08 trying to work things out with Putin. So from the Bucharest summit, we fly to Sochi and meet with Medvedev—they do this weird fake rotational thing where Putin was the prime minister and Medvedev's the president, and Putin was the power—but we're still trying to make things work, Hadley, Rice still trying to make things work with Putin. So we go into Bucharest and we push it as hard as hell. And it doesn't work. Angela Merkel won't give. And so the secretary general of NATO basically blows the whistle, throws everybody out of the room except presidents and foreign ministers, and says, "By God, we will work this out."

So I'm not in the room. So what happens—I find out later. So later, you know, the people who cared the most about this issue in NATO were in a bit of a panic. And so everybody's crowding around Angela Merkel—the Baltic leaders; Radek Sikorski, the foreign minister of Poland; and Condi Rice. And they're all working this out. They all speak Russian as well. So it's in English and it's in Russian, you know, common language. And they're working out the language of the Bucharest communique that says Georgia and Ukraine will be members of NATO eventually—it didn't say when—and they'll do it through a Membership Action Plan. That's pretty important language. It's like Putin was told they didn't get a MAP, and he was happy. Then he was told that they got the promise of eventual NATO membership, and he was furious. And the next day speaking at NATO, he

threatened Ukraine's territorial integrity. He made a claim on Crimea—I was there. I'm sitting next to the Polish national security advisor, [01:00:00] Mariusz Handzlik, who was later killed in a plane crash, and when Putin says—makes his claim to Crimea, saying, “Well, it wasn't transferred fully, legally, properly from Russia to Ukraine,” we both stand up involuntarily, look at each other, and say, “Did you hear that? Did he say what I think he said? Shit! Did he say what I think he said? Goddammit, he's just threatened Ukraine's territorial integrity!” And I went to Condi Rice and Steve Hadley and said, “You better pay attention to that. That's a serious threat.” And they thought I was exaggerating. Even then I was pretty hawkish. I was known as a hawk on Putin. Later, they admitted, “Yeah, you were right.”

MILES: That has aged well—that premonition has aged well.

FRIED: Yeah, well, I wish I had been wrong—

MILES: Me too.

FRIED: —but you see the point is that maybe that was a mistake, pushing MAP, because in the end it gave us a policy that says, Georgia and Ukraine will eventually be NATO members, which I love, because that means you don't draw a line and leave them on the other side of it, and that NATO's already agreed. But it didn't give us much ability to go from here to there.

MILES: Perhaps it could be said that it creates a window of opportunity in the eyes of a Russian policymaker that if they want to redress some grievances, for example,

obviously the thing about Crimea is a fiction, but if they want to make a play like that, then maybe there's—the clock's ticking.

FRIED: No, I understand. This is a debatable issue. My own view—I understand that reasonable, serious people can argue that it was a mistake. No, I give that argument a lot more credence than I give the argument that NATO enlargement alienated Russia [01:02:00] and that it was beastly. No, I'm quite irritated with that argument, which is ahistoric and doesn't consider what they're actually saying. But the argument about MAP towards the Ukraine, even though I'll still defend it, I get the other side. I get the arguments why it was a mistake.

MILES: Yeah, for the record, my argument is actually the opposite direction. It's that more should have been done, and with less vagueness and more explicit, this is the path we're going. But I wanted to ask really quick—did you travel with Condi Rice to Russia in fall '06? I think that's October '06? In her memoir, she recounts a very tense meeting with Putin, she calls it in oblique terms. And I was just curious if you had any recollections about that.

BEHRINGER: This is the one where Putin stands up and towers over her, and then she in turn stands up and towers over him for a moment.

FRIED: I was not there. Bill Burns—if he were to talk to you before, he sure won't now.

MILES: Yeah.

FRIED: Bill Burns was there.

MILES: We're going to try for it anyway. And obviously expecting—

FRIED: No, go ahead, Bill Burns is—you can trust him. I don't know. So what I say is speculation. Condi Rice doesn't like to be bullied and responds badly to attempts to intimidate her. And she [01:04:00] cannot abide crudity. She's an extraordinarily polite person.

I don't know what happened, but I have heard that her blood was up, and that almost never happens. Condi, by the way, when her blood's up, she doesn't get mad. She gets icy. She gets glacial. She rarely gets angry, but I think something happened that made her glacial. I'm not sure what that was, but knowing Putin, and knowing his attempts to intimidate people—I'm thinking of Angela Merkel, where he knows she's afraid of dogs, he brought in two big dogs. If that's the way he deals with strong women, to try to intimidate them and put them in their place—a kind of misogynist, add misogyny to his list of unpleasant attributes—then I can imagine, knowing her, how Condi Rice would have reacted, which is not well, and not by retreating, not one millimeter.

