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Worth a read

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The Undiplomat



MOSCOW — This winter, Michael McFaul discovered a number of surprising things about himself. He was imposing odious American holidays, like Valentine's Day and Halloween, on the Russian people. He personally whisked Russian opposition politician Alexey Navalny out of the country to Yale on a fellowship. He was inviting opposition figures to the U.S. Embassy "to get instructions." And he was a pedophile. Or so his online tormentors claimed.

This was McFaul's welcome to his new job: United States ambassador to Russia. Along with being attacked on state television and having picket lines across from the embassy, he was being followed -- and harassed -- by a red-haired reporter from NTV, the state-friendly channel. One day, a horde of activists from Nashi, a pro-Kremlin youth group, showed up at the embassy gates in white jumpsuits, and played dead: They did not want to be the victims of a revolution, like the unfortunates of Egypt, their posters said. As a result, the ambassador's security had to be tightened.

"What I did not anticipate, honestly, was the degree, the volume, the relentless anti-Americanism that we're seeing right now," McFaul told me in February, a note of real hurt ringing in his normally chipper, measured voice. "That is odd for us. Because we have spent three years trying to build a different relationship with this country." He added, almost stuttering, "I mean, I'm genuinely confused by it."

A month later, he lost it.

The explosion came when McFaul arrived at the office of For Human Rights, an NGO in Moscow's historic center. He was going to see his old friend, veteran human rights activist Lev Ponomarev, whom he'd known since he was an international studies graduate student running around *perestroika*-era Moscow. It may have been late March, but it was cold and the stuff that fell from the sky was neither snow nor rain: a long cry from McFaul's California home. As ambassador, though, he didn't have to bother with a jacket: he had his black Cadillac.

Had he known that the redhead from NTV would again be waiting for him with a camera crew, however, he may have dressed a little warmer.

What was McFaul going to discuss with Ponomarev?, the redhead asked as the camera bounced to follow the moving ambassador.

"Your ambassador moves about without this, without you getting in the way of his work," McFaul said in slightly crooked Russian. He was clearly angry but maintained a wide, all-American smile. "And you guys are always with me. In my *house!* Are you not ashamed of this? You're insulting your own country when you do this, don't you understand?"

"We understand," the redhead said, before going on to inquire which opposition politicians McFaul supported. McFaul, who had already turned to walk into the building, wheeled around, the huge smile now touched with a cartoonish disbelief.

"I met with your president yesterday," he said, sarcastically nodding at her. "I support him, too. It's the same logic. If I meet with him, it means I support him, right? It's called diplomatic work. It's how it works everywhere."

He offered the redhead a formal interview, where they could "calmly" discuss everything and anything she wanted, before he remembered something. "I'm not wearing a coat. This is just rude!"

The redhead took no notice and pressed on. What had he discussed with opposition veteran Boris Nemtsov?

McFaul's smile, now huge and aggressive, looked like that of a man unhinged. Didn't they read his story in *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, he asked? Didn't they read his Twitter feed?

And then he snapped.

"This turned out to be a *wild* country!" he burst out, reaching up to the gray heavens. "This isn't normal!" This behavior was unacceptable, he went on, in all "normal" countries: the United States, Britain, Germany, even China. How did they manage to be everywhere he was, anyway? How did they know his schedule? This,

he contended, his voice rising, was in violation of the Geneva Convention. (In the heat of the moment, he misspoke: He meant the Vienna Convention, which tightly regulates the obligations of the states sending ambassadors, and those receiving them.)

In fact, the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, passed by the United Nations in 1961, stipulates certain things -- the inviolability of embassy grounds, as well as of ambassadors' communications, the duty of the receiving country to ensure the ability of the ambassador to work unmolested, and "to prevent any attack on his person, freedom, and dignity" -- that seemed to have been overlooked by Moscow in the last few months.

And the incident in front of the For Human Rights office was merely the last straw: There were rumors of mysterious individuals trespassing on the grounds of Spaso House, the ambassador's residence, of repeated security threats. The apparent interception of his schedule was almost confirmed by NTV, which said, through a spokeswoman that "the ubiquity of NTV can be explained by its broad network of informants, which is well known to every public figure in this country."

