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U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: David Kramer

Senior Assistant to the Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, 2001-2003
State Department Policy Planning Staff, 2003-2005
Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, 2005-2008
Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2008-2009

Interviewers:

Paul Behringer,
Post-Doctoral Fellow, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University
Simon Miles,
Assistant Professor, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

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[Transcription Begins]

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

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

KRAMER: And I'm David Kramer. I'm a senior fellow at the Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University in Miami.

BEHRINGER: Professor Kramer, thank you so much for being with us today. Could you begin by describing your roles in the George W. Bush administration?

KRAMER: Sure. Thanks for having me, first, and happy to do this. I started in the administration in June of 2001 as senior advisor to the under secretary for global affairs, Paula Dobriansky. And then in 2003, I shifted over to the Policy Planning Staff, where I focused on Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia. And, summer of 2005, I became the deputy assistant secretary for Europe and Eurasia, with responsibility for Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, and non-proliferation matters. And then, toward the end of the administration, in March of 2008, I was confirmed as the assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor.

BEHRINGER: And could you describe the different schools of thought within the Bush administration on relations with Russia and where you fit into that?

KRAMER: Sure. I think there were—you could break it down into two, I would say. There were those who believed in the importance of engagement with the Russians, and

then those who took a harder-line view, who felt that this constant engagement was not leading anywhere and might even do some harm. And so, [00:02:00] I think the former was represented more at the NSC, and the latter was represented more in the vice president's office, at the State Department—though not throughout the entire department, but mostly at State—as well as at the Pentagon.

BEHRINGER: And where did you fall in those two camps, would you say?

KRAMER: I fell into the harder-line camp and had some disagreements with colleagues at the NSC—I think all internal, I don't recall that there was a public disagreement—and some of them pretty heated disagreements. But I was of the camp that endless engagement and reaching out and the dialogue channels that had been established, I didn't feel were the most effective use of U.S. officials' time.

MILES: And, just to get a sense of context, how did you come to form your views on Russia? What was your background in dealing with Russia prior to your service in the Bush administration?

KRAMER: So I studied it in college, went to graduate school, focused on, back then, Soviet Studies—to reveal how old I am—and then continued it when I moved to D.C. in '93, first at CSIS[1] and then at the Carnegie Endowment. So, I have spent most of my career focused on, again, starting with the Soviet Union and then dealing with Russia, Ukraine, and the other countries in the region. And so think

[1] The Center for Strategic and International Studies

tank world before government, some teaching before I moved down to Washington, up in Massachusetts, and that's been my both passion and focus.

MILES: And the Bush administration is interesting because [00:04:00] it actually has a lot of, let's say, Soviet hands—not just yourself, but others, and some in quite high positions—[National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice at NSC and then State, [Secretary of Defense Robert] Gates at DoD. Do you have any thoughts on how the presence of so many people who were Russia experts—maybe some would draw the distinction between being a Russia expert and a Soviet expert—what impact that had on the thrust of U.S. policy towards Russia as a whole?

KRAMER: So, I would say that being a Soviet expert didn't necessarily translate into being a Russia expert. And there were perhaps some—I'm not speaking of any specific people that you mentioned—but some who grew up studying and following the Soviet Union, traveling there, who then maybe didn't quite understand the transition that occurred and the change that occurred that brought about Russia as an independent state and the other countries as independent states. And yet, I think, for most people—and I would include the ones you mentioned—Secretaries Rice and Gates—that experience, I think, was very useful for their understanding for Russia. So being a Soviet expert didn't always mean you were an astute Russian observer, but I think in the case of the people you mentioned, it did.

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned that the view of the more hardline camp, shall we say, was that there was too much engagement with Russia. So this view was actually coming out of the Clinton administration's policy toward Russia, not necessarily—[00:06:00] let me reframe the question. Was that view directed against Vladimir Putin specifically, or at this period was it more of a broader view on U.S.-Russian relations? In other words, were you skeptical of Putin from the beginning and worried about that, about his background?

KRAMER: I personally was skeptical of Putin from the beginning, given his background. I was never of the view that he was somebody we could work with, to borrow Margaret Thatcher's view of Mikhail Gorbachev after she first met him. But I think you have to keep in mind that some of these views were shaped during the campaign in 2000 with a very critical look at the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, a sense that the Clinton administration looked the other way too often, whether it was in '93 with the showdown with the Russian Parliament; '94 with the First Chechen War; '95-'96 with the loans for shares; '96 with the Russian presidential election, in which President Clinton visited two months before and provided assistance. So I think there was this sense that we were too accommodating to a government, granted, compared to the Putin regime, that was friendlier toward us than the one that's been in power for the past 21 years.

But I think it is just being candid to acknowledge that some domestic politics had something to do with this. And then, once the election was over,

President Bush assumed office, the famous meeting in Ljubljana. That kind of changed things. And the rather critical view that I think some of us had taken into the administration was put to the side as President Bush was [00:08:00] interested in trying to find ways to work with Putin.

BEHRINGER: And another topic that came up at that first meeting between Bush and Putin was the Bush administration's intention to withdraw from the ABM—Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Can you talk about why the Bush administration made that decision and went ahead with missile defense over obvious Russian concerns about abrogating the treaty?

KRAMER: The decision, as I recall it, had much less to do with Russia than it did Iran. And I think President Bush and his top advisors felt that the ABM Treaty was tying the hands of the United States to be able to defend itself against what it considered to be a rising threat coming from Iran specifically. It wasn't just Iran, but it was Iran in particular.

And so I think the decision obviously had a major impact on Russia. It meant having to abrogate the treaty, which President Bush gave a heads-up to Putin that he planned to do. Putin, obviously, was not happy about it. He worried that the missile defense system that President Bush had in mind could be used to negate any potential Russian capability to maintain deterrence with the United States that would give the United States the upper hand.

But that isn't what President Bush had in mind. He had in mind protecting the U.S. homeland and U.S. allies that developed over the years. And I think that Putin kind of got it, but as the two terms of the administration went on, there was a [00:10:00] much greater interest on the Russian side to use this issue to score political points against us as much as possible. And so I think to the extent that one wants to criticize what we did on missile defense and the ABM Treaty, it was perhaps not taking into account Russian interests as much as we might have or should have, but this might've been one of those issues where we simply weren't going to agree, and it may have been one of those issues where we had to agree to disagree and try to minimize the disruption and damage to the relationship as much as possible.

