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U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Philip Zelikow

Counselor of the Department of State, 2005-2007
Executive Director of the 9/11 Commission, 2003-2004
Member, Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 2001-2003

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[Begin Transcription]

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

MILES: I'm Simon Miles, assistant professor of public policy at Duke University.

ZELIKOW: I'm Philip Zelikow. I'm the White Burkett Miller Professor of History at the University of Virginia.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for being with us today, Professor Zelikow. I was wondering if you could begin by just describing your various roles in the George W. Bush administration.

ZELIKOW: Sure. I had two jobs in the Bush administration. One was unpaid and the other was a full-time job. I served as a member of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, later renamed the President's Intelligence Advisory Board, dropping the word "foreign," from late 2001 until the beginning of 2003. At that time, the board was chaired by Brent Scowcroft, and we were active on a number of intelligence issues, especially some of the intelligence issues that flowed out of the 9/11 attacks.

Then, at the beginning of 2003, I resigned from the board because I was appointed as the executive director of the 9/11 Commission. And the scope of that work is publicly well known. That work was pretty all-consuming during 2003 and 2004. At the end of 2004, having done a lot of work to assist and work and facilitate the passage of the legislation that enacted some of the Commission's recommendations, I was approached about and agreed to join the Bush

administration in its second term, [00:02:00] working for the new secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, and I was offered and accepted the job as Counselor of the Department.

The Counselor of the Department is an old job at the American State Department. It is not the legal advisor's job. The legal advisor of the department is actually called that. The counselor used to be—it's almost in the old medieval sense of a consiglieri, and it's sort of a deputy without portfolio. And, [in the Wilson administration], the counselor was the number two official in the department, alternating with the position that was then called the under secretary of state.

And the position was redone at the end of the 1930s, so that the undersecretary was the number two and the counselor was the deputy without portfolio, and has existed in that form ever since. Among my predecessors in the job were people like George Kennan, Chip Bohlen and Bob Zoellick for James Baker, Max Kampelman for George Shultz.

The job waxes and wanes along with the secretary of state and the way the secretary chooses to use the counselor. Occasionally sometimes, the counselor job merges with or disappears into a new role called the chief of staff, which comes into existence in the Clinton period. For instance, when Hillary Clinton was secretary of state, her chief of staff became also [00:04:00] the counselor, Cheryl Mills. Anyway, during this particular period, from 2005 until the beginning of 2007, I was Rice's counselor.

BEHRINGER: That's really interesting. And so going back to the beginning of the Bush administration's relations with Russia, the first meeting between Putin and Bush took place in June, 2001 in Slovenia. I was wondering if, either in the capacity of your role in the administration, or just as an analyst looking back at the history of it, what was the significance of that first meeting between the two leaders?

ZELIKOW: Mainly, all of my interest in this was secondhand. Because I had been trained as a cold warrior and been very active in Cold War diplomacy, especially in Europe and especially on political-military issues—though I was not a "Soviet hand" and I do not speak and read Russian—I was very knowledgeable about the Soviet Union and U.S.-Soviet relations and very involved in them in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And I've discussed that in other works that I've written. And also, that's when I got to know Condi Rice. And I made a number of trips to the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s in various places and for various reasons.

So I kept up with that part of the world and with those issues, but in 2001, I was keeping up with them as a foreign policy generalist who is taking a lot of interest in things. [00:06:00] I was becoming a leader of something called the Aspen Strategy Group, which is a group of worthies that tries to opine on many issues in American foreign policy and discuss them at some length every year in the summertime. Bob Zoellick and I became the leaders of that group in [1999]. And then I became the sole director of that group. Zoellick went into the Bush administration at the beginning of 2001, and I became the director of the Aspen Strategy Group.

So, I'm taking a broad interest in things. But I had no privileged information about it, and so my perception, like the perception of many, was that Bush and Putin were trying to reboot the relationship. I did play a role later in 2001 as an unpaid private adviser to Condi. So, for instance, in late 2001, she asked me as an unpaid private adviser, would I please take the hand at drafting a new National Security Strategy for the United States, which I then did between about the autumn of 2001 and the spring of 2002.

And so naturally I'm taking an interest in relations with Russia and other broader issues with that broad purview on things and that yes, they were rebooting the relationship and trying to reset it after the strains of the 1990s, especially the late 1990s. I had been very attentive in various ways about the Balkan crises and was well aware of [00:08:00] the tensions with Russia and had been to Moscow during the Kosovo crisis and was well aware of the tensions with Russia during the Kosovo crisis. And this was clearly an effort to try to turn the page and build a new chapter in U.S.-Russian relations. I think it was perceived that way on both sides.

BEHRINGER: And one of the things at that meeting: President Bush informed President Putin of his intention to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and missile defense becomes a sticking point later in the administration as well when they're trying to negotiate over the various installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. Do you have any insight into—why did the Bush administration insist on pursuing withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and missile defense in Europe?

ZELIKOW: Really, others have more insights on this than I. Above all, Steve Hadley would be the best person. Rice followed those issues too naturally, but Steve followed them with a real intensity because of his longstanding involvement with those issues.

