FROM STANFORD TO SPASO HOUSE

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

IN CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL MCFAUL

In January 2009, Michael McFaul, a renowned Stanford political scientist and author of several influential books on Russian politics, joined President Obama's National Security Council. The war between Georgia and Russia had just sent U.S.-Russia relations to their lowest point since the Cold War, and McFaul's job was to advise the president on all Russia– and Central Asia–related matters. For three years he guided the president in designing a strategy known as the "reset" policy, and it appeared to narrow the rift between the two countries.

In 2011, tired of the chaotic lifestyle that comes with working in the White House, McFaul decided to return to Palo Alto. The president had other plans. That September, he

President Barack Obama is briefed by (*from left*) Mark Lippert, William J. Burns, Ben Rhodes, Michael McFaul, and Denis McDonough in the Conference Room aboard Air Force One, during a flight to Moscow, Russia, July 5, 2009. Official White House photo by Pete Souza

Michael McFaul in the Oval Office with U.S. president Barack Obama as he speaks on the phone with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev on February 24, 2010. Official White House photo by Pete Souza

Just weeks after his departure in late February 2014, Russia annexed Crimea. Since then, the Ukraine crisis has persisted, the West has imposed economic sanctions on Russia, and Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was murdered.

nominated McFaul as the second noncareer U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation in thirty years. McFaul was excited to return to Russia. He had fallen in love with the country as a Stanford undergraduate studying abroad in the 1980s and has been returning there ever since—writing his dissertation on a Rhodes scholarship in the 1990s, researching his numerous books on democratization and revolution, working at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and during his various roles as a political adviser. Throughout the years he had established relationships within the Russian government, and he was looking forward to building on the foundation of his "reset" policy. But when he got to Russia in January 2012, the atmosphere had shifted. A series of street protests against the fraudulent December 2011 parliamentary elections and the corrupt practices of the ruling United Russia Party resulted in a backlash from the authorities and a general distaste toward foreign influence.

McFaul's appointment to the ambassadorship quickly elicited suspicion from the Kremlin, as he was a known critic of the Putin regime and proponent of human rights and democratization in Russia (he had published books with titles like *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin*). To further complicate things, his second day on the job coincided with a visit from Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, whom, according to protocol, he had to accompany on a meeting with human rights activists and members of Russia's political opposition. The Russian media jumped on the story, and, within days of arriving, McFaul was portrayed as the agent of Western-imposed revolution.

McFaul stayed for two years, during which relations between Russia and the United States continued to sour. Just weeks after his departure in late February 2014, Russia annexed Crimea. Since then, the Ukraine crisis has persisted, the West has imposed economic sanctions on Russia, and Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was murdered. I met with McFaul twice—once in early April 2015 in a conference room at the Harriman Institute the day after he addressed Columbia University at the annual Harriman Lecture, and again a month

later over tea at the Omni Berkshire Place hotel in midtown—to discuss his career and this turbulent time in U.S.-Russia relations.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner: What was it like to make the transition from academia to the National Security Council?

Michael McFaul: I'll tell you honestly, I was very nervous. I had interacted with people in government for decades. Often times, at the end of those conversations, they would say, "Well, you don't really understand how government works." My first day was the day after the inauguration. I had worked with the president on his campaign, so it was an exciting time, but the challenges seemed big.

Ultimately, it wasn't as overwhelming as I anticipated. I think there's something of a mythology about the black box of government. There were adjustments to make. Three computer systems, depending on the security level and bouncing back and forth, and learning how to deal with classified information. I briefed the President and prepared him for everything he did related to Russia and Central Asia, but within the government I ran the IPC [Interagency Policy Committee for Russia], which means I chaired a meeting for all the people at the assistant secretary level involved in policy making and coordination for Russia. I held meetings often, I wanted the engagement, and I ran it sort of like an academic seminar—challenging assumptions and asking for data. I found it to be less difficult than I expected. The part I learned more bitterly was that everyone would formally agree on something at the meeting but then go back to their agencies and use different bureaucratic policies to unravel it.

