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U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Robert Gates

Secretary of Defense, 2006-2011

Interviewers:

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[**Begin Transcription**]

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

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

GATES: And I'm Robert Gates.

BEHRINGER: Would you mind beginning by describing your background on U.S.-Russian relations and your career of service?

GATES: I was recruited by CIA in 1966 out of the Russian and East European Institute at Indiana University. After going through training and a stint in the Air Force, I reported to CIA in August of 1968, the week the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, served as an analyst working on Soviet foreign affairs for several years. Then, and during that time, was an intelligence advisor to the U.S. delegation negotiating strategic [arms control] with the Soviets, both in Vienna and Geneva. Joined the NSC in 1974—spring of 1974—on loan from CIA to take the Soviet and East European desk at the NSC staff, and I did that through the remainder of President Nixon's term and then all through the Ford administration. Returned to CIA. Was called back to the NSC four months later to become assistant to Zbigniew Brzezinski, continued to work on—I was his executive assistant, obviously was involved in a lot of things having to do with [the] Soviet Union, especially [00:02:00] relating to the invasion of Afghanistan. Then returned to the Agency in January of 1980 and headed the Strategic

Evaluation Center for about three weeks and then was drafted to become executive assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence, Stansfield Turner. At the end of that same year, I became the National Intelligence Officer for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Back to the NSC—well, then I became deputy director for intelligence, the head of the analytical side of CIA, and then chairman of the National Intelligence Council simultaneously. Then became deputy director of Central Intelligence in 1986 and then became deputy national security advisor to Brent Scowcroft in 1989 and was with him and [the] first President Bush all through the liberation of Eastern Europe, [German] reunification, collapse of the Soviet Union. And then returned to CIA as director of central intelligence, and then retired from that position in 1993. And then returned to government 13 years later as secretary of defense, and served under both Presidents Bush and Obama from 2006 to 2011.

BEHRINGER: And when you come back into office in 2006, can you describe the lay of the land as far as schools of thought within the Bush administration about policy toward Russia and where you stood in the administration on Russia policy?

GATES: The relationship had obviously [00:04:00] deteriorated subsequent to the color revolutions in 2003-2004, in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine, and Putin's beliefs that we'd had a hand in all of those activities deeply. He was pretty suspicious. He had a good personal relationship with President Bush. I think, over the course of 43's[1] eight years in office, he and Putin met something

[1] George W. Bush's

like 40 times. Putin made seven trips to the United States to meet with Bush, including one to Texas and one to Kennebunkport. Bush visited Russia several times.

So they still had a good personal relationship in 2006. But the relationship between the countries was becoming a little frayed, and that culminated in a way at the Munich Security Conference in February of 2007. And so I'd only been in the office for three months—less than three months—when Putin gave his strong speech at the Munich Security Conference, basically accusing the United States of being responsible for every bad thing that had happened in the world and to Russia. Most of the time, when he was giving the speech, he was looking straight at me, clearly felt that my long experience in all of this had contributed to the troubles that they were facing. And then interestingly enough, again, on a personal level, he walks off the stage—having made this very aggressive speech and having received and returned some very aggressive questioning from this European audience—he steps off the stage, [00:06:00] walks straight to me and, with a big smile, invites me to visit Russia.

MILES: We've talked to a fair few folks who had run-ins with the current Russian president beforehand—for example, in the 1990s, during his tenure in the St. Petersburg mayoral administration. Before his rise to the presidency, did you have much of an awareness of Vladimir Putin—perhaps even your paths had crossed in your official roles—and what was your assessment of him—his evolution, let's say—over the course of his presidency prior to your taking office as secretary of defense.

GATES: I'd really never heard of him. I think I may have first become aware of him when he was the deputy mayor in St. Petersburg, but really didn't know much about him until he moved to Moscow. The first time I met him, I not-so-subtly reminded him that when he'd been a colonel in the KGB in Dresden, I'd been the deputy director of central intelligence, and so he never came onto my radar. I think one reason Putin and I actually sort of got along was—and I told President Bush this—that I think behind it was this kind of old CIA-KGB thing. And I think kind of he respected that, and we would have some interesting byplay from time to time.

MILES: And then when you take up your position, of course, he makes himself very known [00:08:00] to the United States in 2006, with Russians' use of their leverage against the energy sector against Ukraine and Georgia, and then, of course, in 2007, when the Russians launched the cyberattack against Estonia over the relocation of a World War II monument. When you look back on those early gambits, how do you evaluate them, and how do you evaluate the Bush administration's response to this early Russian misbehavior?

GATES: I think everything Putin has done since he became president in 1999—first of all, I believe that he became president because he was able to tell Yeltsin that if he became president, he would protect the Yeltsin and the Yeltsin family, keep them from going to jail and make sure they kept all the money they'd stolen. And I would just say parenthetically, there is no one in Russia that can make that kind of a promise to Vladimir Putin today. I think that the relationship, for most of Bush's presidency, really until almost the end, until Georgia, there was

an effort to preserve the personal relationship between the two presidents, even as the governments were interacting with one another, and the relationship was getting tougher in that regard. And they would have pretty candid conversations. I didn't spend any time going [00:10:00] backward in the relationship, so I can't really speak to the president's relationship with Putin or even a lot of the maneuverings that were going on between the two governments until I came back into government at the end of 2006.

BEHRINGER: And moving back to the Munich Security Conference speech again for a moment, can you discuss a little bit what your reaction to the speech was, after he came and shook your hand?

GATES: I spoke the next morning, and I tried to—I didn't want to aggravate the situation, and I basically wanted, particularly for this European audience, to basically not dismiss it, but not take it too seriously. And so I think my remarks were something that I handwrote after his speech, as an introduction to my remarks, something to the effect that we didn't need to start another Cold War, that, unlike some, I'd lived through the Cold War and, unlike some, was not nostalgic for it, and basically said that both Putin and I had grown up in the Cold War, but that I had been to reeducation camp, having been a university president. And so I was trying to be light about it, and then I went into my substantive remarks, but again, on a personal level, as I just mentioned, right after that really dramatic speech—and I think [00:12:00] the general feeling was that he was venting, and I think in retrospect, we realized that the speech was

really a harbinger rather than just a rant, and that he'd really soured on the relationship with the West.