In general, it was the view of the group of people who were working on that, that the strategic arms reduction setup was increasingly outmoded and needed to be rebooted for the 2000s, and this could be done in a way that was non-threatening to Russia. Because, in fact, the concerns that motivated a ballistic missile defense program by 2001 were really quite, quite different from the concerns that had motivated that program when President Reagan announced the SDI[1] in 1983. [00:10:00] This had now become a program—and this is true, I would say, especially in Republican circles since 1999, 2000: increasingly the whole paradigm of national security for the United States during the 1990s had shifted away from predominant concerns about countries like Russia and had become instead a paradigm oriented to new threats, which tended to be defined as rogue states, WMD proliferation, and global terrorism. There was a faction that was arguing for new approaches in global development as well. But among people who were thinking about security and defense issues, broadly defined, that new trinity [of rogue states, WMD proliferation, and global terrorism]— and then there were variations within the trinity.

[1] Strategic Defense Initiative.

So, for example, someone like Don Rumsfeld in the Rumsfeld Commission was much more preoccupied with WMD proliferation and rogue states but didn't care so much about groups like Al-Qaeda, but there were a lot of differences within all of those folks.

Now, from that perspective, then, there ought to be opportunities for really quite significant reductions between the United States and Russia based on increasingly common approach against common adversaries, because the perception in 2001 is that a lot of the same rogue states, potential proliferators, and terrorists that worried the United States were also threatening Russia. At that time, as you know, Russia was embroiled in [00:12:00] its war in Chechnya. There were significant episodes of Muslim extremist terrorism inside Russia, though there's a whole layer of controversy and shadowy arguments regarding the reality of those threats in the late 1990s. I don't want to go into all of that, but suffice it to say that at least nominally, the Russians appeared to have a national picture of national security threats that overlapped quite a lot with the way that picture had emerged in the United States by 2001. A very good illustration about this, for instance, would be the way the U.S. and Russia saw the situation in Afghanistan in the summer of 2001 where both of our countries tended to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban.

So if you roll that back, then, into an approach to strategic arms that they thought should be more radical, simpler, not as cumbersome, and an approach towards ballistic missile defense that needs to continue that, but in a way that's

oriented against different kinds of threats. And so then the job is, can we reach an understanding about this in which that is not only reassuring each other about threats, but possibly even cooperating.

BEHRINGER: And some of that stems from the 9/11 attacks and—

ZELIKOW: Well, the summit you mentioned is before 9/11. So this turning of the page is not a product of 9/11. It's a product of these other things that I've already talked about. 9/11, of course, would simply dramatically reinforced all those trends. And Rice has written about this. [00:14:00] And I would regard this as a quite promising period in U.S.-Russian relations.

This is why, then to look ahead in the story: in general, my view of the history of "why the breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations?" is, you see, I don't regard this as a linear story. This is a fundamental historical point.

I think that this is a very turbulent story and a complex story having to do with the post-Soviet space in the early 1990s. That's a quite distinct set of issues and approaches from the ones in the Bush 41 administration. And in a way, the absolute pit of U.S.-Russian relations is reached in '98 and '99, with the Russian financial collapse in '98, that has been partly abetted by misconceived U.S. and international financial policies in the former Soviet space, which I've written about in another book. And then, in 1999, the Kosovo crisis, which was a very bruising experience for the Russians and I think was ill judged in some respects on the part of the United States. I understand the arguments on both sides, but I think that was fateful.

But it's important to understand that Bush and Rice were uneasy about the Kosovo experience. They did not feel a strong emotional stake in defending those policies or defending the way Russia had been treated in that period about which Rice had some [00:16:00] qualms. And so there was a real basis then for rebooting U.S.-Russian relations for a host of reasons in 2001. And I think the aftermath of 9/11 strengthened that momentum. So that actually, the various damages and legacies and wounds inflicted, including the wounds to Russian pride, which [are] very important—by the end of the 1990s, that's turning around. Putin himself takes power with the mission of rebuilding Russia and rebuilding its pride. Bush and Rice very much accept that mission, understand it, and are trying to adopt policies that are sympathetic to that while pursuing an agenda that they think Russia will also agree with and understand, and things were actually in, I think, a quite promising condition between the United States and Russia after 9/11 and going on into at least 2002.

BEHRINGER: And, in Afghanistan, the Russians give some or facilitate some of the U.S. invasion—

ZELIKOW: They do, and that does not go away. That's persistent. It's useful to understand. And I became involved in these issues partly through the 9/11 Commission. I went to Afghanistan in that work in 2003 and then would get involved in these issues in other respects later.

The more the U.S. commits to Afghanistan, the more it is utterly dependent on lines of supply to sustain this presence in the middle of Eurasia in one of the

most geographically [00:18:00] inaccessible places for the United States that you could find in the whole world. You either run it through Pakistan or you run it through the former Soviet space. We were relying on both. So there was a heavy line through Pakistan, which then involved all sorts of difficult trade-offs and political problems with the Pakistanis, which itself is a large, fraught problem, or you ran it through the post-Soviet space. At the outset, we tended to have two main air corridors running into Afghanistan. If my memory is right, one was through Kyrgyzstan and one was through Uzbekistan. I've spent time in both places. And neither of those air corridors could run without Russian support. They pass through Russia to get to those places, and the governments in both of those countries are extremely sensitive to Russian views.

BEHRINGER: And what did the Russians expect in return, and did the United States offer more support for its counter-terrorism operations in Chechnya due to Al Qaeda-Chechen connections or anything like that?