Udensiva-Brenner: The Obama administration came into office on the heels of the Russia-Georgia war and started the "reset" policy. How did you negotiate getting out of that bitter situation and into a policy of cooperation and engagement?

McFaul: The war, which was in August 2008, gave us a jump start on formulating the reset policy. Much of the first presidential debate was about Russia, and it was a major campaign issue for a few weeks. When we got to day one of being in government, we weren't starting from scratch. The essence of the reset is that it wasn't a strategy about Russia, per se; it was integrated with other issues we were working on. In our assessment, our interests overlapped with the Russians on most big security and economic issues, and the argument for the reset was that if we had

Left to right: McFaul delivers 2015 Harriman Lecture; Kerry, accompanied by McFaul (*right*) and Russian chief of protocol Yuriy Filatov (*left*), tours Red Square during his visit to Moscow on May 7, 2013 (photo courtesy of the U.S. Department of State)

U.S. ambassador Michael McFaul and secretary of state John Kerry meet with Russian president Vladimir Putin and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov

Russia with us, it would make it easier to achieve our objectives. We sought to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, to develop our supply routes to Afghanistan, to increase trade and investment in the world, and to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world, which was the one issue directly related to Russia. For the rest we had our own strategy, our coda, and if Russia was with us, with respect to the strategy for achieving each objective, it would be easier.

Udensiva-Brenner: How did Medvedev react to the policy?

McFaul: The first meeting with Medvedev took place in London in April 2009, on the sidelines of the G20 meeting. It was the first "bi-lat"—as we call it in the government—that I had to prepare, and that's when the president really laid out his approach. Going into it, I had told him not to expect much. We were still just months away from the major confrontation over Georgia—Georgia, of course, remained a very difficult issue between us, not just in that first meeting, but for the entire time I was in the government—but Medvedev came ready to engage with us. And, if I'm not mistaken, he even used the word "reset."

Udensiva-Brenner: How was the reset received by your Republican colleagues?

McFaul: When I arrived and met my new staff at the National Security Council, all of those people had worked for George W. Bush the day before. The same went for all the other entities, too, because the political appointees who needed Senate approval didn't come into their jobs until several months into the Obama administration. We had to tell them: "Okay, now we're going to have a different policy." And I remember one senior person in the Bush administration, who is a good friend of mine, saying, "We all start off with this big head of steam that we're going to change things with Russia, and it always ends in failure." I think about that often, given where we are today. And that was certainly the case in the Bush administration, too.

They started out pretty strong because September 11th really brought Russia and the United States together, and they ended with the war in Georgia. So, there was that kind of skepticism. Others wanted us to be more strident vis-à-vis the conflicts we had with Russia, Georgia being the most important but not the only one. Our attitude was that the reset policy was a deliberate attempt to stop linking unrelated issues. We can have progress

on arms control here, and we can disagree on Georgia over here, but we're not going to link those two discussions. And that was controversial in our government and in the Russian government, because we were not going to allow *them* to link things they wanted to link. They would say, "If you want to get sanctions in Iran, stop talking about democracy and human rights." And we militantly said, "Let's talk about Iran here, let's talk about democracy here. We're not linking them, and we expect you not to link them either."

Udensiva-Brenner: And this is controversial with the human rights community as well—they would like to link these issues.

McFaul: That's right; some wanted to link the new START treaty with human rights issues. And it came into major focus for us during the WTO accession deliberations, when human rights activists wanted us to take the position that until Russia got better on democracy we shouldn't let them into the WTO. Those are not the rules of the WTO, obviously. China is in the WTO; lots of countries that don't meet the standards for democracy are in the WTO. Our argument was: We're not credible on adhering to the rules of the game, including the rules of the WTO, if we try to link membership to unrelated issues.

That was a big debate. You can imagine that for me, given my reputation as a human rights activist and advocate and democracy promoter, this was difficult. I know that community well, and they told me, "You're a sellout, McFaul; you've abandoned us." Now, I never thought that. We also practice what we call dual-track engagement, where we simultaneously engage with the government about democracy and human rights, and, in parallel, engage with society, the political opposition. That's what we always did. And I think we did that more aggressively than many previous administrations. But, you know, they pushed back on us. And that's their job, by the way. If you're working at Human Rights Watch or Freedom House, all those organizations, your job is to beat up on people like me. Sometimes I took it too personally, I think. In retrospect, I regret that, but their job is to keep us honest.

