

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

### **Interviewee: Kenneth Knotts**

Assistant Air Force Attaché, U.S. Embassy in Moscow, 1994-1996

### **Interviewers:**

Paul Behringer,  
Senior Fellow, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University

### **Date of Interview:**

January 29, 2023

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### **Citation**

Kenneth Knotts, interview by Paul Behringer, 29 January 2023. "U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin" Collective Memory Project, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University.

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**[Transcription Begins]**

BEHRINGER: My name is Paul Behringer, and I'm a senior fellow at the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

KNOTTS: And I'm Ken Knotts. I am a lieutenant colonel, retired, from the U.S. Air Force, and will be talking today about some of my experiences as a diplomat in the former Soviet Union.

BEHRINGER: Can you begin by describing your professional background and how you became interested in Russia and Central Asia?

KNOTTS: Yeah. I actually became interested in Russia, Eurasia, and Central Asia even in elementary school because my father was a professor at the time in the Louisiana State University system [at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches], and he actually wrote his master's thesis on the relations between the Soviet Union and China, People's Republic of China.

BEHRINGER: So you grew up in an academic environment a little bit.

KNOTTS: Yes, very much so. Actually, my father was and retired as a professor in Louisiana. My mother was an elementary school teacher in northern Louisiana.

BEHRINGER: And how did your professional background, career start and develop?

KNOTTS: My first professional interaction or study of Russia actually was as a cadet at the U.S. Air Force Academy. And, as you may know, all cadets are required to take a foreign language. My father had already encouraged me—he said, “You can take French or Spanish, [00:02:00] like many, or German. But,” he said, “why don't you challenge yourself and take either Russian or Chinese, for example? It might come



in handy later on.” And, as in most things, my father was very correct that it certainly helped me in my professional career and my Air Force career later on.

BEHRINGER: And then, after you graduated from the Air Force Academy, what was your role? What was your position, and where did you go from there?

KNOTTS: I actually had wanted to be, as many do, an aviator, but I actually had a chance to go to intelligence officer school. And I went to the Air Force intelligence training at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver and wound up and graduated as an intelligence officer and became a then-Soviet specialist.

BEHRINGER: So you went to the school there, and then—about what time, what years?

KNOTTS: I was at the U.S. Air Force Academy from 1979 through 1983. Graduated there June of 1983. In 1984, I went through intelligence training at Lowry [Air Force Base in Aurora, Colorado], and in the spring of 1985—coincidentally with the changeover from [Leonid] Brezhnev to [Mikhail] Gorbachev<sup>1</sup> I was offered an assignment at what was called the Directorate of Soviet Affairs at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. So I went there in March of [00:04:00] 1985 as a second lieutenant—again, almost exactly the same time that Mikhail Gorbachev started his tenure as [Communist Party] general secretary.

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<sup>1</sup> The Soviet Union had a premier as the official head of government, but the real power resided in the office of the Communist Party General Secretary. After Leonid Brezhnev died in 1982, Yuri Andropov (1982–1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984 – 1985), each became general secretary and died in quick succession. Mikhail Gorbachev then became general secretary in March 1985 and remained in that position until the infamous coup attempt in August 1991. Up to that point, Gorbachev was both Communist Party general secretary and president of the Soviet Union, a new position created in March 1991. After the August coup attempt failed, Gorbachev gave up the general secretariat but remained president until the dissolution of the Soviet Union on Christmas Day 1991.

BEHRINGER: So you're there in 1985, and you were there when Gorbachev came to the United States, then.<sup>2</sup> Do you remember his visit?

KNOTTS: I was around, yes. And in fact—and nobody in the White House knew this, but it was because I was so low down in the structure at the time—but actually my agency, the Air Force Intelligence Service, the Directorate of Soviet Affairs, had some inputs into preparing our delegates as far as the negotiations with Gorbachev.

BEHRINGER: So did you brief anybody at that period or you were involved in the preparation of the materials?

KNOTTS: I did a good bit of briefing, but only at lower levels. I did not get a chance, for example, to go to the White House and brief anybody at that level. I did conduct briefings at times with general officers at the Pentagon, but only within the Department of Defense. I was very much involved in preparing some of the briefing items that went to certainly, the Pentagon and, on occasion, to the White House as well.

BEHRINGER: And can you take us from the time you're at Bolling Air Force base up to the time when you go to Moscow in your career?

KNOTTS: I served for four years in the Air Force Intelligence Service, mainly in the Directorate of Soviet Affairs. My main job there [00:06:00] was as the editor of a publication that is now defunct. It was called "The Soviet Press: Selected

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<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev first visited the United States for a summit with U.S. President Ronald Reagan in December 1987.

Translations.” And what we did was we would, in some cases, even subscribe to Soviet military publications, and we would read what they were showing to their military people. And then we would select articles—for every two months, we would put out an issue of “The Soviet Press: Selected Translations.” And part of it was for language training, because we would take at least one article per issue and we would publish side-by-side the Russian text and an English translation. So it had at least two purposes in mind—for language training, but also to familiarize our own military and government people with what the Soviets were saying to their own military.

For example, there was what was coming on board at that point—classified, now unclassified—was the stealth technology. And I noticed and brought to my boss’s attention, the Soviets would actually publish an article about U.S. stealth technology. And what they were doing was they were educating their own military, not only about what they thought the U.S. was—the technology that we were building on, but also to apprise, to educate their own military indirectly about some of the programs that they were themselves working on. [00:08:00]

BEHRINGER: So you were there for four years, to [19]89.

KNOTTS: Yeah.

BEHRINGER: And then—

KNOTTS: Right. To follow on and fully answer your question, I then had the opportunity to work for the commander of the Air Force Intelligence Service and worked a program for him for several months. Colonel George Lotz was his name. And one



day, I said to Colonel Lotz, I would like very much to become an Air Force area specialist and go to the specialist program, which was a two-year master's program at the Naval Postgraduate School, followed by the Army's Defense Language Institute in Monterey. So I was fortunate, and he saw that I got that opportunity. So, from 1989 to 1991, I became a Soviet specialist.

And some of your viewers probably appreciate this, that after the Air Force made me a Soviet specialist, what did they do with me but assigned me for a one-year remote [tour] in the Republic of Korea, somewhere where I had absolutely no specialty training. So that's intended as a polite jab at [the] Air Force and government in general.

But every time I got a chance to talk to anybody Air Force career-wise, I would put in a bid, "Don't forget, I speak Russian. I speak Russian well. I'm an area specialist. I would like very much to go to Moscow or someplace else in the former Soviet Union." And eventually, I got that chance. [00:10:00] In 1994, after I came back from Korea, I got the chance to be an assistant air attaché in Moscow.

Now, in my preparation time, and as part of my attaché training for Moscow, it turned out that the Air Force needed a temporary person to go to U.S. Embassy in Minsk, Belarus. And I just happened to be walking through the administrative office when the man in charge found out that his Army lieutenant colonel trainee had actually been mugged in Washington, D.C. and was going to be delayed in going to Minsk. And so I waved, I literally said, "Hey, I'll do it. Send me." And I wound up—it was a fascinating experience. I was there in Minsk for

close to six months. And you'll never see this in any more than a footnote in any history book, but I was actually the first ever acting U.S. defense attaché to Minsk, Belarus.

And it was fascinating because I got to meet pretty much on a daily basis with some of the senior-most Belarusian military people. I would be meeting with Belarusian three-star generals. They were fascinated in turn that a junior Air Force officer—I was a captain at the time, an O-3—and I actually had some of the [00:12:00] Belarusian officers say, “Now, be honest. You must have a special relationship with someone.” Because, see, in their services, that’s exactly the way that it would have worked. Never would a junior officer have that opportunity unless he had some sort of special political connections. That was not the case with me or with our military in most cases.

