

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Joseph Lieberman

Senator (D-CT), 1989-2013

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

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

LIEBERMAN: I am Joe Lieberman. I was a U.S. senator for 24 years and left the Senate in 2013.

BEHRINGER: Thank you for being with us today, Senator Lieberman. To begin, I wanted to raise this issue of your place in the American political landscape and how it was quite unique. You were the Democratic nominee for vice president in [2000],¹ and then in 2006 you became an independent. And then in 2008 you supported John McCain's presidential campaign. How did your influence on U.S. policy toward Russia change during this time? Or what was your role in U.S. policy toward Russia, and how did you see yourself in U.S.-Russian relations?

LIEBERMAN: Okay, that's a good question to start with. I came to the Senate in 1989 with a real interest in foreign policy and defense policy, but I came from being attorney general of Connecticut. So I hadn't been in [national] office before, but I always followed foreign policy. And, like so many of my generation, I was influenced by President [John F.] Kennedy and greatly admired his leadership of the U.S. during the Cold War and his advocacy of freedom and his opposition to communism. So, in all that strange path [00:02:00] that I [have] followed politically, really, I

¹ Dr. Behringer mistakenly states that Senator Lieberman was the 2004 Democratic vice-presidential nominee, instead of 2000. He later corrects himself.

believe—on the question of foreign policy and Russia—I just followed the principles that I had developed in response to President Kennedy [and] as what might be called a closet admirer of President Reagan.

And my background—and I'll do this real quickly, you can probe it more—of course, I was thrilled when the when the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet empire collapsed. And I was very active in urging the U.S. to reach out to Russia and try to help Russia economically, politically develop the forces of freedom.

I'll tell you a quick story, which is not apropos of anything but it just came to me, for history. During 1989 or [19]90, I spoke to some forum on—I was in the Senate—our relations with the newly liberated people of Russia and the former Soviet Union. And I said I was impressed by the statements that former President [Richard] Nixon was making about how we had to reach out to Russia, make them allies, help them build up. Earlier, President [George H. W.] Bush 41 seemed to be a little bit hesitant.

Anyway, I'm in my office the next day, and my secretary doesn't go on the intercom—she's so surprised—she knocks on the door and she says, “Senator, President Nixon [00:04:00] is on the phone, or at least somebody who says they're President Nixon is on the phone.” So there was a shock jock who was really popular then in New York, Don Imus. And he had a guy who I knew, Larry Kenny, who did a phenomenal impersonation of Nixon. So I thought it was Larry. So I picked up the phone and I said, “Hey Larry, I know it's you.” There was a woman's voice that said, “Is this Senator Lieberman?” I said, “Yes.” [She said,] “Hold on,

please, for President Nixon.” And, sure as hell, it was President Nixon. And he said, “My good friend Dimitri Simes was at the program you spoke at yesterday, and he told me you had some very kind things to say about what I’ve been saying about how to deal with the former Soviet Union. And I just wanted to thank you.”² It was an amazing call for me, because I had despised Nixon in the old days. [After that call] I came within his orbit in a way, because whenever he came to Washington, there were a number of members of Congress he would meet with [and he included me. I learned a lot from Nixon about foreign policy. He was very smart].

So my reaction to Russia—at first, I was very supportive of outreach. I remember making speeches saying that it’s not an implausible goal—it may seem visionary or farfetched, not to happen tomorrow—that we would become so close to Russia that we would welcome them into NATO. At the same time, I was very active, with a lot of others, in supporting accession of the newly-liberated countries of the former Soviet Union into NATO as quickly as possible, which I look back at as one of the [00:06:00] most significant things I was able to do in my Senate career.

But then over time, [Russian President Boris] Yeltsin collapsed. I remember Yeltsin coming to Washington at one point when he was president, and [former Senator] Bill Bradley [D-NJ] was a real Russia expert, and he—we were friends—

² Dmitri K. Simes immigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States in 1973 and became an informal advisor to Nixon on foreign policy in the 1980s. In 1994, he became the leader of the newly established Nixon Center think tank. In 2011, the Nixon Center broke from the Nixon Foundation and changed its name to the Center for the National Interest in a dispute over Simes’s support for a more conciliatory policy toward Vladimir Putin after Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia.

invited me up to a small gathering with Yeltsin. Yeltsin had been in New York first, and—we have to say this—he seemed sober. But what was fascinating was that he wanted to talk about how striking he found the fruit and vegetable stands in New York. “There is so much produce there, and it is beautiful. We have not seen this for decades in Russia.”