Udensiva-Brenner: How would you respond to the criticism that dual-track diplomacy marginalizes human rights issues; that the meetings take place in inferior rooms with lower-level officials?

McFaul: It is true that when I worked in the NSC and when I was ambassador, I did not have the luxury of just thinking about human rights. I had to think about Iran, I had to think about Syria, I had to think about supplying our troops in Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia ride together to lunch at Ray's Hell Burger in Arlington, Virginia, June 24, 2010. Official White House photo by Pete Souza

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And, oh, by the way, there's not a way to supply your troops in Afghanistan without working with some authoritarian regimes. So whether I wanted to or not, that was my job. The luxury you have if you're working at a democracy NGO is you get up every morning and the only thing you have to think about is democracy and human rights. You don't have to deal with the Pentagon asking you to supply your troops in Afghanistan. You don't have to deal with trying to get the Russians to support sanctions on Iran. So it is fair to say that democracy and human rights might not get the same amount of attention as other issues. I think that's a fair criticism. But it's structural and not something specific to the Obama administration.

When I was in government we met with the opposition when President Obama went to Russia. It was the president of the United States, not lower-level officials like me, who met with the opposition—and in the Ritz Carlton, by the way, not some dingy office. He was the only leader at the G20 who met with civil society. Nobody else did. And there's more to it than just meetings. We had the policy, we tried to execute it, and I most certainly tried to execute it when I was ambassador.

Udensiva-Brenner: Throughout his first term in office President Obama was cautious about pushing Russia too much on the democracy issue. For instance, he did not use the word "democratic" during his 2009 speech at the New Economic School. Yet, knowing your history as a human rights activist and democracy promoter, he decided to appoint you ambassador to Russia. Why?

McFaul: I'd say two things. One, with respect to his speech, he said "America wants a strong, peaceful, and prosperous Russia," and he didn't want to say, we didn't want to say, the word "democratic." However, if you look at the five themes of the speech, one of them was about what we call "universal values." So, it's there, but in a different way, in a less in-your-face way.

With respect to me, you know, I was Mr. Reset. I was the guy who steered this new policy in place; first within our government, and then with the Russians. So, when he asked me to become ambassador, months before the demonstrations, in spring 2011, his pitch to me was "we got too much going on, we got too much momentum, how can you leave me now?" And he knew my views on democracy. I had given him my latest book, *Advancing Democracy Abroad: Why We Should and How We Can*, as a Christmas gift—my first Christmas gift at the White House. It wasn't that he didn't know my views.

Udensiva-Brenner: Did President Obama know your history in Russia during the late '80s and early '90s? Did he know that some KGB officers thought you were a CIA agent, for instance?

McFaul and former Harriman director Timothy Frye in discussion with the audience during the 2015 Harriman Lecture

McFaul: That's interesting. I don't ever recall talking about the CIA piece. He most certainly knew of my relationships with some of these opposition leaders, because he met them in July 2009.

Udensiva-Brenner: Would you have gone to meet with the political opposition on your second day as ambassador to Russia had Deputy Secretary of State William Burns not been visiting?

McFaul: Probably not, no.

Udensiva-Brenner: Do you think your time in Russia would have been different had that meeting not taken place?

McFaul: Well . . . I probably wouldn't have done that on my second day, but we always met with civil society, and I wouldn't have avoided them for the entire time I was ambassador. At the time I wasn't that enthusiastic about the meeting; my only contribution in terms of the invitation was, ironically, to invite a communist. Then, of course, the media portrayed it the way they did on national television because it happened at the same time there were massive demonstrations on the street. It was definitely not the start I wanted, but I knew that this was eventually going to be a complicated moment in our relationship. Even the previous ambassador, who did not have the same reputation I had, was already beginning to experience a bit of a tension because of things happening inside Russia, not because of us. It's important to understand: we didn't change our policy. What changed was politics inside Russia, and the rise of the opposition and the regime's fear of them.