MILES: So speaking of blood being up, let's talk about the Munich Security Conference, February '07—

FRIED: I wasn't there.

MILES: —screed.

FRIED: My deputy Kurt Volker was.

MILES: Did that speech surprise you—and by you, I mean you individually and also, let's say, you, the Russia hands in the Bush administration.

FRIED: It did not. Yeah, I remember it.

MILES: If yes, [01:06:00] should you have been surprised by February of 2007, to hear things like that coming out of the mouth of Russia's president?

FRIED: It didn't surprise me. It surprised others. I remember it was on a Saturday. I wasn't on that trip. I don't remember why. My deputy Kurt Volker—later ambassador to NATO, later witness in the impeachment trial. Poor Kurt. Kurt Volker calls me up, and he's not alarmed. Kurt doesn't get alarmed, he's sort of chuckling to himself, like, "Ah, you're going to love this." And he describes the speech and he says that—who was it, secretary of defense at the time.

BEHRINGER: Robert Gates.

FRIED: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Bob Gates is there and responding mildly. Kurt wasn't surprised. I wasn't surprised. We agreed we weren't surprised, we could see this coming. But a lot of the other foreign policy hands were surprised. We saw it coming because we could see the direction of Putin's rhetoric. We were following Russia closely. And by then, right, it's post-color revolutions, and Putin hasn't gotten the deal from the United States he thought he deserved and thought he had, and we're violating it. Later, like 2011, he's mad at Hillary Clinton and a lot of other stuff, but it's all there by '07. The seeds are laid in the Bush administration, because Bush won't give Putin what Putin thinks he bargained for, which is a free hand to slap down his own people. And his own people includes the neighbors that he doesn't think are properly independent.



So we were not surprised. [01:08:00] Weren't too damn pleased, but not shocked. Now, throughout this period, Steve Hadley and Tom Graham are still pushing the most constructive U.S.-Russia relationship possible. And they're not wrong to do so. I never opposed them. Nor, in retrospect, should I have opposed them. Try to make the most of a constructive bilateral agenda. And Steve Hadley is a really smart policy guy, and he was brilliant at coming up with kind of win-win frameworks, and they were all good. They were all solid pieces of work. None of them amounted to anything. Not because they weren't good—it would have left both sides better off—but because Putin was just not interested.

BEHRINGER: Can I follow up on that real quick? So you mentioned that there were some moves from Hadley and Graham trying to engage Russia. And then, on the Russian side, there were also counterproposals. One was Lavrov pitching the OSCE on creating a new security arrangement for Europe to replace NATO.

FRIED: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BEHRINGER: The other more in-depth conversations on cooperating with regard to missile defense, possibly placing installations in former Soviet republics or on—

FRIED: No, no, in Poland and the Czech Republic.

BEHRINGER: Right. The Russians were offering, let's put it in Azerbaijan instead. I'm wondering, what did you think of Moscow's attempts to negotiate on things like NATO [01:10:00] and missile defense, and were these genuine offers of cooperation? Were they possible? And, specifically on missile defense, from the

U.S. side, were the cooperative efforts—how much of it was driven by people like Mr. Hadley and Dr. Graham, and how much of it was the Europeans themselves pressuring you to negotiate with the Russians a little bit more? Did you feel any pressure on that side?

FRIED: You should ask Sandy Vershbow about this. He has argued in a piece we wrote late last year on U.S.-Russian relations that we were wrong on missile defense. Now we shouldn't have pushed this on the Russians, that they had more of a case. We had a point, but I respect Sandy enormously, so I would give his arguments a lot of weight because he really knows this stuff. Now our careers overlap, but in certain areas, he's gone into a deeper scenario, as I have, but I trust him on these kinds of arms control questions, like a lot. He thinks we pushed too hard.

Hadley was trying to look at different formulas to bring the two sides together, the way Steve Hadley does—this relentlessly constructive, thoughtful approach, and Steve just never gives up. [Long pause.]

You mentioned Lavrov and abolishing [01:12:00] NATO. These are like Soviet proposals. Go back to the fifties. They're not serious. What they mean is—they're all ways to make Russia a dominating power in its own sphere of influence. That's it. That's what this is about. They want it and they won't be satisfied till they have it, which is pretty goddamn stupid if you think of the arc of Russian history. Like, they used to be threatening Germany, now they're attacking Eastern Ukraine. What does that tell you? Like, how successful are they when Belarus is a contested area?

Contested, not because the United States wants it, but because the nature of Kremlin rule is that they prefer dictators, and they can't accept a democratic movement. Even when the Belarusian democratic movement is not interested in NATO or EU membership—and I'm not sure Belarusian society is interested in it. What they want is democracy, Putin can't handle that. So I'm not sure that it's so goddamn brilliant. But, doesn't matter what I think.