Then after I had the great opportunity of being an assistant air attaché in Moscow from 1994 to 1996, they needed somebody to go for similar reasons down to Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. And the same man who had sent me to Minsk, Belarus called me up one day when I was nearing the end of my Moscow tour. And, this was playful, but he said, “Hey, Knotts, how would you like to be the crown prince of Ashgabat?” And I said to him, using his first name, I said, “Well, at least I know where Ashgabat is. Tell me more.” And again, because of a personnel issue, they needed somebody to go temporarily to be a one-man office in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. And I did that from the summer of 1996 to the summer of 1997.



BEHRINGER: Wow. So you spent from '94, going to Minsk and then Moscow, and then Ashgabat until '97—you were—

KNOTTS: Perhaps I misstated. It was actually in 1993 that I was for several months in Minsk. And then from 1994 to '96 in Moscow, '96 to '97 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

BEHRINGER: Okay. So then, to begin with Minsk, what were your impressions of the city, and what was going on with Belarus at the time?

KNOTTS: Minsk was a beautiful city. I knew, of course, [00:14:00] that it had been absolutely devastated by the end of World War II, so to see that it was rebuilt and so beautiful—the city center was almost breathtaking, it was so pretty. And because I was searching for an apartment for the incoming man who would be there on a permanent two-year assignment—maybe three-year—I lived away from any kind of a compound and actually lived in an apartment in the city center. I did find a place for the lieutenant colonel who replaced me, or succeeded me, to live as part of my work there. But every day I got to see the beautiful little lake in the middle of the Minsk town center, the pretty Orthodox chapel that is on that lake. I worked hard when I was there, but I also very much enjoyed my free time in that environment.

BEHRINGER: What was their government like at that time?

KNOTTS: They were actually, in my opinion, very determined and interested in becoming a true democracy at the time. There was a prime minister—I'm sorry, yeah, I think





[President] Shushkevich<sup>3</sup> and I actually got a chance to meet him a couple of times, not in any official meeting, just in a couple of receptions, and probably Ambassador David Swartz, [00:16:00] the U.S. ambassador at the time, held or ran a meeting similar to that. I believe that the Belarusians at the time were very interested in becoming a Western-style democracy, and were working toward that. Unfortunately now, the person there, Aleksandr Lukashenko, is about as far from being a left-wing democrat as you possibly can be.<sup>4</sup>

BEHRINGER: What were their relations with Russia at the time? How were those going?

KNOTTS: As best I could tell, the Belarusian military was still pretty close to the Russian Federation. I really would not have expected too much different. There were some that were certainly interested in becoming closer to the United States or to other NATO powers, but they were certainly in the minority and, I'm sure, eventually would be worked out of the system as Belarus—Belorussia, I believe they now call themselves—moved back toward being totally in line with Russia.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stanislav Shushkevich, officially called the chairman of the Supreme Council, was the first head of state of the newly independent Belarus. The Belarusian prime minister, as head of government, was a separate office.

<sup>4</sup> In 1994, Aleksandr Lukashenko won Belarus's first presidential election. Since then, he has consolidated power and rules as "the last and only dictator in Europe," as he told Reuters in 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-lukashenko-extracts-idUSBRE8AQ0V520121127>. A close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Lukashenko has allowed Russian forces to use Belarus as a staging ground for its war on Ukraine since 2022. In June 2023, he brokered an agreement between Putin and Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Russian mercenary Wagner Group, which allowed Prigozhin to flee to Belarus after an attempted mutiny. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/19/europe/prigozhin-wagner-belarus-appears-intl/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> In 1999, Lukashenko and then Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed what is known as the Union State agreement to facilitate Russia and Belarusian integration and cooperation, although the treaty has been interpreted differently by each side at various times. See David R. Cameron, "As Russia & Belarus Develop Their Union State & Hold Huge Military Exercises, Russia Goes to the Polls," 15 September 2021, Yale MacMillan Center, <https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/russia-belarus-develop-their-union-state-hold-huge-military-exercise-russia-goes-polls>, and <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/economics/economic-integration/union-state>.

Belarus is still commonly called "Belorussia (White Russia)," in Russia, which was the name of the guberniia (province) during the imperial period and the name of the socialist republic in the Soviet era. The modern name "Belarus" harkens back to its medieval, pre-Russian-empire name, when it was known as "White Ruthenia (Belaya

BEHRINGER: So then you go from Minsk to Moscow. What was Moscow like at that time, and how did it compare to your time in Minsk?

KNOTTS: There were a lot of similarities, but the political and military atmosphere in Moscow was certainly somewhat different than in Minsk. At the time, as you know, when I first got there, Boris Yeltsin was still in charge. And Boris Yeltsin certainly was [00:18:00] more likely to cooperate with even NATO and with the United States than his successor Putin would become. And so there was a time that it looked like there was a chance to have some at least democratic-leaning government and policies from the Russians in their own country. Even at the time, I had my doubts that it would in the end turn out well, but for a while it looked like it might.

BEHRINGER: And what was Moscow like at that time as far as city services, living conditions, that type of thing?

KNOTTS: My own personal life was very different from many American diplomats in that I never lived on the diplomatic compound, the embassy compound. I lived away from the embassy. At first, I was not sure I would like that, but as it turned out, I very much enjoyed that. I lived in an apartment building out on Kutuzovskii Prospekt only a couple of miles from the embassy, not even quite two miles. It was an apartment complex that was for either diplomats or business people. And so it

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Rus’).” <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-11-peoples-ukraine-belarus-and-russia-are-one>. For more on this complicated history, which also involves the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and other early modern state entities, see Timothy D. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).



was a special apartment complex. We knew that, and the Russians were certainly well aware of that.

I very much enjoyed dealing on a daily basis with the Russian people. At that point, my conversational Russian [00:20:00] was very good. It was never native, but it was very good. And I enjoyed dealing with most Russians, and I found that most Russians, when they find out that you're trying to speak their language, they actually encourage you and they try to talk with you and they'll help you along.

I assumed at any time—we all assumed as U.S. diplomats—that any time you were outside of secure facilities, there was at least the chance that you were being surveilled. And I assumed that that was true basically all the time. So I lived with that knowledge, got used to the idea, and accorded myself, knowing that if I did something wrong that I would be penalized for it. I also had the advantage, though, that I did not usually try to employ—I had a diplomatic passport and I had diplomatic cover. The worst that would happen to me was that if I were either caught truly doing something that was out of bounds for them, or if I was framed in some way, the worst that would happen to me was that I would be declared persona non grata. I would have 24 hours to leave the country, and that would be it. Most Americans there who are not on diplomatic status do not have that benefit.

So, to answer your question, I enjoyed dealing with the Russians who were the common people and people that I [00:22:00] knew within reason were not out

to try in some way take advantage of me. On the other hand, I knew whenever I was dealing with Ministry of Defense people or Russian military, they were there and they were going to act in their own self-interest, and I fully expected that.

BEHRINGER: Staying on that topic, did you ever have a run-in with the local police or anything where they tried to get you in a tough situation or anything like that?

KNOTTS: The short answer would be yes, but nothing that was not something that I could handle at my level. There were a couple of times that I got pulled over.<sup>6</sup> We had diplomatic plates. They knew exactly who we were because we were required to travel in certain vehicles with diplomatic plates. So from time to time, even the lower-level police, the *militsioner*, would see, “Hey, you’re a diplomat. I’m going to show you who’s boss.” And you would run into a situation like that. At some point, after trying to be civil to him—almost always a him; I think I remember one female—if I had to, I would pull out my diplomatic passport and say, “Look, you either let me go or call the American embassy, and they’ll come talk to you.” But I always handled it before I had to call the embassy and ask for their assistance.

BEHRINGER: This period in Russia is remembered now as this terrible economic disaster. What were the living conditions like for average Russians there? [00:24:00] Did you see a lot of shortages or any type of thing like that?