BEHRINGER: And one of the main topics that he highlighted in that speech was Iraq, and, of course, you're coming in to try to fix Iraq. That's one of your big priorities as secretary of defense. To what extent did the Iraq surge after this affect the U.S.-Russian relationship, and did the Russians offer any type of support or any criticisms to you as it was unfolding?

GATES: No. There really wasn't much of a response. I think the notion of the U.S. willingness—what underpinned that speech of his and the subsequent months was just his unhappiness with the United States feeling like it had the impunity to intervene unilaterally, send its armies into another country. I don't think he had a lot of sympathy for Saddam Hussein, but the other aspect of it was that Iraq had been a Soviet client for decades under Saddam. They'd bought billions of dollars worth of weapons from him. So, in a way, it wasn't just the we'd invaded another sovereign country, it was, we had invaded and ousted a Soviet client, and I think that shaped their views.

But I don't recall the next time I saw Putin after the Munich Security Conference, but it was not soon, and I really didn't have much interaction. [00:14:00] I don't have the chronology in the back of my head, but, during the rest of the time, I saw him a couple of times alone and a couple of times with Condi,[2] and really, the primary issue that Putin had with me, and that their defense minister had, for most of the Bush administration was really less about

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[2] Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

Iraq and much more about the President's decision in early 2007, I think, to put anti-ballistic missiles in Poland and the Czech Republic. And the Russians—we found it very difficult to take their concerns seriously because we knew, and we tried to explain to them in graphic detail, how those missiles technically could not be a threat to the Russian missile force, that the orientation of the radars and the nature of the launchers themselves would not permit it. But that was the primary subject of virtually every meeting I had with a Russian leader, and really into the Obama administration.

MILES: And picking up on that point, could you talk a little bit about your sense of why this was such a burr under the Russians' saddles? Did you feel that this was a serious issue on which they were willing to negotiate, or did you get the sense that, really, they were just primarily interested in obstructing an American foreign policy goal?

GATES: Well, I think initially we thought it was the latter, but the more I thought about it [00:16:00]—we gave them very detailed, technical briefings about the missiles—and again, I can't keep the chronology straight—but, at one point, I made a very forthcoming offer to the Russians that, as far as I was concerned, they could station their officers at our sites in Poland. I said, "We'll have to get the agreement of the Polish government, but I have no problem of you stationing officers permanently with our missile sites so you know what in the heck we're doing," and the technical people took those offers pretty seriously.

But I think, as I've thought about it, that the primary concern the Russians had was not with the generation of missiles that we were deploying, or

wanted to deploy at around that time, but rather their concern about successive generations of those missiles. That once the precedent had been established of having those missiles in Eastern Europe, that subsequent generations of those missiles would have additional capabilities that could in fact put their forces at risk. And, for a certain time, I think that they just wanted to obstruct it, and they hadn't forgotten that Bush had walked away from the ABM Treaty. And so I think it was a combination of being obstructionist, but I think they also had some genuine security concerns—and again, not in terms of right then, but what might follow in 5 or 10 years.

BEHRINGER: And was it your sense that these counterproposals that they were offering—radars in Azerbaijan and [00:18:00] other counteroffers—that they were serious about this, or were they—at the time, you made a comment about them trying to evaluate whether they're serious about partnering or whether they're just posing. What was the sense you got through your negotiations with them?

GATES: I think the feeling that we had was, regardless of their motives, those radars would be useless just from a technical standpoint, that we knew quite a bit about those radars from the Soviet days, and there was just the belief that technically they contributed nothing. And certainly for the radars that we wanted to put in the Czech Republic.

BEHRINGER: And then of course, there's a rupture, but then you stay on as defense secretary during the Obama administration. Did Obama and Bush differ on their approach to missile defense?

GATES: The conservatives would argue that Obama basically gave it up. But in fact, the initiative to change the nature of the deployments in Eastern Europe came from the Defense Department, and General Cartwright played a big role in that. And the basic thing was the problem with deploying the GBIs[3]—those ground-based missiles, like the ones we had in Alaska—is that again, what we're worried about is Iranian missiles and particularly the ability of the Iranians to salvo missiles—so, you know, maybe launch 30, 40 missiles at a time—because we're only talking about intermediate-range missiles. And if we only had 10 interceptors, then after [00:20:00] you'd fired those 10, you were done. There was no other defense. And what the Department of Defense came up with, with the SM-2, was the ability to handle an Iranian salvo because you'd have many launchers. First of all, they were much more affordable—they were, like, a fraction of the cost of the GBIs—and it would give us a much greater capability against Iranian salvos.

Now, the funny thing is that everybody, the conservatives and conservative papers and so on, all accused Obama of selling out to the Russians and giving them a gift. The truth of the matter is, while the Russians were quiet about the change for a while, when they did come out, they came out very strongly against it and took the position that it was actually more dangerous to them than what Bush had proposed. And so, while you got some of the conservatives on the one side saying, "We've just given the whole thing up," you got the Russians coming back saying, "Actually, this is worse than what we had

[3] Ground-based interceptors.

before." But the initiative actually came from the Pentagon and was basically the availability of a new technology that we thought could much better handle an Iranian salvo.

MILES: So early on in this process, in, I believe, October 2007, you and Secretary Rice make a trip to Moscow. You're subjected to the traditional welcoming process of the Putin administration, where I believe you're made to wait for the better part of an hour for your appointment, and, according to folks who were also in that room, you were then treated to a pretty lengthy tirade with threats to pull out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Conventional Forces in Europe treaties. [00:22:00] I wonder if you can share any recollections and reactions from your first encounter with the Russian president on his home turf.