Udensiva-Brenner: How did you feel about coming to a diplomatic role with no experience as a diplomat?

McFaul: I was nervous, of course. Moscow is a big embassy not traditionally run by political appointees. The last political appointee actually hired a Russia specialist to be his special assistant so that he could help him navigate the embassy, and obviously I didn't have that. So, I had to learn the ways of an embassy, but I think it's exaggerated how hard that is. I mean, it's listening, it's leadership, it's management. I've been a manager of other things. But you'd have to ask my staff how they felt about it.

The big advantage I had that many career ambassadors did not have when they went to Moscow is that I knew a lot about Russia. I'd written tons about Russia, I spoke Russian, I'd lived there several times, so I was not needing the political officer to tell me who Surkov is, who Dvorkovich is, who Nemtsov was. We had very talented people, but, in terms of analysis of Russia, I was more up to speed than your average person who comes in. And I didn't want to be the traditional American ambassador in Russia; I had a different agenda. I wanted to be more engaged with society, I wanted to be more public. I was on Twitter; I was in the Russian media way more than my predecessor, even in a more constrained environment.

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Udensiva-Brenner: So you wanted to be in the Russian media?

McFaul: I did. I spoke Russian, sometimes very badly, but I wanted to engage with society and working with the media was one way to do it. We wanted to explain our policy, which was distorted by others in the media. And we wanted to show *chto takoe* America, what is America? And I wanted to use my own biography to say that. That was part of our public diplomacy strategy. Somebody told me something very wise before I went: "The best way to be an authentic ambassador is to be yourself." And if you try to be what you think is the right way to be an ambassador, that won't be authentic. And I took that to heart.

We had more guests at Spaso House, where I lived, than in any other period in history—20,000 guests in two years. We did things like throw concerts. One of the first was a country western band. I'm from Montana, my father is a country western musician, and in Montana you don't just sit on your hands and listen to music, you dance. So we did that, and that was radical. It hadn't happened in thirty or forty years, and it was against protocol and all that. And the Russians loved it.

Udensiva-Brenner: Some might say your strategy backfired. Would you go back and do it the same way?

McFaul: I don't think it backfired. I think conditions changed. As I was on my way out, there was an outpouring of goodwill toward me, even by people who had been critical of me before. Thousands, no tens of thousands, Twitter messages, Facebook

Cartoon of Michael McFaul published in *The Moscow Times* in June 2014. By Sergey Elkin

So, despite the kind of cartoonization of me in the Russian media, people would still meet with me and talk with me. And people have changed their views.

messages, saying, "Oh, we're losing this guy, he understands us, he likes Russia."

One colleague of mine said, "You know, what really drove the Kremlin nuts about you was that you criticized the regime, but you demonstrated through public diplomacy that you loved Russia." It would have been much better if I had just been a cold warrior. I do love a lot of things about Russian culture, I know Russian history, and I'm very respectful and admiring of what happened. Some of my best friends in life are Russian. It's not because they're Russian; they're my friends. I know thousands of Russians, *thousands*. Not just a handful of people I got to know in a few years.

Then, with the annexation of Crimea, the intervention in Eastern Ukraine, everything became extremely polarized again, and all that goodwill that I felt dissipated quickly. Especially on social media now, it's very nasty and a lot of it is organized to be that way, but it's depressing.

Udensiva-Brenner: Can you tell me about your time in Russia during the '80s and '90s?

McFaul: I went there as a Fulbright scholar to finish my dissertation about the international effects on national liberation movements in southern Africa. I went several times, but the pivotal time was in 1990, 1991. And, obviously, that was a time of great social upheaval in the Soviet Union, and my thesis was looking at different theories of revolution. So, I was interested in what was going on in Russia. I came into contact with a group called the National Democratic Institute (NDI). I met them because one of my former students worked for them and she just delivered a letter—this is pre-email; she delivered a letter through one of the members of an NDI delegation that came to Moscow. It was by chance, right? And when they found out I was living there, they needed help, so they hired me as a consultant. It was an extraordinary, exciting time.