BEHRINGER: And what did you think about Russian offers to negotiate and cooperate on the various radar systems—placement of them in former Soviet spaces, and—

KRAMER: I don't think we took them all that seriously, to be honest. I think they were designed to scuttle the plans that we had. And at the risk of getting ahead of where you want to be now, but just to quickly fast forward—I went to the two 2+2 meetings that Rice and Gates had with their Russian counterparts in the fall of 2007 and March of 2008, and it was clear to me, both before that and during those meetings, that the Russians did understand that the system we had in mind in Poland and the Czech Republic were not a threat to Russia's capabilities, but they simply did not like the fact that the United States was working with two countries

that the Soviet Union used to control—former members of the Warsaw Pact—and that we were working with them on a missile defense system. And I think that was really the bottom Russian line on this.

And so these ideas of radars in Azerbaijan and elsewhere were simply designed to try to throw a monkey wrench into our plans. The systems weren't compatible. There were many problems with them. [00:12:00] I don't know how serious, frankly, the Russians were about them, other than, if it was a way to screw up our plans on a missile defense with the Poles and the Czechs, then that would make them happy.

BEHRINGER: And then less than three months after that first meeting in Ljubljana, to take us back, 9/11 happens. Can you talk a little bit about how 9/11 changed the relationship?

KRAMER: After Ljubljana, after the famous "looked into his eyes and saw his soul" comment that the president made, 9/11 happened, and then Putin was the first foreign leader to contact the president and offer assistance and provided a green light for [the] U.S. to fly over Russian territory, and Central Asian territory—even though technically Putin didn't have control over those Central Asian states, there was a certain reality to it—and created the impression that he was going to be supportive of what President Bush felt he needed to do in response to the attacks on 9/11.

And so obviously that then triggered an invitation to him to come to the United States in November of that year, and it seems that the contentious issue of missile defense might not be such a big deal, that the two presidents were actually hitting it off, and there was some hope in certain circles that Putin was signaling that he was prepared to work with us—work with us on counterterrorism, work with us in Afghanistan.

After all, in moving into Afghanistan, we were also addressing a problem for Putin himself with the instability in Afghanistan, the spillover effects into Central Asia that would then also go into Russia—the trafficking of drugs, opium in particular, heavily went into Russia from Afghanistan. And so anything that could be done to try [00:14:00] to reduce that transport of drugs was in Russia's favor. And so I think there was a sense in the Kremlin that we could possibly work together to try to address this common problem. And I think that was well-received by the White House as well.

BEHRINGER: And one of the areas of mutual cooperation or potential mutual cooperation were links between al-Qaeda and the Chechen secessionists in Russia. So you, actually, about a month before President Bush went to Moscow to sign the SORT Treaty, I saw that you met with Chechen foreign minister Ilyas Akhmadov. Do you remember anything about that meeting, and did the talks between the Chechens and the Bush administration officials—did it have any effect at all on

cooperative efforts between [Washington] and the Kremlin on counterterrorism efforts?

KRAMER: So that meeting took quite a while to arrange. Originally it was going to be held inside the building—inside of the State Department on C Street. And then Secretary [of State Colin] Powell decided that the meetings should still go ahead, but it should not occur inside the department. And so we actually met—well, I was going to say on the campus of GW.[2] GW doesn't really have a campus. Putting that aside, we met at a building at GW. I was there, and I was joined by two State Department colleagues, both career foreign service officers in charge of the Russia desk. One was the director of the Russia desk. The other was responsible for the human rights portfolio dealing with Russia.

And this was another [00:16:00] issue that was raised during the campaign in 2000 and continued into the Bush administration, where we felt that the Clinton administration, once again, after the second invasion of Chechnya in '99, following suspicious series of bombings that killed 300 people in Russia, we felt that the Clinton administration was much too soft. And I had even written, when I was still at Carnegie, pieces critical of the administration on this—for example, holding up the IMF deal that was promised and an EXIM Bank[3] loan without specifically linking it to the Russian invasion of Chechnya, which was just an appalling human rights situation, with indiscriminate bombing and lots of civilian

[2] George Washington University
[3] The Export-Import Bank of the United States

lives lost in the process. And so there was an interest in trying to push for an end to that conflict when the Bush administration came into office, and one of the ways that we thought was a possibility was to talk to Akhmadov and see if he might be in a position to represent strong enough forces to negotiate some sort of end and resolution to it.

He was viewed as a terrorist by the officials in Moscow. They were not happy with the meeting, but it didn't cause such a break in relations or even in cooperation on counter-terrorism, in part because it was kept at a low level. I was the senior advisor of the under secretary at the time. The others were the office director and the human rights officer, so it wasn't at the deputy assistant secretary level, so it probably was not high enough to have triggered enough of a reaction. I was very unhappy with [00:18:00] Secretary Powell's decision to move the meeting out of the building. I thought that was unnecessary, and I think it's a wrong signal that we were bowing to what we anticipated would be Russian criticism and pressure.

But nevertheless, at least the meeting did go forward, and I think it was the right thing to do. I had, both in '94 to '96 and '99 and beyond, had focused on this issue a lot because I think it represented just an absolutely abysmal human rights record for, first, the Yeltsin government and then including into the Putin government. And so, on that basis, I felt sweeping the problem under the rug,

pretending these human rights abuses were not occurring, was the wrong thing to do.

BEHRINGER: And this is the same meeting that—or one of the people who attended the meeting with you, is that John Beyrle?

KRAMER: No, no, it was—

BEHRINGER: So that's a different—

KRAMER: If I can remember, it was Seth Winnick and Tim Richardson.

BEHRINGER: Okay. So there were multiple meetings with Chechen officials?

KRAMER: I'm trying to remember. Not that I recall. My recollection is that that meeting was the only one, but if John met with them, then it's certainly possible.

MILES: Beyrle says that their meeting also took place in an office at the Elliott School or somewhere at GW.

KRAMER: Huh. Okay. That's interesting. I'm getting senile, but my recollection is that it was three of us. It was Seth Winnick, Tim Richardson, and me. I don't remember that John was there, but if John says he was, I'm in no position to question him.

MILES: Could be a different meeting. [00:20:00] That's not—

KRAMER: It's possible. It's possible.

MILES: Paul, we should dig into that a little bit.

BEHRINGER: Yeah. I think he might have mentioned different people with him, so it—

KRAMER: Okay. Sounds like different meetings then, okay.

MILES: Interesting.

