The Bear Hug

By Stephen Kotkin

The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy by Strobe Talbott

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Imagine that upon assuming office, a new president appoints campaign contributors and assorted pals to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the regional military commands, and the military attaché posts in American embassies abroad. Ridiculous, right? Of course; but this business as usual at the State Department or on the diplomatic side of embassies. Military expertise is nothing to trifle with, but statecraft—well, here professionalism seems not quite as important as cronyism. The loyalty of an intimate friend, remember, is steadfast. (As opposed to, say, the loyalty of career officers?). Thus do we encounter the spectacle of the fortuitously rich and the former fraternity brothers, innocent of foreign languages and of any experience of foreign policy, running American embassies around the world and departments at Foggy Bottom.

Strobe Talbott, though, was a crony with a difference. He was a friend of the president, but he was also an expert. Talbott has had one of those hard-knocks paths to power so characteristic of the American meritocracy: the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut; Yale; a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford, a special internship at Time magazine's Moscow bureau during the heyday of superpower rivalry; a tap on the shoulder to translate Nikita Khushchev's sensational memoirs, and a byline at Time under the patronage of Henry Grunwald, whom Talbott might have succeeded as editor had it not been for the election of his erstwhile Oxford housemate (from Arkansas) to the presidency. Notionally, as Talbott might say, his column in April 1992, in which he defended Clinton's draft dodger, did precede the president's invitation to join the administration, but the summons would have been forthcoming anyway. Maybe it's the white shoes.

To serve as ambassador to Moscow, Clinton first asked Walter Mondale, then he turned to retired Admiral William Crowe, and finally to Talbott. All declined. (Mondale held out for Tokyo and Crowe held out for London.) Talbott writes in his new book that he then suggested Condoleezza Rice for Moscow, implying that the national security aide of the outgoing administration would have no difficulty supporting the Russia policy of the incoming administration. In any event, the post went to Thomas Pickering. Talbott got the newly created post of ambassador at large for the twelve former Soviet republics (excluding the Baltic states) at the State Department. And so he took a seat at the front of the presidential plane, having previously sat back in the press section when covering Washington. "With the upgrade," he writes, "came a lot of work"—an inadvertent comment on his life as a journalist.

Talbott's hack days serve him well in The Russia Hand, which reads smoothly and contains some fine comic moments; but in these pages the diplomat often trumps the reporter. Most of the bile and the West Wing dope has been suppressed in favor of flattery. Talbott enumerates his "debts" to a varied multitude, from Isaiah Berlin to Sandy Berger and other colleagues and experts. Talbott acknowledges his on-the-job training, and also some mistakes (such as his exculpatory position on Russia's massacres in Chechnya, when he had Clinton invoke the Civil War and compare Yeltsin to Lincoln). He refrains from boasting about his influence with the president, omitting mention, for example, of how he maneuvered Bobby Inman to the top of the president's list to replace Les Aspin as defense secretary. (Inman neglected to disclose background information to the White House and was cut loose.) Compared to the dogma-stuffed memoirs of Igor Ivanov, his last Russian interlocutor at the Foreign Ministry in Moscow, or the treatise of Ivanov's predecessor Evgeny Primakov, Talbott's book comes across as informative.

The conceit of the memoir lies in a focus not on the author but on the presidency, and in Talbott's version of the presidency: not Clinton-Gingrich or Clinton-Starr, but Clinton-Yeltsin. During the 1990s, he writes, Yeltsin and Clinton were "the dominant figures in international politics." How this over-hyped duet came about—between the leader of the richest and most powerful nation and the leader of a suddenly impoverished and enfeebled one—turns out to be a study in mutual neediness, manipulation, and dubious policy, notwithstanding the craft and the courtliness of the author.

