McFaul: You're listening to World Class from the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. We bring in depth expertise on international affairs from Stanford's campus, straight to you. I'm your host, Michael McFaul, the director of the Freeman Spogli Institute.

Today we're honored to have a very special guest, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman, now retired from the U.S. Army. Lieutenant Colonel Vindman was most recently the director of European Affairs on the White House's National Security Council. Prior to his retirement from the military, he also served as a foreign area officer with assignments in U.S. embassies in Kiev, Ukraine; Moscow, Russia, and with the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a political military affairs officer. Alex and I, in fact, served together in Moscow; maybe we'll talk a little bit about some of our travels together.

Lieutenant Colonel Vindman was unexpectedly thrust into the public eye in 2019, when he reported the now infamous phone call between then-President Trump and President Zelensky of Ukraine. This decision triggered an investigation which led to the first impeachment of President Trump and inalterably changed the course of Vindman's personal and professional life. In his book –which is, by the way, a New York Times bestseller– Here, Right Matters, Lieutenant Colonel Vindman tells the story of how and why he made the decision to report on that call. We were honored to host him recently at the Freeman Spogli Institute for discussion of the book, and we're thrilled to continue that conversation here today.

Alex, Lieutenant Colonel Vindman, thank you for joining us and welcome to World Class.
Vindman: Ambassador Mike, very glad to join you and looking forward to this conversation. It seems to me that we always find something very interesting to talk about. And now Russia and Ukraine are back in news, so I’m sure that will come up.

McFaul: Well, let’s get to that. But let’s start with your book, because it was a brave book to write and it was a brave decision you made. Before we talk about that fateful decision you made, tell us a little bit about your history that led you to where you were, working at the National Security Council (NSC). In fact, I remember very vividly coming in to see Fiona Hill one day, your boss at that time, and I think it was just your first week there at the National Security Council – a place I used to work as well, for those who don't know, and was thrilled to do so. It was one of the honors of my lifetime. But I remember you being pretty giddy about being in that job, and rightfully so. Tell us a little bit about what led up to that moment.

Vindman: That's a good memory! I You may or may not recall our conversation that you and I had at Spaso House – I want to say sometime in 2013 or so – set me on a course for the NSC. It was when Jane, one my cousins who was one of your students, was there conducting her research, and we had coffee. I mentioned this idea of that I might be a good fit for the NSA. And you said, “Definitely! You should work towards that.”

But it's a longer story than that. The subtitle of my book Here, Right Matters is “An American Story.” It's really kind of quizzical how an immigrant refugee kid from Kyiv ends up in the White House working on Russia and working on Ukraine policy. And the book talks about my deep family background: my father surviving World War II as a refugee fleeing into the Ural Mountains; his generation, his parents generation; growing up in Ukraine, and some of what I’d like to call ‘the DNA,’ or the nature that was instilled in me, but then also the nurture [I got] in coming here with my lived experience as a refugee in 1979. I didn’t have any formal language in Russian, but it was spoken at home and carried forward. I was learning English as a four-and-a-half, five year old on the streets in New York City. Then eventually, of course, I was working through school, university, ROTC commission, and ended up in the army and having a 20-year career in the army, which was pretty amazing. I was stationed in Korea, in Germany, serving in combat in Iraq, and all the lessons [those experiences]. So that's what the book is about; it talks about what I looked back on as key moments of my background and of my family's background that drew on in making those fateful decisions that I did on January 25, and carrying through my congressional testimony.
McFaul: Well, we'll get to that in a minute. Tell me a little bit about why you chose the military. There are lots of different ways you could have served your new country, why the military?

Vindman: As a kid growing up in New York City in the 80s and early 90s, I’m not sure if my horizons were really that broad. They were relatively narrow. I had some thoughts on some different career options, but I knew that I wanted to serve in the military, at least for a stint – a three, or four year commitment. I knew that I needed some discipline; my undergraduate education was decent, but there were some missteps along the way. I managed to kind of pulled myself together, and frankly do better than all the rest of my brothers. Not that I’m being competitive! We all ended up okay.

But I needed some additional discipline, some additional seasoning. I describe myself as a late bloomer. And I thought I could do that and get some my excess energy out through the military.