Those informants -- whoever they are and wherever they sit -- of course obviate the need for any illicit activity on any redheaded reporter's part, which is why, the spokeswoman said, "NTV's employees obviously do not hack into anyone's phones or read e-mails."

And though the State Department filed an official complaint with the Russian Foreign Ministry after the NTV tussle, it was McFaul's undiplomatic lament about the wildness of the country that made headlines in Moscow. On Twitter, he wrote, "I misspoke in bad Russian. Did not mean to say 'wild country.' Meant to say NTV actions 'wild.' I greatly respect Russia." And in an interview a few days later, he went even further, saying, "I really regret that I expressed myself inaccurately." And then he pulled out the card he hoped he wouldn't have to use: "I'm not a professional diplomat."

And just when things quieted down after the presidential elections in March, McFaul stumbled into another mess. Last week, while discussing the successes of the reset, he told an audience of students at a Moscow university that Russia had "bribed" the Kyrgyz to kick the U.S. off its military base at Manas. (The United States, he said, also bribed the Kyrgyz.) The Russian Foreign Ministry lashed out, attacking McFaul on Twitter late Monday and accusing him of "spreading blatant falsehoods." On Tuesday, Putin's foreign policy advisor weighed in, saying, "Ambassadors need to work on a positive agenda because there are already so many agents trying to ruin the atmosphere." McFaul, again on the defensive, stood by his speech in a blog post, but admitted, "Maybe I shouldn't have spoken so colorfully and bluntly. On that, I agree and will work harder to speak more diplomatically."

* * *

When he arrived in Moscow on Jan. 13 to take up his new post, Ambassador McFaul was just being Mike: the easy-going American guy whose informality disarms most everyone; the deft Washington operator who has both neoconservatives and liberals convinced that he's their guy; the Russia expert famous for his wide-reaching and motley network both in Moscow and in the United States; the man whose swearing-in ceremony -- normally a staid and sparsely-attended affair -- was packed to the gills with hundreds of friends and well-wishers, as well as the ambassadorial corps of nearly the entire former Soviet Union. In a break with tradition and protocol, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a glowing ode to McFaul and swore him in.

And yet, in Moscow, something was off. The McFaul mojo seemed suddenly powerless. Shortly after his arrival, McFaul stopped by the bar at the Marine House, on the embassy grounds, to have a beer. The regulars -- marines and embassy hoi polloi -- were rooted to their seats, frozen with fear -- they'd never caroused with the ambassador before. When he joined the pick-up basketball game at the embassy one night, one of the Russians approached him afterwards and joked, "I didn't realize I was playing basketball with the anti-Christ."

I met McFaul early on a sunny, freezing Sunday afternoon in February. The staff scurried around, turning on lamps and vacuuming the rich indigo carpets of Spaso House, a sprawling yellow mansion off the old Arbat Street. McFaul came down to meet me in baggy jeans and a blue sweater, a water stain on his belly. Instead of shoes, or even slippers, he wore washed-out blue socks. As we settled into the plush, floral maroon couches of the library, a Russian butler in a tuxedo brought us coffee on official china and then began to stoke the fireplace. "Hey, howyadoin'?" McFaul said to the butler, who didn't know how to respond.

"When I was here as a kid in 1983, there was all this outrageous stuff," McFaul explained when I asked him about whether this anti-Americanism was really so new. "But it didn't reverberate as fast to America as it does today. Because of Twitter and Facebook and YouTube, it moves fast. I can tell you from our government's perspective: At the highest levels, they're paying attention. And there's this notion that I get told privately, that, hey, don't pay attention to this election stuff. We'll get back to our interests later. Well, that's going to be a little hard to do because it's gotten so offensive. And personal. They have to understand that this message that is intended for people here is also being heard at the White House."

"It makes them look weak in the West," McFaul says. "Man, we thought this was a more serious country. This is not serious stuff."

Like other American officials in Moscow, he reminds me that, three weeks after his May inauguration, reinstalled President Vladimir Putin is going to have to travel to the United States for a G-8 summit, and a tête-à-tête with Barack Obama. (A meeting that Putin, perhaps tellingly, canceled.) According to various State Department sources, the anti-American propaganda and personal attacks on McFaul -- who served as Obama's close adviser on Russia matters before being tapped for the ambassadorial post -- have severely tested the patience of both McFaul's bosses: Clinton and Obama.