Only days after Bill Clinton's election to the White House, Boris Yeltsin began imploring him to visit Russia. Anthony Lake, the national security adviser-desiginate, counseled a refusal, as did George Stephanopoulos, who is singled out by Talbott for having connived to lash the administration to domestic issues. But Clinton seemed intrigued by Yeltsin's entreaties, remarking that "you can just feel the guy reaching out to us, and asking us to reach out to him. I'd really, really like to help him. I get the feeling he's up to his ass in alligators." Talbott reports that he prodded the president toward a bear hug, but more generally he wishes his readers to believe that Clinton had a long-standing fascination with Kremlin affairs. Russia is what Talbott and Clinton discussed when they first met in Philadelphia in 1968 at the orientation for Rhodes scholars, and Russia is what they discussed at Oxford when they shared a house and Talbott secretly translated Khushchev, or "Ol' Nikita," as Clinton then called him.

In the White House, Clinton quickly came to identify with Ol' Boris, a flawed, undisciplined, instinctive politician battling an impeaching legislature and an aggressive media. And so it emerged, a Talbott-Clinton conspiracy: they understood each other, and they understood the historic importance of Russia to the world and to the presidency. When Talbott tried to assert his knowledge of Russia, Clinton interjected: "There's nothing you can out-wonk me on, Strobe, not even on Russia wonkery." So the Russia hand in the title of Talbott's book is not really Talbott. It is Clinton.

Clinton's personal diplomacy toward Russia, Talbott contends, worked like a charm. The key was the discovery that they could exploit Yeltsin. True, the Americans took some time to figure it out, but eventually they grasped a convenient pattern: Yeltsin would throw off American negotiators with bluster at large plenary sessions in front of his own staff, but he would concede everything one-on-one, and then riff wildly at press conferences—not to undo the concessions but to cover up with theatrics how pliant he had been.
"Yeltsin's desire for the spotlight at high-prestige international gatherings," Talbott writes, "gave us leverage over him on issues where we had run into an impasse with his government." Indeed, "on every major point of contention," Talbott boasts, Clinton proved "able to bring Yeltsin around to a position more consonant with U.S. interests than the Russian political and military establishment favored."

Typically, a fraud Yeltsin would then plead for the United States to show more respect, insisting that Russia was not Haiti, and so Clinton would launch into one of those Southern Comfort Boris-you-are-an-historic-figure speeches, and pressure his subordinates to cough up a little more "aid," and muse about the genuine inspiration that he got from the scrappiness of O’Boris. "I've got problems," Talbott quotes the Russia hand as saying, "but nothing like his." In short, Talbott portrays a kind of co-dependency of presidents, but one that worked brilliantly (he claims) to American advantage. Talbott also writes that he counted the glasses that the Russian president downed at dinners: Yeltsin invariably got sloshed, and it looks as if the Americans rolled him like a drunk in an alley. Talbott professes dismay at Yeltsin's drunkenness, but Clinton never returned the contents of Yeltsin's pockets.

Suspiciously, Talbott does not specify when they divided the diplomatic opportunities afforded by Yeltsin's moods, or square it with what they thought they were doing before the light bulb illuminated. But it emerges in the book anyway: Talbott and Company imagined that they were masterminding nothing less than a transformation of Russia. This task had been nominally turned over to the IMF, in a quintessentially 1990s misunderstanding of how successful societies worked; but the fantasy was micromanaged from the White House. Clinton the candidate had criticized George H.W. Bush for not doing "enough" for Russia, and as president he reprimanded his own aides over their stingy "aid" proposals, railing that he didn't want to be "George Bush junior," a political imperative that only grew when Bubba and Boris bonded.

Talbott rightly notes that the policy of guiding Russia's transition by means of IMF loans was supported by Congress, meaning both Gingrich and Dole; indeed, for a time "there was no opposition to speak of." This was too bad, because a farce ensued. Talbott insists that it was Lawrence Summers—who assumed the position of dictating government appointments and policy measures to Russian prime ministers, who tried to remind the American official (Summers) of the existence of the Russian electorate, their parliament, and sovereignty. But “Larry persisted” in administering what Talbott says they called "the spinach treatment": force-feeding the Russians what was supposedly good for them, in exchange for loans at the non-commercial rates of the IMF. So Russian officials promised to follow orders, money was loaned, the "strict" conditions went unmet, and everyone played charades.