GATES: First of all, on the threat to pull out of the INF Treaty, in one of my early meetings—and it may have been at my first, at that Munich Security Conference, but it may have also been a little later—but Sergei Ivanov was still minister of defense, and, in a private meeting he and I had, he said that we ought to end the INF Treaty. And he said, "Look, we're the only two countries in the world that cannot produce these missiles." And he said, "We have no intention of deploying them against the West. We intend to deploy them facing Pakistan and facing China, because of the potential threat from those two places." And I basically told him, "If you want to walk away from the INF Treaty, you're on your own, but we won't be a party to that."

And so the meeting Condi and I had with Putin—first of all, what the press never caught up with was that when Putin came out finally—and it was 45 minutes or an hour later—first of all, he apologized to both of us, but then he said he'd been on the phone with the Israeli prime minister trying to talk about the Iranian nuclear threat. So I think he actually was involved in something other than just gamesmanship in the delay. And it was a long meeting, and we did[n't] get the tirade, and one of the more memorable parts of the meetings for me was Putin produced [00:24:00] this—again, the main topic was missiles in Europe, the missile defense system. So he produces a map, and he said, "Look, this is our intelligence service's estimate of the range arcs of Iranian missiles." And, in all honesty, this thing looked like it had been put together by a fifth grader using colored pencils and a compass. And it was really like they'd never stolen the technology for PowerPoint, which maybe was to their advantage. But anyway, he shows me this map—it's all wrong—and I look at it and he says, "This is the best estimate of our intelligence services." So I turned the piece of paper around and pushed it back across the table at him and looked him in the eye and said, "You need a new intelligence service." And he actually smirked a little bit, like I'd caught him out with this foolish piece of paper.

But I would say that the talks were very businesslike. There was no tirade. That's the thing about Putin. He's not a shouter, he's not table pounder. He never raises his voice. He's very even. I had one meeting with him in the Kremlin that was scheduled for 45 minutes to an hour, and somebody came in

and gave him a message, and he abruptly left. He excused himself. Well, an hour or so later, we discovered that the note he'd been passed was that Yeltsin had just died. And so we understood why he had left the room.

But it was always business-like with him, and, as I said earlier—and I used to joke with President Bush—I think that there was this kind of old CIA-KGB chemistry going on, a mutual respect [00:26:00] left over from an earlier time, and maybe from a time when we were more equal, the two countries were more equal in stature, and maybe just nostalgia on his part. But yeah, when I came back from seeing Putin the first time I told—the president obviously had made his comment about Putin's soul and so on, and his eyes—and I said, "Well, Mr. President, I looked Putin in the eye, and all I saw was a stone-cold killer." And Bush kind of laughed. And I think he thought, "Yeah, that's that old KGB-CIA thing going on."

But most of our meetings during the Bush administration, and actually those that involved me in the Obama administration for the first year or so really were focused on the anti-ballistic missiles. They really were preoccupied. And of course, that was a big concern of theirs, and obviously, since the Department of Defense was doing that, that would be the kind of subject that they would raise with me, although he would do his usual litany of woe of all the sins the United States had committed.

MILES: So, apropos of defense policy, as you just said, in the early years of your time in office, you are initiating some pretty big reform efforts in America's force structure to do with active-duty troop numbers, halting troop drawdowns in

Europe, and also nuclear triad modernization. Meanwhile—also with a really big kickoff in 2008, but with earlier progress [00:28:00] in that direction, starting in 2006—the Russians are making pretty significant modernization reforms in their military. Can you talk a little bit about how, or if at all, these two phenomena interacted? Of course, of particular interest would probably be on the nuclear front, where the United States and Russia are members of a pretty exclusive club at the very top of the nuclear heap. Could you talk a little bit about how you felt about Russia's military modernization, how the Russians might've felt about the United States's, and so on?

GATES: Yeah. I actually developed, I think, a pretty good working relationship with Russian Defense Minister Serdyukov. And, when he visited me at the Pentagon, I gave him all the honors and everything, which the Russians love. But we sat down, and we had some very candid conversations about the challenges of reforming the military. And I remember vividly him telling me he was charged with discharging two hundred thousand Russian officers. And the biggest part of the challenge was finding them housing—where do they go, and what do they do? And so we really got into a lot of detail about the challenges of changing these big institutions, and, in all honesty, what the Russians did was, I think, far more dramatic than what we did because the Russians for centuries, for their whole history, had basically relied on very large ground armies. And what Putin was doing was transforming that service to dramatically reduce [00:30:00] the size of the ground forces, make it more of a volunteer or a contract force, train up elite units that were actually really good and could be

deployed very quickly, but investing most of the money in the navy and in the air force and particularly in their strategic nuclear capabilities.

So there was a lot of modernization going on, but a lot of restructuring as well. And I would tell him about all the programs I was cutting that were wasteful programs, that weren't working or lost their purpose, or five-year development programs in their fourteenth year and stuff like that. And then I'd joke with him that I had a problem he didn't, and it was called Congress, because as long as he could get Putin to agree to what he wanted to do, he could move, and anything I wanted to do, I had to get the Congress on board.

But there was a lot of conversation about that, and it was a very cordial relationship. And, when he visited here, I took him out on a Navy boat, and we had a very nice dinner out on the Potomac, and then he reciprocated on the Moscow River when I went to Moscow and he hosted me. So we had a very cordial relationship, even at a time when the political relationship was getting dicier and dicier.

And that was really all mainly—well, it was while I was secretary during the Bush administration. And I think Condi had the same kind of relationship with her counterpart. And I think—particularly once [00:32:00] she started dealing with Lavrov—I had a better relationship with Serdyukov then she had with Lavrov, but that's just my guess. But those cordial relationships at the very top overlaid, covered the notion or the reality that the two countries were more and more at odds on really big issues. And then, of course, it all came to a head with Georgia.

Now, one of the areas where I actually strongly disagreed with the president and with Condi was on offering a NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. And I told them, I said, "Look, the Russian empire traces its roots to Kyiv in the ninth and tenth century, and it's part of the soul of Russia. And if you try to bring them into NATO, you're really going at the heart of Russia in many ways, because there's a historical and a spiritual, almost, relationship between the Russians and the Ukrainians, not to mention the fact that a great deal of the defense industries and heavy industry of the Soviet Union was actually in the eastern part of Ukraine."