KNOTTS: I certainly saw shortages. I was careful in how I interacted with common—I don’t mean that as detrimental, but with average— Russian people because I did

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Knotts says “intentionally got pulled over,” meaning that the Moscow police pulled him over knowing that he was a diplomat, not that he was trying to get pulled over.



not want to cause problems for them. I had occasion to visit some Russians in their homes, and I enjoyed that. I would say right up front, “I’m an American diplomat. I don’t want to cause problems for you,” but some of them would welcome you on in. But it was obvious if you were looking that there were shortages even for people that were doing fairly well. At the other end of the scale, there were the nouveau riche, the Russian businessmen who were doing very well and driving around in Mercedes and other luxury cars—almost always western, usually American by the way.

To me, the saddest was the older people, especially the elderly women that you would sometimes see begging on the street because they were basically starving. Their pension, if they had one, was not enough to buy the now more expensive foods. And whenever I saw that, especially around metro stops or around some sort of public building, I would immediately think of my then-grandmothers, and picture how sad it would be if they were in a similar situation. So that, [00:26:00] to me, was the saddest kind of thing that I would see.

There was also a tendency that was an assumption on the part of many Americans at the time that Russians, especially Russian men, used way too much alcohol and had a tendency to alcoholism. I saw that that was the case in many cases. As I was leaving my apartment building, at times I would have to step over men that were so drunk that they had just passed out, and, especially in the wintertime, occasionally you will see a man that has fallen asleep and has frozen to death. So you did see things like that occasionally.

BEHRINGER: What issues did you work on while you were there, but also what were the big issues of the day at the time between the United States and Russia?

KNOTTS: The major issues of that time between the United States and Russia either was or became NATO expansion, something called Partnership for Peace [PfP] that I believe is still active. I became, at least for the Air Force—let me briefly explain. At the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Army each had three assistant attachés and one chief attaché for those three services. There was then a one-star general or admiral who was the defense [00:28:00] attaché of the United States in Moscow. My first year there, we had an Army one-star general. For my second year there, we had an Air Force one-star general, and both of them did very well, in my opinion. So that was the structure. Within the Air Force office, if you want to call it that, I became kind of the specialist for the Partnership for Peace. Not saying that the other assistants did not participate, but I became the go-to person in many respects. There was a visit while I was there by the U.S. Air Force Academy to their [the Russians'] aviation academy at Volgograd. And so I naturally got picked for that and became the primary person and escorted the U.S. Air Force Academy delegation when they went to Volgograd.

I also became the point person for what became known as the theater missile defense—TMD in English. The Russians would call it [PRO TVD—*protivraketnaia oborona teatra voennykh deistvii*]. And that was under the umbrella of the Gore-Chernomyrdin negotiations. For the viewers, the Russian person directly under President Yeltsin [00:30:00] at the time was Prime Minister Viktor

Chernomyrdin. He was kind of the counterpart to the U.S. then Vice President Al Gore. And they had a series of meetings, held mainly in Moscow, that were the so-called Gore-Chernomyrdin talks. And a subset of that became what was called theater missile defense. And I became the point person for our office actually for both of those. I—again, from my vantage point, and none of those high-ranking people would even remember me probably—but I had the fascinating experience of meeting Prime Minister Chernomyrdin. I spoke several times one-on-one with Vice President Gore—found him to be a very affable and very approachable person, by the way. I was not a trained translator, but I would often be used unofficially as a translator, even an interpreter. You have to be very careful of that, because my Russian at the time was very good, but again, I was not a trained interpreter. There were a couple of times, and I was glad to do it, but Vice President Gore actually asked me a couple of times to translate for him. And fortunately for me, I did not embarrass myself. More importantly, I did not embarrass the United States. I happened to remember at the right time all the diplomatic language that I needed, the terms that I needed, and did not make a fool of myself, for which I was very [00:32:00] glad. And again, Al Gore would not remember me from Adam, but it was a fascinating experience for a still-captain in the Air Force to have a chance to meet these gentlemen.

And then for the theater missile defense, it was the U.S. 20th Air Force that was the main unit that was involved from the U.S. side, and I got to be the escort for the 20th Air Force delegation that visited some of the Strategic Rocket Forces

bases in Russia and got a chance to go inside their missile silo command centers, got a chance to see some of their silos in person. I also got a chance to see some of their security, which was in some cases rather alarming because I, both as a cadet and later as an officer, have visited, been a guest at, U.S. Air Force missile complexes, and let me just say that the U.S. security was much, much better than what I saw at some Russian facilities.

BEHRINGER: At this point, what was the U.S. trying to do with missile defense in the mid-nineties?

KNOTTS: The U.S. side was trying to get as much cooperation as possible from the Russian Federation. I certainly realized, and I think [00:34:00] that the U.S. negotiators realized, that the Russians were really, even at that point, even under Yeltsin, were still only willing to go so far as their cooperation was concerned. They were certainly interested in measures that would try to prevent any kind of theft, for example, by a terrorist group. That was something that even later, not under Yeltsin—I know that the Russian Federation still was interested in joint security measures. But even under Yeltsin, the Russian negotiators at the time would only cooperate when it was in their interest to do so.

The U.S. [two]-star general who was there, again, was a very personable man, and he asked me my advice a couple of times.<sup>7</sup> He was just saying basically, “What do you think they are getting at? What is their stance here?” And then he

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Knotts says “three-star general” in the interview, but later clarified that “the commander of the 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force was then and still now is a two-star general.”



would obviously make his own decision based on his knowledge and perhaps on the guidance that I had suggested. So that, again, to me, was an incredible experience. But he certainly realized, from my vantage point that, while they were interested in trying to prevent theft by a third party, that they would only go so far as far as true cooperation between the United States and the Russian Federation.

BEHRINGER: So missile defense was an issue that was included under the umbrella of broader nuclear [00:36:00] control and negotiations?

KNOTTS: Yeah. It actually came up in discussions in the Gore-Chernomyrdin negotiations but also became an issue as far as NATO expansion was concerned as well. In some ways, it became involved in both those kind of umbrella issues.

BEHRINGER: How did their systems compare to what the United States had? Had both sides built up to a certain level, or were the Russians way behind on—

KNOTTS: You mean their nuclear forces?

BEHRINGER: On missile defense in particular.

KNOTTS: Okay. See, I didn't get a chance to—I'm not—I never was—a missile officer.

The only missile bases that I visited in person, actually, were Russian missile bases. So I don't really have the expertise to answer fully that question. My impression is that the U.S. had better capabilities at the time. At this point, in 2023, I am not familiar—I haven't had access to classified information for, what, about 13 years now.

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned getting to meet Prime Minister Chernomyrdin. What was he like as a counterpart or an interlocutor?



KNOTTS: I got a chance to speak with him a few times, but it was never, with him, on a really informal basis. So the only times that I was really around him was when formal talks and negotiations [00:38:00] were going on—when you would expect him to have his “official face.”

On the other hand, I got a chance to be with Vice President Gore on a couple of informal occasions and even got a chance to chit-chat with him a few times, which again was fascinating to me. So I didn’t get a chance really to assess Chernomyrdin as far as his informal self.

BEHRINGER: What about his position in the Russian government? How influential would you say he was?

KNOTTS: At the time, my impression was is that he was quite well-placed and quite powerful. My impression in looking back is that, for example, as Vladimir Putin rose in stature, I think that certainly Chernomyrdin and others that were competing entities to Putin diminished in strength and power.

BEHRINGER: You mentioned the Partnership for Peace, and can you explain a little bit how the Partnership for Peace was related to NATO expansion? How did you see it in the broader U.S.-Russian relationship?

KNOTTS: Okay. Both officially and unofficially, the Partnership for Peace was a way for the United States and NATO to get its foot in the door, so to speak. As an example, when I was in Belarus, I introduced the possibility—I think perhaps even Ambassador Swartz before me—before I got there—had introduced the possibility

of Belarus joining Pfp. Eventually, I believe Belarus did [00:40:00] join Pfp, but probably has backed out.<sup>8</sup> I'm almost positive on that.