BEHRINGER: Do you remember, at the time in your conversations with the Polish and Czech leaders, how much are they pushing for the missile defense installations on their own territory versus—

FRIED: Oh, man, I negotiated with Radek Sikorski, who was the foreign minister. Man, those were tough negotiations. The Poles [01:14:00] didn't really care about missile defense. They wanted American military presence on their soil. Radek Sikorski is a wicked smart, tough negotiator. And he didn't want a bad deal for Poland. He wanted as much as you could get and was willing to say no to the Americans. Okay. So he was a tough negotiator, and I just couldn't make it work. Oh, by the way—tough, but honorable. He never lied to me. Like, we're friends. I don't care if it's tough. He was doing his job. No problem. He was tough as hell.

Okay. So there's the Russo-Georgian War. And I'm flying around to France and Georgia with Condi Rice. And then just like a week later we're in NATO for an emergency summit. And Radek Sikorski comes up to Condi and says, "Well, let's land this deal on this. Our Polish position has discovered new reasons to be flexible. Let's get this

done.” And what he wants is American military presence on Polish territory now that the Russians have started another goddamn war. So Condi says, “Come on, let's go to Warsaw.” So she gives him a ride in her plane. She liked Radek. She liked Radek, because she likes really smart people.

And Radek is not only smart, he's witty. He's a Pole who was educated in Oxford and he's got British wit. Like, he outdoes the British at their own game. He's just amazing. You ought to talk to him. He's wonderful. He's married to Anne Applebaum, the great scholar, and she really is a great scholar and historian, as well as a witty and wicked pen. They're wonderful people.

So we go there, we sign the deal. Radek's a damn good bureaucrat, too. So we do the deal. Then the Obama administration [01:16:00] changes it, pissing off the Poles and the Czechs. The Czechs are mad to this day, by the way. And they're mad and the Poles are mad because Obama tells them the news on September 17th, '09. And what's September 17th to you? Probably nothing. But to the Poles, it's the date—twinned with September 1st, 1939—September 1st, the Nazis invade, September 17th, the Soviets invade from the east, because they're Hitler's ally. Oh, and yeah, later that month they have a joint victory parade with the Nazis at Brest-Litovsk. Just in case people get all sentimental about the Soviets defeating the Nazis, which they did, but that was after they were allies, which they were. Okay. The Obama people screwed that one up pretty badly.

But then again, to Obama's enormous credit, he puts not only a NATO battalion into Poland, but a U.S. armored brigade into Poland on a rotational basis. That's more than we did in the Bush administration. I never thought Obama got enough credit for that. That was a really cool move. Good for the Obama team. Good for Obama. You know, solid stuff. That's a big deal. Shows you how far we've gone, right? Look at the arc here. That a Democratic Party president, in whose party are significant elements of lingering NATO skepticism, or used to be—an armored brigade in Poland.

BEHRINGER: We've only got about nine minutes left, so I wanted to ask—I think this will be my last question then I'll see if Simon has any more. I was hoping you could reflect a little bit on [01:18:00] the effects of personal diplomacy. Bush famously visited Russia at least seven times, more than any other president in U.S. history. Putin visits Crawford and Kennebunkport—

FRIED: Yeah, I was there at Crawford in '01.

BEHRINGER: Yeah, I was wondering if you could tell us about any of those meetings that stick out in your mind, and what are their significance for understanding kind of the effect of this personal relationship on the broader U.S.-Russian relationship?

FRIED: That Crawford meeting was maybe the high point of U.S.-Russia relations under Bush. I mean, the warmth was real and the sense of possibility was real. So I'll give you a sense. I'm talking to a senior Russian official at the reception at Crawford, and things are just going great. They'd met in Washington and we'd fly to

Crawford, and everybody's relaxed cause the heavy lifting is done. I said, "We're just getting to know Putin." He looks around and says, "So are we." I said, "This can really work out, man, this can be really cool." You have the sense of hope and possibility.

There was a Texas band playing. They played "Cotton Eye Joe," and I danced "Cotton Eye Joe" with Condi Rice. It's a four-part polka with a little bit of Mexican stuff thrown in. It's a really interesting dance, if you see it, and I know how to do it. So I tell you that so you get a sense of the atmosphere. But that seemed appropriate.

Otherwise, she would have given me the glacial stare, told me to bug off when I asked her to dance. By the way, she didn't know how to dance it. I had to tell her while we were dancing. But she's so good at everything she does, [01:20:00] no problem, she did it. She's—my God, she's good at dancing. The woman's good at everything, everything she touches.