And I said—the other piece of my argument was, "NATO is a military alliance. Do you think the American people are actually going to send their kids to fight for Georgia or Ukraine? Do you think we could even begin to do that if the Russians were serious, because they're right there on the doorstep. Anyway, [00:34:00] the President's attitude was, if they want to be in NATO, we ought to let them be in NATO. And I didn't make too big an issue of it because I was totally confident that neither the Germans nor the French would ever allow it. So I figured, it ain't going to happen, so why make a big deal out of it? So the Bucharest conference was pretty dicey because of that big issue, and that was obviously Putin's main point, and where he made some very critical remarks about Ukraine and so on. But once the Bucharest conference took place in April—I guess it was in April of '08—I think the relationship by and large went into, if not a deep freeze, at least a cold refrigerator. And then, of course, Georgia in August.

BEHRINGER: So you were surprised by what happened at Bucharest then. You thought the Germans and the French would be a little bit more resistant to—

GATES: Well, they won the argument. They won the argument. And what NATO basically did was essentially say, "Yes, someday, we'll consider it," but they didn't offer then the path to membership that other countries have been offered and so on, so it fell short of what had been extended to—I don't remember what the catch phrase was, but the period leading up to extending an offer to join the Alliance. But they weren't even offered that when the compromise language, as I recall, fell short of that and basically just said, "We're not ruling it out, and perhaps someday," but that was about as far as it went. And that essentially was compromise language that was intended to pacify the United [00:36:00] States but also both Ukraine and Georgia.

BEHRINGER: And in the people we've talked to, there's two views that have come up. One is that this compromise language was like a tripwire for the Georgian war, that it spurred the Russians to make a move. Others claim that, if it had gone farther, if they had offered NATO membership, that it would have been more of a deterrent effect. How do you see it in relation to Georgia?

GATES: Just because Georgia was so far removed from NATO and from capabilities that could stop the Russians if they intended, I think it would not have deterred the Russians had they been extended the offer. The other thing that needs to be taken into account is just how much Putin hated Saakashvili in very personal terms. And, when they had a phone conversation, Putin basically told

Saakashvili to stick it up his ass in even more graphic terms than that. And so there was a real personal animosity there that I think was involved.

And essentially, what I've always believed and wrote about in *Duty* is, for all practical purposes, Putin set a trap for Saakashvili, and Saakashvili walked right into it because of his own emotionalism and getting caught up in the moment and so on. But, even when the war was going on, we had a very open line of communication between the Defense Department and the Defense Ministry in Russia, and Admiral Mullen [00:38:00] in particular was on the phone almost every day with his counterpart on the General Staff, for example, providing latitude and longitude positions and times of arrival and flight paths and so on for the C-17s bringing a Georgian brigade back from Iraq so that the Russians wouldn't inadvertently shoot down one of our C-17s.

So there was a very close coordination of both sides making sure we didn't get cross-threaded and ended up having an incident that would really have created huge problems. So, even while the war was going on, there was a very businesslike exchange of information going on.

MILES: So, continuing on that theme of your experiences with the August 2008 war in Georgia, could you talk a little bit about how you heard the news that hostilities had broken out, your assessment of how the Bush administration handled this challenge? Because it seems from the other folks that we've talked to that there were different opinions at the time—and there still are different opinions—about what the right American response was and how appropriate and successful you think U.S. policy was regarding that conflict.

GATES: I've always been at the view that, first of all, there weren't a lot of tools in the box for the President to use. We're at the far end of our logistical reach. The Russians have all of the equipment that they need. They have total escalation control. They already have occupied a good part of Georgia. And so it seemed to me that the decisions [00:40:00] the president made, made probably the most effective use of the limited tools we had. We brought the [Georgian] brigade back from Iraq, as we had promised. We provided a lot of supplies—humanitarian supplies and a lot of communications equipment and stuff like that—essentially non-lethal stuff—to the Georgians. We put a couple of warships into the Black Sea headed toward Georgia.

So it seemed to me that we had to be mindful that, if we decided to do something more, Putin could occupy the entirety of Georgia before we even got our cables written. So there was a recognition that all Putin needed was an excuse to occupy all of Georgia, and we weren't going to give him that. And we were very supportive of Sarkozy's effort to mediate and to get the Russians to pull back. And they finally did. I think they agreed after a couple of weeks. I think they moved their first soldier back about three months after that, two or three months after, so they weren't exactly in any hurry. But I think we had a pretty realistic view of what we could and couldn't do, and also the risks that the Russians could finish the job in no time at all if they chose to do so, and nobody was going to be able to do anything about it. And so we were operating within that framework as well.

BEHRINGER: You called Georgia a "Pyrrhic victory" or "strategic overreach" by the Russians. Would that still be your view on—

GATES: [00:42:00] Yeah, I think so, in the sense that Abkhazia and Ossetia are not exactly profit centers for the Russians. They've got it, but what've they got? It's a constant drain on them for money and support. They don't produce—it's all outgoing, no income, when it comes to that, and what've they got? Maybe they made a point. I think one country—I think it was Nicaragua—recognized their actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Georgians undoubtedly feel aggrieved, as they should, but this did not exactly provide any big strategic advantages for Putin. But it goes to what I was saying at the very outset, and that is that, from the very beginning, his approach has been, "How do I restore Russia as a great power?" And that involves control of the near abroad. And I continue to say today that he doesn't want to take over. He doesn't want to recreate the Soviet Union. He doesn't want to be responsible for all the problems of those countries in the near abroad. What he does want, though, is for them to take a knee. He wants them to do what Russia wants them to do whenever Russia wants them to do it. And whether it's Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan or Georgia or Ukraine or Transnistria or Moldova or Belarus, it's all a consistent pattern. He doesn't want to take them over. He wants them to be subservient. And that's where Georgia falls. And I think it was also—he wanted to make the point that [00:44:00] Georgia just was never going to be a member of NATO.

MILES: To be fair to Abkhazia, they did produce the single worst bottle of wine that I've ever tasted in my life while I was in Moscow. I made a strategic error at the grocery store, once.