BEHRINGER: Yeah. So that's 2002. And then, of course, you have the run-up to the Iraq War and the Iraq invasion. Can you talk a little bit about how the Iraq War, the invasion of Iraq, its impact on relations between Moscow and Washington and did Russian officials continue to raise the invasion as a big sticking point?

KRAMER: I would say not as much as people might've anticipated for the following reason. I think they enjoyed the fact that Germany and France did not support the invasion. And so they were more interested in tapping into the differences within NATO and within the West and letting that play out more than creating a huge rift between Washington and Moscow over this. They were, of course, opposed to it and were not happy with it, but I would say that that issue—if you look at the ABM decision and then you look at the invasion of Iraq, those two issues on our side were arguably, at that point at least, the two biggest sources of friction in the relationship. From their side, it was the situation in Chechnya. It was the declining human rights situation overall, which then gets much worse in October 2003—so, six months later, with the arrest of [Yukos CEO Mikhail] Khodorkovsky—and the color revolutions. I think those things, maybe surprisingly, had a bigger impact on the relationship [00:22:00] than the U.S. invasion of Iraq did in March of 2003.

BEHRINGER: And were you involved in any of the meetings in the run-up to the invasion, trying to bring the Russians along, meeting with Russian officials and trying to explain the rationale and get them to sign off on the various UN resolutions and not fall into the French and German camp?

KRAMER: No, I was not. I was still the senior advisor to the under secretary for global affairs. My only role with Iraq, the decision on Iraq, was to occasionally attend some meetings that the under secretary for political affairs, Marc Grossman, organized to represent Paula Dobriansky's office. But no, I was not involved in efforts to try to persuade the Russians.

BEHRINGER: And one thing we haven't raised yet is NATO expansion.

KRAMER: Yeah.

BEHRINGER: Can you talk about your position on NATO expansion, and were you involved at all in the debates over the specific approach that the Bush administration landed on, which is known as the "Big Bang" approach, bringing everybody in all at once, in 2004?

KRAMER: Yeah, I supported NATO enlargement, and that did come the following year, in 2004, which added to the list that—from their perspective, that was yet another issue on our side that we were responsible for. And I felt strongly that the Baltic states needed NATO membership to be more secure—they earned NATO membership—and that granting Russia de facto veto over any country's aspirations would be the wrong thing to do. [00:24:00] Figuring out how to manage the differences over that issue and the friction that would come was important. And I was in the Policy Planning Office by that point, when this happened.

The decision on enlargement was made way above my pay grade, so I really didn't have any say in the matter. But I think it was the right decision. And I think history has shown that it was the right decision in the sense that those countries are more secure as a result of Article 5 security guarantees. Without that, I think Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—those three in particular, because I think those are the three that, among that batch, mattered the most to Moscow. It's bad enough that Estonia was the target of a cyberattack in 2007, but it might've been much worse if they were not NATO members, as we've seen with Ukraine and Georgia.

So, point of friction and some tension for sure. Remember, early on though, Putin—I think it was rather disingenuous, let's put it that way—expressed interest in having Russia join NATO, but that, of course, would have been on Russia's terms, not on NATO's terms. And I think our view was, "Sorry, if you want to join the Alliance, then you have to meet the criteria and you have to win consensus," and neither of those was going to be possible. So, while Putin dangled that idea, I don't think it was serious, and I don't think there was really any way—even if we were interested in entertaining that possibility, and I do think that there was a little consideration to that—that we could never have gotten consensus among NATO allies on that issue.

BEHRINGER: And that expansion [00:26:00] happens in the middle of the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan—

KRAMER: During a presidential election in Russia.

BEHRINGER: What was the Bush administration's approach to the color revolutions? What types of support were offered, or how did they support the revolutions both during and after the elections there? And would you differentiate, in terms of their importance, between Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan?

KRAMER: I think it depends. Importance for whom would be one response I'd have, but I think Ukraine may not have happened had it not been for Georgia the year before. So the Rose Revolution was, I think, as important as Ukraine. And while there was, I think, some good feelings, positive vibe towards [President Eduard] Shevardnadze, just given his history and relations with the United States when he was Soviet foreign minister and even as president of Georgia, coming to power was Mikheil Saakashvili, who spoke great English and knew the United States so well and quickly bonded with President Bush. So I think that revolution was important. I think we had virtually nothing to do with it except scrambling to keep up with what was happening on the ground. I know there is—I'm not attributing this to you, of course—but there's the myth out there that we fomented these revolutions, or, as Putin accused Hillary Clinton in 2011, of "giving the signal"—no such signals, no such fomenting, none of those things was done. We were scrambling to keep up with what the hell was happening there because it was a rather dizzying experience.

Same thing in Ukraine, although that played out [00:28:00] over a bit longer period of time. And, in that case, I do remember vividly a debate within the

administration. This was after the second round, where [Viktor] Yanukovych tried to steal the election. Secretary Powell had just come back from a trip, and I and some others within the department, with support, from the NSC and the vice president's office, urged him to go out and basically say the following, which is, "We do not accept these results as legitimate." And I do think Powell's statement at that point, as there were protests forming over the second round and the falsification of it—I think Powell's statement was very important. And we did try to play, Senator [Richard] Lugar at that time, and others tried to play a mediating role.

And so I think we were more involved in the situation in Ukraine than we were in Georgia. We had an opportunity to be more involved because it played out over a longer period of time. But, at the end of the day, this was driven by Ukrainians, just as, the previous year, the Rose Revolution was driven by Georgians. And I think we were as surprised as anybody by the reaction of Ukrainian citizens who turned out in massive numbers in the Maidan, but we also felt that Yanukovych's effort to steal the election was completely inappropriate and wrong, and we took a principled position in support of rerunning that election so that it could produce a legitimate winner.

In Kyrgyzstan—it was very important to the United States because of the base we have there. And what was happening, the possibility that we could either stay or be kicked out. [00:30:00] But the Kyrgyzstan situation didn't turn out quite

as—I don't know if you want to say "well," in the case of either Ukraine or Georgia—didn't turn out the same way, let's put it that way.

And so I think, of the three, the revolution in Kyrgyzstan was the least important. I mean, it was still important. But the overall impression, I would say, Paul, is that, for the Kremlin and for Putin, it created this sense of a domino effect, that these revolutions were popping up all around Russia, and Russia was next. And so—it was before the Ukraine revolution but after the Beslan tragedy in September 2004—Putin spoke about outsiders or outside powers trying to take a "juicy piece" of Russia—by the way, a phrase he almost used exactly the same just last week in talking to Russian officials, in which he said, "We'll kick them in the teeth" or "knock their teeth out." And so, I think that Beslan reaction was fed in part by the Rose Revolution in Georgia. Again, Ukraine had not happened yet. But Putin may have sensed—although I want to be careful here because I think Russian officials' reading of Ukraine has been absolutely awful and off the mark—but he may have sensed that there [were] challenges and tensions brewing in Ukraine. And so it was laying down a marker there.

