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BEFORE HE HEADED TO MOSCOW IN January 2012 as Barack Obama's new ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul was itching to get out of government. He had dreams of moving back to Palo Alto. The weather's nice, his family missed the place.


But Obama had come to rely on McFaul, a longtime Russia scholar and the National Security Council's point man on the country. So he offered him a posting he couldn't decline.

McFaul's academic specialty is revolution—a detail that Vladimir Putin, hounded by a bubbling uprising, immediately seized on. State television vilified McFaul as the man Washington had sent to bring chaos to Russia (something Putin seemed to actually believe). Pro-Kremlin mobs started showing up outside the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. Despite complaints from the Obama administration, the intimidation and scapegoating never stopped, even after Putin won reelection and crushed the protests. Two years later, U.S.-Russia relations have soured dramatically, and Putin is in the midst of an epic crackdown on civil society, the very thing McFaul spent two decades of his career trying to nurture.

On February 4, McFaul announced his resignation from what has been a very controversial ambassadorship. Some career State Department types fault him for taunting the bear: One of his first meetings in Moscow was with the opposition, and he has avidly used social media to reach out directly to Russian citizens, all of which is said to drive Putin to distraction. Needless to say, McFaul takes a very different view of his tenure. Two days after the Winter Games' opening ceremonies, he and I met up in Sochi for a beer in a hotel bar just outside the Olympic security bubble. McFaul had just completed one of his last official duties, leading the U.S. delegation and its several gay athletes—a gesture he'd helped orchestrate as a way to stick it to his not-always hospitable hosts.

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ON HIS WAY OUT OF RUSSIA,
**U.S. AMBASSADOR
MICHAEL MCFAUL** SPEAKS
CANDIDLY (AS USUAL) ABOUT THE
GOONS MASSED OUTSIDE HIS HOME, THE
PERILS OF SOAPBOX DIPLOMACY, AND THE
ONE FAILURE
HE CANNOT SHAKE.
BY JULIA IOFFE

ANNIE DALL HAT

Julia Ioffe: This is a pretty good send-off, no, going to the Olympics?

Michael McFaul: It wasn't planned, but in a way it is. I got here a few hours before the rest of the U.S. delegation, so I had the chance to walk around the Olympic Park by myself. And I signed more autographs and did more photo ops in one day than I'll do in the rest of my life. Yes, there's this anti-Americanism, and I'm this evil person fomenting revolution. Yet those one-on-ones made me feel like maybe we did some good things.

Jl: What were the Russians you met expecting? Did they say, "We thought you had horns?" or—

MM: Russian people are always blown away, when they meet me in person, that I don't quite fit the cartoon character. One, I speak the language. People are always surprised by that. Two, I'm a pretty informal guy. They have a different image of what an ambassador is, right? People stare, and I can feel it. They want to talk, but they're too shy. So I just take the initiative. It doesn't mean we wind up agreeing—I want to be clear about that. My objective as ambassador was never, We want the Russians to love us.

Jl: What was Moscow's reaction when they found out that Obama wasn't coming to Sochi? Did they really think he would, after Edward Snowden, etc.?

MM: I had tried to make it clear that the expectation was inconsistent with reality. But they were insistent. At very high levels, too. Not just my level.

Jl: How high is "very high"?

MM: I have a recollection that Putin himself, during one of their phone calls—I can't be sure about that, but there's no question that they had been asking.

As [former Homeland Security] Secretary Napolitano said, "We're not chopped liver!" Our delegation is a diverse group of Americans, all extremely accomplished in our own way. We are ambassadors for the president. He sent us here.

Jl: And it's all happening as U.S.-Russia relations are near rock bottom.

MM: I wouldn't agree with that. I can think of other times in our history with this country when relations were much worse. What I would say is that the whole portfolio is more complicated. We're still running supply routes into Afghanistan. That really matters to American interests. On the two biggest proliferation issues of our time, Iran and North Korea, there's virtually no daylight between the Russian and American positions, and on Iran, there's the potential for a breakthrough. Syria's complicated, because the radical disagreement we've had with them in interpreting the causes of that

genuine tragedy. But the level of cooperation we have to remove and destroy their chemical weapons is unprecedented. There's places where we cooperate, places where we radically disagree. It is what it is.

Jl: Some people look at that less as pragmatism, and more as naïveté, as thinking America can have it both ways.

MM: This has been a hard part of what we do and hard for me as an individual. It's what we call dual-track engagement. We have from day one followed a policy of engaging with the Russian government on mutual interests and engaging directly with Russian society on mutual interests. There's an assumption that you have to do one or the other. We've tried rather militantly not to take that trade-off.

I'll let others judge the results, but when President Obama was in St. Petersburg at the G20 summit, it all really crystallized. He met with President Putin and discussed cooperating to remove and destroy Syrian chemical weapons. That is in the American national interest. The bigger debate about Syria is different, but is it good for the American people and good for American allies in the Middle East to get rid of chemical weapons in Syria? The answer is yes. Can cooperating with Russia make that outcome more probable? The answer is yes.

Literally three or four hours later, I got in the president's car and we drove somewhere off-site, and we met with civil-society activists, including two very brave LGBT activists. That's our policy.

Jl: Given the way Russia is tightening the screws on civil society and Russian media, is the Obama administration doing enough to call Putin out on human rights abuses? Why hasn't there been more noise from the American side?