GATES: I would just say along those lines that, back in the Cold War, when I was dealing with the head of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, Kryuchkov gave me a bottle of Georgian wine that was bottled in the year of my birth. So, first of all, it was very old wine, and it was not the kind of wine that got better with age. And he would give me vodka, and he'd give me caviar, and he gave me the wine, and I never tried any of it. I always figured that it was probably laced with polonium or something.

MILES: [laughter] Better safe than sorry.

GATES: Exactly.

MILES: So, 2008—big leadership changes in both of the countries that we're talking about, so maybe we could talk about them in turn. First, the transition, as you experienced it from the vantage point of the Pentagon, from the Bush administration to the Obama administration, but, of course, we'd also love to talk about the transition from President Putin to Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev.

GATES: Yeah. I would say that, in my discussions with the president-elect about staying on at the Pentagon, Russia was never on our agenda. It was totally, how would we operate in the government? How would I operate [00:46:00] in an Obama administration? So it was all about, when we had our secret meeting in the firehouse at Reagan Airport to talk about this, it was all about budgets,

people, Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on. But when they decided to do the reset, which was pretty early on, I put it in the same box as—when Condi wanted to reach out to North Korea, [Vice President] Cheney was very much opposed to it. It was very controversial in the administration. And I was okay with it. I didn't have a problem. I was convinced it would fail, but I saw no harm in trying. I saw no downside. So it's the same kind of attitude on my part when Obama wanted to do a reset with Russia—and, I might add, and tried to do the same thing with Iran. I thought his letters to the Ayatollah were foolish. I was convinced they would not produce anything concrete, but I saw no harm in trying. And so that's kind of where I was with the reset with Russia. And frankly, if they had ever shared with me that they were going to use this little stunt with the reset button, I would have strongly advised against it, and I would have reminded them about Ollie North's trip to Iran with a cake in the shape of a key. And I would have said, "These kinds of things always backfire, so just forget it." And then, of course, they got the translation wrong and that's—more and more.

So I didn't have any problem, but I was pretty sure that this relationship [00:48:00] was not going to go in a very positive way. And it ties back to the change in Russia. And I will say, I think the relationship between 2008 and 2012 did provide a certain easing of tensions between the two countries and mainly because both Obama and Medvedev were kind of simpatico. They're young and so on and so forth. And I think Medvedev had some interesting visions for what Russia could become, and, if he'd been the real president and had had a second

term, things might've gone differently because he wanted to modernize Russia. He wanted to diversify the economy away from just oil and gas. So he had some pretty modern ideas. And so I think he and Obama were pretty simpatico.

And we'd have never gotten the UN resolution on Libya through the Security Council had Putin still been the president. And he actually came out and criticized Medvedev for that decision and compared what the West was gonna do in Libya to the crusades. And so there were areas where Putin would put his foot down and basically say, "We're not going to do this." But mainly on stuff like Libya and some others Medvedev did some things that Putin would not have done. And it was in that environment particularly that I had some of my most forthcoming discussions with Serdyukov and [00:50:00] so on. So there was a change in tone while Medvedev was president. There weren't any big concessions on anything, but they did make some decisions that allowed us to act. But I think there was generally the feeling that on really significant issues, that Putin was the guy pulling the strings, that he was the real president of Russia.

MILES: And just to follow up on that very quickly, you feel that that was something that was understood in the U.S. government at the time, that even though they might officially deal with Medvedev as the president—of course, Obama famously goes out to the Putin dacha, compound, whatever term you want to use, to meet with the Prime Minister, is naturally kept waiting a long time. Do you think that was understood in the administration, or was that a gradual coming to terms with that reality?

GATES: I don't know. I know I felt that way from the beginning. It's the job of diplomats to be optimists. And that's why I was an intelligence officer instead of a diplomat. And I think Obama understood at some level that Putin was still in charge, but one thing that Medvedev did was loosen the constraints that Putin had imposed on NGOs working in Russia that were working on democracy, democratization, institution building, human rights, and things like that. Putin had put some very severe limitations on. Medvedev loosened those up pretty dramatically. And, of course, the second Putin became president, he not only reversed everything Medvedev had done, he made it even more [00:52:00] draconian.

So there were areas where Medvedev clearly differentiated himself from Putin. But as I say, I think there may have been what I would characterize as false optimism on the part of Obama and maybe [Secretary of State] Hillary [Clinton] about Medvedev. From my standpoint, I never doubted for a second that Putin was calling the shots on all the stuff that really mattered.

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned in *Duty* that, in the Obama administration, you played, you called it a “minor role” in U.S.-Russian relations during that period. What was the reason that you didn't play a bigger role with your background on U.S.-Russia, and could you also talk a little bit about your role in the New START Treaty?

GATES: I've always been an advocate of these strategic treaties with Russia and the Soviet Union. I mentioned at the very beginning of this, I'd been an intelligence advisor to both SALT I and SALT II back in the early seventies and was there in

‘78 in Vienna when Carter signed the next agreement, and I was very supportive, because my basic pitch, always, particularly to the opponents was, “I look at it in one way and one way only: Is the United States better off with it or without it? And you can make all kinds of different arguments, but, net-net, are we better off with it than without it?” And I always said, “Having predictability is better than not having predictability and being able to monitor onsite is better than having to rely on satellites by themselves.”

So, for those two reasons, I was quite supportive, and Hillary and I went to the Hill a bunch of times. My God, I wish I had a dollar for every [00:54:00] minute we spent negotiating with John Kyl and two or three others up there. I think the one thing that I got out of the treaty was, to get it ratified, the administration had to agree to a significant modernization of our nuclear establishment. And I mean to the tune of about eighty to a hundred billion dollars over a ten-year period. And that was the price extracted by the opponents of the treaty, or by those who were negotiating to see if we could get it ratified.