ZELIKOW: It really gets into the details of the specifics. I'm not a good authority on what the Russians asked for in return. For instance, when the Russians had their Beslan attack, the United States [asked], "Is there anything we can do to help?" And the Russians offered help on some issues, [00:20:00] we were happy to help them on some issues. But then you would get into details. For example, we would get occasional troubling intelligence reports about possible leakage of highly enriched uranium, for example, from the post-Soviet space into potentially very bad hands

that might, if you had the right relationship, be an issue one would raise with Russian counterparts.

BEHRINGER: Since you mentioned the reset in relations, I wanted to move to a subject of more continuity, which was NATO expansion, which discussion started, of course, in the 1990s. And then in the Bush administration, you have the "Big Bang" approach. What was your view of NATO expansion, and why did the Bush administration elect to go with that approach?

ZELIKOW: It's interesting, because I was a central player on all the NATO issues in the Bush 41 administration until the time I left, since I had the NATO portfolio at the NSC and I was the executive secretary of the European Strategy Steering Group during 1990. And so the whole approach of liaison missions to former Warsaw Pact countries—that was my idea adopted at the NATO summit in July 1990, developed with Condi from the NSC staff. That is what produces then the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991. [00:22:00] It's the same concept, which by the way, pretty much at first included the Soviet Union, welcomed the Soviet Union, and was meant to. And indeed, the perspective we had was that basically after you get the Soviet break-up is that NATO needed to be receptive to engaging with all these people about their security concerns and very clearly needed to have sort of a space set aside at the great power table for Russia once Russia was ready to take that seat, after it came through its "time of troubles."

And then, when the NATO enlargement effort really picked up, I personally was bemused by it. Basically, I thought it was trying to find another melody to play

while the Balkans were burning, if I may put it bluntly, especially involving Richard Holbrooke. And so I actually wrote an article that was published in the journal *Survival*. I wrote two articles, one called "The New Concert of Europe" that I wrote at the beginning of the Clinton administration, which actually mentions the notion of the need to create some kind of coalition on this, and then the notion of holding a seat open for Russia when it was ready to take it [00:24:00] so that Russia did not feel excluded. You're not creating a new sense of exclusion. You're not creating what the Russians refer to historically as a new Versailles system, which they take as a synonym of exclusion. Then I wrote another essay, I think in '95, called "The Masque of Institutions," *m-a-s-q-u-e*, which is a reference to a theatrical display, shall we say, in Renaissance terms, where I regarded the NATO enlargement issue as almost a deliberate distraction for more important matters.

So in that sense, I clearly wasn't ardently for it. I also wasn't particularly ardently against it. I thought the issue was being rushed a little prematurely, that these things should move in a more of an evolutionary and cooperative way.

That was my view at the time. Now, to separate it, my view as a historian is not actually all that dissimilar, except that I believe that the issue was managed especially with the help of the Germans—and the German role in regulating this process, I think, is generally underplayed by American scholars because the Germans are exquisitely sensitive to Russian concerns and Polish concerns for lots of reasons and are extremely well-positioned both to govern the pace of the NATO

process and then to manage the pace of the parallel EU process. And the EU process [00:26:00] is more important than the NATO process for these countries. And it's just something folks should never forget—and more impactful on their societies than the NATO process, as important as that might be. I think the NATO process in general is more symbolic and cultural, and that has more to do with cultural identification. There is a certain kind of element of existential reassurance in there, but there were no imminent threats. A lot of it is about cultural identification, but the EU is about that too, but also about money—much more tangible things. So Germany is regulating both those things, makes these moves in the mid 1990s. Russia is angry, grudging, but goes along. This is a period in which I'm caught up in allegations that all this was supposedly precluded by the negotiations of early 1990. I've discussed that historiography in other places and don't need to review it in this conversation. But the point then is, in the mid-1990s, it looks like this is being managed for the first group of entrants. Russia's not happy about it, but they're accepting it.

And by the way, the same is true for the Bosnian War. Again, the Russians are uneasy and anxious about the way that's being handled, the way the Serbs are being treated, but they also see the arguments, and diplomatically, [in] the Bosnian intervention, the Russians go along, [00:28:00] grudgingly, in '95. But, you see, that's the context then in which you get into the second Clinton administration. Clinton's second term, I think, is marked by more hubris than Clinton's first term, and, in a way, I think, the period after the Bosnian War ushers

in a kind of period of American hubris that in general lasts about 10 years, and the second Clinton administration, I think, exhibits it more, and the Kosovo crisis is a pretty good indicator of that. And there I thought we were really doing a lot of damage. We had basically treated them as worthy of respect and worked the issue very hard with them. And there was a sense in the Kosovo crisis [of brusquely] being shoved aside, and it's hard to avoid the sense that, in the case of Secretary of State [Madeleine] Albright, this almost didn't have a personal quality about it because of her background. The Russians certainly read it that way.

This is then the climate surrounding NATO enlargement that the Bush 43 administration inherits. You've got a doctrinaire part. You've got one faction of the Republican Party that now is wedded to NATO enlargement and is either anti-Russian or heedless. But again, it's mainly a cultural issue. It's a matter of posturing. The people who are making this argument are not making this argument because they actually perceive some concrete, imminent [00:30:00] threat, and the alliance therefore needs to be extended to deal with that threat—though, sadly, they would take actions that would help realize the emergence of such a threat and catalyze it. It's more of a matter of political posturing, which is what a lot of foreign policy debates in the United States are about. But they're not actually trying to solve any particular problem that exists in that part of the world, except for the fact that some of these countries are pleading to be given a security home after having canvassed many other options to solve that problem for themselves earlier in the 1990s.