So I think the color revolutions were very important in shaping Putin's thinking that the West was a threat because Putin [00:32:00] refused to accept the possibility that Georgians and Ukrainians and Kyrgyz on their own would go out on the streets objecting to their corrupt authoritarian leaders. And so, of course, that had to have been spawned by the United States because, if Ukrainians and

Georgians and Kyrgyz could this, well then Russians could do it too one day. And that prospect, I think, terrified Putin.

BEHRINGER: And then, just after this—well, in 2005 then—Bush has the famous or well-known summit in Bratislava with Putin where he's quite critical of human rights abuses and domestic issues in Russia. Then the following year, in 2006, he's slated to go to St. Petersburg for the G8 summit. And there were some calls—oh, I guess I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit here. So, in a more general sense, how strongly did the United States push for continuing democratization and human rights behind the scenes with Russian officials? So, in addition to Bush's more well-known interactions with Putin.

KRAMER: Sure. So, keep in mind the Bratislava meeting happens a month after President Bush's second inaugural speech, the Freedom Agenda. And there may have been some other good test cases for this, but Russia, of course, was a big test case for the Freedom Agenda. And so, President Bush did raise the growing list of human rights concerns in Russia. [00:34:00]

As I mentioned before, just backtracking a bit, the arrest of Khodorkovsky, I think, was a wake-up call for President Bush. And I touched on this a little bit in my book,[4] and Peter Baker does in *Days of Fire*,[5] but President Bush understood, arguably better than most of his advisors, the importance of that development. He

[4] David J. Kramer, *Back to Containment: Dealing with Putin's Regime* (Washington, D.C.: The McCain Institute for International Leadership, 2017)
[5] Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013)

realized that if Putin was able to go after the richest guy in Russia and throw him in prison, he was sending a signal to everybody else, oligarchs and others: "You cross the line into political interference with what I'm doing, you're going to pay a price." And so Putin was reelected the year before. There's growing crackdown on civil society, and President Bush felt a need to raise these issues and got just an incredibly long response from Putin, and the president didn't raise these issues much anymore.

However, as you indicate, when he did go to—it was still [the G8] —this G8 meeting, then, he insisted on meeting with civil society. And so, I don't know if you want me—if I'm getting ahead of things, just cut me off.. Basically, I was not on that trip to, to be clear, but I was the DASS[6] at that time. And the Russians essentially said, if President Bush intends to go to that meeting, they will pull the police escort for his motorcade. And the decision was made there on the ground, "Well, screw them. We're going to have this meeting, motorcade escort or not." And so there wasn't a lot beyond that meeting that [00:36:00] was public that President Bush did and said, but the very fact that he held that meeting was very important, particularly since word did get out that the Russians were putting up a lot of—pardon the expression—roadblocks in trying to prevent that meeting from happening. So, I think credit to President Bush and those who were with him on insisting that that meeting was going to take place. And I think that did send a

[6] Deputy assistant secretary of state

signal of support against a wave, however, that was really overwhelming at the same time.

We tried to push on human rights. I gave a speech in May of 2007 in which I raised these issues. There were others who were raising them. I had some—I don't want to go into a lot of details—I had some disagreements with the embassy on these issues. And I had enormous respect for the ambassador, Bill Burns, who's now the director of the CIA, but Bill and I didn't see eye to eye on all of these issues. We had very respectful disagreements on some of these issues, and Bill's one of the smartest, most capable diplomats—and now, ex-diplomat—that I ever encountered.

But when it came to human rights, Bill was of the view that we—I don't want to speak for him. There was—let me phrase it this way—there was a view out there that raising these issues, pounding on these issues, was not going to make any difference and would only exacerbate the relationship, so what was the point of raising them? And Bill was not alone on these, by the way. This was part of the disagreement with the NSC at the time. And others of us felt that—and I think frankly, the president felt—that this was a matter of principle, and we had to [00:38:00] stand for what was right even if, at the end of the day, it didn't actually produce a difference. And there were, I think, reasonable arguments on both sides. I, it won't surprise you, was on the side that it was very important to raise these

issues, to do it privately and publicly, because I think if you only do it privately, and no one knows you're doing it, it's sort of like a tree in the forest.

MILES: Can I ask you just to loop back to the meeting in St. Petersburg, the escort-less meeting in St. Petersburg? To the extent that you were briefed on it, can you characterize what transpired in the conversations between the president and these civil- society leading figures?

KRAMER: As I recall, this is—some things I remember better than others.

MILES: I know—it's not a fair question, but then none of these really are.

KRAMER: No, it's a good question. It's a perfectly legitimate question, Simon. I guess some of them were actually—I'm trying to remember if one of them was actually blocked from attending the meeting. I think there were one or two that were supposed to have flown in from St. Petersburg. And I think they were stopped from joining the meeting. And I think there were other efforts, if we were going to go ahead with the meeting, to prevent the Russian participants from being there. But the president was very—this is a compliment—very stubborn and determined to hold this meeting. And I think, for the people who attended, for the Russians who attended, it meant a great deal to them. [00:40:00]

I saw this in the case of Belarus—just a real quick digression—President Bush thrived on meeting with activists and dissidents from around the world. And I remember in September 2008, on the margins of the UN General Assembly, he met with Belarus's main opposition leader, Aleksandr Kazulin, who had been

imprisoned by [Beluarusian President] Aleksandr Lukashenko, who's been in the news of late. And we sanctioned the Lukashenko regime until they released the political prisoners, and it took until 2008 to get Kazulin released. Then President Bush met with Kazulin in New York, and I met with Kazulin afterwards, and Kazulin was in tears. He couldn't believe that the president of the United States took the time to meet with him and cared about his situation.

And so, just on an individual, personal level, that kind of interaction with the president of the United States—it carries so much weight. And President Bush loved doing that stuff. He felt it was very important, but he also felt it was just the right thing to do. And so I think that the people who attended that meeting felt the same way.