Anyway, then he collapsed. Putin came along, and over time Putin just began to turn in a very bad direction. And so I, with others, like John McCain, began to offer as much opposition as we could here, as much support for his opponents. So I’ll stop with that introductory statement and let you pursue particular questions.

BEHRINGER: No, that's great. That puts us right up to 2001 in Slovenia. Before we go there, I have to correct the record [for] a second. I said you were vice presidential candidate in 2004, but Simon reminded me it's 2000 with [former] Vice President [Al] Gore.

LIEBERMAN: It's 2000. I will tell you a cute little story, because I know you're focused on—this involves President Bush 43. So I had never met President Bush until inaugural day in 2001. And [00:08:00] after the inauguration was over, the Democratic leader, Tom Daschle [D-SD]—it was a very cold day—held a little social in his office—hot coffee, hot chocolate, et cetera. And my wife and I went in there. And when we came out—just as happenstance would have it—President Bush and his retinue, Secret Service, et cetera, were coming around the corner from what we call the “president's room,” where he had just signed the formal

documents that a president signs after inauguration, essentially accepting the presidency. And we had a very brief but cordial talk. He was very complimentary to me. I said to him the election was over and my wife and I were praying for him and his wife, and if there's any way I could help him that I was comfortable with, I would be delighted to. And then—I can't impersonate the Bush look—but he had that funny smile on his face, and he said, “You know, I think we're going to find some ways to work together.” And I smiled and I said, “I hope so.”

And it was amazing how many ways we found to work together. A week later—not related to what you're focused on—the White House called me up, knowing that I had been involved before in so-called faith-based initiatives, telling me that President Bush was about to, I guess a week later, go to the Anacostia section of Washington[, D.C.], which was a low-income, largely African American section at that point. I think it's where the Nationals Park is now. And would I go with him? Senator Rick Santorum [R-PA] was going, who I worked with. So I did. And there was beginning of a friendship that [00:10:00], for better or worse, was particularly—well, it developed, I worked closely with him on the No Child Left Behind Act, which I think was maybe his most significant bipartisan domestic accomplishment. And then, of course, we both agreed about Iraq—not just about the war, not just the beginning, but the end.

At some points, I was troubled by the president's—of course everybody was, but it was understandable—by that “I looked into his eyes,” and all that stuff.³ But his eyes opened up, President Bush’s, about what Putin was all about. McCain and I and others may have pushed a little harder, but I always felt that we were essentially in sync with President Bush about the threat that Putin increasingly represented.

BEHRINGER: Did you ever get a chance to meet with President Putin or go to Moscow?

LIEBERMAN: I have a recollection. John and I for years chaired the American delegation to the Munich Security Conference every February. And classic McCain— “sleep is greatly overrated.” People who went on CODELs [congressional delegations], congressional trips, [with] McCain said they were really death marches, and you had to be ready for them. So John always said, “It doesn't make sense to just fly to Munich. Let's fly overnight on Thursday night”—the conference started, at that point, later, Friday afternoon—“Let's go somewhere in Europe that matters.” So one of those years—and I believe it was in the later nineties, the record will show somewhere—we did go to Moscow, turned out to be a very cold, snowy day. We were actually worried about whether we were going to be able to take off to get to [00:12:00] Munich. But we were able, and we did get to Munich in time.

³ The exact phrase, which President Bush said after meeting President Putin for the first time in Ljubljana, Slovenia in June 2001, is, “I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010618.html>.”

I don't have very clear recollections of the meeting, but I do to this extent that Putin was beginning to emerge as an autocrat, but it was not totally clear at that point—certainly not as clear as it became, you might say, after 2000. But I remember the meeting being cool. In other words, he was not a proactive personality. And I wish I could remember what we talked about. I'm sure, knowing McCain and me and the others who were with us from both houses, that we talked about how much we wanted to help Russia to be economically strong and free and how committed we were to the independence of the countries of the former Soviet Union, which didn't please them [the Russians]. But I don't remember a lot of hostility at that meeting. It was just kind of cool. That's the only time I think I met him to that extent, sitting down and talking with him.

