

1994 MOSCOW EMBASSY DISSENT CHANNEL MESSAGE: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Russian-American relations are now as bad as at any time in our mutual history. Even during the most dangerous episodes of the Cold War, Moscow and Washington at least maintained broad and active communication. When the Soviet Union imploded a third of a century ago, we anticipated a very different future. What went wrong?

This essay examines the first tenth of that period, 1991-94, from an American perspective in the Russian capital. It is a highly personal view and lacks balance and inclusiveness. It accompanies a lengthy commentary (a State Department “Dissent Channel” message, attached) from March 1994 criticizing US policy toward Russia at that time. During those three years I was in the Political Section of the US Embassy, in charge of what was called “Political/Internal” as both the editor of a very talented team of reporting officers and as the main individual commentator to Washington on Russian domestic political developments. I had served in “Pol/Int” during a previous Moscow assignment in the early Eighties and returned in early August 1991 after a year at the US Army Russian Institute (USARI).

During those three years, I was very fortunate in most of my Embassy co-workers, although some of those relations deteriorated badly during the third year, in part resulting in the Dissent Channel message of March 1994. Thirty years later, the National Security Archive (“the Archive”) obtained the release and declassification of this message after an extended legal effort through the Freedom of Information Act. The Archive has asked my agreement to publish the message as part of its public record of Russian-American relations (which I give with enthusiasm) and for me to produce this accompanying essay to provide some background and context for anyone reading the Dissent message almost a third of a century later.

I begin by affirming, with genuine appreciation, the consistent support I received as head of Pol/Int from my two ambassadors, Robert Strauss and Thomas Pickering, and their two deputies, James Collins and Richard Miles. While neither ambassador brought to his assignment a background in Russia, their deputies compensated with rich experience in Soviet and regional affairs as reflected in their own future ambassadorships. All four men gave me encouragement and support in seeking to explain to Washington the dynamics of the critical changes taking place in post-Soviet Russia, even when they may not themselves have fully agreed with my views. No Foreign Service Officer could have asked for better.

Those who worked in Pol/Int in that period may recall my motto that "Washington is always wrong." In my experience, Washington seeks to understand other countries by looking in the mirror (a common human failing). US policy toward Russia in the early post-Soviet years was an especially virulent case of Washington institutions trying to ram a foreign square peg into an American round hole. During these years, I wrote several hundred messages of varying length and edited probably several thousand more. Many of these could illustrate our difficulty in conveying that the Russian peg simply would not fit into the hole and role assigned to it in the Washington policy environment. Some of the longer messages have already been declassified. I herein identify from memory (always a faulty guide) a few which I think are relevant to understanding US policy toward Russia in that period. The culmination (for me) was the Dissent Channel message of March 1994.

I arrived in Moscow in mid-August 1991, only a few days before the putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev, but with the advantage of having travelled in both Russia and Ukraine in the late spring with my USARI class which gave me a vivid sense of the dynamic social changes underway in the disintegrating USSR. Then, before arrival in Moscow, I had a normal round of consultations for my Pol/Int job in Washington at the State Department, White House, Pentagon and intelligence agencies. I was deeply shocked by the complacency I encountered about likely

developments in the Soviet Union. Typical was a senior official who told me I was going to Moscow “too late” as Gorbachev had already accomplished all the reforms possible, leaving the Soviet Union to face “a prolonged period of complacency and drift.” This attitude was quite common in my interagency consultations, with only a single veteran CIA official anticipating major changes, but even those years in the future. After my own visits to Moscow and Kiev only weeks before, I could see clearly that historic transformations were imminent and it would be part of my job in the Embassy to try to shake this attitude at home.