What's fascinating – and you know this as a public servant yourself – is that public service is extremely rewarding. And the opportunities that were placed in front of me, at every turn when I was considering my options – whether it was time to move on to something else – were pretty amazing. Whether it was leading troops in Korea, commanding a company, being responsible for almost 200 folks, being a foreign area officer: there's that expression, “For every season there's the right moment,” and I had that kind of experience.

And then becoming a foreign area officer was a particularly phenomenal opportunity to dig into intellectual pursuits. Being a combat leader also is intellectually challenging, but it has a physical component and it has a leadership component. I wanted to dive into some intellectual pursuits as a foreign area officer – the Army's equivalent of a foreign service officer – and I had a chance to go to graduate school to the other school on the East Coast in New England.

McFaul: The ‘Stanford of the East,” is what we call it.

Vindman: Yeah! I didn't want to say and get into that one.

And then picking up another language, serving in Ukraine, traveling throughout the former Soviet space, and then ultimately landing in Moscow almost at the same time as you did in 2012. I think you preceded me by a couple months
McFaul: Just a little bit, yeah. Well, I agree with you. Reading your book, you did have these incredible turns and opportunities. Not everybody gets them in the government, by the way, and you moved up the ladder very quickly. And you probably would have just kept moving up, if not for this fateful phone call that changed your life and changed the President's life and changed American history.

So, tell us a little bit about what that phone call was, give us some context, and then the really difficult decisions, you had to make – the ethical decisions – about how to respond to it.

Vindman: I think the phone call was kind of the first in a couple of milestones in the Ukraine scandal. There were other important moments also, but what I’d been witnessing – and when we bumped into each other in the offices that you at one point occupied in 2018 – was a slow-moving foreign policy train wreck with Russia that also collided with a domestic corruption enterprise by the President.

McFaul: Already in 2018? That's an important thing, I think, for our listeners to understand. These things don't happen overnight.

Vindman: In 2018, it was on the Russia side of the equation, mainly focused on the fact that the President really had some strong views. He was enamored with Vladimir Putin. He also wanted to really kind of poke back at his critics that were talking about his campaign’s collusion with the Russians, as laid out in the Mueller report and things of that nature. So that was on the one side of the equation. The other side of the equation was, you know, as he came closer to the 2020 election, he’s seeing the threat of Vice President Biden as his chief rival and starts looking to undermine his campaign. So he looked to coerce the Ukrainians to deliver an investigation into Vice President Biden.

He was almost successful. He was probably somewhere between two to three days from realizing this enterprise because Volodymyr Zelensky had a presser on the books with Fareed Zakaria in which he was going to announce this investigation. This was in the middle of September when there was only about two weeks left to receive those funds that the U.S. had promised and that the Congress had allocated for Ukraine, and the President was obligated to spend. And he was about to deliver. The only reason he didn’t is because I started a chain of events when I reported the President’s wrongdoing that resulted in congressional inquiries, three of them in the middle of September, into the President’s hold on security assistance. That both let President Zelensky go back to where he was felt comfortable, which
is not bending to President Trump's pressure campaign, but it also uncovered President Trump's corrupt scheme.

This unfolded over the course of about eight or nine months.

**McFaul:** That's pretty fateful when put it that way. In political science we play around a lot with counterfactuals. And if you think of the counterfactual to the story you just told, if those investigations didn't start, prompted by what you did, many different outcomes could have happened, including maybe a different presidential outcome. We'll come back to counterfactuals if you have time.

Dig a little bit more into the details of what you heard on that call. And then what you decided to deal with it. I think that's hard for people that don't work in the government to know how one deals with a situation like you faced.

**Vindman:** A quick aside on the counterfactual: I had this in an interview with Susan Page from USA Today, and she kind of drew this out. We could have ended up in a world where Vice President Biden was damaged going into the primaries and never made it through to be the Democratic nominee, and never had his moment in South Carolina.

**McFaul:** Right.

**Vindman:** Trump would have been would have come up against not a lesser candidate, but somebody that maybe was not as competitive in a presidential election. We were potentially close to ending up with a second Trump administration, which would have been catastrophic, as I know both of us agree.

But in terms of the decisions: For me, I had to express concerns about the direction this enterprise was taking months before when Marie Yovanovitch was first fired.