At the Munich conference, we had many meetings with Lavrov and—I forgot the name. There was a previous foreign minister, defense minister came—
MILES: Ivanov.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah. He had a defense minister, Ivanov, Sergei Ivanov. And one night, on a Saturday night of the Munich Conference—which was in a beautiful old palace in Munich—they put me next to Sergei Ivanov, [00:14:00] and we had a good conversation. About 20-30 minutes into it, I said, “Minister, I must say, you speak perfect English. Did you learn that in school in Russia?” “Oh no, no. I was our KGB station chief in London for many years.” And I’m like, “Oh, okay, that works.” He was very close to Putin at that point—I don't know whatever happened to him—

and he stayed around after he left the Defense Ministry, so we had a lot of contact.⁴

I was there at the famous speech in 2007 when Putin was—really, it was like a declaration of war against the U.S. and the West, a verbal war. And McCain and I were always, as co-chairs of the American delegation, put in the front row. And Putin, as he went on, was glaring at us as he was speaking. It was a classic schoolyard bully routine. And of course, McCain and I, without even passing a word, looked at each other, and we got it, and we were as capable of being schoolboys as he was, so we glared back at him. But it was a stunning and turning-point speech, and I think it actually shocked the delegates, including the Europeans there. They could see that, by that time, that Putin was turning into a totalitarian leader. But this was really in the face of the rest of Europe and particularly the United States.

As I recall, I was on the program the next day, and I had a prepared speech, but I said a few words at the beginning [00:16:00] that were critical of Putin that basically said he had attacked us and tried to be clever about the rest of the world in saying that there was only one center of power in the world, or at least that's what the United States thought, and that was not acceptable to Russia, or, he

⁴ After serving as defense minister, Sergei Ivanov worked under then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as deputy prime minister. Ivanov was widely viewed as Putin's potential successor for the Russian presidency. Instead, in 2008 Putin swapped roles with Medvedev, and Ivanov also served as Putin's deputy prime minister. When Putin returned to the Presidency in 2012, Ivanov became the chief of staff of the Presidential Administration. In 2016, Putin appointed Ivanov as his special representative on environmental activities, ecology, and transportation.

assumed, the rest of the world. And I picked up on it and said, there was one center of power. It wasn't the United States. It was the power of freedom, and that was something he would ultimately have to reckon with. So here you go. We're still reckoning.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to move back in time now to—9/11 happens, the United States goes into Afghanistan, and the Russians offer their assistance there. What was your impression of Russian assistance in the war in Afghanistan?

LIEBERMAN: It's interesting, because I was very much involved in that, although at the time, I was—there was a period of years there, beginning in the late nineties, where I was either the chair or the ranking Democratic member of what was originally the Governmental Affairs Committee. Then, after 9/11 legislation, it became the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. So I was focused very much on the domestic reaction to 9/11. But because I was on the Armed Services Committee, I was also quite involved in voting [for] the authorization for the use of military force in Afghanistan, which of course was a basis for a lot else that the succeeding administrations did.

I apologize [00:18:00]—I don't have a clear recollection. I remember being skeptical about the Russian offer and really focused on how important it was and would be that our allies in NATO join us in Afghanistan, which they did. I don't even remember actually what—maybe you could refresh me—what Russia did do [for] us, or whether we just said to them, forget about it.

BEHRINGER: They basically offered to exchange intelligence information.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah.

BEHRINGER: And then also greased the wheels for corridors through Central Asia, airbases there, in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, to bring supplies into Afghanistan. But yeah, we've heard there are some mixed results on the Russian assistance. Some of the intelligence sharing turned out to be somewhat one-way from the U.S. side.

LIEBERMAN: Interesting. No, I'm not surprised. Actually, the aforementioned senator from Arizona [McCain] and I led a delegation—it was a large group, it was about seven or eight other senators—to Afghanistan, maybe late January-February of 2002. And then we met with Karzai at that point and his cabinet. It was quite a scene. They wouldn't let us go to Kabul because it was thought to be insecure. So we met him at the air base at Bagram, which was a mess at the time—the Russians and the Taliban had just let it deteriorate.

But anyway, the reason I mention [00:20:00] it is that we took a tour of the “stans” then [Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union]. And we did go to Kyrgyzstan, and I have a recollection that we may have thanked them for whatever help they were giving us. It was weird. We went in sort of late, early evening—it was dark. The streets were totally empty. It was very weird. And we went to see the local totalitarian leader—I don't remember his name.⁵ He was cordial. We had a good conversation. But before—I mean, we left. We flew right

⁵ The leader of Kyrgyzstan in 2002 was President Askar Akaev, who had ruled the country since its independence in 1991, a year after becoming the leader of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. Akaev finally resigned in April 2005, under pressure from protests in what became known as the Tulip Revolution.



out. It was a very quick trip. It was an interesting time—but I don't want to spend time with that.

In a way, the most interesting visit was when we went to Uzbekistan, and there was an old Soviet-type leader, [Islam] Karimov. He had been the dictator for a long time, long after we were there—fascinating to me because he had a very, I thought, sophisticated and quite interesting geopolitical, geostrategic worldview.⁶ But there was a sense that things were changing. Anyway, I could tell too many stories about that that are not quite relevant.