As it happened, even the August coup itself did not really break Washington’s serenity because the rapid failure of the putsch convinced many of our readers that now all would be well for Gorbachev and his policies. Almost needless to say, our intensive reporting portrayed just the contrary. Thus, I again was genuinely shocked in mid-October to learn of an intensive debate between senior staff of the NSC and CIA as to whether Ukraine might become independent within five years. Like most people on the ground in Moscow, I knew full well that it would happen in about five weeks with the scheduled independence referendum in Ukraine. Given that we and our colleagues at the Consulate General in Kiev had reported this reality in great detail, I was flabbergasted that our government could be so out of touch with the impending Soviet collapse. In consequence, over a weekend I drafted a somewhat vivid message entitled “The Bolshevik Goetterdaemmerung: End of Empire and Russian Rebirth,” certain I would have to tone it down considerably to obtain approval. To my surprise, both Collins and Strauss signed off on the text without change. I later heard it provoked considerable skepticism in Washington up until the final Soviet collapse arrived that December.

The first post-Soviet year, 1992, started fairly well for us in reporting terms, in no small measure because Robert Strauss enjoyed such access and prestige in Washington that he was actually listened to. A good illustration is “A Mid-Range Political Assessment” of Boris Yeltsin which I wrote at the end of January for his meeting with President Bush at Camp David. (The

National Security Archive published this text in 2015.) This message made clear that Yeltsin would struggle with the profound challenges facing his country, as his political power was as much a reflection of the fragmentation of opposition forces as of his genuine authority.

Washington judged the Russian president by his forceful leadership during the previous summer and did not recognize that in institutional and legal terms, Yeltsin was not strong at all. Most of his actions on the economy depended on emergency powers granted by the Russian legislature for only one year late in 1991. These would expire in conjunction with a session of the Congress of Peoples' Deputies in early December at which Yeltsin's adversaries and skeptics (there were many of both) would be able to overrule the radical economic reform policies favored by Washington. To try to convey this reality, in late November I wrote "The Underlying Russian Political Crisis" which anticipated the breakdown of the existing political peace in Russia.

To my astonishment, the State Department Operations Center called to say that this classified message had been leaked to CBS News and read in part on his national broadcast by Dan Rather. In addition, the broadcast had provoked a market crisis at the start of the trading day in Tokyo for which the Treasury Department wanted me fired. In the event, CBS had used my message quite responsibly while the market kerfuffle in Japan was a response to an botched translation of an interview with former CIA Director Gates. This comedy of errors along the Potomac illustrates our continuing difficulty in conveying to Washington that changes in the Russian economy would require transformation of the country's political system which was still operating under the constitutional provisions of the Soviet-era Russian Federation, in which Yeltsin was institutionally and juridically fairly weak. Sadly, Yeltsin's image in Washington encouraged many there to push a Neo-liberal radical economic policy without much consideration for either popular support or legal legitimacy in Russia.

In consequence, 1993 became a more stressful year for Russia than had been the breakup of the Soviet Union itself, as the failure of civil politics

resulted in resort to violence both by elements of the opposition and by the government itself. Russians took great pride in the largely peaceful nature of the failure of the Soviet power structure in their country and valued their new-won “legality” very highly. They feared the potential for civil violence of the kind which took place in other Soviet successor states and in the former Yugoslavia. Both Yeltsin and his rivals were therefore under public pressure to maintain civil peace even as they pursued their incompatible agendas, Yeltsin’s viewed in the public eye increasingly with the United States. This peace was only narrowly maintained during nine months as the Congress of Peoples’ Deputies sought to introduce the concept of “impeachment” into Russian politics early in the year, leading in the spring to a compromise four-part referendum (“da, da, nyet, da”) which initiated a constitutional drafting process in the summer. Politics were very much played out on the streets, but still remained largely non-violent.