So I was very supportive of that and went to the Hill and was very supportive of Clinton's efforts and the administration's efforts. And I think they felt like I was pretty important to that process precisely because I had been appointed by President Bush and was a Republican. And so they felt that that gave me a credibility on the Hill among Republicans that none of them had. So I did participate in that regard, but in the arms control negotiations—I was in the situation room and so on, but for all practical purposes, I really didn't have

any serious objections to what they were doing. They were very supportive of the new missile defense initiative in Poland and actually an expansion of our capability there. The first two years he was in office, Obama was supportive of the defense budget. We began to part ways in the third year, so my timing was great in terms of getting out of there.

So, I would say, [00:56:00] because I was not opposed to what they were doing, I wasn't a big presence, if you will, in the situation room and the discussions of these things because I didn't have any problem with what they were doing, and most of it was just tactics on the Hill and, how do you try and get these agreements through, and so on.

The one place where I did weigh in, and weighed in pretty strongly, was when the FBI found the sleeper cells. And I wanted to make that very painful for the Russians, as did Leon Panetta at CIA, as did the director of the FBI, and the attorney general, and—I can't remember the White House lineup. But the president and the vice-president were both chagrined—I think more chagrined that the FBI found out about this than they were that the Russians had still been doing it—because it had the potential to blow up the arms control agreements, the strategic arms agreement, and the whole relationship. And I said that I thought there was a chance that Medvedev hadn't known anything about this, but that Putin almost certainly had known that they were still putting sleeper cells in the United States.

And I wanted to see if we could drive a wedge between Medvedev and Putin by having the president—they were getting ready to have a summit

meeting, and that was another factor that made both Obama and [Vice President] Biden mad that the FBI had discovered this thing, was because it had the potential not only to screw up the arms control negotiations but also the prospective summit between [00:58:00] Obama and Medvedev. And I said, "So how about this? How about to your meeting with Medvedev you take a list of these people and say, 'I can't believe you would have known that you had these sleeper spies in the United States. And what's your government doing? Do you know what you're doing? Do you know what your own government is doing? Do you know what your security services are doing?'" In other words, I would have tried to split him and Putin. And the Obama folks just wanted to make it go away. And that's essentially what they did. They basically just gave them warning and then shipped them out of the country. I think they may have gotten one or two people released from Russia as a quid pro quo.

But that was the only significant issue involving Russia where I had a significantly different point of view than the president and Clinton.

BEHRINGER: Going back to the Bush administration, you had already talked about Bush's reaction when you told them what you thought about offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. But in your book, *Exercise of Power*, you criticize Washington for this failure of imagination since 1990s on the topic of NATO, and you raise the possibility that at some point during that time, NATO membership could have been offered to Russia, or a Membership Action Plan. Was that idea basically dead by the time you got into office in 2006?

GATES: [01:00:00] Yes. I think there's a very narrow window for imagination and for changing the course of events, and that would have been '92 to '94 or so, and it was a very narrow window when things were still so much up in the air, and I think a wholly different way of thinking about it. And, frankly, I think something different might have happened if, say, Bush and Baker had had another four years. There might have been something much more creative and much more willing to think entirely anew, just like Baker took advantage of the victory in the First Gulf War to get the Madrid Conference for the Middle East together and some things like that. They were willing to think about things in a different way. But I think the Clinton administration, from the very beginning, was headed in a different direction. But that's when it would have had to happen, would have been early in the Clinton administration. Yeah, by 2001, that idea was completely off the table.

MILES: In *Duty*, you wrote that, apropos of the 1990s, you had told President Bush that the United States—and I believe I'm quoting you here—"badly underestimated the magnitude of Russian humiliation" after the Cold War, over the course of the 1990s, and also that expanding NATO was—I'm quoting you here—"a mistake," and that any attempt to bring Ukraine and Georgia in were "truly overreaching." Can you talk a little bit about how President Bush responded [01:02:00] to these concerns about Russian face, NATO enlargement, and Ukraine and Georgia's potential future in the alliance, how he responded to those concerns when you raised them?

GATES: First of all, I think that, in terms of enlargement, the train was mainly out of the station by 1997. We'd already added several new countries. And, on reflection, I thought, maybe because we had never recognized that the Soviets had incorporated the Baltic states, I was much more open to expanding NATO and to include the three Baltic states and Poland, and perhaps Czechoslovakia. But I felt that we shouldn't—really the basis of what I wrote in *Exercise*—any different approach that would have involved offering a path to Russia would have also involved, how do you integrate that with a path for these other countries? And if the Russians felt like they were going to be a part of the system going forward, then their objections [would have] been significantly less to those countries in particular.

I think a big part—I think the Russians, to a degree, draw a distinction between enlargement that included former states of the Warsaw Pact and enlargement that involved republics that had been part of the Soviet Union, and particularly someplace like Ukraine that had been part of the Russian Empire for [01:04:00] two centuries. And I do think that they drew a distinction between those enlargements, between countries that had never been part of the Russian Empire and those that had actually been part of the empire for a long time. And that would have included Georgia as well. So I did draw that distinction.

A lot of this, these conversations had moved well along before I ever got there. And I think Bush was sympathetic. I'm stretching my memory here. I think he was sympathetic to what I was saying about the magnitude of Russia's

humiliation. But now I'm just projecting my beliefs onto the president. I think he was deeply, deeply committed to the Freedom Agenda. And I think, on membership for Ukraine and Georgia—I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think Condi expressed her concerns to him about those as well, because of her knowledge of the Soviet Union and Soviet history and Russian history and actually posed the question to him that it was going to likely cause a lot of problems. And I think in his book, he talks about how, at the end of the discussion, he basically says, "If they want in, how can I say no?" And so, I think not only had he been told about the risks, I think he took that aboard, [01:06:00] understood it, and made that decision regardless. In other words, he didn't go into this oblivious to the risks and the concerns.

MILES: You mentioned Secretary Rice's doctorate and background in Soviet history, especially the Soviet General Staff and its workings, and, of course, you are also coming into your position as SecDef[4] with a doctorate in Soviet studies, Soviet history as well. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how that background informed your own behaviors, and, since several people have also commented on this, it would be really interesting to hear your impressions of how Secretary Rice's background shaped her own approach to U.S.-Russia policy.