I won't tell you the full story, but there's a great story how we went out on an aircraft carrier which had been moved after [the invasion of] Afghanistan into the waters there—one of ours, I think it was the [USS] *Roosevelt*—and McCain and I always joked about it, because the commanding officer assembled about 2,000 of the sailors in that big area on the deck underneath the top. And McCain had just run for president. Of course, he was a war hero. He got introduced, had a pretty good round of applause. [00:22:00] I had just run for vice president. I was introduced, there was a nice round of applause. Next comes Fred Thompson, our colleague from Tennessee. He gets introduced—the place goes wild. McCain turns to me and says, “What the hell was that?” I said, “The only thing I can think of, John—*The Hunt for Red October*.”⁷ Anyway, there you go. Okay. Please, focus me.

⁶ Karimov ruled Uzbekistan until his death in 2016.

⁷ Fred Thompson served as the Republican U.S. senator from Tennessee from 1994 to 2003. An attorney, lobbyist, and professional actor, he played Rear Admiral Josh Painter in the 1990 film *The Hunt for Red October*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099810/>.

BEHRINGER: Oh, that's great.

LIEBERMAN: Fred reminded us of that every opportunity he could.

BEHRINGER: I bet. Great movie. I wanted to ask a question about missile defense and nuclear issues. What did you think of the Bush administration's pulling out of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty early in the administration? That's in 2001. And then in 2002 Bush and Putin signed the Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty—SORT treaty—in Moscow. And as a member of the Senate—I can't remember if you voted—maybe you can tell us whether you voted or not to ratify the treaty—but what did you think about?

LIEBERMAN: I guess I'd put it this way—I can't believe I voted against it. In other words, I believe I voted for it.⁸ I haven't gone back and looked. I had a kind of growing confidence in President Bush and his administration on these questions. I was glad he pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. I can't date it, but I had begun to be a supporter—unfortunately, one of the few Democratic supporters of us developing a ballistic missile defense—it was Star Wars or whatever.⁹ It's fascinating to look back on it, because I [00:24:00] think [Senator] Mary Landrieu [D-LA] may have been the only other Democrat who was with me. I remember our critics saying, this is just foolhardy to develop a ballistic missile defense. It's the equivalent—this was one of their favorite phrases—of having a bullet that can hit a

⁸ Indeed, the Senate voted 95-0 to ratify SORT. <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IB98030.html>.

⁹ In 1983, President Ronald Reagan unveiled a plan to develop a space-based missile defense system called the Strategic Defense Initiative, which was popularly dubbed “Star Wars.”

bullet in the air. And I said, “Yeah, that’s the goal.” And Reagan had already been discredited for going with Dr. [Edward] Teller and the Star Wars stuff, but, by God, we did it. Incidentally, there was great anger in Democratic ranks in the Senate about President Bush pulling out of the [Anti-]Ballistic Missile Treaty. But I thought he was right, and everything that's happened since then, both with the Soviet Union, but also in a lesser way, with the development of the Patriot systems and together now with our allies in Israel on Iron Dome and all the other generations coming along, and, of course, look—what are the Ukrainians asking of us now? It's the same kind of ballistic missile defense. So I thought that was a gutsy and sensible position that the Bush administration took. I know [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld gets a lot of criticism for a lot of stuff. My guess is that he informed this decision by President Bush. I have no idea. I don’t know for sure. But I also think, listen, the president gets blamed for things. He deserves credit when he does something right, and I think he, President Bush, deserves credit for this. [00:26:00]

BEHRINGER: You mentioned your meeting with President Putin early on and the view that he was, at some point, becoming more authoritarian, more “totalitarian” as you put it. And in the research, I noticed that already in 2003, and then again in 2005, you and Senator McCain introduced a bill to revoke Russia's G-8 membership.¹⁰ What were the circumstances that caused you two to introduce the

¹⁰ The Group of Eight Industrialized Nations (G-8) is an annual economic meeting of the world’s most highly developed economies, including Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United States,

bill, and how did you view Russia's membership in the G-8 and cooperation with Russia on these economic issues?