"This didn't even happen in the Soviet Union," McFaul goes on, a small rage rising in his voice. "Let's be clear about that. This is breaching diplomatic protocol. Imagine the outrage if this happened to the Russian ambassador in Washington. It's just not the way countries interact with each other. It's not respectful."

At the same time, however, McFaul is not your traditional ambassador. Not only is he not a career diplomat, unusual for such a sensitive post, but he came in at a time when the State Department has been pushing its representatives all over the world to actively use social media. In McFaul's hands, the directive has become a flamethrower. It's hard to remember a time when an American ambassador to Russia plunged into his work so boldly at such a politically precarious time: McFaul arrived just a month after Putin accused Clinton of stirring up regime change in Russia. On his second day, he had opposition activists over to the embassy. (The meeting, McFaul explains, had been scheduled long in advance of his arrival to coincide with the visit of Deputy Secretary of State William Burns.) Not a week into the job, he was tweeting at Navalny. He publicly invited himself onto the TV shows of Russia's reigning diva-loud-mouths, Tina Kandelaki and Ksenia Sobchak. He accused Margarita Simonyan, the editor of the English-language pro-Kremlin channel Russia Today, of lying. "That was only because I couldn't get the phrase 'untrue statements' into 140 characters," McFaul explains.

For someone whom friends and colleagues unanimously describe as a man who glides easily between all possible worlds, who is a keen reader of character and situation, McFaul's transition to diplomacy has been surprisingly bumpy. "I think he may have not totally understood the ramifications of his new position," says Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, McFaul's former colleague at Stanford University and co-author on many of his scholarly articles.

"A good diplomat is going to say enough and start enough conversations that will help make his case, not get into arguments that permanently cast him as an enemy," says Stephen Sestanovich, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations and a veteran of the diplomatic world. He is also McFaul's close friend. "A diplomat has to

figure out the terrain he's operating on and to make sure he makes good use of it. He knows there are a lot minefields out there and he has to be careful." He adds, "He probably responds to things on Twitter a little differently than I would. But that's Mike, and in general it works for him."

Alec Ross, a senior advisor to Clinton and one of the architects of this policy of social media diplomacy, disagrees that direct engagement with the people via Facebook and the like sets American diplomats up for disaster. "I don't agree that it's going over Putin's head," he told me. "Russian officials are very aggressive users of social media themselves. Look at [Russian Prime Minister Dmitry] Medvedev, look at [Russian diplomat and politician Dmitry] Rogozin. They started tweeting years before Ambassador McFaul. And the content of his Twitter feed is about his playing basketball. This is not exactly the Radio Free Europe tower." Ross made sure to add, "Ambassador McFaul enjoys the full support of the State Department."

And yet this initiative, coupled with McFaul's unshy public image, played right into the hands of the Kremlin, suddenly rickety and feeling pressed by this winter's pro-democracy protests, and just when it needed a big and convincing win in the March presidential elections. "They're using McFaul as a resource," says Sergei Markov, a United Russia deputy and trustee of Vladimir Putin. "It would be a sin not to use it."

McFaul, for his part, is understandably at a loss. He is, after all, the architect of the "reset," the man who made Russia an unlikely foreign policy priority for Obama, the man who **arranged the spy swap** in the summer of 2010 to keep it from torpedoing Russian-American relations, who twisted Georgia's arm to keep it from blocking Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, the man who, even as officials of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party attacked him -- post-election -- for meddling in Russian affairs, was in Washington, lobbying Congress to repeal the Soviet-era Jackson-Vanik amendment, which prohibits normal trade relations and has long been a sticking point in Russian-American relations. And after all this, he has found himself the target of a dirty and personal attack, orchestrated -- or, at least, condoned -- by the very people with whom he had worked closely for the last three years, people he thought he knew.

On that bright Sunday afternoon, McFaul talked about the things he and "the president" - Obama -- had accomplished so far, and the tougher tasks still left on their plates. He talked about the differences in Russian and American approaches to diplomacy -- one ceremonious and legalistic, the other loosey-goosey. But the virulent attacks clearly stung him in a personal way, and at times he sounded like a lover scorned. "They're the ones who have changed," he said, shaking his head and spreading his arms in a kind of stunned helplessness. "We've changed nothing. Zero."