GATES: So I'll take you back to the first Bush administration, when Condi worked for me and for Scowcroft and had the Soviet desk, and I was deputy national security advisor, and she had the Soviet account. And I will say—I hadn't met Condi until 1989, till she joined the NSC. I would say from day one, I don't

[4] secretary of defense

think there was a single instance during all the things that happened between 1989 and 1992, there was a single instance in which Condi and I had a serious disagreement. We were on the same page when it came to saying to the first President Bush, "You need to talk to somebody in addition to Gorbachev. You need to reach out the Yeltsin. You need to be in touch with other reformers. You can't put all your eggs in the Gorbachev basket." [01:08:00] And we worked together and had the help of Cheney and Larry Eagleburger[5] in terms of getting Yeltsin in to see the president. And Condi and I argued that the U.S. ought to push back harder when Gorbachev used force in '91 in Lithuania and in Baku. So we were arguing for a tougher line then.

So Condi and I, I think, for a long time have approached these matters, having never met each other until we were way out of grad school. And we're on the same page, nearly always. And the same thing was true when she became secretary of state, and I became secretary of defense. I don't think there was any instance in which we had a significant disagreement, particularly when it came to Soviet affairs or Russian affairs.

But I think our view of the Soviet Union and Russia was very much shaped and influenced by our having studied it a long time. There are a lot of political scientists, I'll say—I hope without any pejorative connotation—who tend to treat Russia and the Soviet Union like every other kind of state, and Condi and I understood the Russia was a very different kind of state. Here is a state that missed the Reformation, missed the Renaissance, was occupied by

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[5] Dick Cheney was secretary of defense and Lawrence Eagleberger was secretary of state during the George H. W. Bush administration.

the Mongols or subordinated to the Mongols for two centuries and just had a completely different historical experience than nearly all [01:10:00] of Europe, and that they had a different approach to the way they looked at the world. So yeah, I think our study of Soviet and Russian history very much affected us.

MILES: I wonder if I can just—

GATES: Including the notion, first of all, that Putin was a bully, like most Soviet leaders and Russian leaders, and there was only one way to deal with a bully.

MILES: I was just going to ask if you had any concrete anecdotes or issues that spoke to, obviously, Putin. Does anything else come to mind?

GATES: I think neither Condi nor I—without being rude, I think neither of us were ever willing to give Putin the last word in a conversation or to let him throw something out that was outrageous as a final statement and then let it stand—I don't have any concrete examples of that. And I think he respected that.

BEHRINGER: And I wanted to talk a little bit more about the Freedom Agenda, since you brought it up. I was struck when I was reading a recent *Washington Post* interview you did with David Ignatius, and he asked you about the reasons why young people might go into government service, and you cited advancing "democracy and human rights abroad" as one reason. And you've been portrayed in the media as a realist and a pragmatist during your service in the Bush and Obama administrations. But clearly balancing ideals and interests are an important part of statecraft. While you were in [01:12:00] office, how did you think the Bush administration did balancing trying to find mutual strategic

interest with criticism and pressure on Putin to make democratic and human rights reform?

GATES: So my attitude—I don't know whether you'd call me an idealistic realist or a realistic idealist, but I'm of a belief that you can be an advocate for the Freedom Agenda and for human rights and understand that you can't impose it on other countries by military force. I think we always stand for that. I think we, in our strategic communications, in our diplomacy, and all of those things, that's always got to be part of our agenda. Just like under the supreme realist Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, every time he went to Moscow, had a list of Soviet Jews we wanted released from prison or allowed to emigrate. There was always an element of that in all of our presidents' approach to the Soviet Union, even as we would take very realistic and sometimes tough-minded decisions. And I think that's true in dealing with other countries as well. And I think you deploy military force and you use coercion in those cases where your vital interests are threatened or at stake, but when it comes to our ideals and the Freedom Agenda, that's an agenda that is put forward that is in the context of diplomacy and economics and a whole host of non-military tools in the box.

And that's where [01:14:00] I drew a distinction, at least in my head, in implementing the president's policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. I thought they both began—and I wrote about this in *Exercise*—that they both began with great military victories. We achieved our objectives. And then when we decided to use our armies to bring about a better future for those countries, that's when we got into trouble. Rather than understanding that [being] free, if you will,

requires institutions, it requires the rule of law, and it requires time for these societies to evolve. And we can be very powerful in that. A perfect example is South Korea, [which] evolved from a very tough dictatorship into a really terrific working democracy, but it took a long time. It wasn't until 1968 or so that South Korea really began to move away from dictatorship and toward a real democracy. That's almost 20 years after the Korean War.

BEHRINGER: And we talked a little bit about how your background and Dr. Rice's background influenced how you made policy. And you've brought up a few times how your shared CIA-KGB intelligence background with Putin gave you something in common, a superficial level at least. If you could analyze how Putin's intelligence background [01:16:00] influenced his policies during the Bush administration and his worldview in general?

GATES: I think, at the 30,000 foot level, he was an employee of one of the principal instruments of power of the Soviet Union as a superpower. And I think he has been nostalgic for that since 1991. And I think, how do you restore Russia to the stature that the Soviet Union had where other countries are fearful of you and respect you and defer to your wishes and have to think twice before they take an action that offends your sense of place. The Russians never forgot that the United States paid no attention to their objections when it came to military action against the Serbs back in the Clinton administration. And there are other instances like that, where, during the period of great Russian weakness, particularly in the nineties and the very early 2000s, that the United States, in his view, just ran roughshod over Russia's interests and didn't pay any attention

to the Russians when we should have been more deferential to Russia's interests in a place like Serbia, and where there are longstanding historical relationships.

So I think that's where his background in the KGB probably affects his outlook. And my guess is, had he been a colonel in the Soviet Army, he'd have the same [01:18:00] feelings.

MILES: So as we run to the end of our time with you—and thank you again for being so generous—I think we both probably have some big-picture questions that we want to wrap up with. And mine has to do with: you've had a front row seat to policymaking in the United States for an incredibly long range of time, starting with the Nixon administration, and I wanted to ask you—

GATES: Actually, Johnson was the first president I've worked for.