LIEBERMAN: Yeah. So again, here's one where I wish I'd gone back and looked at it, but this much I remember. What motivated us to raise the question about basically suspending Russia from membership in the G-8? It was their behavior internally and externally, but internally, I would say around 2000-2001, Putin began to really make himself the sole power in Russia. He eliminated opposition parties. He changed the rules in the Duma so that he was basically in control. He began to manipulate elections, and he started to take action against his political opponents, and some of it was brutal. But he also—as I recall, the first instances of external brutality [00:28:00] were toward the Chechens. So that was that. There were probably other things he did toward the countries of the former Soviet Union, which it was clear even then that his—you know, I forgot whether he made the famous statement then or later that the collapse of the Soviet Union was one of the great catastrophes of the last century.¹¹ So, obviously, a radically different view.

and the United Kingdom. Until Russia joined in 1998, the group was known as the G-7. President Bush attended the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, Russia in July 2006. Russia's membership in the G-8 was suspended in 2014 in response to the annexation of Crimea, and the group has continued to meet, without Russia's participation, as the G-7. <https://www.cnn.com/2014/03/24/politics/obama-europe-trip/index.html>.¹¹ In his 2005 annual address to the Russian Parliament (Federal Assembly), according to the official Kremlin translation, Putin said, "Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>. Whereas the official Kremlin transcript translates the phrase "*bylo krupneishei geopoliticheskoi katastrofoi veka*" as "was a major geopolitical disaster of the century," Western media outlets often translated it as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057>. For the argument that the official Kremlin version is a better translation, see

John [McCain] and I talked about this and just felt that probably it was going to be hard to get people, nations, to throw them out of the G-8. But we had to say it, we had to make clear that, really, he didn't—okay, there were some economic benefits of the exchange, particularly on energy, because, then and now, one of Putin's great failures was and is that he has never diversified his economy. I'll just say in two sentences, compare him—it's not popular to say this now either—to Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince is really diversifying that economy. Putin never did it, and the Russians have paid for it. So what I'm saying is there were economic benefits to having them in the G-8, but they were not as broad as they should have been if he had been a better leader. And he didn't meet any of the other qualifications to be—he was losing credibility to be considered part of the “civilized community of nations.” So this was one of those, which McCain and I often did, where we said [that it's] unlikely that we're going to achieve [00:30:00] what this resolution calls for, which is [for] Russia to be kicked out of the G-8, but it's really important that we get out there publicly on it. I don't actually remember what happened to the resolution, but there was a lot of support in Congress for it in both parties at that point.

BEHRINGER: I know that the Bush administration was very intent on having this dual-track cooperation on economic issues as they also did some criticism of human rights issues and democracy and those things. And one of the ways that Congress

<https://www.lenconnect.com/story/opinion/columns/2022/10/27/paul-delespinasse-translating-putin-geopolitical-disaster-remark/69592792007/>.

was able to slow down the economic cooperation track was by keeping the Jackson-Vanik amendment in place. And some people that we've talked to said the White House could have done more to push Congress to repeal that. What was your view on Jackson-Vanik in particular?¹²

LIEBERMAN: There's a lot of stories here. Some of them are kind of unbelievable, but the reality was that Jackson-Vanik worked, and as we know, there was a large emmigration out of Soviet Jews, particularly. So to some extent, the Russians had a justified claim to remove Jackson-Vanik. On the other hand, they were misbehaving in so many other ways or behaving badly in so many other ways that I always had the feeling that the Bush administration were just as well that Jackson-Vanik remained in some state to [00:32:00]—choose your verb—pressure, torture, exasperate the Russians, because it didn't matter to them. And here I introduce you to a sub-theme, which probably the administration was aware of, it goes back to the nineties, and it carried on. There's an Orthodox Jewish group, Hasidim, called Lubavitch Jews, with a Grand Rabbi that came from a town called Lubavitch. In fact, the Grand Rebbe—I was just reading, coincidentally—was born in Kherson in Ukraine, which is now such a center of combat. Anyway, the tsar had seized the library of the previous Grand Rabbi back in the early part of the last century,

¹² The amendment, which was introduced by Senator Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson (D-WA) and Representative Charles A. Vanik (D-OH), was attached to the Trade Act of 1974 and restricted trade with non-market economies accused of limiting Jewish emigration and violating human rights. The amendment prevented the normalization of U.S.-Russian trade relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union until it was finally repealed in 2012. <https://www.cfr.org/blog/embrace-and-slap-congress-votes-normalize-trade-russia-and-slap-it-wrist>.



maybe 2000 books, 2500 books. And it was a major focus—I could tell you too many really incredible stories about how I got involved in it. They also got Al Gore involved. We worked together—it was a topic of focus before Gore became vice president later on, it was actually—well, now I was in the Senate, and then it maybe it carried over—anyway. Oh, it was like pulling teeth. But [we] negotiated in an agreement with the Russians where seven of the books of the 2000 or 2,500 would be loaned to the Library of Congress, long-term loan. This was an irritant, and apparently [00:34:00] it got under the skin of Putin and [Dmitry] Medvedev.