MILES: So, on the flip side, there were those who, because of, let's say human rights backsliding, to use a broad, generic term, were critical of the Bush administration for actually having President Bush go to Russia and participate in the meeting. You, as Paul has noted here on the question, said it was the right decision to go. Could you talk us a little bit through that—maybe calling it a controversy is a little bit hyperbolic. To what extent was this a conversation within the administration? And could you explain, just for the record, why you felt that this was the right call, that, if that side did prevail, why that was [00:42:00] a good thing.

KRAMER: Yeah, I don't recall within the administration that there was much debate about whether to go or not. I think there were calls from the outside whether it

was a good idea to go or not. But I wasn't proposing that the president not go. Secretary Rice was not advocating skipping the meeting or not traveling there. And it was a G8 meeting that it was Russia's turn to host. And you may not like the host, but I think the president and his team felt it was important for the United States to be represented in the normal way, which was at the presidential level. So, I still do think at that point, it was the right decision. And the fact that the president then tacked on those other meetings, I think, reinforced the view that it was the right decision to make.

BEHRINGER: After 2006, then, there's a sense in what I've read about this period that President Bush himself pulls back a little bit from public criticism of Putin's human rights record. Was there a sense in the State Department and in the vice president's office, or maybe in the administration at large, that the State Department and the vice president's office could be a little bit more critical in public, and President Bush would be able to smooth things over in his personal relationship with Putin?

KRAMER: Yeah. I think by 2006, [00:44:00] the differences between NSC and State—and the Pentagon was more aligned with us—were increasing. And the speech I gave in Baltimore did get cleared by the NSC. It was a different NSC person at that point who cleared it, who I think was more in line with my views and the views of others who were advocating for calling out the Putin regime about its issues. The previous

person, Tom Graham, had left in January 2007.[7] And again, Tom's one of the smartest people on Russia, but he and I had some major disagreements about what policy should be. And so there was a different person there, Mike Klecheski.[8] Mike was also one of the smartest people on Russia—he lived there, served there for a number of years.

And also, the situation was just getting worse. Keep in mind—and I think you want to get to this—Putin's speech in Munich in February 2007 laid down a marker. And so I think there were a number of us who felt it was still important to speak out about these issues. Again in 2005 and 06 the Freedom Agenda was still being pushed very strongly. One can question the implementation and the consistency of it, but if the Freedom Agenda meant something, then we couldn't give Putin a free pass, and I think there were enough people in the administration who believed that.

BEHRINGER: And I wanted to bring up a question that we've been asking other people that I've forgot to put on the list, but it concerns the Freedom Agenda. [00:46:00] There's a quotation that Putin, or people in the Kremlin, viewed the Freedom Agenda as a wolf in sheep's clothing, as a cover for a more *realpolitik* approach to Russia. And I was wondering what your view is on how the Russians are misunderstanding the Freedom Agenda and how it would have improved the

[7] Thomas E. Graham served as director and then senior director for Russian affairs at the NSC from 2002 to 2007.

[8] Michael S. Klecheski, who served as acting senior director for Russian affairs at the NSC after Thomas Graham left the administration in 2007.

broader relationship if they had understood the correct goals of the Freedom Agenda as they pertained to Russia.

KRAMER: Yeah, in that case, the Russians grossly misinterpreted the president. The president believed in this passionately. This was from his heart. I thought it was a great speech he gave for his second inaugural. I think this is where he felt he was going to make his mark. This was going to be his legacy. And if they felt this was a wolf in sheep's clothing, then they really misunderstood it.

Now, again, as I mentioned before, you can criticize the implementation of the Freedom Agenda, how we addressed it with Russia. We did have other issues and interests that we wanted to pursue with them. But they then, in that case, grossly underestimated the president's commitment to the Freedom Agenda, the passion for it. And it wouldn't surprise me that they would interpret it that way.

I've heard that as well. I'm not hearing it for the first time, but I understand that interpretation.

BEHRINGER: You mentioned Putin's Munich Security Conference speech, and you also [00:48:00] mentioned before that the Khodorkovsky arrest was the first warning shot. By 2007, were you surprised by either the tenor or the content of Putin's speech, and what did you think of the Bush administration's response to the speech?

KRAMER: So I wasn't there, just to be clear on that. I was back in Washington. I can't say I was shocked by the speech. The fact that he went there meant he wanted to make

an impression, and he certainly did. Had I been consulted—and I was not—about what kind of response there should have been, I would have argued for a much stronger response than Secretary Gates gave. I think it was a mistake not to have pushed back. I understand the argument for doing so. But my view had been, and continues to be, that if Putin pushes and doesn't meet any pushback, then he's just going to keep pushing.

And I think it wasn't long after that Munich speech that the cyberattack occurs on Estonia. And we didn't do anything about that either, by the way. There's a NATO member state attacked on cyber, and we didn't have a response. We didn't have, as an alliance, a response to that. So I think the Munich speech, the cyberattack on Estonia—all of these things start amounting to Putin testing the waters as much as possible and discovering that he can keep swimming forward without, really, any waves whacking him, to really abuse that metaphor.

BEHRINGER: And another, at least, a threat that is happening at this point is Russia pulling out of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty.[9] Can you [00:50:00] discuss the types of efforts that the administration made to find a compromise solution to keep Russia in that, or what was the response to Russia's possible withdrawal?

KRAMER: Yeah, we went to—and I personally did, with Dan Fried, who was the assistant secretary at the time, I was the deputy assistant secretary dealing with this issue.

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[9] The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty.

Dan and I spent an awful lot of time and effort, travel to Moscow and elsewhere, to try to keep the Russians in the Adapted CFE Treaty. But, in doing so, we were pushing for them to live up to the Istanbul commitments of 1999, where they had said that they would leave Georgia and Moldova. And those were the sticking points. And neither host government had granted consent for Russian forces to be on their territory. Russia had pledged to leave, and Russia was not doing it. It was not living up to the Istanbul commitments.

So we were told from the highest levels to try to resolve this issue. And so we did, and I think we really did give it our best efforts on doing so. The ones we were dealing with, if I recall correctly, were Sergey Kislyak, who was the deputy foreign minister at the time, later to become ambassador; and Anatoly Antonov, who is the ambassador now. And they were the main interlocutors on these issues. We would bring delegations to try to sort these issues out. Pentagon officials joined us on a number of these occasions, including, at the under secretary level, Eric Edelman. John Rood was involved, who was the under secretary [00:52:00] at State for arms control issues. We were making, I think, a very good effort to try to find some solution to this. And, at the end of the day, I think the Russian side had already made its mind up, and it decided to not fulfill the requirements and to stay in the treaty. So, it wasn't for lack of trying. And we worked closely, very closely, with our European allies on this, and we also coordinated as much as possible and even applied some pressure on the Georgians and Moldovans to be flexible, but

there were certain baselines that we couldn't cross, and, as a result, we wound up where we did.

