

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR “FROM COLD WAR TO HOT PEACE”

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On-screen text:

From Cold War to Hot Peace
a discussion with Michael McFaul

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Michael McFaul

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Michael McFaul: Hey, everybody, my name is Michael McFaul. I’m a professor here of Political Science at Stanford University. Last year, I just wrote a book, which I’m happy to talk about today. It’s called *From Cold War to Hot Peace: A U.S. Ambassador in Putin’s Russia*. It’s a quasi-memoir. I was the U.S. ambassador in Putin’s Russia from 2012 to 2014. Before that, I worked three years at the White House for President Obama from 2009 to 2012. And this is partially a book about my experiences in the government, but it’s bigger than that. It’s not just about me. It’s really a book about U.S.–Soviet relations and U.S.–Russia relations for the last 30 or 40 years.

The book starts with me in high school. I grew up in Montana. I went to Bozeman Senior High in Bozeman, Montana. And back then—this is a long time ago, 1979, 1980, and I graduated in ’81—I joined the debate team in high school, and the topic was about U.S. trade policy towards other countries. And we, my debate partner and I, developed a case about how to increase trade with the Soviet Union. My debate partner, by the way, is now Senator Steve Daines from Montana. So we were a pretty good team, by the way. But it was from that time that I got interested in the Soviet Union. And this was at the height of the Cold War. Tensions were really, really high between our two countries. And back then, I was scared that our president, our newly elected president, Ronald Reagan at the time, was going to get us into a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.

So when I arrived here at Stanford—and this is all in the book, so please read the book—when I arrived here at Stanford as a 17-year-old kid, freshman, I registered for first-year Russian and PoliSci 35, *How Nations Deal With Each Other*, animated by the belief that if we could just communicate more with our counterparts in the Soviet Union, we could reduce tensions. And then the next several years were a fantastic time if you’re interested in U.S.–Soviet or U.S.–Russia relations, because relations improved dramatically. The Soviet Union eventually even collapsed in 1991. And it felt like the United States and Russia were going to become partners, some would even say allies, in the world. Because back then, the people of Russia and their leaders—then under Mr. Mikhail Gorbachev, initially, the last leader of the Soviet Union, and then Boris Yeltsin, the first leader of independent Russia—claimed that they wanted to join the West and be close to the United States and develop democracy and capitalism. And I was living in and out of Russia and the Soviet Union at the time and it was a really euphoric period. It felt like the world was—finally the Cold War had ended, and our former enemy was becoming our friend.

Fast forward to today and it didn’t work out. Today, we’re back in a very confrontational relationship with Russia under Vladimir Putin. I call my book *From Cold War to Hot Peace* because I want to echo that it’s a little bit like the Cold War but it’s somewhat different. Let me give you a few examples.

So the good news from the Cold War that’s over now is we do not have a nuclear arms race in terms of the number of nuclear weapons. Back when I first got interested in the Soviet Union,

we were developing tens of thousands of, peaking I think at 30,000 or 40,000, nuclear weapons pointed at each other. The good news today in the “hot peace” period is we’re now down to 1550. We’ve gone way down. By the way, you can still blow up the world with 1500 weapons. We have some work to do to reduce that. But that’s the good news.

The bad news in our current era, your era, is that we have a qualitative nuclear arms race right now that in many ways I think is more destabilizing than the old Cold War, some new weapons that can do real damage, especially to people like me who live on the coasts. They have a new weapon, for instance, a nuclear weapon. It’s a torpedo that travels hundreds of miles through the ocean and then blows up right before it gets to the coast, designed to flood the coast and kill millions of people. So good news, bad news? Better today than the Cold War? It’s somewhere in between.

Another example. During the Cold War, there was an ideological struggle between the Soviet Union and communism on the one hand, and the United States and [what] we used to call “the free world” on the other hand, between democracy and autocracy, communism and capitalism. Thankfully, that ideological struggle is over.

But there is a new ideological struggle today. At least Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, believes there is. He is trying to propagate a set of ideas, conservative, national, anti-multilateral ideas against what he calls the decadent liberal West. That’s us. And he is now investing resources into that to try to win allies. And after a period of years where nobody was noticing, he now has allies in countries like Hungary, Italy, and some would even say here in our country in the United States. So, better off, worse off? Somewhere in between.

The means of fighting these two different episodes. During the Cold War, it actually wasn’t cold. I think that’s a really bad term. It was a hot war. Millions of people around the world died when we were fighting proxy wars between the Soviets and the Americans in places like Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Angola, and lots of people died there, tragically, including lots of Americans, by the way. So the good news is we’re not fighting proxy wars all over the world to combat and contain communism.

The bad news is that there’re some new tactics in the “hot peace” fight that are pretty destabilizing. One is annexation. For decades, there has been no annexation of territory between countries in Europe. That changed in 2014 when Vladimir Putin, the leader of Russia, annexed a piece of Ukraine—it’s called Crimea—for the first time since 1945. You have to go all the way back to World War II to find a time of annexation. Second, sanctions. The United States today has more Russians on its sanctions list than at any time in our history during the Cold War, and likewise the Russians have more Americans on their sanctions list than any time during the Cold War. I know. I’m one of them. I can’t travel to Russia because of this confrontation we’re in today. And finally, in 2016, we saw another new tactic in the fight in the “hot peace” when Vladimir Putin, through a multi-prong campaign, interfered in our elections here in the United States of America, and tried to swing the vote towards president—then candidate, now President Trump. Whether he did or not, is debate[d] amongst academics, but that he tried to do so is unprecedented. That’s something new in our current era.