When I was in Turkmenistan, my job there was similar. I worked with the Turkmen Ministry of Defense to invite them and work with them working toward membership in Pfp. One program that the Turkmen were certainly interested in and were active in—the U.S. Coast Guard sent, when I was there, I believe two different delegations that went to the Caspian Sea and worked with the Turkmen Navy-slash-Coast Guard flotilla on the Caspian Sea. And it was mainly beneficial to the Turkmen because they got training on the most up to date Western thinking, technologies—I believe the U.S. Coast Guard even gave them some equipment, I think eventually even donated to the Turkmen Navy a formally active-duty U.S. Coast Guard cutter, I believe. So that was a way in which the Turkmen Navy specifically benefited. It was also beneficial for the U.S. trainers to get a look at how a former Soviet military—probably reminding them how fortunate they were to have all the up-to-date equipment and training that they have back here in the U.S. [00:42:00] But it was certainly a very good experience for their training instructors as well. So that was one specific thing that happened. I think, after I left, the Turkmen did sign and join Partnership for Peace. I don't know if Turkmenistan is still involved, is still a member of Partnership for Peace.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Belarus joined Pfp in 1995. In November 2021, NATO “suspended all practical cooperation” with Belarus in response to Minsk’s “instrumentalisation of irregular migration artificially created by Belarus as a hybrid action targeted towards Poland, Lithuania and Latvia for political purposes.” [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49119.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49119.htm).

<sup>9</sup> Turkmenistan joined Pfp in 1994 and remains a member. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50317.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50317.htm).

BEHRINGER: And I think some scholars have portrayed Partnership for Peace as this alternative that the U.S. government could have invested in more instead of the pathway toward NATO expansion. Did you ever see it as an alternative, or were they both different, or—?

KNOTTS: I guess I didn't see it in that perspective, but I can see where somebody not directly involved would have that view. I don't even know—I could not dispute directly if people back in Washington or in other NATO capitals would not have that same kind of opinion. I'm just not positive on that.

Let's look at the example that is very much in the news now, Ukraine. It was very involved in Partnership for Peace. It applied for full NATO membership. As a retired officer, I will say, I am sure that one of the reasons the United States and other NATO countries hesitated to approve full membership was the fear that exactly what started happening in 2014 and has been expanded almost a year ago now would happen. [00:44:00] And as anybody who has studied Partnership for Peace and NATO knows, there's the famous, infamous Article 5, that if a full NATO member is threatened or certainly invaded, it is incumbent on the other members to come to their aid. It is left up to the individual members whether they actually commit to warfare, but Article 5 commits them to at least consider doing that. And so, from the U.S. and other non-U.S. NATO-member perspective, I can see that as a concern. And indeed, many people, including some of the viewers, may think of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as starting in 2022. Well, let's not forget that, actually, it goes back to 2014, where they took off the whole Crimean

Peninsula. And then back beyond that, in 2008, Russia militarily invaded the Caucasus country of Georgia, and many Georgians died in that invasion.

So, NATO expansion has always been something that the U.S. and other NATO countries were very interested in promoting, but they also had to consider the risks involved as well, and the case of Ukraine is a perfect example. I have such admiration for the Ukrainians for how [00:46:00] they have defended themselves. And we may someday ask, if they are not successful, should we have done more? But certainly, the man who sits in the White House—and someday the woman who sits in the White House—will have to weigh that very heavily. When you invite new members to join, you also take on great risks and responsibilities. Are you willing to risk your hometown young men and women to go and defend Kyiv? That's basically what you have to ask yourself.

BEHRINGER: And at this point, in the mid-nineties, was NATO expansion considered—it seems to me that this was something that was up for negotiation at least, or was it considered by the Russians sort of a red line, or did they refer back to—a lot of times you'll hear Russians today refer back to this promise that they think George H. W. Bush gave, "We're not going to expand NATO past Germany." Was it as contentious back then as it is today, or was there that kind of feeling that this was going to be something that was a red line? How controversial was the idea of expanding NATO from the U.S. perspective?

KNOTT: From the U.S. perspective?

BEHRINGER: And from the Russian perspective, I guess.

KNOTT: The U.S., I think, was very much for it, but with some concerns, as I just expressed, as far as Ukraine is concerned. From the Russian perspective, when I was there, from [19]94 to '96, with Russia under Yeltsin—I'm pretty sure [00:48:00] in his heart of hearts that Boris Yeltsin was only willing to go so far as NATO expansion was concerned. I doubt, unless he saw a specific advantage for Russia to be part of NATO, that he would ever have agreed for the Russian Federation to formally join NATO. Just, to me, it beggars the imagination. But why do you defend against the country that is your number-one threat? I don't know. I'd have to go back in history, and there are probably other examples that turned out okay.

Even under Yeltsin, in my view, the Russians certainly had their misgivings, their limitations as to how far they would cooperate. And let me give you an example that, even when they said they were cooperating, there were several—okay, let me back up and explain briefly. U.S. attachés, and other countries' attachés, would request for visits to Russian military bases, would request to attend the Russian air show that used to be promoted, may still be, on an annual basis. Many times, at least a dozen times, I would be on a travel team. We would put together an itinerary. [00:50:00] We would go from our office and introduce it officially with a request to the Russian Ministry of Defense. Several times, the Ministry of Defense in Moscow would say, "Yes, you may go and visit this installation."

Almost without fail, what would happen is that the U.S. attachés would travel to the base installation in question, and we would get turned down at the



last minute, sometimes on the morning of the visit. And the phrase that we would almost always hear at the other end, the voice at the other end of the telephone line, was, “*K sozhaleniu, slozhnosti byvaiut.*” And for any non-Russian speaker, that is, “Unfortunately, there are complications.” And that was followed by, “Unfortunately, you cannot visit today. If you can come back in two or three days, or perhaps next week, perhaps we can let you visit then.” So in Moscow, they would approve it, and you would get to the destination and you would get turned down.

Now, every once in a while, you would successfully visit an installation, but then they would usually show you only those things that they wanted you to see and almost never, of course, the things that you would like to see—their best technology up close. To be fair, I’m pretty sure that, on the U.S. side, we would certainly limit their attachés’ access, to some degree at least. But as far as I know, at least at that time, [00:52:00] the Russian attachés were allowed to see and allowed to visit on a much more regular basis than the U.S. attachés assigned to Moscow. We from Embassy Moscow would complain about that back through channels to Washington, D.C. and say, “Why don’t you limit the Russian Federation attachés more than you do?” Sometimes they did, but I don’t think that they were ever limited as much here as we were in Russia.

BEHRINGER: And so even if the Russians were talking, if there were some conversations, which I think there were at least in the later nineties about maybe Russia joining

NATO, those types of discussions were just possibilities that were being talked about in a general way. There was never a serious negotiating posture on that.

KNOTTS: From my vantage point, I don't think so. In an ideal world, if you had a Boris Yeltsin, or, before him, a Mikhail Gorbachev, who seemed at least at times to be willing to deescalate from a nuclear standpoint and cooperate to a greater degree, I think there would still be some limitations as to how far each country would go given the forty-year period of non-cooperation that we typically call the Cold War now. [00:54:00] I mean, as I'm sure you know, but some of your viewers may not know, I was there in Moscow from [19]94 to '96. In the summer of '91, there was a coup that temporarily overthrew Michael Gorbachev and was defeated only because Boris Yeltsin did not go along with it. But then, by the end of that year, the Soviet Union went away, because Boris Yeltsin was then stronger politically than Mikhail Gorbachev.

That's just the way that the history, traditionally, has gone in the Russian Empire, in the Soviet Union, and now in the Russian Federation. There's just a tendency that a so-called strongman gathers the power. And we see that vividly now with Vladimir Putin, taken to an escalated level that, at least in my opinion, Vladimir Putin is the biggest threat that the U.S, and NATO has faced back to World War II. I tell my students in military history classes, "You are seeing now, Vladimir Putin is basically the Adolf Hitler of the 2020s."