Many people were fooled for quite some time. Indeed, in the sheep-eat-sheep world of academia, everyone still obsesses over the IMF loans to Russia and the accompanying neo-liberal reforms, which one side (the right) asserts transformed Russia and the other side (the left) asserts destroyed it. How inconvenient for both sides is the fact that the reforms did not happen. They simply could not have happened, given the entrenched interest groups inherited from the Soviet period that were inimical to the implementation of far-reaching neo-liberal reforms.

Eventually American policy-makers, while extending more IMF loans, stopped trying to enforce "conditionality," but not because they understood the inherent constraints. After Russia's parliamentary elections in 1993, when the pseudo-fascist media clown Vladimir Zhirinovsky surprised everyone with a decent showing, a false Weimar analogy ("Weimar Russia") seeped out of the punditry—leaned on the IMF (that is, on Larry), promised to follow orders, money was loaned to Russia (that is, on Summers) to go easy. Following suit, Talbott publicly urged "less shock and more therapy," making it seem as if he blamed Russian "reformers" for the apparent efflorescence of proto-fascism. Summers exploded. "Larry's brain was like a tank powered by a Lotus engine: it purred as it rolled over anything in its way," Talbott writes. "Over the next eight years, I was flattened more than once, but I usually found the experience educational."

They both needed an explanation. Talbott's explanation for what he had really meant to say regarding shock therapy—he wished to advocate the necessity of creating a social safety net—is unintentionally revealing, since many of the Soviet-era social welfare mechanisms, from near-free housing and utilities to padded employment, remained stubbornly in place in those years, and these institutions and customs were precisely what was blocking effective marketization. Meanwhile Talbott's blooper did help to expose the fact that the IMF loans were not about structural reform at all, but about propping up the Yeltsin regime.

The use of loans nominally for economic reform but really for political patronage reached its notorious apogee in 1996, when Yeltsin geared up for re-election, armed with the state budget as well as some IMF cash. Talbott writes that he "agreed" with the "reformers" on the need to re-elect Yeltsin, but he "disagreed" over their unsavory methods. A pity that he neglects to identify the alternative methods to attain a goal for which he insists there was no alternative. Was there really no alternative to Yeltsin short of anarchy and a new cold war? This was the strong-arm line straight out of Yeltsin's re-election campaign. And just how much influence did Yeltsin—who spent the bulk of the 1990s in the hospital—really have over the larger structural processes at work? Consider that Russian regions in which nominal neo-Communists were elected, such as Krasnodar, turned out little differently from regions in which "democrats" were elected, such as St. Petersburg. Each sported a hyper-executive branch dominating the legislature and the courts, and epidemic looting by insiders, and the destitution of the populace. Call it the late Soviet Union, extended through the 1990s.

Moreover, did "support" for Yeltsin really have to mean pursuing very close American involvement in Russia's internal affairs? And how to explain the fact that Vladimir Putin has been implementing—without the "spinhich treatment" or the IMF loans—most of what the Clinton administration had tried to impose upon the Yeltsinites? Domestic stakeholders in reforms finally arose, as the Yeltsin era's wild cannibalization of Soviet property and wealth—for that is what took place in lieu of reform—cleared the decks and created demand for the measures that Putin has been glorifying in. Instead of reflecting on the Putin era's retrospective implications for American policy in the 1990s, Talbott conveys Clinton's regrets in 2002 at not having done "much more" to underwrite the Russian transition to the market! Here is an admission that what the United States did do was insignificant, despite the rhetoric and the contours of the analysts right and left.

No wonder, then, that Talbott magnanimously gives the "credit" for Washington's role in micromanaging Russia's mirage of economic reforms completely to Summers. He settles scores the gentleman's way. No wonder, too, that Talbott attempts, on behalf of himself and his president, to snatch a strategic victory of sorts from their confusions and their setbacks, by recasting American policy
toward Russia as the shrewd mugging of Yeltsin. Why did no one notice their policy brilliance at the time?