MM: I think our policy is very clear. The president of the United States has spoken out on these issues publicly, on the Jay Leno show. When he met with LGBT activists on purpose at the G20—I didn't see any other leaders around the world doing that. I do it every single day in meetings, in interviews, on Twitter. You can't have it both ways. You can't say I'm the most outspoken ambassador and then say we're not doing enough.

Jl: I don't just mean on LGBT issues, though. I mean the broader crackdown.

MM: I sat there in real time watching [Alexei] Navalny's verdict being read. And as he was tweeting out to the world, I tweeted in Russian, "Hi. I'm watching." Who else was doing that? What other government? And then we, the Obama administration, made very clear that we thought this was a politicized verdict. Later, others did—but who was leading that charge? We were. Pussy Riot:

Who spoke out first? I did. Which U.N. ambassador just met with Pussy Riot in New York? Ours did. And it's not just in public. It's private conversations at the highest levels. I understand that for the human rights community, their job is to beat us up. I respect that. They want more and they should always want more. But the way I look at it, the Russian government understands very well what our position is. Now, I don't want to exaggerate the results. I think that's very important. I actually was discussing this last night with my colleagues, watching figure skating. Hundreds of thousands of hours of effort went into what we watched, but that doesn't guarantee you a gold medal. Are we frustrated with our efforts not always leading to results? Of course we are.

Jl: What are you frustrated with specifically? Where have you seen the biggest gap between effort and results?

MM: For me, it was when the Russian government decided to not allow American parents to adopt Russian children. Emotionally, of all the things I've had to deal with, that probably was the hardest—the tragedy of it all, the senselessness.

We had a very active engagement strategy with the Russian government to try to de-link the adoption issue from other issues. I don't want to go into all the details, but I'll just remind you that even the Russian foreign minister spoke out about that, and that gave me hope. And yet, at the end of the day, we didn't achieve the result we wanted. It was very painful for me. These parents can't go plead to the Russian government. So they pleaded to me: "Why can't you let my daughter come home?" People forget, but the seventy-plus children that we got out, that was not clear that we were going to be able to do that. It was a lot of effort by our embassy to get them out. But we also left a lot behind.

Jl: Do you feel at this point that tougher measures against Russia would be counterproductive?

MM: I think it's easy to overestimate the coercive power of outsiders when dealing with large powerful countries like Russia. But I don't have a good answer to that. I genuinely do not. I know that we struggle with it every day. I know that we want to make sure that we listen to our Russian colleagues. Many times I've heard from civil-society leaders and members of the opposition that, in the name of a nice sound bite or photo op, we have done damage.

Jl: What does the future hold for the opposition?

MM: I mean, my honest answer is: I don't know. The space for political action has been dramatically constrained. That's just obvious.



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At the same time, I am impressed by the vibrancy of Russian society. There’s a dynamism here that is not going to end.

Jl: So will this place be a democracy in twenty years?

MM: I am an optimist about Russia. Living here, experiencing the country in a more intimate way—I’m more of an optimist today than I was two years ago.

Jl: Did the president or Secretary Kerry try to convince you to stay in the post?

MM: Yes. Oh, yes. Absolutely. The president likes me being his representative here. At the same time, his daughters are about the same age as my boys, and nobody has been more sympathetic about the need for us to do what’s best for our family. When we first moved from Palo Alto to work for the administration in Washington, I promised my oldest son that we’d only be gone for two years. ‘Cause that’s kind of the standard for professors in U.S. government, right? Five and a half years later, he wanted to go home and finish high school there. It was a good decision for him. It’s time to go home.

Jl: What will you miss most about being ambassador?

MM: Spaso House [the U.S. ambassador’s residence]. Well, there are some minuses to it. I’m not used to living with people in your home all the time. Our place in Palo Alto could literally fit in the embassy’s chandelier room. But what we did at Spaso House, in terms of our outreach, is what made it really special. And we did it differently, by the way. My wife and I, we tried to change things.

Jl: How so?

MM: The first revolution was that we cleared out three rows of chairs for a concert, so that people could dance. That was not the way it was done before. But it was a group from Montana, a country-western group. My father is a musician in Montana. The greatest insult you can do to a musician of that genre is sit and tap your foot for four hours. People loved it. Russians were dancing with Americans, government officials were dancing with civil-society leaders.

Things like being close enough to [Valery] Gergiev to see the sweat pouring off his brow as he’s conducting the American high school youth orchestra that came here—you know, I’ll never get to do that again. Or having Herbie Hancock in your living room—I mean,

that ain’t gonna happen again.

I’m sorry to keep going on, but I like living in Russia. I like Russians. Of all shapes and sizes. The ones that love me, the ones that hate me.

Jl: So what won’t you miss?

MM: I won’t miss having to think about every word I say to a journalist like you. I won’t miss—see those guys over there? [*Gestures toward diplomatic security agents.*] I spend a ton of time with them, probably more than anybody. I love them to death. But I won’t miss having to choreograph every movement I make.

More seriously, I have gotten frustrated watching the Russian press, the state-controlled press. The relentless mischaracterization of the Obama administration and my country, and, I don’t know, the cynicism, the—I’m not quite capturing this right. Being assaulted by that. The hate, these virulent tweets that come to me every day. Maybe they will still at Stanford. My guess is not. ●

Julia Ioffe is a senior editor at THE NEW REPUBLIC. This interview has been edited and condensed.