So, my book tries to explain why. What happened between that euphoric moment that I talked about when I was a young man studying at Moscow State University in 1991, and our current confrontation? And I walk through what we would call theories, you might call explanations, and let me just summarize them now and then encourage you to read the book and come to your own conclusions.

So, one theory is that great powers always clash. They rise. They fall. They annex territory. If you look at a map of Europe and you fast forward for 1000 years of history—I use one of those when I teach in my own courses here at Stanford—what do you see? You see countries getting bigger, countries getting smaller, territory moving. And one explanation is that it's the same old, same old. Soviet Union was weak, collapsed, a weak Russia took over. But now, Russia is back. Russia has a lot of power to do things. And that, you know, whether good or bad, same old, same old. That's one theory.

There's a second theory that I try to wrestle with all these theories in my book, which says, "No, it's about America." The United States did this. We took advantage of Russia when Russia was weak. And we told them they had to develop markets and capitalism, and then we expanded NATO in Eastern Europe, that Russians saw as threatening. Then we bombed Serbia in 1999. We invaded Iraq in 2003. We sponsored color revolutions in Georgia, a country near Russia, and in Ukraine, another country near Russia in 2003, 2004. And finally, Russia just had to push back on American imperialism. That's a second explanation for our current confrontation.

And a third one is about domestic politics inside Russia. And that explanation says that this is really about Putin and his internal struggles as a president, and he needed a new enemy to help solidify his electoral base inside his country. I happen to think all three of these explanations have some validity. But I think the third one is probably the most important one, and I try to spell that out in my book.

Right as I arrived as the U.S. ambassador, there was new elections in Russia, parliamentary vote, falsified in kind of normal Russian ways, 5, 6, 7%. We didn't think any big deal when I was working at the White House. This is kind of a normal Russian mode. But this is now December 2011. A lot of Russians this time around had a different view. They didn't like the fact that their votes were stolen. They documented it. They found out that they were—in part, by the way, by using Facebook and Twitter and something called VKontakte, an equivalent of Facebook in Russia. And they documented with their smartphones that this falsification was happening, and they spun it around the Internet. And finally, people say, "I don't want my vote stolen anymore." First 50 people came out, 500, eventually 200,000 people came out on the streets to demand free and fair elections.

But you know, you get 200,000 people together, they stirred themselves up. And by the end of some of those demonstrations, they were yelling, "We need a Russia without Putin." And Putin got nervous about that, in my view, and needed a new argument to mobilize his voters and to marginalize those opposition people. And that's where we, the Americans, came in. America, Obama, and me as the new U.S. ambassador in Russia. And then he tried to explain to his people that, no, these are not—these people are being funded by the Americans, and funded by me, personally, by the way. That's what Vladimir Putin described on television, as I arrived as the new U.S. ambassador. And so, the explanation I tease out in the book, I won't go into all the details today, because I want you to read the book, is that those domestic political considerations where Putin needed an external enemy to solidify his power at home, that ended a period of cooperation that preceded him. And that's what I try to explain in the book as a whole.

Now, there's a substory through the whole book. In fact, some people just read the substory. My mother is not interested in that theoretical stuff. She's interested in a different story that's in the book. What is it like to be the U.S. ambassador in Russia? What is diplomacy about? What does it mean? And I was new to this. I was an accidental ambassador. I was appointed by President Obama because he didn't want me to leave the government. And so I do in the book, in detail, just talk about kind of the mechanics of diplomacy.

And the punchline of that is I loved being the U.S. ambassador. If you ever get a chance, do it. It's a fantastic job. And it's a fantastic job for a number of reasons. One, just doing diplomacy and interacting with the Russian government to try to achieve outcomes that were good for the American people, I really enjoyed that. Remember, I had studied Russian as a kid. I had lived there. I'd studied there. I'd lived in Russia six or seven years of my life. So, to be back, this time as the ambassador living in a giant ambassador's house, by the way. It's called Spaso House. Look it up, Google it and do a virtual tour. It's a fantastic place. I really loved that part of the job.

But there are other parts of the job that I also liked that I didn't do as an advisor to the president back at the White House. It was my job to interact with Russian society. And so I got to do a lot of things that don't normally happen for me here at Stanford. I got to go to, you know, the Bolshoi Theatre and sit in the front-row seats, and watch the Nutcracker, that was a special event, and representing my country, showing that we were acknowledging the incredible Russian culture.

I also got to bring American cultural and sporting and business leaders to Russia, and to showcase what we in America can do. So I hosted one time the NBA. I had two dozen NBA players at my house, some were Russian, by the way, talking about how great the NBA was. And for my kids at the time, who were big football—basketball fans, that was one of the best events we ever had at Spaso House.

I also had lots of musicians come. And to highlight what we Americans do, and more than anything, I would say, when we're talking about culture, especially music, music bound people together, Russians and Americans, in ways that I was surprised by, concerts that we had when people would get up and dance. We had one group come from my home state of Montana, country western band. And in Montana, when you go listen to a country western band, you dance. You don't just sit on your hands. And that was not so diplomatic, by the way. Traditionally, I guess ambassadors are not supposed to dance. But when they did, it was a bringing together of Russians and Americans that was truly special. And so that's the other theme of the book, just what is the kind of ins and outs practically of being a diplomat.

So I hope you look at the book, skip the theory if you just want to get to the other parts, and I look forward to finding and discussing it with you on my various social media platforms. Once you have read the book, find me on Twitter, @McFaul, @-M-C-F-A-U-L. Hit me with your questions. And I promise to the best of my abilities, I'll answer your questions about my book, again, called *From Cold War to Hot Peace: A U.S. Ambassador in Putin's Russia*.