Undercutting the supreme cleverness is Talbott’s treatment of the financial meltdown in the summer of 1998, when the Russian government partially defaulted on its debt, and unilaterally awarded a debt moratorium to private interests against their Western creditors, and watched the ruble dive. This piece of work, contrary to Talbott, had little to do with the Asian financial crisis of the previous year, which Russia weathered (some $2 billion in assets were withdrawn, without grave consequences), or with the Russian government’s failure to collect taxes (revenues were up, if one counted regional governments, too). The cause, rather, was the listless financial system, especially the Russian Central Bank, which through a proxy speculated in dollars against its own currency, failed to remit the law-mandated fifty percent of any dollar revenues to the government account (compared, by the way, to the seventy-five percent mandated remittance for the U.S. Federal Reserve), squandered a hard-currency fortune on its own aggrandizement (grand offices and commercial projects, astronomical salaries and bonuses, interest-free loans to management), protected cronies private “banks,” and forced the government into default to try to save its own skin.

All this was explained to me in the summer of 1998 by the Russian private citizen Andrei Illarionov (who would become Putin’s economic adviser); but the American architects of Russia policy, to save their skins, authorized a new IMF tranche to Moscow that very summer, just weeks before the meltdown. And this money was wired not to the Ministry of Finance, as previously had been the case, but to... the Russian Central Bank! Confounded with other hard-currency reserves, the IMF loans became as traceable as the capital pirated out to Cyprus and other offshore locations (a technique pioneered not by the Yeltsinites but by the Soviet KGB, to funnel money surreptitiously to foreign Communist parties and to buy embargoed Western technology). The American policy-makers who still felt willing or even compelled to transfer billions to Russia in July, 1998 could not have been that shrewd.

Russia’s crash mercifully pulled the plug on the wretched era of IMF loans and “conditionality,” a debacle that could not be openly admitted in the run-up to Al Gore’s presidential campaign. But the ruble devaluation also achieved more for Russia’s GDP in a few months than had been achieved in the seven previous years. The collapsed ruble provided a stunningly logical boost to the economy by becoming a de facto policy of strongly encouraging Russian manufacturers (not by the chimera of industrial policy, as the critics had urged, but by the rigor of fiscal policy). Talbott does not bring out all the ironies.

Still, to give him his due, Talbott copiously reports one of the main overall consequences of the Clintonites’ Russian policy: the successful inculation of deep anti-American sentiment. “You know,” Andrei Kozyrev, Yeltsin’s first foreign minister, told Talbott, “it’s bad enough having you people tell us what you’re going to do whether we like it or not. Don’t add insult to injury by also telling us that it’s in our interests to obey your orders.” Similarly, Yuli Vorontsov, Moscow’s ambassador to Washington ended a forty-seven-year career in the foreign service by remarking: “You know, Strobe, having worked on U.S.-Russian relations most of my career, including during the Soviet period and cold war, I must tell you that it is much easier to be your enemy than to be your friend.”

Such comments could be mustered endlessly. Talbott attributes them to the bitterness of the Russians about their precipitous collapse, and he is right. But that is not the whole story. He and other well-intentioned American policymakers contributed to the deep mistrust. The United States, after all, was not in military occupation of the former Soviet Union, and did not have the leverage (or the depth of commitment) to do in Russia what it had done in postwar West Germany and Japan; and yet the United States acted as if it did, raising expectations and fanning resentments. The United States arrogated to itself—in the guise of the phony multilateralism of the IMF and in the name of democracy—the right to determine the personnel and the policies of a foreign government, because we know what is best. This did little to affect those personnel and policies, but it did help to discredit liberal internationalism.