So you've got that faction of the Republicans. You've got another faction of Republicans that include people like Brent Scowcroft and probably someone like me, who kind of, a little bit of, like, "What's the rush here?" And "Don't we have a lot of other things that we can worry about?" And not spending a whole lot of energy to just try to oppose it. Scowcroft expended more energy in that way than I did. "But we do have some really gripping concerns here. Can we focus on those please?" So you have an established group and faction that's wedded to these issues for various reasons, including State Department people who have strongly identified with some of the country interests that are being represented in the debates, like Polish interests and so on. And then you've got another faction of Republicans like me.

Bush, by the way, is not decisively in either camp. It's my perception, [00:32:00] though I'm not talking to Bush about this directly, so this is just an indirect perception. Rice, whom I do know better, I believe is also not decisively in either camp. I think she would occasionally give lip service to support for enlargement but was not a passionate advocate of that camp and was knowledgeable of and respectful of the wariness of other friends of hers, like Brent.

BEHRINGER: So that happens in 2004. And then in 2005 is when you joined the administration as State Department counselor, correct?

ZELIKOW: Right. So, they go ahead. But really, what they're still doing in '04 is they're carrying forward and completing, it seems to me, the enlargement program that had been fundamentally put in place in 1997 that also has an EU companion with

it. They're not really adopting a brand-new initiative for the further extension of NATO enlargement during Bush's first term. He's completing and carrying through the work that had been basically catalyzed in Clinton's second term and at the end of Kohl's chancellorship.

BEHRINGER: When you become State Department counselor, how much does Russia figure into your portfolio, or how much are you thinking about Russia at that time?

ZELIKOW: The answer is not much. Rice had two senior advisers [00:34:00] without portfolio. That was me and Steve Krasner in policy planning. The division of labor on that was basically, Krasner handled the Southern Hemisphere and development issues. I handled the Northern Hemisphere, so to speak, including all the issues having to do with terrorism and intelligence. On those issues, I actually went to the deputies meeting as Rice's deputy, including all the intelligence and covert action issues. And then that meant that I was involved in the issues of Europe, the Middle East, Northeast Asia, India, and that would have included, with Europe, Russia. So, for instance, any trip that Rice took to Russia in 2005 and 2006, you should assume that I'm on that trip.

But it's a good indicator of what I was spending my time on that, literally before I actually even set foot in my office at the State Department, I was already in Iraq. I went to Iraq before I actually set foot in my State Department office. Because, frankly, we were at that time, we were in a very deep hole in Iraq. I had played no part particularly in getting us into that hole. I was not really involved in

any of that. I had watched what was happening with great dismay, but here I am at the beginning of '05, and [00:36:00] basically one of my big jobs from the start was trying to advise Rice as how to get out of that hole.

BEHRINGER: And, since you brought up Iraq, how much did the Russians bring up Iraq after 2004-2005 as a sticking point in the relationship? And did you ever get a sense that Russia not only opposed the initial invasion but was actively working against U.S. goals in Iraq?

ZELIKOW: By that time, the Russians had already internalized Iraq and what they thought Iraq meant. That had all happened in '03 and '04, especially '03. It's very important to remember—the Russians went along with us on the first Iraq resolution in November of '02. So, the whole approach to use force to get the inspectors back in—Russia backed our play on that. That resolution was adopted unanimously in the Security Council. And we did not have a big headache on that with Putin.

When we then decided to cut short the inspections process and move ahead with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, I believe that Putin drew the most negative inferences from that choice. I think there had been a lively debate among the Russians as to how to read what the Americans are doing here. And then when Bush made those decisions, that seemed to validate a particular camp among the Russian analysts. And, [00:38:00] of course, these are people who pride themselves on being tough, disillusioned, and cynical in their assessments of the world and of each other, often. So they would have mocked each other as fools or naive had

they professed to believe what the Americans were saying they were doing in Iraq, when they made those decisions at the beginning of 2003.

And then that had just continued to get reinforced. As the United States then leaned a little bit more on the United Nations to help us in Iraq—though then the United Nations mission in Iraq was attacked in August of '03—but the Russians are increasingly distancing themselves and now profess to be suitably disillusioned about American plans. They come to the view that the Americans are very full of themselves, enraged and arrogant, and that we're becoming somewhat dangerous. They said those things freely, and I think the leadership believed those things. So by the time I'm coming in at the beginning of 2005, that's all settled from the Russian point of view. And they're very clear in their views on all of that.

BEHRINGER: And part of that was reinforced by the color revolutions that happened in [00:40:00] Ukraine, Georgia, and to a lesser extent, perhaps Kyrgyzstan.

ZELIKOW: Ah, now that's a new factor for them. That's a new factor for them. That's not all of a piece with Iraq. And it's one thing for the United States to be full of hubris and swinging its sword right and left, here and there, in the Middle East, and then gets recklessly embroiled in these disasters, from the Russian point of view. And I think if you talk to Russians about all of that, they'd have their views about it. But when things began breaking down in Ukraine—one set of issues is the Russians are viewing the world circus with cynicism, wariness, and bemusement. When you start talking about what's happening in Ukraine, you're in a whole different universe of interests for them now. Now you're in their core world. And by the

way, in a way, even the Baltic republics were not, and those are issues they take quite seriously in every respect—both on the formal, nominal side of their policy world and on kind of the underworld part of their private affairs, so to speak.