BEHRINGER: Did you have any knowledge of Putin in the late nineties?



KNOTTTS: The short answer is yes. We know—it is publicized now—that he was a professional officer of the KGB, Committee for State Security. [00:56:00] He eventually became the head of the KGB.<sup>10</sup> At some point, I did become aware of him, because I was a U.S. intelligence officer, and we knew to some degree about the personalities of our potential adversaries. Certainly, when he was brought to Moscow and started to rise, then, within classified knowledge, and then publicly, I feared—I expected—that he would at least be a potent adversary. Even I did not foresee that he would basically become the great threat—the active threat—that he is now to European security.

BEHRINGER: When Yeltsin elevated him, and as he's rising through the government so rapidly after [19]96-97, what was your impression about why Yeltsin was doing that?

KNOTTTS: Yeltsin, to some degree, certainly was looking for able lieutenants, able subordinates on whom he could depend. I don't know now, and I don't know—I'm pretty sure that somewhere within U.S. intelligence—which, in my opinion, is the best in the world—I'm sure that somebody has a pretty good idea at what point Yeltsin started to consider Putin as his successor. I do not personally know that.

To try to answer your question, as Putin's profile rose, [00:58:00] I knew that he would, again, be at least an intelligent, savvy leader. What I did not

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<sup>10</sup> In Russian, KGB stands for *Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopastnosti*, or Committee on State Security. After the dissolution of the USSR, the KGB's successor organization became the *Federal'naiia sluzhba bezopastnosti* (FSB), or the Federal Security Service. Putin was a lieutenant colonel in the KGB and became head of the FSB in 1998.



foresee—certainly didn't predict at the time, knew it was a potential that he would be a dangerous adversary—but not at the time did I realize he would be a dangerous invader.

BEHRINGER: One of the major events that happened in [19]96 was the reelection of Boris Yeltsin, and it's been written about how the United States supported his reelection. When you were there, what types of discussions were you having about how much to support his reelection and whether he was of someone that the United States should continue to work with, or were there other options in the Russian leadership who you were looking at as, maybe, would be better for U.S.-Russian relations moving forward? What types of conversations were you having? Were you giving any advice about Yeltsin's state of mind or Yeltsin's policies, warning the United States or anything like that?

KNOTT: As far as the political realm, I can only give you my personal opinion, not to try to dodge your question, but because my specialty had to be in the military sphere. I did talk with on a daily basis, sometimes traveled with some of the political officers from the State Department, from Moscow, and so I knew some of their opinions. [01:00:00] My personal opinion is that we favored Yeltsin perhaps not as the number one that we would prefer to be there, but the number one that we thought had the political basis, the political power to maintain—and he was certainly a better candidate than some of the other far more conservative people at the time. So you can say perhaps, in hindsight, he was the lesser of evils. We knew, obviously, he had been the last communist leader of the Russian FSR

[federativnaia sotsialisticheskaiia Respublika, or Federative Socialist Republic] under the Soviet Union. We did not expect him to overall or overnight become a Western-style liberal democrat. I personally never expected Boris Yeltsin to be a far-left liberal democrat. But at least he did accede to democratic-style elections, and I think he was elected, reelected mainly legally. Now, the same cannot be said, as best I can tell, for some of the reelections of people like Vladimir Putin and probably countless others at regional and local levels. But I think that Yeltsin was reelected on a fairly legal, Western-style basis. So again, to answer your sub-question, he was a known entity that we thought we could deal with, and we thought had a pretty good chance [01:02:00] for being reelected.

BEHRINGER: So who did you work with in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow?

KNOTTS: In Moscow, again, I was the assistant air attaché, but I had the great experience—first of all, let me say that I cannot think of maybe but one or two State Department people that I worked with in three different embassies that I would prefer not to have worked with. Most of the State Department people—the vast majority of the State Department people with whom I worked were incredibly knowledgeable and very professional, to perhaps use that overused word, but were excellent professionals in what they did.

A couple of people I would specifically mention—I worked under, indirectly, for Ambassador Tom Pickering in Moscow. I know that he had been a US ambassador in at least two other countries before and including at least one Mideast country. I had the occasion to work directly with Ambassador Pickering—

I can think of about a half dozen occasions—and I got a chance to be a military escort to him on I think two facility visits. A couple of times, I got a chance to sit in the same car with him and speak with him person-to-person. My impressions of Ambassador Tom Pickering—he was one of the best we had, and I think he went on to be one of the deputies at the State Department if I understood correctly. But he was wonderful to work for. He was very good at his job, [01:04:00] and his Russian capabilities—although it was not, I think, his best foreign language capability, it was very impressive. So, in every facet I can think of, Ambassador Tom Pickering was among the best we had.

I also had—he was the political chief at the time at U.S. Embassy Moscow. My impressions even before he was elevated to his current, very high position—the chief of the political section at the time was then, let's call him political officer William Burns, usually referred to as Bill Burns, and he's now of course the director of CIA. I can tell you that I worked with him on a number of occasions as an attaché in Moscow. And again, as with Ambassador Pickering, I got a chance to go on at least two facility trips with Mr. Burns, and I found him very approachable, very down-to-earth. He would ask questions that obviously he wanted a direct and specific answer and a competent answer, but once he had a good impression of you, he never doubted the advice or guidance or responses that you were giving him.

And to me, to be able to work as a still-pretty-junior Air Force officer with such very capable State Department people was an incredible opportunity and was



a fascinating [01:06:00] experience. I was very close friends with an assistant who worked in the ambassador's office, and through her I made my interest known. I said to her, "If you hear that the ambassador or one of the principals wants to go to some sort of a military-related facility and they need somebody to go, say, 'I know somebody'." And then, once I had a chance to meet with Ambassador Pickering and Mr. Burns, I told them myself, "Anytime you need somebody, as long as it's okay with my boss, I'm your man." And they kept that in mind. And I had some incredible experiences as a result of that.

BEHRINGER: So you got to travel around the country quite a bit in your time as military attaché—what regions did you get to go to, and how would you compare those to the living conditions in Moscow? What were those trips like?

KNOTTS: I traveled more widely than I think most military attachés did. There are a couple of reasons for that. I became kind of the travel officer, travel person responsible for our travel program for the entire attaché office, at least unofficially. I worked with our non-commissioned officer on that. So every chance that I saw that I could, without offending somebody, that they needed somebody to go somewhere, I raised my hand and said, "I'll go." And partly as a result of that, I got a chance to go to more places than most attachés did. [01:08:00]

Another thing that helped me in that sense was that, unlike most military attachés, I, at the time, was single. And in fact, there was a hesitancy to allow single military officers to be attachés because U.S. managers thought that you would be more prone to temptation, shall we say, from being set up with a KGB—



or [what] became FSB—set-up, entrapment, in other words. I made it clear that I knew where the limits were and that I wasn't going to do that. And probably because also I was trusted by the office that had sent me to Minsk, they supported my going to Moscow as an unmarried officer.

But okay, to work back, you were asking what are some of the places that I had a chance to go to. I went to dozens of places, even in an official capacity. And the places I went to most notably would be, for example, in the spring of 1996, I went to Anadyr, in the far northeastern part of the country. I also, either in late [19]95 or the spring of '96, I went to Murmansk. And that was another occasion [where] I had set up a visit to the headquarters of the Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula. And that was one of the places [01:10:00] that we got one of the calls—*“Slozhnosti byvaiut. Nevozmozhno segodnia. It's not possible today to visit. If you can come back next week? Perhaps.”* They had authorized it in Moscow. We got to Murmansk, and, on the day of the visit, it got canceled. So that was—in some ways, it was heartbreaking. Was it totally unexpected? No. I was used to it by then. But I was in Murmansk in January. I think it was January of 1996. I saw temperatures there—I believe it was about 45 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. At an Anadyr, the same month, I had the fascinating experience—again, the visit to the local facility was canceled at the last minute, but I got a chance to see Anadyr, and I walked out on the frozen bay of Anadyr, and I saw parts of it freeze in the distance or go from a liquid to ice. That was fascinating. But the places we were walking on, you could tell that the ice was thick enough—you didn't have to worry



about it. But to walk out on that bay frozen over was an incredible experience. So those were some of the places I got a chance to see.