And what, pray tell, was the “take”? Talbott provides a list of the Clinton administration’s accomplishments, all linked to Russia’s external behavior: (1) the removal of Soviet-era nuclear missiles from Ukraine—but the crucial agreement involved the cooperation of Ukraine; (2) the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Baltics—but would this not have taken place anyway? The impious Russian government has continued to close bases and withdraw troops from multiple places, including where the
In Your Chair

Who joins the ranks of the beloved dead?
It is easier to love those who have departed,
Who have left the airless rooms the living inhabit
And floated into the unwalled realm of dreams
Than rub against the obstacles of bodies,
Stubborn, opaque. You were sitting in your armchair
Surrounded, almost submerged, by drifts of paper—
Mail, piles of it, and almost all for me.
The heap seemed festive, Christmas-lavish, wasteful.
I fished a letter out almost at random,
Then scurried to the atlas, found the map
So I could show you where I would be going.

Rachel Hadas

The expansion of NATO threatens, above all, to put readers into a coma; but the topic occupies the heart of Talbott's memoir. It was his special bailiwick in the 1990s, and it appears to be a major source of pride. To demonstrate the obstacles that he overcame, Talbott reminds us that "virtually everyone I knew from the world of academe, journalism, and the foreign-policy think tanks was against enlargement." More important, "the Pentagon was overwhelmingly opposed to enlargement." According to Talbott, Defense Secretary William Perry wanted to postpone enlargement "for a decade, or perhaps forever." (It would have been nice to have been told why.)

When Talbott turns to the positive case for expansion, he leaves out the fact that it was Germany that began the push for eastward expansion of NATO, because it was tired of being on the front line. This omission makes the policy seem an American initiative. From the American vantage point, Talbott writes, there were two reasons for the expansion of NATO. The first reason was that we owed it to the Czechs and the Poles for what they endured under communism after Yalta. This may be morally sound; but if the enlargement of the alliance with America was about payback, then we should have started by admitting African countries from which we extracted massive slave populations and where the European imperialists committed unfathomable mass atrocities.

The second reason, Talbott argues, was that NATO expansion helped to nudge the expansion of the European Union—"an indirect admission, perhaps, that the really important goal was the grandification of the EU. Note the lack of a claim about increased security, either for the United States or the new NATO members. So much time and energy was sucked away in cajoling Russia to resign itself to its exclusion from the Western alliance—and after September 11 NATO turned out to be unessential, while Russia proved to be more crucial to American security interests than even Talbott had understood.

Conspicuously, Talbott does not dwell upon the argument that NATO expansion carried domestic political significance in the United States. Perhaps this is just as well, since such significance has never been demonstrated. Instead of electoral constituencies, the key domestic factors were an inertial anti-communism combined with professional and ethnic cheering inside the government. We can only wonder what American foreign policy would have looked like had the establishment been populated not by Soviet specialists on and émigrés from Eastern Europe or their descendants, but by, say, Japanese, Taiwanese, Korean, or Vietnamese immigrants and their descendants, or Saudi, Iraqi, Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani immigrants and their descendants, or by specialists on all those countries. Would our diplomacy in the first decade after the Cold War have been so fixated on Russia and on expanding NATO?

Talbott narrates in great detail how he toiled to implement enlargement by delaying it slightly, so as to placate the Russians; and how in exchange for Russia's "agreement" he and Clinton were willing to pay the supposedly trivial price of formalizing Russian entry into a G-8. That trade-off met opposition by Lawrence Summers and Robert Rubin, who argued that admitting Russia, with a paltry one percent of world GDP, would violate the rationale and the efficacy of the group. Clinton pressed forward. But Summers and Rubin were right, and for additional reasons: much of the Russian elite is now moving toward appreciation of the need to qualify for admission to international organizations, with the hard effort and the real payoff that this entails domestically, instead of soliciting and receiving bogus exemptions that reward fakery and sloth.