However, most of official Washington applauded when Yeltsin abandoned his own constitutional reform process in September, abrogated the legitimate legislature and resorted to emergency rule. Forced to the barricades, some of Russia’s most genuine reformers chose opposition, and in the following weeks Yeltsin failed to rally broad genuine popular support. The overt confrontation at the Russian White House (literally across the street from the Embassy) finally erupted into urban civil war on Sunday, October 3. At that point, as head of Pol/Int I had not been home for over ten days, working double and triple shifts and sleeping in Collins’ basement (he was in Washington). That Sunday (by chance, my birthday) I thought I saw a lull in the fighting and went home in search of laundry. My mistake, as the opposition exploded across central Moscow, cutting off the Embassy and preventing my return. On instructions from Ambassador Pickering, who remained within the Embassy, I led a small team to his residence to establish a potential alternative embassy, not anticipating that on October 4 the battlefield would expand to encompass the residence, giving us an uncomfortably front-row seat to the armed struggle.

During this fortnight of domestic turmoil, our reporting was intense but of necessity lacking in long-term analysis. Now, after Yeltsin's armed forces had crushed the opposition, we needed to consider the impact of these events on US interests. Almost immediately the prevailing American opinion, including within the Embassy, was to see Yeltsin's victory as our own as it would remove effective opposition to the radical economic reform program we strongly favored. I did not agree. I saw Yeltsin's resort to unconstitutional means as both unnecessary to achieve his political goals and as disastrous for the development of rule of law in Russia. While I accepted that the United States would overtly support our client in a real crisis, I felt that American interests had been seriously damaged. Worse, our choice then to double down on an even more aggressive program of economic reform associated the United States in Russian popular eyes (correctly, in the main) with the considerable pain these reforms inflicted on average citizens. I felt it my duty to express this perspective to Washington, even if in the form of a Dissent Channel message. Unfortunately, I failed to do so, for which I cite the intense demands on my time and simple exhaustion. I have regretted this failure ever since.

In late November I did produce a lengthy forecast of the upcoming mid-December national elections and the referendum on Yeltsin's somewhat half-baked draft constitution, a document which lacked the legitimacy that would have adhered to a constitution from the convention which he had jettisoned. Washington anticipated decisive electoral victory for our clients, while I predicted across-the-board rejection. Ambassador Pickering demonstrated his high professionalism by signing out this message after altering only the subject line from "A Negative Prognosis" to "Watch for Surprises." This message emphatically told Washington what it did not want to hear though, as it proved, my prognosis was nowhere near negative enough, and there is still doubt that Yeltsin's constitution received enough electoral support to be valid.

Washington's perspective is shown by the fact Vice President Gore arrived the day after the balloting with a large delegation to celebrate Yeltsin's anticipated triumph at a reception at the ambassadorial residence. What they encountered was the outcome of a genuine national election (the last in Russia for a long time to come) in which our pro-reform clients had been decisively rejected on both the left and right. The failure of US policy in democratic terms could hardly be more apparent. Although the visitors from Washington could see if they wished the confirmation of our repeated warnings about Russian political reality, nobody wanted to speak with the author of those warnings. Indeed, one intelligence staffer on the delegation told me some participants even held me responsible for the bad news, a view I heard a number of times in the months ahead.

From this point I encountered considerable difficulty in obtaining clearances for my analyses from the Economic Section and Treasury Attache (normally a standard courtesy within the Country Team), although the Ambassador and his deputy remained supportive of the integrity of our reporting. By late February 1994 I returned to a draft I had begun during the preceding October about the meaning of the political crisis of that autumn and of American policies toward Russia, policies which I felt certain would fail in economic terms (I had lived in Russia for almost six years and knew something of its limitations) and would alienate the people of Russia from us.

The result was the long (certainly, overlong) message attached to this article, "Whose Russia Is It Anyway?" Not surprisingly, my text was not well received in terms of clearances. After several disputatious weeks, the Ambassador called a meeting to discuss the draft and, as it was apparent the message could not be fully-cleared, offered to authorize it as a front-channel message (with normal interagency distribution in Washington) but labelled as the work of only one person, me. This was an exceptionally generous offer, though not without precedent in Embassy Moscow and was within the established guidelines of Foreign Service regulations to accommodate conflicting professional views. (Indeed, I had benefited from

this provision of the Foreign Service Manual in the past and would again that summer when Pickering authorized a “Final Telegram” to mark the end of my three years as head of Pol/Int.) However, in the March meeting the Treasury Attaché strongly objected to front-channel status even if uncleared, declaring that if the text received normal distribution in Washington “it would give Larry Summers a heart attack.” At this point, with thanks to the Ambassador, I decided to resort to Dissent Channel to bring this lengthy and exhausting process to an end.