My biggest disappointment—I never got a chance to go to Vladivostok, and I wanted to go to Vladivostok for a number of reasons.

Now, on a personal basis, I traveled to many other places. I went several times to St. Petersburg and went to the Hermitage, for example. I went there probably a half dozen times. [01:12:00] In 1995 when I was halfway through my tour—I paid for some of it, my parents paid for some of it, but I brought to Russia, sponsored them to come to Russia—my father, my mother, my youngest brother and sister, and my daughter all came to Moscow. We traveled to a few places around Moscow, including a couple of the monasteries and the so-called Golden Ring. And then the most fascinating thing that I and we did—we traveled from Moscow to Irkutsk on the Trans-Siberian Railway. And we stopped in Irkutsk, and we stayed two days and nights on a hotel on Lake Baikal, and then we flew back from Irkutsk to Moscow. It was a wonderful experience. And I'm sure that whoever was following us, because I was there, was wondering, "What in the heck are they doing?"

But I told you that my father was a professor. He had retired by then. But he loved to talk to people. And at every place the Trans-Siberian train stopped, he'd grab me, and we would go out on the platform, and he would pick out at random people, just average Russians, and he'd go up and he would say, "My name is Kenneth Knots, and I'm a professor from the United States, and tell me about

yourself.” By the time that he had done that about a dozen times, he learned how to say [the introduction in Russian], “*Zdravstvuite, menia zovut Kenneth Knotts, ia professor.*” [01:14:00] But every other time that he stumbled, he would look to me, and I would be his interpreter. So that was fascinating for me and for my father, but my mother was terrified, because she was back on the train, and she was terrified that my father would keep talking so long that the train would go off and leave us, and she would be on the Trans-Siberian with no escort, with the kids, and with nobody to translate for her. And so, two or three times, she would fuss when we got back in the train compartment and say to my father, “Don’t you do that again! You almost got left!”

So it was a really wonderful experience, and most of the people with whom my father talked at first probably thought he was some kind of crazy man. But most of them, when they realized that he was truly just a tourist and wanted to know about them, they would talk about some of the things they did. And we talked [to] everybody, from—one guy was a train conductor that fell in my father’s footpath. There were a couple of farmers we talked to. There were a couple of shopkeepers. It was a wonderful experience.

BEHRINGER: That’s amazing. Yeah, that sounds great. And obviously something that, these days, Americans can’t do—just traveling around.

KNOTTS: No. And in fact, I would love to go back to Russia, but my wife and I have talked about it, and especially with some of the things that have happened with





some of the people, including one who is now in prison there, former military<sup>11</sup>—the chances of me getting framed [01:16:00] for something would be pretty great, and it's not worth the risk, unfortunately.

BEHRINGER: Is there anything that you disliked about living in Russia or that you wouldn't—what was the worst thing about living there?

KNOTTS: Let me say, first of all—I've certainly given the impression, I hope—but I very much enjoyed interacting on a daily basis with what I'll call the average Russian, the nonofficial person. What I will not miss the most is the idea that you're almost always being watched, sometimes even in a semi-threatening situation. I developed a negative view toward most of the Russian military officials with whom I interacted for the reasons I've told you. We would set up a visit, and yet I grew to expect that it was phony, that it would get canceled at the last minute. And more often than not, that's what happened. So I don't miss that.

The other things I don't miss were some of the things that I said before, were some of the saddest things I saw—some of the very poor people, especially the elderly women, that reminded me of what my grandmother might go through in a similar situation. To me, that was part of the saddest things that I saw in Russia—were the victims of the rise of the Russian economy. The prices were such

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<sup>11</sup> Here Lt. Col. Knotts is referring to Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine arrested in Russia in 2018 and convicted by a Russian court of espionage. As of this interview (2023), Mr. Whelan was still serving his 16 year sentence in Russia.

that the pensions—the people who were retired—they could not hope to buy even basic commodities, food or shelter. [01:18:00]

BEHRINGER: Moving a little bit to the end of your time in Russia and then after from a policy perspective—one of the goals of the project is looking at how the personal relations between presidents—American presidents and Russian presidents—affect or don't affect the broader U.S.-Russian relationship. What was your impression of President Clinton's relationship with President Yeltsin at the time and its impact on U.S.-Russian relations more broadly, either for good or for ill?

KNOTTS: I had a chance to see President Clinton [on] three separate occasions, if I remember correctly. To answer your question, I think that President Clinton was certainly very open and would push as far as he thought he could with President Yeltsin as far as promoting, again, Western-style, truly democratic measures. And I thought that President Yeltsin welcomed that to a point—to the point that it started detracting from his power base, I'm sure he would consider that himself a red line. But, as I said before, I think that, to a degree, he was willing to allow Western-style economics and political measures from my vantage point—perhaps not as far as Mikhail Gorbachev had done, but Yeltsin also had the perspective that he saw that in some ways that was letting the genie out of the bottle for Gorbachev. Gorbachev never intended to be the last general secretary of the Communist [01:20:00] Party of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin saw that, I'm sure, as a danger himself. So I think President Clinton realized, as I suspected, that there were certain points beyond which Yeltsin would not go. But he probably

welcomed, I think, the fact that at least Yeltsin was willing to go to fairly democratic-style elections, for example.

I would also say I had the occasion even more frequently to watch then First Lady, later Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton interact on a number of issues. I was in the room several times when she walked into a room, and she was obviously extremely intelligent, very capable. She sometimes was, as a woman expressing some of the views that she did, even with some Russian officials—they probably privately did not welcome it, but they always listened to her and to some degree, I think, respected her. And that was always very interesting to me to get that opportunity.

I mentioned before Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, Vice President Gore. I think that Chernomyrdin was more open than many believed he might be to Western-style economics and politics. But again, I'm sure that he privately had red lines himself. And Vice President Gore I saw more often than either of the Clintons. And I know that Vice President Gore was going to push [01:22:00] as far as he could without offending Chernomyrdin, and I think he did. Unfortunately, again, as Putin rose to power, people like Chernomyrdin got cast aside.

BEHRINGER: And do you remember—you can answer this either at the moment or in hindsight—what did you think of George W. Bush's approach to Russia when the administration came in and then how his relationship developed with Vladimir Putin?

KNOTTS: Again, I was not in the diplomatic circles, and so I did not see President Bush personally as I did President Clinton. But I can tell you from a military officer's standpoint and with diplomatic background, I thought that President George W. Bush had a very realistic approach to dealing with Russian officials—by then, Vladimir Putin. And I think that President Bush was realistic in that he sought areas that he thought that President Putin would cooperate on—for example, common terrorist threats and, to some degree, reductions in nuclear arms. I think that President Bush realized that, as time went on, that President Putin was less receptive to true cooperation and probably would not fully cooperate on just about anything except where Russia gained [01:24:00] an advantage in doing so. So in that way, I think President George W. Bush was quite realistic in seeking areas that the U.S. and the Russian Federation could cooperate in, at least to some degree.

BEHRINGER: Do you think that the way that relations played out, first with the war in Georgia and U.S.-Russian relations ending up at a very low point at that moment, despite all the hard work that the Bush administration did to create a rapport between the two countries—was that in some sense inevitable, or what were some of the big mistakes on the U.S. side, if there were any that would've made a difference?

KNOTTS: At the time—I'm thinking that my response might have been different in that I might have speculated that President George W. Bush might have done a few things, might have pressed harder on a few issues. In hindsight now, in 2023, seeing what Vladimir Putin has turned out to be, I would be less critical of actions

of either President Clinton or President George W. Bush, because we now see vividly what Vladimir Putin not only potentially could be, but has become. And are there things that somebody could have done along the way to negate that?