And the developments in Ukraine, then, and everything that Ukraine is thinking of doing, [00:42:00] become an issue of the absolute first importance to the Russians. So, not a linearity for them—one naturally leads to another. So when Bush, then, at the beginning of '05 begins not only welcoming the color revolutions, but describing an agenda for the new administration in these grandiose terms, which he does in his second inaugural, I think a lot of Russians interpreted this now very gravely.

BEHRINGER: And that formulation became known as the Bush Doctrine, correct?

ZELIKOW: Yes, which is I think an exaggeration. It's partly the invention of both Bush publicists who are trying to exaggerate the significance of their rhetoric and also Bush enemies who were trying to characterize the administration's policy with an overweening neocon[servative] doctrine that they regard as the consistent bright thread in all of its disasters. Both sides run ahead of the reality.

It's useful to understand a little bit about what's going on here. And it's very interesting to contrast the language of Bush's State of the Union message of January 2002 with the language of his inaugural address, the second term, in January of 2005. In 2002, the State of the Union is formulating an agenda of [00:44:00] American ideals that is oriented as a contrast with the nihilistic violence of the terrorist groups and the rogue states. And in that contrast, that speech was

designed—this part of the speech was ignored in the public commentary—but it's the one that Rice, and others, spent a lot of time on, is there is a listing of the non-negotiable demands of human dignity. You'll actually notice that speech actually says very little about democracy in that context. These are about core attributes of human dignity that all forms of government, of varying systems, need to respect. And even that is, by the way, not a prime motive for the invasion of Iraq, which has other routes and sources.

During 2004, Iraq is going very badly. What they now have to do is try to rationalize a story of what they're trying to do in Iraq. The United States, when it took over Iraq, then faced the fundamental choice—basically, do we just get out and throw this to whatever tyrant can grasp the apples of power? We scatter the apples of discord and let the tyrants fight it out. Or do we actually try to help the Iraqis facilitate the Iraqi development of a new kind of government? By the way, both we and the Iraqis—it never occurred to anyone except to try to do [00:46:00] this in democratic forms.

And this was very much true among the Iraqis. It's not an American import, especially among the Shia Muslims. The Shia had long been advocates of democratic ideals in Iraq, for reasons I won't go into a lot of detail about.

The whole point is that, the second inaugural, it's basically a way of saying that since we find ourselves in the position of having to build a democracy in Iraq—which is not why we thought of intervening there in the first place, but there we are—we're now going to rationalize that tremendous effort now that we find

ourselves doing it, and say, "Well, see, this is part of a positive agenda we have." My point is that you'll understand the context of the second inaugural better by putting it in the context of what's happened in Iraq in the last year. Just as the January '02 thing is written in a way that's responding to al Qaeda, the January '05 thing is written with respect to what we've just been doing in Iraq, in getting elections held there and so on. It's not written about Ukraine, in other words.

Now, as the spring of '05 develops, and there are things that are happening in Lebanon, Ukraine, elsewhere—in general, we applaud the theme, because we generally do think that what these people are trying to do is superior to the alternative, that corrupt tyranny is not as effective a system of governance and human development as some sort of participatory system of government. [00:48:00] And then Rice gives a speech in Cairo, where we're making the same point there, but it's in comparison to the alternative, "What's your story about how your country develops?"

So naturally there's this attitude about Ukraine. What makes Ukraine so distinctive is everything that's happening with Ukraine now vitally affects the interests of a major power, which is Russia. So, at a minimum, you would want to think about some kind of very serious conversation with the Russians about Ukraine that, at a minimum, attempts to reassure the Russians about what's going on there and then what the United States is trying to do there. I'll just stop there.

MILES: Can I ask a context question, as you put it? At this point, Iraq [is] very clearly the dominant issue in the minds of not just yourself and Condoleezza Rice at the State

Department but throughout the Bush administration when you joined it in ’05, and yet Rice herself is a Soviet hand, right?

ZELIKOW: Yes, that’s right.

MILES: And for a while was the preeminent expert on the Soviet general staff. And so, I wonder a little bit how her deep Soviet/Russian background, in your opinion, affected how she thought about current relations with Russia and Putin, how that may or may not have shaped the overall views of the Bush administration in which she was obviously a critical player.

ZELIKOW: Yes, I think it gave her a sense of confidence that she knew how to [00:50:00] handle policy towards Russia, that she understood the Russian leadership and that she felt confident in her ability to advise the president on that policy area. So therefore, for example, it was not an issue on which she would routinely seek advice from me. At that time in ‘05, in addition to Iraq, I'm spending a lot of time on North Korea and a big move on India that will become important, for instance—plus a series of fraught terrorism and intelligence issues having to do with the treatment of the detainees and the future of the CIA black sites.

So those are huge issues for me in the first half of 2005, but it's not like she's asking for a lot of help on Russia, and I don't have time to give it to her. She's not asking for a lot of help because she thinks she's got it pretty well. I'm going with her on these trips, and we talk about stuff, but she's not leaning on me a lot there.