BEHRINGER: What were the sorts of arguments the Russians were making to not abide by the treaty?

KRAMER: "We can't just pull the troops out." They were also making the argument that, in Transnistria, they weren't Russian troops in any event, and they couldn't just leave the ammunition depot unattended that was there—I forget the city or the town that was located in—starts with a K, I think.[10] And that if they abandoned the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, then there would be blood. And so they felt that the Georgians and Moldovans were not to be trusted. They also felt that they could move forces within their territory, wherever they wanted, even in violation of the limits that were in place.

So, the problems boiled down to the presence of Russian forces [00:54:00] in Moldova and Georgia. And they didn't view their forces as occupying, and we did.

BEHRINGER: And, in the summer of 2007, you gave what was widely reported as a kind of "bumper sticker" summary of U.S. policy, you said, "Cooperate wherever we can. Push back whenever we have to." What I'm interested in—did this represent the administration's unified approach to Russia, or did it reflect conflicting viewpoints within the administration?

[10] Here Mr. Kramer is referring to the town of Cobasna.

KRAMER: It represented the view of the State Department. Secretary Rice backed me up. The NSC was not too happy about it. Although, as I mentioned before, it had been cleared by the NSC—it was cleared interagency—I think perhaps there had been some internal issue there about apprising Steve Hadley.[11] The Pentagon was supportive, and the vice president's office was supportive.

But to the extent that there was an issue, it may have been lack of heads-up and lack of coordination, not what the message was. And so on the message and that sort of bumper sticker, as you referred to it—I guess even I referred to it that way—I don't think there was much disagreement at that point.

The embassy was in a different place on a number of these issues. The embassy raised concerns about what we were doing in three areas—missile defense, NATO enlargement, and recognition of Kosovo independence. And the embassy kept flagging that, if we [00:56:00] keep pushing on these issues, the U.S.-Russian relationship is going to suffer. And the pushback was, "Those issues actually matter to us." To the point where we felt we needed to pursue them, and we did.

Did it damage the relationship? It did. I don't think there's any denying that. But sometimes you have to make tough choices about what the right thing to do is and what serves U.S. interests better. We were still hopeful that we could negotiate and smooth out the differences we had on some of these issues, hence

[11] National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley.

the two 2+2 meetings that we had. And yet, at the end of the day, we obviously failed on that.

BEHRINGER: Toward the end of the administration, you changed roles from deputy assistant secretary to assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor. How did the change in roles affect your perspective on and approach to Russia?

KRAMER: Throughout the time I was in the State Department, I attached a lot of importance to human rights issues, as exemplified by that meeting with Akhmadov in 2002. And so when I was in DRL,[12] those issues obviously mattered a lot.

I do remember meeting with Kislyak, though, when I was in DRL in my office. I had forgotten this, I guess—I had apparently been helpful in getting permission for him to bring in his hunting rifles into the United States. So he came to thank me for that. I guess I did that when I was the DASS. But pushing on these [00:58:00] issues was very important. And, when I was in DRL, I obviously still had in mind from my experiences as the DASS in EUR,[13] the other issues—security issues and things—but the human rights issues obviously took priority.

The other thing is—I make a joke of it, though I shouldn't—I like to say, "Well, Russia never invaded Georgia while I was the DASS." That happened when I had moved over to DRL. But that then also changed everything in the attitude towards the relationship.

[12] State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
[13] State Department Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs

BEHRINGER: While we're on the topic of you switching roles in State, I wanted to ask another related question, but one that takes place earlier, which is, was there any change at State between when Colin Powell was secretary, and then you switched to Secretary Rice, or Condoleezza Rice comes in as secretary—and obviously one change is that she's a Russia-Soviet expert. But did that change the way the State Department operated in relationship to policy toward Russia or anything like that?

KRAMER: Keep in mind that—I would say Secretary Powell from even 2002, even before the invasion, but 2003-4 was consumed with dealing with the Iraq situation. And 2005, when Secretary Rice came in, Iraq was obviously still very much an issue, but the Freedom Agenda became [01:00:00] the new driving force, and working with allies, dealing with the threat from terrorism, all of that.

So, I think the Russians were more prepared to work with her simply because she was a more familiar presence. But I think they respected Secretary Powell a lot because of his military background. So, in terms of Russia, there was—again, this comes back to the 2+2 meetings. . By 2007, despite what I think was, or maybe actually because of the deterioration in relations, there was a desire by the president to try to salvage the relationship before he left office. And so he tasked Secretary Rice and Secretary Gates to do these two 2+2 meetings. And I think it's not revealing secrets that neither Rice nor Gates thought that this was going to lead to anything. And I do remember one meeting in the situation room where we were preparing for the meeting and Steve Hadley mentioned, “This is really

important." Then I think it was Gates who turned to Hadley and said, "Why don't you go and do it?" Because I don't think either Gates or Rice felt that there was much likelihood that we would find agreement or common ground.

But this continued—again, I left for the DRL job in March 2008—this continued around the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, and then right immediately after that, President Bush's trip to Sochi, where he clearly [01:02:00] was interested in trying to leave the relationship in as good a shape as possible while recognizing it was not in very good shape. So he and President Putin issued a statement which, if you hold it up to the statement issued a year later by President Obama and President Medvedev, is very similar. And President Bush was hoping that, by the time he left office, the U.S.-Russian relationship would be in better condition.

BEHRINGER: And I want to get to Bucharest in a second, but I was interested in doing the research for this interview that—I think some of what's become publicly accepted wisdom is the Orange Revolution happens, and Ukraine wants to become a NATO member immediately, and, after the Orange Revolution, the Bush administration expressed support for that eventuality. But, between that point and the Bucharest summit, there was actually a fluctuation in public opinion in Ukraine regarding support for NATO, and there were some anti-NATO protests in Crimea. I even saw, in July 2006, you were quoted as saying that NATO's positive attitude toward Ukraine "had dissipated." So I was wondering if you could walk us

through this period of seesawing enthusiasm for Ukraine joining NATO, and what were the debates like within the Bush administration? Did the Bush administration's view fluctuate at all during this period?