Perhaps. Possibly. But I doubt it, because he has shown, especially in his invasions of Ukraine, just how crass and, frankly, evil he is. [01:26:00]

BEHRINGER: As long as we're talking about the Bush administration, the biggest event of the last couple decades and certainly of the Bush administration was 9/11, and I understand that you were actually working in the Pentagon at the time. Would you mind telling us what that day was like and what happened and your experience?

KNOTTS: Yes, I consider myself actually quite fortunate that I am one of the ones who walked out unhurt from the Pentagon that day. I, at the time, was a branch chief as an Air Force lieutenant colonel, worked for Joint Staff intelligence on a daily basis. Either I and/or some of my subordinates would brief the two-star admiral, at that point, who was the Joint Staff intelligence officer. And we would have briefings each day at about five o'clock in the morning. That would be the start of his day. He, the intel chief would then go and brief, based on his previous briefing, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And so that's where I was and why I was there in the Pentagon, in the basement of the Pentagon, on 11 September of [20]01.

In hindsight, certainly one of the things we had been concerned about was potential terrorist attacks, but we had not anticipated what happened that day. At least, I don't know of anybody who specifically had anticipated that. [01:28:00] The

way the day unfolded for me was I had gone to my briefing that I was briefing, and then had gone to an eight o'clock meeting where we discussed the issues that we knew about that were bubbling and that we were preparing to brief on the following day. That is the venue in which somebody ran into the room and said, "Turn on the TV. A plane has flown into the World Trade Center." And so that's the first word that we got.

And so we turn on the TV and, just like just about everybody else in the United States, were horrified, but also thinking, what's going on here? Though, sitting in that room, we're probably thinking even more so, is this just an accident? Doesn't look like it. We were commenting, you could see in the background—the sky was clear. There was not a cloud in the sky. And so we had our doubts as to whether it was an accident, and then, at some point, we saw the second plane go in, and at that point, two or three of us said, "This is an attack." And so we started speculating, "Okay, what's going on? What should we do?" And I, and the Navy commander—he and I worked closely together; our spaces were adjoining. He was the "Asia shop" commander. He and I looked at each other. He said, "Well, you know, if there are more aircraft in the air, we can't be too far down the target list."

Now we did not know that [01:30:00] at the time, but we were already saying, "Hey we better be a little bit concerned, too." And then we went back to our spaces with the knowledge that things were not going well, and so we were starting to make contingency plans—"what if?"

When the aircraft that hit the Pentagon actually hit, I did not feel it, even though I was not too far from the point of impact. It is such a massive building. I did not feel it. A young lady who worked for me, a colleague, ran into the office space. She said, “The building’s on fire, the building’s on fire. We’ve got to get out of here.” That was my first indication that there was a direct threat to us. But again, we did not know immediately that an aircraft had hit the Pentagon. We soon figured out that is what happened.

I was positively impressed with the way that everybody around me that I saw personally—how they conducted themselves. They did not panic. They did not go ballistic. They did not say, “Let’s get the heck out of here.” My first concern—“Where is everybody? Do we know where everybody is?” And we knew where all but one person was. And it turned out later he was actually on leave that day, and I had not been aware of that. We, in an orderly manner, but without delay, [secured classified spaces and] started getting up the staircases to the ground level.

Something else that stands out in my memory—and [01:32:00] I don’t see myself as any hero in doing this—but there was a lady who was in a wheelchair, we were concerned that she could not get up the escalators. We didn’t want her to use the elevators. So, actually, there were about four people standing around, including a Navy guy that I knew, that I worked with fairly often. I said, “Look, let’s just all—we will carry her together up the steps. Let’s get her up the steps.” I didn’t ask the lady her name, and I do not know it, but that’s something that I remember because we did get her up to the ground level, and somehow somebody got



another wheelchair for her, got her in the wheelchair, and a security policeman pushed her outside the building. So we saw that she had gotten safely out, and we were trying to get everybody else out, too.

We were wondering who were the unlucky ones, because we knew that in a building that size with so many thousands of people in there that somebody had died. We did not know that until later. We got outside in a parking lot, south parking of the Pentagon, and people were just standing around, and I talked to a couple of other branch chiefs and said, “Hey, there’s, it’s possible that this is a multi-phase attack. Somebody could start lobbing mortar rounds into this parking lot. Let’s start moving people.” And we started moving toward a little hillock—a hill, basically—and away from the parking lot. One of my superiors, whose name I will not publicly say, said, “What are you doing? [01:34:00] We’re supposed to stay here.” I said so and so and repeated what I just said: “I’m moving my people over here.”

We were also trying to find somebody with a cell phone. Not a whole lot of people had cell phones at that time. We had put together a list of all our personnel, their next of kin, the phone number that that person could be notified at. And so we finally found a staff sergeant who had a cell phone, and she let us use it. One of my subordinates then just went down that whole list and said, “So-and-so,” I’m talking for—I’ll use Maureen—“just to let you know she’s okay.”

There were a couple of people that had no earthly idea what was even going on. One of my senior civilians—his father said, “What are you talking about?” We





said, “Sir, please turn on the TV. You’ll see what we’re talking about.” And so we were trying to let loved ones know [that] we were still alive. But—and then I’ll share this too—one of the most beautiful sites I have ever seen—we were very concerned that there were other aircraft with terrorists on board that were still potential threats. One of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen—all of a sudden, there was a huge bang, and it was a sonic boom, and there was a flight of two U.S. Air Force F-16s that had been sent at supersonic speed, max thrust, from Langley Air Force Base to Washington, D.C. And they flew and did a modified starburst<sup>12</sup> over the Pentagon. [01:36:00] And you would not believe the cheering that went on at that point, because we knew that we were safe now from any approaching threatening aircraft, that those F-16s would protect us. And that has to be, short of being present at the birth of my daughter and my son and marrying my wife, that has to stand out as one of the most beautiful sights I’ve ever seen.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for sharing that. I did a little work in the Pentagon in the 2007–2010 era.<sup>13</sup>

KNOTTS: I didn’t realize that.

BEHRINGER: And so I’d often walk past the—indoors, they have the area where the planes hit, and then of course the memorial outside. I’ve worked with some people who were there that day, but never got to hear their stories. It’s a privilege to take yours down.

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<sup>12</sup> Referring to an aerial maneuver in which a tight formation of aircraft rapidly split from each other.

<sup>13</sup> Behringer was a contract media analyst in the Public Affairs Research and Analysis office.

KNOTTS: More than anything else, I felt fortunate that I was able to walk out unhurt that day, and I feel extremely bad for those who did not. And the knowledge is there that—again, we were even speculating later—had the terrorist pilot kept that aircraft in the air for even another second or two, I would not be here today. I would have died that day. And across 20 years of service—20 years and a couple of months—I volunteered twice for combat duty, was never selected for combat duty, was told, “Stay where you are, we’ll call you if we need you.” But I’ve got one day of combat on my record, [01:38:00] if you will. And it was 11th of September of [20]01, because everybody who was there that day was ad hoc awarded one day of combat pay.

BEHRINGER: Deservedly so. I think I’ve taken enough of your time, but I wanted to get some of your thoughts on your time in Turkmenistan. Not many Americans have been able to live there. So, just to, to start off, what was it like to live in—or I don’t know if we talked about this quite yet, but how did you come to work in Ashgabat, and then what was it like getting there?

KNOTTS: The same man who had sent me to Minsk for a few months because of personnel issues was the man who offered me the job in Ashgabat. And in a joking sense, the way I found out about it was, he said, “How would you like to be the crown prince of Ashgabat?” And he was of course, joking, but I said, using his first name, “At least I know where Ashgabat is. Tell me more.” And in Reader’s-Digest-condensed version, he says, “Well, again, I’ve got somebody that was supposed to go there that, for other reasons, cannot go there. Could you go there for a year,

approximately, perhaps longer?” I said, “Let me make a couple of phone calls, but my tentative answer is yes,” and eventually, my formal answer was yes.