And that remains true pretty much during the whole time that I'm the counselor. She ends up leaning [for Russia advice] on a relatively small circle of

people. In my view, that circle basically consists of Dan Fried and Bill Burns and just about full stop after that. Now, by the way, her relationship with Dan Fried goes way back. Both of us know Dan Fried going back to 1989. And actually, I know Bill Burns also going way back, also to the Bush 41 administration when he was a deputy to Dennis Ross [00:52:00] on that policy planning staff back then, and Burns and I got along. Back then, Burns was an Arab-Israeli Middle East expert. And I was spending some time on Gulf War issues and Middle East issues too. But, by this time, Burns is the ambassador to Russia and someone whom Rice takes seriously and whom I take seriously. He's discreet and reticent, but when he speaks, it's worth listening to what he has to say. And Fried is outspoken and entrepreneurial and bureaucratically skilled. He's a very important figure in this period.

BEHRINGER: And at this time he's assistant secretary of state—

ZELIKOW: for Europe. He had been Rice's principal Europe advisor in the first term at the NSC staff. And then when she went over to the State Department, she brought him over to run the European Bureau. And she and Fried had established a positive relationship even really in—there was important crystalline moment in March 1989, when we were developing a new move on Poland that would result in the Hamtramck speech. I discuss this a little bit in the book I wrote with Rice, published in 2019. If you follow the development of Poland stuff in spring of '89 and follow the end notes on that—I don't detail it at length, but basically Fried is bootlegging to Rice [00:54:00] ideas that his superiors in the European Bureau

don't approve of, like Roz Ridgway[2] and Tom Simons.[3] And Fried and Rice form this partnership on Poland and what to do about Poland early as March, April 1989, and that link and friendship and sense of mutual respect doesn't go away. And then he is her key adviser on Europe for eight years, really at all times. And he's a career diplomat. He's very capable. But he comes in with some very strong views.

BEHRINGER: And notwithstanding the fact that Rice can handle the Russia issue herself given her expertise—

ZELIKOW: By the way, I'm not saying that she was right to believe she could.

SIMON: Yeah, that was going to be my question. I want to jump on that. So you worded that carefully with, you know, "belief" and "felt" and things like that. Flagging that, can I invite you to elaborate on your word choice there to frame it as perception, not necessarily reality?

ZELIKOW: Yeah. Well, she felt relatively confident and therefore—in general, she was not very good at doing policy staff work. This just gets into a longer discussion of her strengths and weaknesses. And she has formidable strengths, but like all of us, she also [00:56:00] has weaknesses, and sometimes they are the flip sides of the strengths. And, on a good day, people are conscious of their weaknesses and do things to compensate for them. So, for example, Jim Baker—to use a contrast, and it's an important contrast in this particular period—Jim Baker knew what he was

[2] Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Canada Rozanne L. Ridgeway
[3] Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union Thomas W. Simons, Jr.

good at and knew what he was not good at. And Baker would lean a lot on people like Bob Zoellick and Dennis Ross to do a lot of policy staff work, and Baker set a very high standard on what he meant by policy staff work. And he had a system for how he did that, which I understood, but I think Rice did not really understand. So Rice was quite comfortable with just managing something like Russia. I think her experience with Russia gave her perhaps a bit of complacency about her ability to understand and manage that portfolio.

SIMON: With what consequences do you have in mind, and do you have a sense of—

ZELIKOW: At the time—this is now retrospective. At the time, frankly, I was so preoccupied with other things that even though I was on these trips with her and was following the issues, I did not attempt to actively play on these issues, either way. I didn't attempt to foment or stop. I also knew Fried and respected Fried, and I just watched what was going on and mused a little bit about it. Perhaps if Bill Burns and I had [00:58:00] connected directly, and if he and I had the chance to just sit together and talk for an hour or two about his concerns, he could have used me to intervene more effectively in the Washington policy debates. I think it did not occur to him to do that, because I think he would ultimately realize that his views were not carrying enough weight. I would have been the perfect conduit for him to change that calculus, but he did not alert me, and therefore I didn't get alerted and engage on these things.

I did engage with [some] Russian [issues]. I was very involved in Iran stuff, for example, and the reopening of talks with Iran, which then also created the new

UN Security Council resolutions to begin pressuring Iran, which is a series of moves in the P5+1[4] in early 2006. So I'm involved in Russia indirectly in that way.

So I say all that as a preface to explaining that the insight I'm offering you is a hindsight insight. It does not reflect the views that I was arguing at the time. With hindsight, I think that the issues that were merging with Russia in '05 and '06 were becoming increasingly great, and that therefore, actually inspired by the experience we'd had in the Bush 41 years, [01:00:00] we needed to invest energetically in a process to work, to manage these issues with the Russians proactively and purposefully and taking them very seriously as a major power vitally involved in this space, which, at a minimum, would at least have conveyed [that seriousness] to them.

And by the way, it might've been completely futile because a lot of this is being driven for Russian reasons that we are powerless to affect, and indeed they need the enemy. So I'm not asserting by [saying] this, that our policies are the decisive variable in the story. They probably are not. The truth is, I don't know, because I don't have enough insight into the Russian side of it. What it would have done, though, at a minimum, is it would have conveyed a degree of respect that I think might have mitigated damage.