MILES: I stand corrected.

GATES: First of the eight.

MILES: So over eight presidents, a mere eight presidents, I wonder if you could give your historical assessment of the Bush administration—its successes and failures, since you have so many points of comparison, intimate points of comparison—and that's a question about Russia, which of course, was, in its guise as the Soviet Union, a critical issue for so many of those presidents. But even broader, wherever sort of your inclination takes you to situate how you assess the Bush administration as stewards of American foreign policy vis-a-vis some of the other administrations in which you've played a role.

GATES: I think, in a way, that's a hard question to answer, because each of the administrations that I worked in faced a unique set of circumstances. [01:20:00] For example, the two and a half years I worked for Obama—I think one of the reasons Obama wanted me as secretary to stay on is because he was in the middle of one of the worst economic crises the country had ever faced, and he didn't want to have to take any chances in the Department of Defense. He wanted things kept under control and somebody who wasn't going to do anything rash, but would let him not worry about that while he focused on the economy. You know, Carter, in many ways, was seen at the time as a failure, but as I wrote in *From the Shadows,* he did some things that, in many ways, paved the way for things Reagan would do and get credit for. I mean, the stealth airplane program began under Jimmy Carter and Harold Brown, but Reagan reaped the benefits of it.

I'm not actually dodging your question as much as I'm just trying to say I think it takes a long time before you get a sense of historical perspective. You've heard the old quote from when Mao was asked about what he thought about the French Revolution, he said, “It's too soon to tell.” And I feel that way. I think that I think that the president's first term and the management of the relationship with Russia, the management of the relationship with China—in some ways, that path had already been set by the Clinton administration, and that was that the China relationship was basically going to be about economics and the Russia [01:22:00] relationship was about, where can we work together?

And it began very well on counterterrorism and Russians' willingness to work with us and arranged the bases in Uzbekistan and so on.

So, the first term, I think, getting alliances together, getting the country and much of the world aligned with us in taking on terrorism was a huge achievement because Clinton had mostly failed in that arena. And I think that his legacy will always be burdened by the decision to move beyond military success into trying to create something new in both Iraq and Afghanistan and the challenges of doing that. And there were people in his administration—including [Secretary of Defense] Don Rumsfeld, if you believe his memoirs—that objected to that expansion of the mission in both places.

I can say that he was terrific to work for. There were places where I was worried he was going to make a decision that I felt would have been a disaster and realized that, although he had allowed debate to continue, he'd already made up his mind not to do that. For example, military action against Iran. And I was really, really concerned that, because of the direct access the Israeli leadership had to the White House, and because of Cheney's strong views, I was very concerned that the president [01:24:00] might be willing to take action against Iran. And, secondarily, when the Israelis asked for the equipment so that they could take action against the Iranians, I was worried he would do that and allow the Israelis to take control essentially of an area that had a great impact on American security.

In both cases, when I sent him memos warning against this, he would come back to me, or there'd be a meeting, and after all my worries, he'd say,

"I'm not gonna do that." Just kinda, boom. "Not gonna do that." And so I was very reassured by that.

So I think if you take Iraq and Afghanistan out of the equation, he managed foreign policy very well. And I think he and [German Chancellor] Gerhard Schröder couldn't stand each other. Bush by far had the better of that argument because Schröder was a jerk. But he managed the Alliance well, I thought. He had terrific relationships with the military. Going back to Iraq, his decision to do the surge—we were where we were at the end of 2006—and his decision to surge in Iraq was one of the most courageous decisions I ever saw a president make. Because almost everybody was against it, including most [01:26:00] of his military commanders, and he'd just lost control of both houses of Congress. And I'll tell you, during the spring and summer of 2007, I had a half-time job of trying to make sure we could keep 41 Republican senators together to allow the surge to succeed. The Democrats were totally committed to shooting it in the crib as early as January—within a week of when he made the decision, they were trying to shoot it down on the Hill, cut off the money for it and everything. And so I, like I said, I think that's one of the most courageous decisions I think he made.

Whenever I wanted to fire somebody, he was totally supportive, never questioned my judgment. Whether it was the secretary of the army or the secretary of the air force, chief of staff of the air force, or whoever—they were all presidential appointees— I'd go in and say, here's my concern. Here's what I want to do, and he never even hesitated.

So I'm kind of rambling, but I think it's a little too soon to judge, and sometimes these things that look good or bad from the vantage point of 5 or 10 years may look very different 15 years from now. The fact is, for all the travail and for all the costs—and I'll just end with this—who would have thought a dozen years ago that Iraq would be the only functioning democracy in the Arab world. As flawed as it is, as corrupt as it is, it's the only [01:28:00] one. And those politicians are yelling at each other. They're not shooting at each other. So what is going to be the final judgment on Iraq? I think the jury's out. Cost a lot, but—.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for your time. I don't want to push it too far. Do you have time for one more wrap-up question?

GATES: One more question.

BEHRINGER: I was wondering if, given all your service to all these presidents and everything, could you just reflect for a moment on the nature of personal relationships in president-to-president diplomacy? When is it important? When is it ineffective? And then evaluate the Bush-Putin relationship?

GATES: It's never as important as the presidents think it is. And most of them think—they're all politicians, and they're all extremely successful politicians. After all, they're the president. And so they all think they have remarkable powers of persuasion and the ability to beguile and woo and create a personal relationship that allows you to achieve things with the other side. And that's not how it works.

Those personal relationships can get you past rough spots in a relationship. They can create channels of communication that might not otherwise exist, but they will not change—a president cannot get a Soviet or Russian leader to change his mind on something that matters to their country any more than they could the president of the United States, no matter how friendly they are. [01:30:00]

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for your time. It was a real privilege to talk to you.

GATES: Believe me, that started with Franklin D. Roosevelt, and it's true of every single president who's dealt with a Soviet leader since or a Russian leader since.

MILES: Thank you very much for your time. Thanks for answering all of our questions. We're really grateful.

GATES: Sure, happy to help.

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