* * *

McFaul was born in 1963, in Glasgow, Montana, a tiny town near the border with Canada, but he grew up on the other side of the state, in Butte. The city is famous for its gold, silver, and copper mines, and for the Berkeley pit, a lake of acidic water laced with heavy metals so poisonous that it kills whole flocks of foul unwise enough to rest there. (It was once a copper mine.) As a scholar, McFaul can appreciate Butte as an interesting town, one with parallels to contemporary Russia. "In the 19th century, it was the fourth largest city west of the Mississippi," he says. "There were oligarchs in Butte, and they made a lot of money there and they shipped it to New York and lived there. There was a similar tension between the metropole and the regions," referring to the Russia outside of Moscow.

Things looked less interesting closer to home, however. Butte was classic middle America, a rough mining town where social status was directly proportional to athletic prowess. Even now, sitting in the ambassador's sitting room at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow during another interview, 30 years later, McFaul can boast of the fact that the high school wrestling team swept the national championships 17 years in a row. He demurred when I asked him what sport he played. "These are delicate moments for me!" he exclaims. It was, he says, "a pretty rough experience growing up there." (McFaul ran track.)

The pain eased two years later, in 1978, when the family moved 90 miles down the road to Bozeman. McFaul's father had quit his job as a music teacher, and decided to become a professional musician. He would end up spending decades on the road, but in those days, his steadiest gig was at the Ramada Inn in Bozeman. He split his time between the Ramada and Butte, where his wife and children still lived. Bozeman was a university town and, in addition to reuniting the family, the McFauls figured they would have an easier time putting their five kids through college if they could live at home. Three months after moving to a trailer in Bozeman, McFaul's father lost his gig at the Ramada. "He virtually never played in Bozeman again," McFaul says.

Despite the family's financial straits, the young McFaul underwent a renaissance in Bozeman. He discovered the town's thriving counter culture; he was elected student body president. He took the debate class where, at the height of the Cold War, he argued for the repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. It was his first exposure to foreign policy and Soviet-American relations. "That's when I developed the view that our policy toward the Soviets was wrong," he recalls. "I had what in retrospect what I would call a naïve view, that if we just could communicate and get to know people better, we could reduce tensions."

Two years later, when he got to Stanford, he signed up for introduction to international relations and Russian. "I was horrible at it," he says of the latter. "I hated it. I still do. I'm not good at languages. But my whole motivation was to go to the Soviet Union."

In June 1983, after his second year at Stanford -- and two years of Russian -- McFaul arrived in Leningrad. It was the first time he had traveled abroad, and yet the leap from California to Leningrad seemed smaller than the one he had made from Bozeman to Stanford. His arrival in wealthy Palo Alto had politicized him and moved him further to the left. "There were rich people in Montana, but that's because they have a lot of land," McFaul recalls, slipping his foot out of a clunky black shoe. "They all drive pick-up trucks and wear blue jeans." Stanford was different. "The first day of freshman year, I met a guy who had 90 Grateful Dead tapes. That was like a sign of wealth to me. I just never met anybody who had 90 tapes of anything! That blew my mind."

Leningrad in the early 1980s had the right dash of gritty authenticity. That summer, McFaul experienced the city's famous white nights. He waited in line for ice cream with chocolate sprinkles; he argued with his American friends about unemployment and trickle-down economics.

That summer, McFaul laid the foundations of what would become a wide social network in Russia. He made a local friend, Yuri, with whom he snuck into underground jazz concerts. He became acquainted with the local *refuseniks* and the *farsovschiki*, or black-market speculators. "They're the ones you could meet because they had business to do with you," McFaul says. "Yes, they were taking our blue jeans and changing our dollars, and it was all business. But they also listened to Led Zeppelin and did things that college kids want to do."

The next time McFaul came back to the Soviet Union, in 1985, it was for his semester abroad, at Moscow's State Institute of Russian Language, part of the city's prestigious Moscow State University. "That took the edge off the romance," he says. The cafeteria had given someone food poisoning before the foreign students' arrival and remained shuttered for the rest of the semester. "It was a struggle to get calories," McFaul remembers.