KRAMER: We consistently supported an open-door policy for [01:04:00] Ukraine and for Georgia, both countries desiring to join, but [in] Georgia, the level of support was much, much higher. You're right that, in Ukraine, at certain points, it was in the teens. And so, frankly, I would say that in 2006, when I made that comment, and even into 2007, there was not a lot of thinking about Ukraine and NATO because the Ukrainians didn't seem interested in joining NATO at that point.

And so, it wasn't really until January 2008 when [Viktor] Yushchenko, [Arseniy] Yatsenyuk, and [Yulia] Tymoshenko all signed this letter asking for a Membership Action Plan. And that was really the tipping point for President Bush to focus on this issue. Up until that, even though Georgia was pursuing a Membership Action Plan, I don't think, on its own, there would have been U.S. support for Georgia only in seeking a Membership Action Plan, a MAP. But I think once that letter came in from the three Ukrainian leaders—the president, the prime minister, the speaker of the parliament—that then changed the dynamics of the calculations. And so it was from there that the president, I'd say from January 2008—I forget the exact date when that letter was issued—but January 2008 until Bucharest, the president then focused on this more and more, realized that a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia was in U.S. interests, something he strongly supported.

And it was an issue in which he then decided to push personally but then failed. And instead, he and Chancellor [Angela] Merkel hammered out that alternative language [01:06:00] that, to some, actually goes even further than a MAP would have, but I think for Moscow was interpreted as a backing off of support for Georgia in particular at that time.

I think the Russians were firmly opposed to a MAP for either country and were so fixated on those three letters—M-A-P—that they didn't really focus on what the actual language coming out of Bucharest Summit was, which was Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO. A MAP in itself does not guarantee membership. It's a steppingstone for most countries, but it doesn't guarantee membership. That statement guarantees membership. Doesn't say when, doesn't say how, but it says they're going to become members of NATO. And so, after Bucharest, I would say there were two schools of thought—that the Russians viewed this as a cause for concern and alarm and therefore invaded Georgia and launched the provocation that Saakashvili fell for in August or felt emboldened because the MAP was not offered and, therefore, it was open season. They could do whatever they wanted with Georgia.

So, President Bush got very involved in this. I wasn't in Bucharest, so I can't speak personally from what happened there, but he himself personally pushed for this. It demonstrated that the United States is obviously the most powerful

country in NATO, but even with that power, it was not able to persuade all fellow NATO allies that a MAP for these two countries was the right thing to do.

MILES: And of those two schools of thought—a MAP or non-MAP—and how that may or may not have catalyzed Russian behavior towards Georgia, in which did you fall? [01:08:00]

KRAMER: I was in favor of providing a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia. And I am of the view that Russia interpreted the lack of a MAP offer as weakness on our part and as a green light to them. But I understand those who argue the opposite—that it alarmed Russia, what came out of Bucharest. Again, keep in mind, Bush went straight from Bucharest to Sochi and did his best. He knew—and Putin had been in Bucharest too, by the way—and was doing his best to try to soothe the tensions of this issue, because I think he felt he had succeeded to the best he could. But, at the end of the day, my interpretation is that the Russians viewed this as a green light, that the alliance did not attach as much importance to Georgia as perhaps Washington had.

MILES: So let's cast our eye ahead a little a few paces to the 2008 war. Of the various factors, what role do you think that the NATO issue played in the ultimate Russian decision to launch an invasion of Georgia, as opposed to others? It would be interesting to get your sense of the Russian thinking behind that—and then your evaluation of how the Bush administration and other policy makers handled that crisis when it did break out.

KRAMER: Putin hated Saakashvili, and it was mutual. And he was looking for an opportunity to [01:10:00] send Saakashvili a pretty clear message, if he could, to try to bring him down, though I don't think he wanted to overtly go all the way to Tbilisi and remove Saakashvili. But he wanted to find a pretext to launch an invasion, and that, in turn, he hoped would turn the political situation upside down in Georgia and lead to Saakashvili's removal. I think that the Russians were itching for a confrontation with Saakashvili. They then launched some provocations from South Ossetia, and Saakashvili responded, and that then in turn led to the five-day war. I think, in part, they never forgave him for the Rose Revolution. That's still stuck in Putin's craw.

In terms of how we responded, we didn't do much. I mean, there were no sanctions imposed. We did bring back Georgian troops from Iraq. We sent, I think, a ship or two into the Black Sea. But, other than that, there was not much reaction. Now, the reasons for that, I think, are also pretty clear, which is, we were at the end of the Bush administration. The election in the U.S. was just two, three months away. There was not a lot of empathy for Saakashvili in parts of Europe, particularly in Berlin, where Merkel and he had a very testy relationship. There were some Europeans who blamed Saakashvili for falling for the Russian provocation. And so there was not a united view in the West [01:12:00] toward how to handle this crisis then. And the Sarkozy ceasefire plan, the six points—that, I think, for many Europeans, was the last that they were hoping Europe would be

dealing with this issue. And then there was just a sense of, Georgia's far away—I mean, where the hell is Georgia?—and I think a lack of appreciation for how important Georgia was, and the feeling that President Bush had over-personalized the relationship, and that this mattered more to the United States than it did to the Europeans.

I do think that the lack of a reaction—made worse, I would argue, by the Reset policy of the Obama administration so soon after—generally gave Putin the impression he could get away with it and contributed to what happened in 2014 in Ukraine. But that gets ahead of things.

BEHRINGER: And we actually just talked to Ambassador Tefft yesterday, and I thought he said some interesting things about Saakashvili as a leader. I was wondering, from your role as assistant secretary for democracy, how do you assess his leadership in Georgia, particularly during this period?

KRAMER: Mixed. In November 2007, he launched the state of emergency, cracked down on opposition TV, and behaved rather badly when it came to democracy. But credit to him for what he did in trying to root out corruption, particularly at lower levels. And he also went through elections, including in 2012 and '13—he was term limited; he couldn't have stayed on as president—but [01:14:00] in which his party lost, and then in which there was a new president, and he accepted and recognized the results. And, in that part of the world, that was not to be taken for granted. So, I think he deserves a lot of credit for dealing with the corruption issue, for overall

improvement in democracy. I think Georgia really did stand out in the region. It's surrounded by countries that are not democracies, to say the least. But, at the end of the day, he also—and I think has an impact to this day—so personalized Georgian politics, and we see that still playing out even between the politics between him and [former Prime Minister Bidzina] Ivanishvili.

I traveled there when I was in DRL, a month or two before the war, and that was my first visit to Tbilisi. So I did raise a number of issues, including on prison issues, which were a big concern back then, but also the events that occurred less than a year before, in November 2007.