**McFaul:** Right, our ambassador to Ukraine, to remind everybody, at the time.

**Vindman:** I thought that we should lend her more significant support at the White House in spite of the fact that former President Trump’s son, Don, Jr. was the one that finally got her removed by tweeting nasty things about her. I was overruled on that one, probably a wise call, because going up against the president's offspring is not necessarily a good idea. But
that rolled forward into a pressure campaign with Rudy Giuliani. He’s taking a lot of heat for
that now, including, you know, he might be seeing the inside of a cell for his efforts there.

McFaul: Remind our listeners that at the time, he was the personal lawyer for President
Trump.

Vindman: Right, he was a personal lawyer with no official role in government. Then this
campaign started to migrate into the official sphere with Gordon Sondland, the ambassador
to the EU, also saying that the Ukrainians had to deliver an investigation into Joe Biden in
order to get a presidential visit and then ultimately have their security assistance funds
delivered.

So throughout this whole period of time, I reported my concerns and tried to take action. By
July 10, when the Ukrainian National Security Advisor Oleksandr Danylyuk was in the U.S.
meeting with John Bolton, the U.S. National Advisor, I had reported that this quid pro quo
was first articulated. I reported that their instructions were coming from Mick Mulvaney,
President Trump’s chief of staff. So, all I really did was follow through on the 25th by making
all these reports as I’d done in the past that spelled out the dangers of this to U.S.
national security, and that those dangers were undermining the institution of free and fair elections, a
cornerstone of democracy. I reported this, and then all I needed to do after that was just stick
to my guns and follow through even though it meant personal risk to career and so forth.

McFaul: So it was so clear to you in terms of the violation of one of the fundamental
principles of American democracy, that it was not a close call, in terms of what you had to do?
Or did you have some anxiety over what to do and how to respond?

Vindman: No anxiety. My reports were all behind closed doors and in classified environments,
right? So I didn’t really think that these things were going to enter the public view. There’s
this famous section in the book where I walk into my twin brother’s office and say, literally
just coming from the phone call minutes before, “Eugene, if what I’m about to tell you ever
becomes public, the President will be impeached.” And of course, President Trump was
impeached, not once, but twice.

McFaul: Just remind our listeners: Eugene is your twin brother who is also working at the
National Security Council, as a lawyer, right?

Vindman: He was. That’s right.
McFaul: And you had professional reason to be talking to him as well.

Vindman: That's exactly right, and that's a good point. I've talked about this so many times that I sometimes forget. My twin brother was the chief ethics official [at the NSC], so there were multiple reasons to talk to him.

McFaul: He was not just hanging out on the street getting coffee or something.

Vindman: I made this report without any hesitation, thinking that there was an opportunity to right the course of events by having senior legal officials counsel the President. My perception was criminal wrongdoing. And that's what I thought was going to happen. And of course, that didn't happen. It didn't play out within the executive branch. But I did what I thought was right. And then when called to testify about making these reports, I followed through. Even there, it was not a hard decision about what the right thing to do was.

Of course, my attorneys wanted me to be reluctant and only offer yes or no answers. But that would have been a disservice to a critically important moment in the U.S. [It was] the third impeachment of a president in U.S. history, our democracy was under threat, and I was not going to put my interests ahead of U.S. interests.

McFaul: Interesting. That's an incredible set of convictions which you write about, just to remind everybody, in lots of detail in Here, Right Matters.

One more question on this, and then I want to jump to the contemporary period because tragically, we're facing another crisis with respect to Russia and Ukraine and the United States.

Once you made that decision, and then once you testified, were there any surprises in the way that your peers and your colleagues interacted with you? Were you pleasantly surprised by some and disappointed by others? And not to name names; I don't want to do that. I'm just curious that, once you make a fateful decision, what happens in this system? Does it all, they all kind of close ranks? Or do they all say, “Okay, we're going to help Alex get through this.”

Vindman: In general, I've experienced overwhelming support from my peers. But the layer of peers, as you as you know, in the White House is relatively thin. That's the director level.
you get to the political level. And there, I immediately felt like I was ostracized and marginalized. There were peers that saw opportunity in trying to trip me up or report on what was going on; that’s the nature of the Trump White House, unfortunately. That’s how these kinds of things unfold. These are competitive environments. I imagine you didn’t have to experience anything quite like this, but the Trump White House took on the character of the president. These are the kinds of folks that the President chose. These are the kinds of folks that the President elevated. There were directors, my peers, that ended up as acting Secretaries of Defense, based on whatever services they provided. So, it was a combination of both.

But in general, the professional class, the folks coming out of departments and agencies were very supportive and quietly offering words of encouragement.