His saviors were the African students he roomed with. They fed him homemade stews and taught him how to eat something rarely eaten in Middle America: vegetables. McFaul was still socializing with Moscow's *refuseniks* and *farsovschiki*, but it was the African crew that became the fulcrum of his time in Soviet Moscow. Life was hard for them, McFaul recalls: racism, sporadic violence. "But those guys knew how to throw parties. They could access beer. Buying a beer in 1985 was not easy to do in this country. And they knew how to do it."

The star of the crew was Fani, the Nigerian. "He was the Michael Jackson of Moscow," McFaul grins. "The best disco was at [Stalinist agricultural expo center] VDNKh. What's that hotel called? Cosmos! Is it still there?" He remembers Fani bribing the doormen to get their friend Natasha, a student at the elite state diplomatic academy, MGIMO, into the club. "The Nigerian guy was sneaking in the MGIMO students, in their own country," he says. Through Fani, McFaul met the children of the elite of Eastern Europe -- they were friends with the son of the Polish defense minister -- and through them, the MGIMO kids. "They reminded me a lot of the elite right now," he says of the gilded youth of the Soviet Union's twilight. "They liked their lifestyle, they were appreciative of what they have, they don't want to lose it, but they also know the system's limitations and want more." But he adds, "they were scared to death of real dissidents."

McFaul didn't meet any real dissidents on that trip, but he became interested in the African question, and would end up writing his doctoral dissertation on Soviet and American influences on revolutionary movements in southern Africa. "They came to Moscow on these scholarships to learn communism," McFaul says of his African friends. "Nothing was a more powerful tool of making them pro-American than the experience that most of them were having here." McFaul also says those hungry months made him increasingly anti-communist.

At the end of his semester in Moscow, he shipped off to Nigeria, where a Stanford student named Donna Norton -- his then girlfriend, now wife -- was doing research on urban-to-rural migration. Fani met him in Lagos. It turned out he was the son of the general secretary of the Communist Party of Nigeria. "In all my time here, I never knew it," McFaul says. "He's an entrepreneur now. He's making a lot of money in Nigerian-Russian trade."

* * *

When I met Sergei Markov, the United Russia Party foreign-policy hawk and Putin enthusiast, he was on crutches and had a cast on his left foot -- a motorcycle accident in January had left him with a broken ankle. We talked as he waited in the freezing green room of a Russian television studio. He had set up an invisible conveyer belt from the refreshments table to his mouth. "The reset has fulfilled its mission, which was to remove the foolishness of the Bush era," he said, inhaling a mushroom pastry in one bite. "Now it's time for the Americans to meet us halfway." That means: Get rid of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, develop their military strategy with Russia's interests in mind, and change the anti-Russian

"regimes" in Latvia and Estonia. (How? Well, that is up to the Americans, he told me.)

Even with these beliefs, Markov thinks McFaul is the right man for the job. "He's the perfect representative of America," he told me, devouring a cucumber spear. "He is open, friendly, generous. He's very democratic. He has a strong moral compass, and he really wants to help." Markov knows all this firsthand.

It is one of those strange twists of fate that this man was once McFaul's close friend and colleague. The two were observers of the ferment of Moscow in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Markov was a philosophy graduate student at Moscow State and active in Democratic Russia, an early shoot of the Russian democracy movement, and McFaul was studying international relations at Oxford. Together, they chronicled the collapse of the Soviet Union, interviewing scores of participants in the events of the time for a book called *Russia's Unfinished Revolution*. (Markov's then wife earned some extra money transcribing the interviews.) They had tea at Russian nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's tiny apartment in Moscow's northern suburbs. They went to see the hard-core "Pamyat" (or "Memory") movement, where one activist greeted the two students in full SS regalia, and another nearly killed Markov for accidentally sitting on the group's flag. Markov recalls McFaul noting afterwards that it was his first time seeing a real racist, in the flesh.