There's this common misperception we were coming to impose something, to pressure the government. But, in those days, it was exactly the opposite. We were special guests trying to help them build a new society, and it was incredibly exciting and heady. I was a young guy and I had a pass to the parliament—I met Boris Yeltsin—and it felt like we were helping to end the Cold War and make democracy in Russia. People who come into this story later forget that the Russian government greeted us as friends and colleagues and partners. All these newly elected officials in the Russian parliament and the Mossoviet, the Leningrad City Council—Popov, Sobchak, and all these new democrats—they wanted us there, they invited us.

I didn't want to be the traditional American ambassador in Russia; I had a different agenda. I wanted to be more engaged with society, I wanted to be more public.

Udensiva-Brenner: How did your past in Russia influence your present there?

McFaul: I think what is probably frequently misunderstood about my time as ambassador is that I've been interacting with the Russian political and economic elite for thirty years. So, despite the kind of cartoonization of me in the Russian media, people would still meet with me and talk with me. And people have changed their views. Some people have become more powerful, some people are more marginal, but I know a lot of these people, and, even when we disagree, we're still interacting. I have very good contacts with many senior Russian government officials. For instance, Minister Ulakayev, the minister of the economy, used to work for Gaidar. We had him come to Stanford for a conference on defense conversion in 1992 or 1993. These contacts remain. Partly because of my job, and partly because they knew I was close to the White House and to Obama, and partly because I've known some of these people for a very long time.

Udensiva-Brenner: How did it feel to be vilified by the Russian media?

McFaul: At times I was frustrated by it, of course. I was the guy pushing for closer relations and *perezagruzka* [reset], so early on in my ambassadorial times, I wanted to say, "Don't you understand that, guys? That's who I am." But then I understood that it was much bigger than me, that it wasn't about me personally. But sometimes it felt very personal. And I'll tell you honestly, in the early days of my tenure as ambassador I was reporting about how the Russian regime was changing, how Putin was different than Medvedev and how we had to adjust our expectations. That we weren't going to be able to continue with the reset. The reset was over, as far as I'm concerned, in 2012. But not everybody back in Washington agreed with me and my team at the embassy. And, tragically, I think history has proven that we were right, even more so than we thought at the time. The trend started in 2012; it started way before the current crisis.

Udensiva-Brenner: You mentioned during your Harriman Lecture that you don't think we should push Russia too much or test Russia too much because Putin is testing us. But you also said that you're in favor of arming Ukraine. How do you reconcile those two attitudes?

McFaul: First of all, Ukraine is a sovereign country. The whole world recognizes it as a sovereign country, including Russia. Countries have the right to defend themselves and to have a monopoly on the use of force within their territories. This is IR 101. United Nations 101. Those are the norms, and therefore Ukraine has the right to defend itself and should be able to purchase weapons from other countries. Russia purchases weapons from other countries. Why is it not provocative when they do it, but provocative if Ukraine does? That's how I feel on the level of principle.

On the level of policy, the debate is that if we arm Ukraine, Putin will respond. And I agree—I think there will be a response. But who is eliciting that response? It's the same people who are asking for arms. They are the ones who will bear the burden. They are the ones who have decided, in the cost-benefit analysis, that it's better to obtain these arms than not, and I think it's a bit presumptuous of us to think that we know better than Ukrainians what is in their own security interests.

The third piece, I would say, is that there is a way to provide weapons that are designed for deterrence and defense, not offense. If you install a new alarm in your house, and the neighbor says, "Well, that's provocative, why are you doing that?" You would respond, "It's only provocative to those who want to break into my house; if you have no ambition to break into my house, this is not a provocation." I think of defensive weapons in the same way. I'm not a military expert, but I think there are certain ways to prevent more conflict by making escalation costly. That said, I do believe it's a very difficult issue. I'm not dismissive of the opposing arguments. My prediction, knowing where the Obama administration stands on this, is they're not going to provide arms—lethal arms—unless it is in response to a Russian escalation.