**McFaul:** Interesting. And by the way, that’s an interesting observation about how the institution takes on the personality of the leadership at the top. That was also true when I worked at the National Security Council, but for a very different kind of president, President Obama. But his thoughtfulness and deliberativeness and ‘no drama Obama,’ were norms that actually affected the work downstream.

In part because of what you did, we have a new president, and we definitely had a moment of euphoria, I would say, in terms of U.S-Ukraine relations after President Biden was elected. There was a sense, at least from Ukrainians I know, that we’re going to get back to a kind of normal relationship. President Biden knows Ukraine well. I actually traveled to Ukraine with him when I worked for him as vice president. Probably no American president has ever known as much about Ukraine before he came to office as he does. And yet, here we are a year later into the Biden presidency with the second in a row of Putin threatening building up on the borders of Ukraine. And I’m just curious, how do you evaluate the Biden response and the Western response? I’m wondering what kind of memos you’d be writing right now, if you were back in your old job at the NSC?

**Vindman:** In a way, I benefited from a year of working on my doctorate at Johns Hopkins and working on U.S. foreign policy toward Ukraine. And I wouldn’t have the experience of conducting the research to offer this kind of advice before. But now I would offer the fact that we have an interests- and values-based need to work closely with Ukraine.

The [values]-based case is pretty straightforward. It’s a democracy that’s fought for its place amongst democracies with two revolutions. It’s not a negligible contributor to the weight of
democracies around the world with a population of 40 million. It’s the largest country by landmass in Europe. Russia is not European; it's Eurasian – I have to throw that in there.

The interests case is actually more compelling. I don't know if I would describe it as a theory, but a thought or a notion that I'll definitely advance in my dissertation, is that Ukraine makes a compelling normative case for where Russia could end up. And I use this idea of West Germany making East Germany unviable in the Cold War. Both countries started at the same place: decimated. But West Germany, being democratic and prosperous and enjoying basic human rights, thriving economy, made East Germany unviable and demonstrated Germany as a failure.

In much the same way, Ukraine could do the same thing for Russia. As we both know, Putin believes that Ukraine and Russia are the same people separated by an artificial boundary; the share roots and have a shared identity. Now, that's a vast oversimplification. That's not entirely true. But that's what he believes. And that's what he's convinced this population of. So, how would he explain 20 years from now, or in 2036, when he's done with his latest term in office, and there's somebody else that's looking to step in: how can another authoritarian leader step in and say, “We're going to continue the course with managed democracy,” when Ukraine is prosperous?

It makes a really compelling case for a path that Russia could take on a path that would take it towards democracy. That would be a difficult road, but it's a viable path, because [Ukraine] is an example. And that's important not just because of our strategic aspirations for Russia, but also because it has an impact on China. I think you've heard me talk about this notion that all of Russia's national security threats are from a belligerent rising, coercive China; they're not from the West. The West is held out as a boogeyman at the moment, because it's useful to the regime. It's important to the regime to fight against the West as the aggressor and to couch the West as a failure and decadent for regime stability purposes. But from a national security perspective, I think any reasonable assessment would indicate that those threats are really not emanating from the West, but from the East. So I think it also empowers our competition with China. That's why I think that the Biden administration should be unconstrained in its support of Ukraine.

Now that the immediate response might be, “Isn't that likely to escalate the situation?” Potentially, yes, because the right now the costs and the consequences for Russia are not decidedly negative, and Russia could pursue an aggressive militarized policy. But with Ukraine, it’s become much more robust in terms of economic power, military power, more
cohesive, all moving the same direction as it has been for the past seven or eight years. It makes it a very difficult proposition for Russia to try to attack Ukraine, because the costs are just too high. So, it's a delicately managed situation, but that's where we should be investing our resources from a values- and interests-based approach.

**McFaul:** Fascinating. Sounds like a great thesis. Let me just thank you. First, for your service to our great country. Second, for writing this book, *Here, Right Matters* still available anywhere. It's a great holiday gift, great Christmas gift for those still looking. Third, I look forward to this next book. It'll be a dissertation first but a book next, and believe me, we need more expertise on that part of the world from my point of view. And then finally, thanks for joining us on World Class today, Alex. It's great to talk with you.

**Vindman:** I'm looking forward to doing this again in the future.

**McFaul:** We'll have you on soon!

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