In theory, Dissent messages are reviewed by the Secretary and a few other senior Department officials. I later heard that Secretary Christopher requested a summary of the message (which has a summary), but I heard nothing from his office. Several weeks later, Deputy Secretary Talbott sent the Embassy a thoughtful back-channel message which I was allowed to see but not keep, reflecting his own careful reading of the message. I did not receive an official response from the Policy Planning Staff as required by regulations. The National Security Archive has now provided me a copy of the S/P commentary which went to Moscow in September 1994, after my departure from post. Perhaps almost needless to say, as is common for Dissent Channel, the message had no impact on US policy or recognition in Washington.

Several years after my retirement from the Foreign Service in 1998 I requested release of this message under Freedom of Information Act and was refused. I later filed an appeal and was again refused with the curious rationale that to release a Dissent Channel message to the person who wrote it might discourage others in future from employing Dissent Channel. Obviously, just the opposite is the case, but this “logic” does illustrate State Department attitudes about dissent. I was aware that other FOIA requests for the message were filed by the House Foreign Affairs Committee staff and the PBS program “Frontline” and predictably refused. I was therefore surprised and gratified earlier this year when informed by the National Security Archive that it had obtained the message and the State S/P commentary which I had not previously seen.

In retrospect, I regret not accepting Ambassador Pickering's offer to send the message as a front-channel statement of my individual views rather than as Dissent Channel. This is an established option in Foreign Service reporting, even if rarely used. It should, in my view, be used more often to enliven policy debates in Washington. By resort to Dissent Channel, my views on US policy toward Russia received effectively no access to whatever debate there may have been within our government. Proof that Ambassador Pickering was willing to accommodate dissenting views without use of Dissent Channel was demonstrated twice more during that year, 1994. In the first instance, he authorized a "Final Telegram" from me before my departure from post that summer which emphasized the importance of reforms within the Russian Orthodox Church for the country's future. This was a theme I had written on before, but on leaving Russia I was able to give the role of spiritual issues in Russian identity the importance I felt it deserved, even though some of my colleagues did not share this view. In the second instance, late that year after I was gone from Moscow, one of my colleagues in Pol/Int wrote a strongly-argued message in defense of the Chechen independence movement which Pickering authorized as a front-channel expression of individual views. This was a highly-controversial point of view which I did not share but nonetheless welcomed as contributing to Washington's very limited understanding of ethnic tensions within Russia. Indeed, Yeltsin's resort to large-scale violence in Chechnya demonstrated one of my own blindspots as, despite six years in country, I completely failed to anticipate how crudely he would respond to a domestic challenge to Russian national domination.

Looking back now over thirty years, I regard my Dissent message (attached) as much too long and as probably only of scholarly interest. However, there is nothing in the text I would now alter on substance as the ensuing years unfortunately confirmed my essential analysis, that the policies advocated by Washington were both inappropriate for Russia's post-Soviet needs and that pushing them on a Russia lacking in the necessary rule of law would in time alienate Russians and confirm an

international rivalry rather than lay the potential for a long-term partnership. I cannot avoid seeing strong parallels between US policy in Russia in the early Nineties and our policies and attitudes in Iraq a decade later, both combinations of ignorance and arrogance. I certainly do not assume that any other engagement policy we might have pursued with Russia would of necessity have produced a benign outcome — and I recognize the importance of other international issues — but I cannot avoid the personal conclusion that in the early days of our post-Soviet relations, the United States squandered an historic national opportunity of immense proportions through a blind attachment to economic ideology and to a hubristic pursuit of international hegemony.

MERRY DISSENT

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