I'll tell you a funny story about this. I wasn't there, so I'm just going to tell you, it involves President Bush. Oh no, this goes way back. Sorry. Well, it goes back to Bush 41. There was a major force in the entertainment industry named Jerry Weintraub. He produced John Denver, a Frank Sinatra concert, he did *Oceans 11* [and] *12*. He was really something. He's passed away now. So I met him. He actually asked to meet me to—I didn't realize why—to talk about these books, because he had become close to this group in California. But here's what I want to tell you. He was very close to Bush 41, because Jerry had had a place up in Kennebunkport, and they got to know each other. So right after the inauguration, Jerry tells me, the president calls him into the Oval Office and says, “You're my dear friend, Jerry. You help me a lot. What do you want? How about becoming an ambassador somewhere?” [Weintraub replied,] “No, I don't want that. I'm happy where I am.” And then he started to tell President Bush about these books he wanted help in bringing. So he says, Bush got on the phone, called [Secretary of

State] Jim Baker, “Come in here,” and they worked on it. And then, when Clinton came in, Weintraub called me, asked me to his house while I was out in California. I thought that he wanted to meet me. I was excited because he was known as a great fundraiser. And he did help me raise money for my campaign.

But lo and behold, he wanted to talk about these books so that—anyway, we worked on it. I’ll just [fast] forward one more time. This is fascinating. [00:36:00] And this same group—can’t tell you the year—I’m in the Senate. I’m chairman of the Homeland Security Committee. [Senator] Harry Reid [D-NV] calls me. He’s up for reelection, and it’s a very close campaign. He says—he’s the [Democratic Senate] leader—“I need your help, Joe.” He says, “There’s this group in Nevada, the Lubavitch Jews.” He mispronounced it.¹³ “And some of my big supporters are active in that group. They’re calling me about some books that the Russian tsar took, and I don’t know what they’re talking about. And they’re really asking me, when Medvedev—who was president then—comes to Washington in a week or two, I’ve got to bring this up, but I don’t understand it. And they told me you did. So normally, [Senator] Mitch McConnell [R-KY] and I have heads of the Foreign Relations, Defense, and Intelligence Committees, Republicans and Democrats—I’m inviting you and [Senator] Susan Collins [R-ME], but I need you to raise this question with Medvedev.” So, I did, and Medvedev—I thought he was going to get out of his chair. [He said,] “I told my staff we would not say the words

¹³ Senator Lieberman repeats the word “Lubavitch” here, pronouncing it how Reid mispronounced it.

Jackson-Vanik again! We would not say them because somebody would bring up these damn books!” Oh, he got so excited, and he said, “You tell your friends in that Jewish movement—let 'em go to court and if they win the case, we’ll give them the books back.” What an experience. But anyways, it showed how Jackson-Vanik lingered all that time.

There was another year when [00:38:00] it was almost going to be repealed in the House, and the same group asked [Representative] Tom Lantos [D-CA] for help and [Representative] Howard Berman [D-CA], and they blocked that repeal of Jackson-Vanik. It's a little bizarre to think that something—it's apples and oranges, really—so it wasn't only the Bush administration, and to some extent the Clinton administration, but it was this relatively small group that had this focused interest in getting these books back that kept Jackson-Vanik on the books for a long time after, really, the Russians had satisfied the original requirements of Jackson-Vanik.

BEHRINGER: That was a great story about the different twists and turns of that amendment and the opposition to it. That's terrific.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, I'll tell you, I'll tell you one more quick one. This was McCain telling me—he was an aide to the Senate after he came back from Vietnam, because he couldn't go back into active duty. Anyway, on one trip, he went with a Senate delegation—John Tower [R-TX], Scoop [Henry] Jackson [D-WA]—to Israel. And he [McCain] says, “We get off the plane, we go onto a bus right from the plane, and they opened the gates, and there's a thousand, two thousand people there yelling. I turned to the senators, and I said, ‘What are they protesting?’ And then Senator

Jackson said, ‘look at the signs’.” These were all Russian emigres to Israel. They came out, because they knew Jackson was coming in, to thank him for liberating them. It was a touching moment, really, but it shows what an impact Jackson-Vanik made. There were probably a million [00:40:00] Jews from the former Soviet Union that came to Israel as a result of Jackson-Vanik, and they play a really important role in Israeli life. And a lot of them are here, too. There are parts of New York where you can get Russian food with no problem.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to jump to 2007 when you and Senator [Joseph] Biden [D-DE] introduced the resolution condemning violence and internet hacking against Estonia and its embassy in Moscow.

LIEBERMAN: Right, right.