Udensiva-Brenner: The U.S. is currently conducting joint military exercises with Georgia. Do you think that's in the same vein?

McFaul: Yes, I do. Georgia's not going to invade Russia. Ukraine is not going to invade Russia. These countries are not a threat to Russia's national security. They're not fools.

Do you know how many countries joined NATO while I was in government during the Obama administration? One. We were not expanding NATO. We were not pushing missile defense against Russia. We were taking actions very deliberatively to try to build security relationships with Russia, not against Russia. It's Putin who changed that, we didn't change that.

Udensiva-Brenner: Some people see Kerry's recent visit to Sochi as a new mini-thaw. How do you see it?

McFaul: I think it's interesting that Putin, who is extremely protocol-conscious, agreed to meet with somebody who is not his equal for four hours. Barack Obama didn't come to see him. The vice president didn't come to see him. The fact that this meeting took place kind of signals how eager he is to be reengaged with the Americans. From what I've heard about the meeting, there was a desire to be better understood, so that's a good sign. I don't think it will lead to any breakthroughs. And even signaling that it will is, in my view, extremely dangerous. This is not a moment for reset 2.0, because there's no way that's going to happen.

Udensiva-Brenner: One might argue that the sanctions against Putin have actually given him a convenient excuse for the already declining economy in Russia—now he can blame Russia's economic turmoil on the West. This has strengthened his position at home and made his propaganda campaign much stronger. What's your response?

McFaul: Yes, it's a big source of his popularity. *My ne vinovaty, oni vinovaty* [we're not to blame, they're to blame]. Certainly, that's there for those who watch and believe the propaganda on television. To those who are involved in the international economy and are losing money because of the sanctions, some of them billions of dollars, it is perfectly clear what's going on, and they're not convinced by this kind of argumentation. I mean, they don't like the sanctions, they think we went too far, they're doing whatever they can to revoke them, but they know precisely why they were put in place.

Udensiva-Brenner: One year after you left Russia, Boris Nemtsov was murdered. Could you have foreseen something like this?

President Obama meets with (*seated, from left to right*) Leonid Gozman, Boris Nemtsov, Gennady Zyuganov, Yelena Mizulina, and Sergey Mitrokhin

McFaul: When I was ambassador I had death threats against me. There are a lot of kooky people out there who get wrapped up in weird ideas, nationalism. I don't know what happened with Nemtsov, and I don't want to speculate, but I do know that he feared for his safety and he was nervous about these things. Although now that I think about it, I was totally shocked that he was killed the way he was. It's important to understand that Nemtsov was not just an opposition figure—the Western press says he was killed because he was an opposition politician and the regime didn't like him. Well, some people in the regime didn't like him, that's true, but a lot of people in the regime were close to him. A lot of people in elite circles were close colleagues of his. He had been deputy prime minister. He was a two-time governor. He was friends with Prokhorov, he was in that *tussovka*, he was in that milieu. He was, as my colleague phrased it, part of the *nomenklatura* of post-Soviet Russia. And so, his assassination was not just a shot across the bow to the opposition, it was a shot across the bow to all of these people. And that's important to remember, so that's what's shocking to me. He actually used to say to me, "I'm too important, they would never go after me."

Udensiva-Brenner: When you were leaving Russia you told the journalist Julia Ioffe that you were more optimistic about Russia after spending two years there than you had been when you came in. Does this still hold true given recent events?

McFaul: I'm still optimistic about Russia in the long run. Though I'm much more pessimistic about it today as a result of what happened in Ukraine; this pivot has gone farther than I expected. Having always been a great believer that Russia could become a normal, democratic, market-oriented, boring country—this debate has been going on for more than thirty years—I find this current phase to be without question the most depressing. I even felt better about the Soviet Union when I was there in 1985 as a student than I do today. But I believe in modernization theory: property, education, urbanization, and globalization. The Putin regime can retard that, they can slow it down, but they can't stop it. ◻

Flowers left at the site of Boris Nemtsov's murder. Photo by Alexander Krassotkin