BEHRINGER: And this probably wasn't part of your portfolio, but did you warn him at that time not to do anything to instigate Russian actions? —

KRAMER: No, it wasn't in my portfolio. No. But others did. Others did. Nobody that I know of urged him to go forward.

BEHRINGER: And I just have one more question, and then I'll throw it to Simon to see if he has anything, but I wanted to ask this question about personal diplomacy and Bush and Putin's relationship. Bush visited Russia at least seven times, more than any other president in history [01:16:00] at that point. And Putin, of course, famously visited Bush's ranch in Crawford and the family compound in Kennebunkport. First of all, were you present for any of those meetings or trips, and I was wondering if you had any recollections of them? But stepping back a second, do any of them stand out as particularly important for understanding the

effect of personal diplomacy on U.S.-Russian relations, or what's the significance of this personal relationship for the broader policy?

KRAMER: Yeah, so I can answer the first part quickly, Paul, and no, so I was not at any of them. The only time I met Putin was at Andrews Air Force Base, where I was the senior official greeting him, and I joked to Ambassador [Yuri] Ushakov at the time—it was a very hot September day in D.C., and I was sick as a dog—and I said, "I fear I'm either going to throw up on your president or pass out on the tarmac. I'm not sure which." And I said, "Which would you like me to do?" And I fortunately did neither.

But personal diplomacy was very important to President Bush. I think it did matter to President Putin. I think they were able to develop a bit of a bond that way. And I even remember President Bush's book, in which he acknowledges the note that he sent to Putin at the end, as he was leaving office—as President Bush was leaving office, Putin never really did. And I think that that personal interaction was very important to President Bush. I mentioned before how important it was, I think, to President Bush to meet with these activists and dissidents. And I think he really took that in, and it mattered [01:18:00] to him personally. And I think the same thing with foreign leaders—he felt that developing relationships, that he could get to know them, build up a level of trust. And I think that worked with a lot of leaders. I don't think it worked with Putin, and I think I reflects that Putin actually—I mean, President Bush can be trusted, but Putin can't. And so, in order

to have trust, it has to be mutual. And I think just from almost day one, the ability to develop a strong relationship and a constructive positive relationship with Putin was very, very limited.

MILES: So, returning to the note on which we opened that's a little bit more zoom-out—I'm curious of your sense, as a whole, if there really wasn't much that the Bush administration could have done to have ended on a, let's say, a better note in U.S.-Russian relations than at the beginning, including the highs, if you will, of the immediate post-9/11 moment—were there missed opportunities, or was this, to a certain extent, a function of policy priorities in Moscow to which the United States either couldn't or shouldn't accommodate itself. And I'm particularly curious about these big picture things because, of course, Russia and the Soviet Union are a family business for you. I've known your brother, Mark, for quite some time—

KRAMER: Sorry!

MILES:—and we tend to run into each other in Moscow and Kyiv [01:20:00] and places like that. So I'm curious if your sense of the history here is one of missed opportunity or perhaps has a little bit of—if you'll pardon me for saying it—the classic Russian fatalism about how events unfolded.

KRAMER: Well, my view is that this relationship was bound not to work, and that is because of the leader in Moscow, who has shown to be a pretty brutal leader, incredibly corrupt leader. And so, when you have Putin overseeing an

authoritarian kleptocracy, I don't see how we can really find opportunities to work closely with Russia as long as he is at the helm.

So I think his style of leadership prevents us from moving closer together unless we sacrifice our values and our principles and our interests and other countries in the process. And I hope we won't. You asked in the beginning about Putin. About Putin's background—I think just his background alone meant that this was going to be a much more difficult interlocutor for American and European leaders to deal with. But to be clear though, Simon, let me also say, I don't think the relationship is doomed forever. I think, under different leadership, [01:22:00] we and Russia could get along. We will never see eye to eye on everything. There are some issues in which we are just bound to disagree, but managing those differences—how you manage those differences, I think—that's the key. And I think that our differences now are so severe and have been for a number of years before the invasion of [Georgia] in 2008,[14] that I think, as long as Putin is there, our ability to get along is close to zero.

But I do think that someday we could have better relations. It's possible the person who replaces Putin will be worse. It's also possible the person who replaces Putin will be better, but we shouldn't paralyze ourselves into thinking that, "Let's do what we can to help and support Putin stay in power because at least it's the devil we know." That's usually bad policy, and it leads us down a path where we

[14] Mr. Kramer accidentally says "Ukraine" instead of Georgia here.

make bad decisions, unprincipled decisions. It's not up to us, at the end of the day, who's going to lead Russia. That'll be up to the Russian people in one form or another. And we, I think, are always safest, even if it doesn't produce immediate results, to stay principled and stay true to our values.

And I hope the current administration will do that. I've written recently—just yesterday, in fact—that I'm worried the current administration is going soft on Putin after taking what I thought was a right—tougher—approach in the beginning. And we'll find out at least parts, I guess—June 16th, I believe, has just been announced as the date for their first meeting. And I just realized I'm referencing dates after promising I wouldn't do so. [01:24:00]

But in any event, I think that, once Mr. Putin came to power, the U.S.-Russian relationship was going to face some very serious challenges. And I obviously couldn't have predicted the ones that we have come upon, but holding up the United States as the biggest threat to Russia, which Putin does in order to justify his way of maintaining control at home, is something that could have been seen very early on. And again, I cited that Beslan speech. I think that really is one of the earliest signs of Putin doing that and—I'll maybe end with this—I can never get past how Putin came to power through those bombings. I do fall into the camp that thinks that there was something really suspicious about those bombings and that they were designed to turn the political situation in Russia upside down at that time where [Yevgeny] Primakov and [Yuri] Luzhkov were the two main names

being mentioned as likely successors for Yeltsin, and the Yeltsin circle was terrified of that prospect. So they needed something to flip things around, and the Basayev incursion into Dagestan didn't do it. Those bombings, and then Putin's reaction to them, did.

And I'm of the view that, if there was something fishy that brought him to power, how can you ever deal with that guy? If he and/or forces aligned with him were ready, willing, and able to kill 300 of their own citizens in order to change the political dynamics, that's not the kind of leader I think [01:26:00] we're going to be able to do business with. And it's why I started my book talking about those bombings. I can't get past them. And that may be a huge problem on my part, but I think if you start from there, it is hard to get past that idea that he came to power through suspicious bombs, including the bomb that didn't go off in Ryazan, where, if that's the case, my God, what else is he capable of doing?

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