Markov began to work with the U.S.-funded National Democratic Institute -- a decade-long gig. He went to McFaul's wedding in California, where he -- unsuccessfully -- hit on another Russia scholar and friend of McFaul's, Condoleezza Rice. In 1994, McFaul and Markov helped found the Moscow Carnegie Center, which hosted regular discussions and seminars featuring a novel feature to draw an audience: free dinner. A few years later, Markov was pushed out of Carnegie because he was viewed as the propagandist of the second Chechen War. McFaul defended him and the two have remained friends to this day, "which can be kind of difficult at times," says a mutual friend who had been part of their crew in the 1990s. "The last time I was in Washington, I stayed with McFaul," Markov told me. "We debated vigorously."

But if McFaul is famous for his ability to befriend anyone, he is also famous for a hot, quick temper (as the redhead from NTV can well attest). At one academic conference, McFaul got into a long, full-throated throwdown with Stephen Kotkin, the famous Soviet historian, because he had criticized McFaul's 2008 essay in *Foreign Affairs*, co-authored with Stoner-Weiss, his Stanford colleague, and called "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back." (Someone from the Kremlin called the two authors to tell them, "Mr. Putin has read the article, and it was not entirely to his liking.") But McFaul's views on Russia escape easy categorization. He seems to dish it out on a purely egalitarian basis. Former Bush administration official David Kramer, who runs Freedom House, an

organization known for its very anti-Kremlin views, frequently squabbles with his old friend McFaul. "I've gotten some very long emails from him after I've written some things," Kramer told me. "And, yes, it had some colorful language sprinkled in."

And yet, McFaul has been able to hop between the lily pads of academia, politics, and journalism. After a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford, he stayed on to complete a DPhil, the rough British equivalent of a Ph.D. This put him at odds with many in the political science community in the United States, where the methods rely less on local knowledge -- as per the British model -- but on computation and a strict methodology. "He kicked the door open into the American system in a way I haven't seen," says Stoner-Weiss. "Look at how many DPhils you see at elite American universities. There aren't that many. And the fact that he got tenure without doing hi-tech methodology tells you how good he was." (McFaul puts it this way: "I went to Oxford so I'm considered a Neanderthal.")

If he was able to win over the gray beards of the academy with his mastery of the subject, he was also the friend of every Western journalist covering Russia, past and present. Sometimes he managed to beat journalists at their own game. In 1996, when Boris Yeltsin was facing an uncertain election, the hardliners around him -- Alexander Korzhakov and Oleg Soskovets -- were at times encouraging the sick old man to stall the election or call it off entirely. "They didn't talk to Western correspondents much, and we never knew what they were up to, or thinking," recalls David Hoffman, *Washington Post* bureau chief in Moscow during the 1990s. McFaul, meanwhile, had no problem penetrating the barrier: Once, Korzhakov and Soskovets even brought him back to one of their dachas to drink and talk politics. "I was terribly jealous," Hoffman says. "I also wanted to meet with these guys. They sent an official Volga for him!" Hoffman's jealousy subsided when he found out the reason for the Yeltsin crew's hospitality. They had thought McFaul was CIA.

* * *

McFaul's entry into politics came in the run-up to the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Long at home in policy circles in Washington, he had become a foreign-policy advisor to John Edwards, who was running against Obama in the primaries. (Edwards later flamed out in scandal, admitting he fathered a child with a campaign staffer while his wife was dying of cancer, and McFaul now tries to downplay their relationship.) Then he switched to Obama. With the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, McFaul's share of Obama's attention span grew. He was able to

convince the president-to-be that repairing the Russian-American relationship would be a great opportunity to set the new administration apart from that of George W. Bush. It would be another way to improve America's image on the international stage, an image Bush had done so much to mangle.

McFaul relished the role of advisor, joining the White House staff as a senior director on the National Security Council. He became simply "McFaul" to Obama. In his office in Washington, in the Old Executive Office Building, he had a poster of a *New Republic* magazine cover that showed Obama's first chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, leaning over Obama's desk in the Oval Office. Once, when I visited McFaul there, he explained it to me: The illustration had actually been based on a picture of him, but the designers at the magazine swapped Emanuel's head for his. McFaul loved to talk about his experiences negotiating with the Russians, about accompanying the president to summits, about getting to know the Russian muckety-mucks and to rub elbows with them. He loved participating in an historical process and gathering anecdotes along the way: He can tell a long story about how the "burger summit" between Obama and Medvedev happened, and how Vice President Joseph Biden got on the phone and boxed Saakashvili's ears after Georgian state television led an evening newscast with a fake Russian invasion.

