

Michael McFaul: From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin\222s Russia.
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.
Reviewer: Laina Farhat-Holzman

For those of you who keep up with TV news, Michael McFaul is the go-to person for insight into Russia. He served as American Ambassador from 2008-2010 during the Obama presidency, a somewhat rare appointment of an academic expert rather than political appointee. But he was not new to the White House, having been an advisor to George Bush\222s administration before being tapped by Obama.

It is important for us in a time of extreme partisanship to realize how many people serve government when called upon, regardless of a president\222s party. This is the first memoir by McFaul, whose writing has been devoted to scholarly books and papers, and his career as a Stanford University Professor, a specialist in both revolutions and Russia.

It is also fascinating to see how America\222s exceptionalism can enable a child reared in small-town Montana to be spotted in high school as bright enough to get a Stanford scholarship. From his graduate school days in Stanford, he was recognized by our government as a rising star in Russian studies.

From his teens, he took positions in school debates that the then Soviet Union could be transformed by democracy. It was an idealistic view that as countries educate and grow prosperous, democracy is a desired choice. This view was not widely held at the time, but after the sudden collapse of the USSR, McFaul was seen as prophetic.

Part of his graduate school education was in Russia, where he began learning the language and steeping himself in a culture he loved (music, arts, literature), and where he also began making friendships that would continue over time.

What brought him to Russia in Grad school, however, was not Russian politics, but his earlier interest in revolutionary theory: how most revolutions follow a predictable trajectory, a discipline created by political scientists for the past century. McFaul\222s interest was in South Africa, what would happen to them after their emancipation. Could South Africa experience a permanent democratic transition, or would it fall into the chaos followed by dictatorship that so many others did? He found that the Russians, with their long history of interference in colonial issues, had collected a rich horde of data gathered by their "Africa Studies Institute." Russia would be the place to study the revolutions roiling Africa. However, he found Russia itself in a recognizable phase of its own revolution as Communism fell of its own weight.

While a student, he became something of an activist within the pro-democracy movement among young Russians and previously stifled intellectuals. When he started to be called upon by the Bush administration, he began to realize that he could not be a consulting specialist and an activist. Scholarly discipline won out. His essays, op-ed columns in American newspapers, and even public lectures in Russia itself prime him from a future player in the role of explaining Russia to the West.

After his return and assumption of a professorship at Stanford, he was called by the Bush administration to join their team as an advisor. He soon learned that giving advice doesn\222t necessarily mean that it will be heeded. This is good discipline for a professor who has to learn to work with others.

He then joined the Obama Administration, first as a specialist advisor but then came an unexpected opportunity: to serve as Ambassador to Russia under his boss at the State Department, Hillary Clinton. His tenure as Ambassador was a mixed bag of delight to showcase and promote American culture and values, but it had the downside of Vladimir Putin\222s paranoia about America\222s intentions and a particular dislike of McFaul, whom he had believed was a CIA plant. Putin tried very hard to make McFaul\222s tenure as miserable as possible through widespread propaganda on Russian media to tacit threats on McFaul and his family.

The good that came out of McFaul\222s tenure, however, was a clear-eyed understanding of Russia\222s nature and an up close and personal understanding of Putin, who transformed himself from a democratically elected leader to a vindictive autocrat and Kleptocrat (he and his inner circle have robbed Russia blind!).

This big book (500 pages, including voluminous notes and index) is worth reading if the reader wants to understand what an ambassador does, what makes a professor of use, not only to his students, but to his country, and what it is like to be working in the White House and afterwards as a sound authority whose wisdom we badly need today.

McFaul's most important insights in his Russia experience have to do with long-standing Political Science analysis of revolutions: almost all revolutions since the French one in 1789: the destruction of the ruling class and mob vengeance, followed by chaos and anarchy, then a moderate ruler, then populism, then dictatorship and a new oppressive class. In an op ed he wrote in 1990, McFaul depicted Gorbachev as the interim moderate (like Kerensky in the Russian Revolution of 1917), who would eventually be overthrown by radicals such as Yeltsin and his allies. He also expressed concern that a strongman like Bonaparte or Stalin would eventually come along after the radicals failed. Putin is that person.

Another important truth about American ideals is that we are simultaneously pragmatic (Kissinger, seeing the world as it is) and idealistic (Bush and Obama), believing that democracy is a universal human right that we shall support. What enables critics to claim that we are hypocrites is that practicality often trumps our idealism. During the Cold War, some of our clients were as loathsome as those of the Soviet Union. Democracy had to take a second place to pragmatism. (Consider our alliance with Stalin in World War II, for example. We needed him then.)

A major difference between Putin's worldview and ours is how to modernize traditional (religious) cultures. Putin believes it must come from the top: a dictatorship. In Russian history, that was always so, from Peter the Great to Communism. Our view is that when we aid a backward society to prosper and adopt modern education, eventually democracy will emerge. This has been so in South Korea and Taiwan. Both were states under military rule, that over time became ready for participatory governance that the people demanded. (In a way, this is a combination of Putin's theory and America's theory.)

McFaul's most important insight is that America, which is so big and powerful (and inclined to short attention span) can do things that others misread. Our support of democracy in Ukraine, for example, was in line with our "making the world safe for democracy" policy, going back to President Wilson. Putin, who inherited Russia's paranoia, honed through a terrible history, thought that this was a deliberate attack on him and Russia.

Finally, McFaul tells us that history is the result of large movements and trends, which may seem inevitable, but are not. In many cases, individuals can shape these trends and make them either better or worse. Germany's post World War I misery might have abated over time had not Hitler arisen with a persuasive personality that led Germany into monstrosity. The Great Depression could have led the United States into either a fascist or communist dictatorship had not FDR led the country into a better place.

Leadership matters, and we will see what Putin and his suspiciously compliant White House colleague, President Trump, will make of the American-made Global World Order.

1,212 words