See, to me, the first really loud fire alarm occurs just as I leave government, which is the beginning of 2007—the CFE[5] suspension. I had been very involved in

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[4] The UN Security Council Permanent Five (United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom) plus Germany.
[5] The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty.

the creation of the CFE Treaty to begin with. And so I followed those sets of issues. To someone who is sensitive to European security issues, that is—we just had this experience with the pandemic: at what point did we know a pandemic was coming?—at what point did you know that relations with Russia were starting to go really south? That CFE suspension in early '07, which goes with the Munich speech.

At a minimum, it's a plea for attention [01:02:00]—at a minimum—and maybe much more than that, you see, because all the military things they would do, later, in Georgia, in Ukraine, those were all options that would effectively have been handicapped or prohibited by the CFE Treaty and the way the treaty operated. By getting out of the CFE Treaty, you're reopening the old bad world of European security all over again. And then, like, "What's going on here?" In the period when I'm in government, '05-'06, it's possible that we could have started putting in motion the kind of process we had in the Bush 41 years that was designed to better address and listen to Russian concerns and maybe find a way to manage them in some fashion.

Ultimately, on the NATO side, it was the Germans who had to blow the whistle because we, the United States, did not check itself, and so the Germans had to check us. But at the point where the Germans have to blow the whistle on us, the alarms have already gone off in Moscow, and they're already doing stuff to move and react. Again, I'm not sure we could have stopped it.

Now, I will say that I think that the really grave phase, the truly serious phase of this crisis, develops after I've left government, beginning of ’07, and is in the year 2007 and then on into ’08 and beyond, by which point I'd been replaced by Eliot Cohen, who has a very different view of all these issues than I do and basically [01:04:00] detests Putin and the Russians and doesn't give a damn what they think. And if they don't like it, then we just have to prepare to deal with that.

My view was, I can get to that place, okay? But I think that let's first try a concerted, proactive diplomatic effort and see what's possible. But, see, that's a high-energy effort that requires a lot of attention. And we just did not do that. We just did not do that. We basically embarked on a period that was as sensitive in our relations with Russia as that period around the end of the Cold War, and we never created the kind of diplomatic process to manage this that we created at the end of the Cold War to manage that. We had no diplomatic process to manage it, really, that was worth the name. And unmanaged, it veered into a very, very bad place, which we're still in now.

BEHRINGER: So in ’05 and ’06, on these trips to Moscow with Secretary Rice, you didn't really get the impression that things were going off the rails, so to speak. Do you remember anything specific—

ZELIKOW: Actually, there were ominous, weird things.

SIMON: Do tell.

ZELIKOW: I'll give you, I'll give you an illustration of this. This was probably—I may be wrong about the dates—but this was a visit to Moscow I think in 2006. I know I

was in Moscow in June of '06, [01:06:00] because other things happened related to other issues in June of '06, and I remember getting the news about them at dinner in Moscow. But I think this was a trip—it could have been an earlier trip in the spring of '06—and Rice had had her usual sort of one-on-one maybe with Bill Burns and a Russian small group where they'd had their talks. And then we had another meeting with Putin at the Kremlin. And I went to the meeting at the Kremlin. And I remember that Putin basically burned up the whole meeting complaining about the way the Lithuanians had behaved towards the Russians in the 1600s. And Rice and I talked about this at the time. It's like, "That was interesting." To just use this time we had at the Kremlin to vent all these old historical grievances. But it's interesting.

And one thing I know about Putin is Putin is very, very interested in history. He is deeply interested in history. He's an amateur historian. I actually wrote a long essay about the origins of the Second World War last year, that was a reply to these extraordinary interventions Putin made on the origins of the Second World War, and I and only a handful of people in the United States realized how remarkable it was that Putin was inserting himself in the historiography at this depth, and that this was worthy of a reply. I took it seriously. And actually, my article was published both in English and was translated into Russian and published in the *Russia in* [01:08:00] *Global Affairs* journal, which is their authoritative foreign affairs journal. But hardly any other Americans even noticed this.

But this is all of a pattern. Putin thinks this way. He's very interested in history, but the fact that he chose this particular occasion to just go off on the Balts, the persecuted Russians, and spend so much time on histories of centuries ago—though, since we're both historically sensitive, we appreciate that, but still. But see, that's what I mean though—you could say strange, but also ominous.

MILES: And was he linking this to Russian minorities in the Baltic states at the time? Or was this—I'm really curious about this. Was this—

ZELIKOW: Hard to say.

MILES: Not explicitly.

ZELIKOW: Yeah, there was some of that, but more than that. The arrogance and anti-Russian animus of Russia's neighbors, Russia's historic neighbors. You see, if you understand the history the way he understands this history, there isn't much difference between the Poles and Lithuanians in this period.

MILES: Well, it's the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

ZELIKOW: You see.

MILES: So aside from the trespasses of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, what were the main substantive issues that were being addressed at these high-level meetings at the time? What was the Russia agenda, in other words?

ZELIKOW: This is one of the faults—we did not have, in my view, a deliberate, proactive Russia agenda that was worth the name in this period. Did we have a list of topics to talk about? Well, sure. If you construct a list, it'd be a long list. Let's go through, tick off all the areas of potential concern. Is there anything to talk about, say,

having to do with nuclear arms control, ballistic missile defense, Iran, Afghanistan, possible counterterror cooperation, developments in this or that Russian neighbor—say, Uzbekistan might be in the news in 2005. So there's a list of things you go through on which the Americans have a position. And then the positions are written up as talking points in which we simply tell the other side what our positions is on eight different subjects. That's not really a proactive diplomatic agenda. It's not a purposeful effort to work together to get at some further result. How should we solve this problem? It's not a dynamic. Each side states its positions, and then you have digressions into various other things.