But by 2011, his family was itching to return to Stanford. When McFaul broke the news to Obama, the president offered to make him ambassador -- a strange move, given how much the Russians loved then ambassador and Russophile John Beyrle. But Obama was keen to keep McFaul: As his domestic agenda ran up against an intransigent and radicalized Congress -- which majorly delayed McFaul's confirmation -- and American policy in Middle East went up in flames, Russia was one of the few major successes that Obama could point to.

At first, McFaul spoke of himself as "an accidental ambassador" -- a phrase he says he is trying not to use anymore. And the early miscalculation -- and Russia's icy reception -- aside, McFaul is coming to relish this new role, too. "Actually, I think that Mike has become a pretty disciplined diplomat," says Sestanovich. "He does this 'aw, shucks I'm not a professional diplomat,' but he's gotten pretty good at managing public statements, at managing public-policy process. He's found his balance pretty quickly." Nor does Sestanovich buy into the talk of McFaul's naïveté. "My children grew up hearing Mike talk about knife fights in Montana mining towns," he says. "The idea that the world is dominated by misunderstanding that can just be dispelled by dialogue is not Mike's worldview."

* * *

"There's this notion out here that all I taught was regime change," McFaul told me that February afternoon at Spaso House, referring to the infamous commentary on state-owned Channel 1, which alleged that McFaul, an expert in revolutions, was coming to finish the job he started in 1991. McFaul did, in fact, teach a class in revolutions at Stanford, but, he points out, he also taught a course on U.S.-Russia relations and on the political economy of the post-communist world. As for the Channel 1 allegations, McFaul says they are "absolute nonsense."

"I'm not here to foment a revolution," he says. "If we were here to foment revolution, we'd be doing very different things. I know exactly what we did in other countries. I've written a lot about how external actors impact on domestic change and the punchline of most of my work is that it's always incredibly marginal and, in big countries, almost negligible."

Given all that's happened, does he feel that the reset is stalling, or dead? Or, given the extent to which simple spite and wounded pride factor into Russian foreign policy, that it was a naïve endeavor to begin with? "Our policy is that we think it's in our national interest to have governments that are open, more transparent, and more accountable to their people," he says, citing the widely held theory that democratic countries are more likely to be at peace with each other.

But at times this winter, the reset has looked more and more like the jolting dance of unwilling partners who occasionally -- and perhaps purposefully -- step on each other's feet. On one hand, Medvedev told Obama in Seoul in March that this was the best Russian-American relations had ever been. Then came the hot-mic incident -- Republican challenger Mitt Romney went at Obama for asking America's "geopolitical enemy No. 1" for "room to maneuver" -- and Medvedev's testy response. He asked "all U.S. presidential candidates" to "check the time -- it is now 2012, not the mid-1970s." Meanwhile, pro-Kremlin youth groups were harassing Obama's ambassador to Moscow.

In the meantime, a split seems to have developed inside the State Department as a result of all of this. Career Foreign Service officers are appalled at McFaul's undiplomatic behavior -- what kind of ambassador gets down and argues with a sham television reporter? -- while McFaul's big bosses still insist he's the right man for the job.

But the incident with NTV proved "a breaking point," according to one U.S. official in Moscow. Afterward -- and after the State Department filed an official complaint with the Russian Foreign Ministry -- the Russian promise that the harassment would die down after the presidential elections came true. Shortly after Putin's inauguration, in May, McFaul boasted, "It's the last time I ever saw those guys."

The State Department, for its part, has decided to show a unified face and step up its public defense of McFaul. Speaking amid the ashes of the controversy surrounding McFaul's Kyrgyz "bribe" comment, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland made clear that the Americans weren't about to change anything. "He speaks plainly. He speaks clearly. He doesn't mince words. He's not a professional diplomat," she said. "I think that for the Russian government, the fact that he speaks clearly when things are going well and he speaks clearly when they're going less well is something that they're having to get used to."

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