But that's the sense of possibility, right? Everybody's thinking, "This is really gonna work out. It's after 9/11, but by God, we're getting it together with the Russians on counter-terrorism and we're gonna make this work."

Didn't work out that way. Completely turned to ash, but we didn't know that then. And neither did the Russians. I'm not even sure Putin knew it. I'm not even sure Putin knew it. The Russians he was with sure as hell didn't. They were so happy and excited, you know, like, "Putin's going to pull us together. We're going to have a more orderly country and we're going to work with you and we're going to make

Russia developed.” No, that’s not what happened. But we didn’t know that. What a waste.

MILES: So then, yeah, that’s my question is how do you see this whole thing? To put it very mildly, an eventful eight years. So is the story opportunity squandered? Is the story of Sisyphus, just trying to make something happen that’s never going to happen?

FRIED: No, no, no. Opportunity squandered sounds like a political science course where both sides made mistakes. Now, clearly both sides made mistakes. But that’s not equal. It’s not that there were misunderstandings and the U.S. was too aggressive. No. The reason it didn’t work out is because of the nature of Putin’s rule  
[01:22:00]—

MILES: Yeah. Opportunity squandered could be that the Russian squandered the opportunity, right?

FRIED: They completely squandered it. They completely squandered the opportunity because we were offering them an honorable place at the high table of the world—membership in the G8—and Bush forwardly, the American president saying, “Listen, man, I’m going to work with you.” But Bush was not willing to abandon the Freedom Agenda on the altar of better relations with the Kremlin. And when he had to choose, he chose wisely.

By the way, George H.W. Bush made the call to support Solidarity in 1989 and made the call to support German reunification on Western terms. He didn’t have to do that.

There were lots of people in his administration who would have thrown up their hands and said, “Nah, Poland is too hard.” The Bushes—they did a lot of good. George W. Bush will be remembered for the Iraq War the way LBJ is remembered for Vietnam, I get that. But I told George W. Bush when I ran into him after he was president at some event, and I said, “You realize the decision you made to bring the Baltics into NATO made sure that 5 million people aren’t afraid, and [are] secure? You did that.” Balts know it too.

The problem was the nature of Putinism. Go re-read George Kennan's “Long Telegram,” where he talks about the problem of Russian autocracy. Autocracy Russian-style leads to backwardness. Backwardness leads to defensiveness about the West. Defensiveness leads to aggression [01:24:00] to keep the West far away and its poisonous ideas, from a Kremlin perspective, at bay. I hadn't read the “Long Telegram” since graduate school. I was rereading it because of course I teach at Warsaw University and I thought, oh my God, this makes better reading than I thought—more timely reading than I thought, and what bad news. Yuck. The problem is the nature of Putinism. That's the problem.

And that doesn't mean that Russia is doomed to be a patrimonial kleptocracy as it is now, and therefore aggressive. It could be better, but there, I admit, I'm in a minority. Most Russia hands think Russia will never be better than it is now. And Tom Graham thinks, this whole democracy thing in Russia is a fool's errand. Tom and I are known to disagree about Russia a lot, but I will say this, he is no fool. It's not



like he's ignorant or dumb. He is really smart and really knows what he's talking about. I think he's wrong, but I can't tell you that he is wrong. I have a different—a different view. But you want to get somebody who has, who is the best exponent of the realist approach, capital “R” doctrinal Realism for Russia? You can do worse than Tom Graham. Another person to talk to, of course, would be John Beyrle. I disagree with him, but far [less]—you know, John's great. He warned me about the Russo-Georgian War. He said early on, first day, end of July, or, a week before the war, “Putin's spoiling for a fight, watch out.” I think it was in July, 'cause he was back in Russia for the war. Anyway, I've got to run.

MILES: Yeah, thank you for this. This was a lot of fun.

FRIED: I hope it was useful. [01:26:00] I'm trying to give you stuff that's—you don't need a regurgitation of Condi's memoirs in my words. I'm trying to give you stuff—I don't think I've ever told people about “Cotton Eye Joe.”

MILES: That's a great story.

BEHRINGER: That was terrific. Thank you.

FRIED: So here's one more: as Putin was leaving, as it was breaking up, Putin sees me, walks away, stops, turns back, comes to me, shakes my hands, and says in Russian, “You really dance well.”

[Laughter]

MILES: See, you and Putin can agree on one thing at least. [Laughter] Thanks so much for this. This was hugely helpful.

BEHRINGER: Thank you, Ambassador Fried, we appreciate it.

FRIED: Good luck, guys, and you know who to talk to, right?

MILES: Yes.

BEHRINGER: Yes.

MILES: Thanks so much.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much.

FRIED: All right, take care.

BEHRINGER: Take care.

FRIED: Bye.

BEHRINGER: Bye.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]