But I want to stress, I'm not in the most sensitive meetings. Really, the only American in those meetings [other than Rice] is Bill Burns. Usually, they would conduct their major business just with Rice or Rice and Burns at a dacha or something, and then [01:12:00] there would be a formal meeting, but the formal meeting would not be as important. Then Rice has her own meetings with [Russian Foreign Minister] Lavrov, which are pretty sterile and probably frustrating for both sides. By this time, the American opinion of Lavrov has gone down a good deal—rightly or wrongly, I'm not in a position to judge, but that's just the impression people had.

But stepping back from it all, the sense is, relations with Russia are more or less on autopilot, unless we're working with the Russians on some particular positive thing. For example, in the spring of 2006, we were working with the Russians on a particular agenda we had with Iran and how to reactivate the

diplomacy on Iran, but also get the UN Security Council back in the game on Iran. And by the way, the Russians ended up going along with us in the spring of '06 and the crucial UN Security Council resolutions that provide all the groundwork for the entire Iran sanctions regime, [which] were adopted in '06. The Obama administration later built some significant further addition to that building in '09, but the basic building was in '06, and the Russians were with us on that, and that would be something we would spend a lot of time talking to them about.

But there was almost a sense of, we shouldn't discuss Ukraine too much with [01:14:00] them because it would cede too much of the impression that Russian views on Ukraine are dispositive somehow. And it nurtures Russian belief in their post-imperium space—so there is a certain complacency and drift in parts of that agenda. Maybe one can argue when one views the record that that's excusable in '05 and '06, because the issues weren't grave enough yet. I don't know. They for sure become more urgent in '07.

BEHRINGER: And I did want to go in a little bit on Iran, since you mentioned that you were involved in getting the Russians onboard—

ZELIKOW: Oh, and let me just comment before I got off that—this is one reason why you see I'm so supportive of your project because the general tendency in the scholarship is to focus overwhelmingly on the 1990s as the key period in which to understand the alienation of Russia. And while I think that's interesting and important in various ways in setting some background circumstances, I don't think it's the decisive period.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to give you a chance to speak a little bit more about the Russian role in Iran, since that was one of your main issues that you worked on. Was there anything you wanted to expand on in that? You mentioned the Russians went along. Was it hard to get them to go along, or was this relatively something where the Americans and the Russians were on the same page?

ZELIKOW: Yeah, I'd say it was hard, it's always hard at this point, but they did. And so Rice spends time with Lavrov on this, [01:16:00] and they worked it, and there was some work done at the UN, and Burns is doing some work—Nick [Nicholas] Burns, not Bill Burns. Nick Burns in his job as under secretary for political affairs also had an important role in the Iran diplomacy for the United States. I'm a little more behind the scenes in the conceptualization of the move and the policy move. Nick is more out there in running the P5+1 diplomacy supporting Rice, and then we've got John Bolton at the UN. And there were some worries about this or that Russian relationship with Iran. But this was an area where the notion of cooperation against new threats had still survived to some degree.

MILES: Can I sneak in one last little question about that '07 speech, right? Putin's Munich Security Conference speech in February of 2007 was very critical of the U.S., calls it a destabilizing power. There's a lot of references to the invasion of Iraq, both explicit and more implicit. Can you talk a little bit about how you understood that speech, how you made sense of it, how others in the administration made sense of it and particularly, there's a lot of daylight between what Putin is saying at Munich

and the early years of Bush saying, “I've looked into Putin's eyes, and I've seen his soul.”

ZELIKOW: People can mock Bush about that—and [01:18:00] he shouldn't have put it that way—but the relations were good.

MILES: So how do you square that circle?

ZELIKOW: And maybe they shouldn't have been, and maybe, if we had had the advantage of Catherine Belton's book[6] back then or others—but at the same time, the government of the United States needs to figure out how it relates to the government of Russia. These are big, important countries, and they have to have some terms of interaction in the world. And Russia is a country that needs to be taken very seriously.

But I thought this [Putin's 2007 speech] was clearly an accumulation of resentments that had developed and been fully articulated now into a considered worldview that was now going to begin guiding Russian actions. And various things are now going to unfold from this. And yes, it's come a long way from ’01-’02, and actually, in our conversation, I think we've mapped some of the highlights of that story.

And a good question one would ask as a scholar is, “Was the United States surprised, and should it have been surprised?” See, I think if we had understood Russia well enough and been tracking this, we should not have been surprised.

[6] Catherine Belton. *Putin’s People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took On the West* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

That would actually be a good question for Bill Burns. “Were you surprised, or did you see this coming? [01:20:00] If you saw this coming, did you communicate that? To whom?” There may be some evidence in declassified cables and so on that shed some light on this. And I think this was a case where we needed to look hard and if we did not see it coming, shame on us. If we did see it coming, then we needed a proactive way of addressing it unless we just didn't take Russian power seriously anymore. If we didn't take Russian power seriously anymore, that was also a mistake, as the Russians have now taken the last 15 years to remind us at length.

BEHRINGER: I really want to thank you, Professor Zelikow, for speaking with us today and being so generous with your time. And it was really a pleasure to talk with you today.

ZELIKOW: Okay. It was my pleasure. Take care.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]