BEHRINGER: Can you discuss what you were trying to do with that resolution, and do you think the Bush administration did enough to protect NATO allies against Russian attempts to influence states on its borders through its cyber attacks and also energy policy?

LIEBERMAN: It was pretty clear to us—and I was glad to work with Joe Biden then, as I did in a lot of things then—we were in a major conflict with Russia under Putin, and it was going to be fought out on various fronts. We hoped, obviously, that it wouldn't lead to war, but we both had the feeling, and certainly in this case on the cyber attacks, that if we let it go or just responded with lame words, Putin would keep doing it. It is interesting to see how much already, by that time, the real Putin was pretty clear, and we've lived with it since—now, tragically as a result of his

invasion of Ukraine, totally unnecessary to his own security, certainly. [00:42:00]

So that's why we did that.

I don't remember enough to have a judgment of whether we thought the Bush administration had done enough in response. I assume that they were upset by it and that they protested it, but honestly, I don't recall whether it was as much as they might have. I'm curious, do you have an opinion about that?

BEHRINGER: I think what we've heard from people is that there was this dichotomy within the administration by this point with people who wanted to engage Russia and felt like criticizing Russia on human rights policies and other things was detrimental to engaging Russia and trying to change it that way. I'm going to throw it to Simon for a question on the color revolutions.

MILES: Yes. I wanted to ask you, Senator, in the early 2000s—keeping our focus outside of Russia's border now—we see massive popular protest movements which change governments in countries like Georgia, Tajikistan—the gentleman that you met earlier is out of a job—and of course, most famously, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. From your vantage point in the Senate, how did you think that the United States handled these democratic groundswells, and do you think that the Bush administration was sufficiently forward-leaning on that policy issue?

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, so it's interesting. Again, I'm sure they were sympathetic. I don't have a clear memory. It may be that there were those two camps [00:44:00] in the administration who were arguing over this. I had—it's really vague—a feeling that

the president himself was very sympathetic to those revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia.

What I do remember, because we all remember what we were involved in more, is that McCain and I—McCain was a great believer in what senators can do in foreign policy by just two things. One is speaking out—writing a letter, publicizing it, giving a talk on the floor of the Senate, issuing an appeal to some country to let some political prisoners go—it gets publicity, the prisoners hear about it. McCain was very affected—as President Bush was, incidentally—by Natan Sharansky’s writings about his experience as a refusenik in the Soviet Union, and also about the value he put on freedom and his experiences and how much it meant to Sharansky and the others in prison there when President Reagan called Russia an “evil empire.” A lot of people might have thought that was just rhetoric and posing or even a genuine expression of his foreign policy beliefs, but for them it was a lifeline. And so McCain believed in that. And also, the other thing—he felt was that, if we were willing to travel, particularly to trouble spots or spots where courage was being shown, it would have an effect. [00:46:00]

So we went to, in that period of time, both to Kyiv and to Georgia. Over time, he and I, particularly John, became very friendly with [Mikheil] Saakashvili, who was the new leader of Georgia—including in 2008, when the Russians came in and grabbed those two provinces [Abkhazia and South Ossetia]. But we both went to Kyiv after the Orange Revolution. Was it [Viktor] Yushchenko?

MILES: Yes.



LIEBERMAN: He was the one that the Russians poisoned, and his face broke out. But there was a funny moment. We went in to see him—basically, to wish him well, [to] say he had a lot of friends in the U.S.—to get publicity both for the people of Ukraine, but also hopefully Europe and, of course, in Moscow to say that this was important to us. A funny little color story—literally color—is that John and I didn't realize, as we headed in a car together to see Yushchenko that morning, that our staffs had both had the same brilliant idea, which is that they had each bought us an orange scarf. And so when we got there, we both pulled it out and laughed like hell. And we walked in to see him with the orange scarfs, and he was very happy, and there were pictures taken by the Ukrainian media. So we were very sympathetic. He was impressive. And he had that woman, [Yulia] Tymoshenko, who was, I think, prime minister then, also quite impressive, bright, strong.¹⁴ And we watched as he suffered and was back and forth in Ukraine. [00:48:00]

In 2008, as I think one of your questions said, Lindsey Graham and I went to Georgia to give support in person to Saakashvili and the people of Georgia in response to the Russian invasion of those two provinces. And the truth is we were—I think we may even have said it at the time—we were dispatched by John [McCain]. In other words, John was on the campaign trail. He would've loved to go, but he couldn't. So he asked Lindsay and me as two close friends to go and give

¹⁴ Yulia Tymoshenko was prime minister during the Yushchenko administration in 2005 and from 2007 to 2010. She lost the 2010 Ukrainian presidential election to Yushchenko's former Russian-backed opponent, Viktor Yanukovich. The following year, she was convicted of abuse of power and spent over two years in prison. After Yanukovich fled the country during the Maidan Revolution in 2014, the Ukrainian Supreme Court and Parliament rehabilitated her and she now serves in the Ukrainian Parliament.

his support to Saakashvili. I will tell you, because I spent a fair amount of time with John during that year on the campaign trail or whatever—Saakashvili and John were in touch by phone almost every day. John was really important to Misha¹⁵ during that period of time in just giving him advice, sustaining him, and giving him encouragement.