Talbott's portfolio, even before his promotion to deputy secretary of state in 1994, extended beyond Russia, encompassing the entire CIS region, and in a single passage he dutifully remarks on the importance of the many former Soviet republics besides Russia. So important were they that he took what he calls periodic "hello-goodbye tours," that is, trips of "no more than a day or sometimes a few hours in each capital." His sojourns in Russia were longer, but how far he strayed beyond the foreign ministry and a wee group of "reformers" remains unclear. From his memoir, you would not know that Talbott regularly sought advice on many of his official missions to Moscow from Igor Malashenko, then a big news boss at NTV and close to ruling circles. (Malashenko's spoofs of his sessions with Talbott were long a treat.) Talbott does write of one excursion to the Moscow hotel Radisson-Slavianskaya—known colloquially as the Radisson-Chechenskaya, for the supposed mafia owners—and remarks on the hookers, the casino, and the metal detectors, and also on a meeting there with an old acquaintance, a dispirited former dissident, who soon died at age fifty-seven (the median age for male mortality in reforming Russia). This recollection seems designed to demonstrate how much Talbott knew about what was going on in Russia, and also that he deeply cared, but it may have the opposite effect.

Readers may wonder also about the intelligence to which Talbott had access. Very little of Russian society—its tens of thousands of factory managers and tens of millions of trade union members, its myriad regional officials and institutions—interrupts Talbott's diplomatic narrative.
of manipulating Yeltsin or, when he frequently dropped from sight, shopping for other Russians willing to do the American bidding. (They were always found.) The best part of the book is certainly Talbott’s report of a high-jinks encounter at Russia’s Ministry of Defense over the pathetic Russian dash to the Pristina airport in Kosovo, as well as his initial impressions of a bureaucrat named Vladimir Putin. Talbott, who contrasts Putin’s judo to Yeltsin’s sumo, writes that Putin “men-bidding. (They were always found.) The other Russians willing to do the American substituting, or confrontation was an option.” This was almost two years before September, 2001.

Talbott comes closest to venting anger when he recalls that during the 2000 campaign Condoleezza Rice—yet another Soviet specialist at the top of our national security establishment—savored the Clintonites’ Russia policy, and called for Russia’s “quarantine and containment” rather than integration; and he relishes her about-face since September 11. While she eats crow, he crowns that the Bushies are now doing everything that Rice had criticized the Clintonites for doing: courting the Kremlin and of being even more solicitous (dropping the tardy and toothless Clinton criticism over Chechnya); and relying on personal diplomacy, with meetings to create chemistry followed by efficiency press conferences.

This drill Talbott perceives as the classic Clintonite one—in truth, it is a tradition that began during Bush 1—of getting a weak Moscow to sign on to the American agenda while softening the blows. But the differences are significant. Today’s Republicans are not trying to micromanage Russia’s internal affairs, and so far they remain ideologically incapable of accepting Russia’s strategic importance as more than a necessary evil. If only the American establishment could slice it down the middle: stop patronizing and lecturing Russia and stop instinctively wanting to demean and to isolate it as well.

Perhaps the latest Bush–Putin summit proves that we have finally reached this point of intellectual and diplomatic balance. Perhaps not. Putin’s Russia verbally disparages American supremacy, even as it (like almost every other country) aspires to a special relationship with Washington. But the integration of Russia with the West will not be accomplished by arms control. It will be brought about solely by the continued deepening of Russia’s internal transformation, which must be deep and structural. The hard work must all be done in Moscow, the crucial enticements of the WTO and the EU notwithstanding. The new arms control treaty wrung from Washington resembles the U.S. tax code, obliging no one of importance to cough up anything they do not wish to grant voluntarily. The codification of a junior NATO structure to include Russia is a curious matter: the Kremlin is already cooperating fully on the matters that are to be taken up by the council (notably terrorism). Nor is this the first announced “historic” rapprochement between NATO and Russia, yet Moscow has never found members of its military establishment interested in being assigned to NATO for cooperation purposes. Still, in creating a modus vivendi between their states, both presidents are properly struggling to get beyond finessing Cold War institutions, as well as Clinton-era “aid,” to a stronger commercial relationship of trade and investment. That means, as in the case of China, sending clearer signals to U.S. businesses and opening wide America’s domestic market.