It was, in some ways, even more amazing than being in Minsk or Moscow. I’ve traveled through deserts before, but, for somebody who does not know, Ashgabat is on the [01:40:00] edge—an edge—of the Karakum Desert. And so for a year I lived in a desert and only about 20 or so miles away from Iran, or at least the border with Iran. I worked for a very capable U.S. ambassador, but the U.S. ambassador had differences with, disputes with the Department of Defense. Because he had disagreements with the Department of Defense, he would not allow me to live on the diplomatic compound. So I lived in an apartment—in a hotel—right across the street from the U.S. diplomatic compound. So I had some of the benefits of the location, but I did not have the security, for example, that people who lived on the compound had better than I did.

Another thing that was fascinating about being in Ashgabat—the president of Turkmenistan at the time was President [Saparmurat] Niyazov. He called himself *Türkmenbaşy*,<sup>14</sup> which meant “the head of the Turkmen.” In short, the political atmosphere in Turkmenistan was one of hero worship, cult of the personality. From 1991 to 1992, I had served a one-year remote [tour] in U.S. Forces in Korea.<sup>15</sup> I saw [01:42:00] on a day-to-day basis matters related to the cult of the personality of Kim Il Sung. Basically, you had the same kind of political

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<sup>14</sup> Pronounced “Turkmenbashi”

<sup>15</sup> United States Forces Korea (USFK) is the joint headquarters for American forces in South Korea.

atmosphere for Niyazov in Turkmenistan. Indicative of that, there was a circular staircase that led from my second-floor apartment down to the lobby. At the foot of the circular staircase was about a seven-foot-tall statue of President Niyazov. It was gold plated, but it was not pure gold, as best I could tell. I'm no gem expert. But there were statues of Niyazov everywhere around Ashgabat. There was one that was installed about the same time I was there that actually would move, and the forefinger, index finger of Niyazov would be pointed toward the sun as it went from one horizon to the opposite horizon. That was about as bizarre and extreme a cult of the personality as was possible, and that's what existed.

Now, yes, this hand [hold up his right hand] twice shook the hand of President Niyazov. Did I consider it an honor? No, not really. It was neat to be able to say, "Hey, I shook the hand of the great Türkmenbaşy. He was, again, not too far from being a Vladimir Putin. A few of his political opponents were known to have met with an [01:44:00] untimely death, for example. So Niyazov was no left-leaning liberal democrat, by any stretch of the imagination. But that was the political atmosphere.

Turkmenistan was somewhat interested in Partnership for Peace, as I mentioned before, but only so far, really, as it benefited them on a military-force-to-military-force level or relationship. Under Niyazov, they were careful to show that they had somewhat independent policies—they did not kowtow, in other words, to every single thing that Moscow told them to do. But they were certainly closer politically, and certainly militarily, to Moscow, to the Russian Federation,



than they ever probably would've been willing to be with the U.S. and/or other NATO countries.

BEHRINGER: It's a famously closed society. Were you able to meet or fraternize at all with average citizens or anything like that?

KNOTTS: Not usually. I did go to the market a lot and so interacted often. Many of the Turkmen, because of their former Soviet Republic status, either spoke or understood some Russian, and I learned a couple of Turkmen phrases, but never to the point that I could really carry on a conversation. So any time of business, I would usually use Russian, and it usually worked. But to answer your question, I frequently would go to places [01:46:00] like common stores or to the market.

I had the unfortunate experience of having to help get out of a Turkmen jail a U.S. person who got in trouble when he was there. One of the political officers called me because they thought that I could help, and so I actually got inside a Turkmen jail and helped get an American out of jail, released, so that he could return to the United States, which he ultimately did.

Let me share a funny story. I won't use the man's first name, but there was a gentleman who was well known by the American diplomats at the time in Ashgabat who owned a camel. And he had an informal relationship with the U.S. diplomats and would, every couple of weekends, every couple of weeks, would bring the camel—whose name was Joe, as in Camel cigarettes, Joe the Camel—would bring Joe the camel to the diplomatic compound and let little kids and visiting delegations and diplomats, when they wanted to, ride the camel. I

developed a closer relationship with the owner of the camel, and I would sometimes go and visit their place, and I would pay for some of the food and upkeep of Joe. And I even was allowed to take Joe on a couple of personal rides [01:48:00] and went to a couple of parks that were not too far from Ashgabat and probably got pretty close to a couple of places that I wasn't really supposed to be. But I was just out riding my camel, you know? I got a chance to get to know the owner fairly well and see his kids and his family, and they thought it was quite amusing, I'm sure, that they were using this U.S. diplomat to help finance—probably do most of the feeding—of the camel, but I enjoyed having the ability to go most days if I wanted to and visit Joe the camel and ride him when I wanted to. So it was a fun experience.

BEHRINGER: I hope you got some pictures of you on Joe the camel.

KNOTTS: I've got a couple of pictures of me on Joe.

BEHRINGER: Were there any stories or any insights that you wanted to share that we didn't make it through?

KNOTTS: Let me give a couple of examples. I've already mentioned what a wonderful experience it was to work with Ambassador Pickering, with now Director Bill Burns. There were also a couple of other outstanding State Department people that I would like to mention. I mentioned his name before—Ambassador David Swartz was the U.S. ambassador in Minsk when I was there. In sharp contrast to the U.S. ambassador in Ashgabat, Ambassador Swartz could not have been more welcoming. He was very pleased to have a Department of Defense person there. He

opened as many doors for me as you can imagine. So Ambassador Schwartz was wonderful to [01:50:00] be around and to work for, and I learned a lot from him. He later, I think, went on to be in charge of some negotiations, I believe even related—I forget the specific title, but he went on to other important fora, let’s put it that way.<sup>16</sup>

His deputy was a man named George Krol, and George, as I was leaving, actually got a very nice presento for me and had a little plaque put on it: My name—[it] said, “First defense attaché to Minsk,” knowing that was not [my] official [title], but it was a nice thing that George did. George, I believe, went on to be an ambassador—but I’m not sure where—and I’m sure he went on to be a department head in the State Department, and he may be even higher than that now.<sup>17</sup> But George Krol was another very knowledgeable, highly professional State Department person that I worked with.

The other person that I would mention would be, ultimately, Ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller. I first encountered her when she was a political, I think, section head in Moscow, then working for Mr. Burns. And then Tatiana, at the same time that I was asked to go down to be the military attaché in Ashgabat, she became the

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<sup>16</sup> From 2001 to 2003, Amb. Swartz headed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Moldova. <https://blogs.lawrence.edu/news/2005/04/former-ambassador-discusses-eastern-europe%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cunfinished-business%E2%80%9D-in-lawrence-university-international-relations-series-lecture.html>.

<sup>17</sup> George Krol served as the U.S. ambassador to Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan during the George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump administrations. He was also the director of the State Department’s Office of Russian Affairs, minister counselor for political affairs at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, and deputy assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

deputy, or the chargé d'affaires, in Ashgabat. She ultimately went on to be a U.S. ambassador, I believe in Kyrgyzstan. And she's another just outstanding State Department professional that I had the chance to work for and with [01:52:00] who went on to bigger and better things. From my perspective, it made no difference that she was a she, a female, but I thought it was especially impressive that she might have been—there certainly were people in Turkmenistan and other places in Central Asia that I'm sure had doubts about her capabilities because she was a woman. I think she and others have put, cast all those doubts aside now, showing what a competent and very smart and capable American diplomat she went on to be. And I had the pleasure of working with her in Moscow and then working for her in Ashgabat.

And there were others too. Ambassador Michael Cotter in Ashgabat was top-notch. It's just that he had negative views about the Department of Defense, and that's the reason he would not allow me to live on his diplomatic compound. But as far as being an ambassador and doing a great job, I commend him for that.

**[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]**