Now, what was the response of the administration? It's fascinating to me that I don't focus on it. We were not hostile to the administration. I think we felt that they were sympathetic to what we were doing. I couldn't tell you exactly what they were doing, but I'm sure they were for the Orange Revolution and against Russian incursion into Georgia. But there you go. That was the beginning—again, in 2014 Putin goes into Crimea and eastern Ukraine, and now this year into the heart of Ukraine.

MILES: Sticking with the issue of Georgia and also Ukraine, and in the year 2008, I wonder if we could just backpedal a little bit and talk about the decision at the Bucharest Summit [00:50:00] to indicate that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of the NATO alliance without actually initiating the formal legal proceedings to do so, which other folks that we've interviewed have indicated was basically a product of a compromise between the Bush administration and primarily the French and the Germans—the Bush administration, who wanted to go further, the French and the Germans, who were reticent on that issue. I wonder

¹⁵ Misha is the diminutive of Mikheil, used by friends and family.

what your thinking was on the wisdom of that policy choice and how you perceived it from your perch in the Senate.

LIEBERMAN: I was really grateful. I totally supported accession of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO under a fast-track system. And there's no question I had in mind, and a lot of my colleagues in both parties did, what had happened after the fall of the Soviet Union, which is that we all had a feeling that this was a moment of opportunity, and that the people of those former states of the Soviet Union and the governments really wanted to be part of Western Europe and NATO, wanted to be part of the transatlantic alliance, if you will, and that if we waited too long, there was no guarantee that the Russians would not try to, in one way or another, rebuild their empire, which is, of course, part of what's happening now. And we were able to get a lot of those countries in pretty quickly.

By the time the Bucharest Conference occurred, it was clearer that [00:52:00] Putin was definitely trying to rebuild the empire. But there were people who were skittish about it, particularly in Europe—you're absolutely right—because there had begun to be relations with Putin's Russia, particularly the Germans, as we've seen again, and the French. And McCain and I and others were out there urging that Ukraine and Georgia will be admitted to NATO. And I remember being very grateful that the Bush administration had argued for that at the Bucharest meeting. Of course, there was a compromise, and obviously nothing ever happened. It never was realized. And I think that if we had brought Ukraine into NATO in the aftermath of the Bucharest Conference—it's easy with

hindsight—but I think it's pretty sure that Putin would not be invading Ukraine in 2022, wouldn't want to take on NATO in that direct way. I think he is surprised that NATO has responded as strongly in support of Ukraine as it has now, but he never would've risked it if Ukraine was in NATO. The world would've been a lot better off. So that was an act of real leadership—I'd call it moral leadership—by the Bush administration.

BEHRINGER: One of the direct things that did happen after the Bucharest Summit was the invasion of Georgia. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about if you remember where you were when the war broke out and [00:54:00] also what you thought of the Bush administration's handling of the Georgia crisis in response to the Russian invasion?

LIEBERMAN: Yeah. Here again, I don't remember exactly where I was. I remember being furious and just remember it followed all that Putin had done to consolidate his power in Russia, to diminish or kill his political opponents, and to be more aggressive with the countries of the former Soviet Union. So in a way, I wasn't shocked, but the reality of it was jarring. Most of that year, as I said, I was either working in the Senate or, as my wife would tell you, spending too much time on the campaign trail with John McCain, which I look back at with a lot of gratitude that I did. So we were very forward-leaning, John and I and Lindsey [Graham], about what had happened in Georgia, very supportive of Saakashvili. Frankly, I don't remember—I remember being mildly unsettled that—those were tough decisions for the administration. They obviously condemned the Russian invasion,



but they were not really prepared to do much more than that to be supportive. So in that sense, I was disappointed. But these are vague recollections. I apologize. And it's only—what is it?—[20]08, it's 14 years ago. But, you see, you forget the details. I remember our activity. I can tell you that we had great food [00:56:00] and wine with Saakashvili. He was a good host in the middle of war, but of course we were in Tbilisi.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]