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Michael McFaul. *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018. ISBN: 9780544716247 (hardcover, \$30.00); 9781328624383 (paperback, \$16.99).

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Russian President Vladimir Putin “turned ... to stare intensely at me with his steely blue eyes and stern scowl to accuse me of purposely seeking to ruin U.S.-Russia relations” (ix). So Michael McFaul, former U.S. Ambassador in Moscow, begins his memoir, *From Cold War to Hot Peace*. McFaul, a Stanford academic and a Russia expert, served in the Obama Administration since 2009, first as a senior adviser, and then, in 2012-2014, as Obama’s Ambassador to Putin’s Russia. He had a front row seat on the rollercoaster train of Russian-American relations, both during the short-lived era of *Reset* (which McFaul helped inaugurate), and, when the train left the tracks, on an open-ended journey to a bottomless pit.

McFaul did not enjoy the journey. He returns to the question of personal responsibility time and again in perplexity over Putin’s bitterness, over accusations of Russophobia, over all the mean, hostile coverage he received in the Russian state media that seemed determined from day one to see McFaul as a revolutionary rather than a diplomat, as someone who was intent on undermining the Russian regime. “I had logged roughly seven years in the USSR and Russia,” McFaul pleads: “pretty powerful evidence that I did not hate Russia or Russians” (282). Who should think he did? The fact that a former ambassador who had spent a lifetime studying Russia now has to profess the absence of hatred for his host country is a pointer to the dismal state of Russia’s relations with the West, and to McFaul’s personal pain; “What did I do wrong?” (410).

McFaul answers this question by highlighting the “larger forces over which I had little, if any, control” (279). The larger force that permeates the narrative is Putin, on whose shoulders McFaul places most of the responsibility for the crash of the Russian-American relationship. If only Putin had not been there... If only the KGB had not been there... It could all have turned out differently. What would have happened, for instance, should former Russian President Boris Yeltsin have selected the reformer Boris Nemtsov, instead of Putin, as his successor in 2000? “He [Nemtsov] would never have cracked down on Russia’s opposition; he would

never have annexed Crimea” (426). If only Yeltsin had chosen wisely, and selected for Russia a “*democratic president*” (59, McFaul’s italics), things surely would have turned out differently.

The other man who could have made the difference but in the end did not was Putin’s long-time associate Dmitry Medvedev who served as Russia’s President in 2008-2012, and whom McFaul sees as a victim of unfortunate circumstances, a closet liberal, someone very different from Putin. Alas, this was not to be. Putin’s return to the presidency ruined all chances for a closer Russian-American relationship. “Putin,” writes McFaul, “has a different worldview than the younger Medvedev” (240). “Putin developed his theories about American foreign policy years earlier, when he was a KGB agent in East Germany” (259).

What are these theories that McFaul finds so incongruous? For example, this: “For Putin, there were no white hats and black hats. We were all the same: practicing double standards, preaching about values to camouflage the pursuit of our own national interests, and deploying propaganda to weaken foes” (359). Putin’s favourite examples, McFaul notes, were Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, where the U.S. “either acted without any UN sanctions or completely distorted the content of such resolutions...this was classic whataboutism I endured every night on Twitter from pro-Kremlin bloggers and bots,” adds McFaul (400).

But whataboutism is not just a tool of the Kremlin’s propaganda. One does not have to be a Kremlin bot to appreciate the harmful effects of American unilateralism on the rules-based international order that the United States purports to defend. The fact that an autocrat draws, for reasons of his own, on the narrative of Washington repeatedly overstepping the bounds of the permissible, does not in and of itself devalue this narrative. McFaul even concedes that “there are empirical data to support Putin’s hypothesis about American foreign policy” (260). But if so, then one struggles to understand why he relates these concerns to Putin’s KGB upbringing or why anyone else, if he or she were in Putin’s shoes, would fail to draw some of the same conclusions about America’s sobering experience with unilateralism.

Some of McFaul’s most interesting recollections touch on Putin’s craving for respect. During one meeting in July 2009 between President Obama and then Prime Minister Putin, the latter launched into a lengthy monologue about Russia’s view of the world: “He punctuated his narrative with several instances of disrespect from the Bush administration.... Putin even suggested that Russia and the United States could have cooperated on Iraq had the Bush administration treated Russia as an equal partner” (130-131). And then more: “For each vignette of disrespect or confrontation, he told the president the date, the place, and who was at the meeting” (131).

Obama, McFaul notes, promised Putin to respect Russia. He gives the President good marks for sticking to this promise, recalling that Obama “repeatedly emphasized our aim of engaging with other countries based on mutual interests and mutual respect” (90). Unsurprisingly, Obama’s infamous reference to Putin as “a bored kid in the back of the classroom” did not quite make McFaul’s chronology of the President’s politeness.¹ But there is little doubt that the Russian leader, who is ever on the lookout for hints of American disrespect, added

¹ Steve Holland, Margaret Chadbourn, “Obama describes Putin as ‘like a bored kid,’” *Reuters*, 9 August 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-obama-idUSBRE9780XS20130809>.

that reference to his list of vignettes for later recitation. Incidentally, this is a sentiment Putin shares with his predecessors in the Kremlin. It is difficult to find a Russian or Soviet leader who did not at one time or another voice concern about being snubbed by an American counterpart. George Kennan would have pointed to the innate sense of Russian inferiority before this world's rich and powerful. Kennan was right, of course.

McFaul's book exposes a problem at the heart of Obama's Russia policy. The first key principle of American foreign policy, McFaul notes, citing from Obama's speech, was the importance of "getting our own house in order as a necessary condition for inspiring others to emulate our system of government" (114). Yet literally on the next page, McFaul recounts how the administration "eventually adopted a new strategy for advancing democracy and human rights in Russia" (116). This democracy promotion programme included U.S. government funding for Russian Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), something that the Putin regime found objectionable and ultimately stopped. One could well make the argument that if the administration stuck to its own first principle—getting its own house in order—it could have been much more effective in inspiring the Russians to emulate democracy. This is a question that goes to the heart of the scholarly debate about the merits and demerits of democracy promotion. McFaul is clearly an advocate of external involvement in constructing civil societies. He laments the failure of this effort in Russia and faults Putin for his interference in the work of the Russian civil society, even when such work depended on regular subsidies from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

At the end of the book, McFaul attempts to understand what happened to Russian-American relations. There seemed to be a moment, early in the Obama administration, when there was hope that Moscow and Washington would overcome their disagreements and build a closer partnership. This was the era of cooperation—of arms control agreements, Russian helpfulness in Afghanistan and Iran, forward movement in trade-related issues—the good old days of *Reset*. Then things quickly fell apart. They were falling apart already before the war in Ukraine, before Russia's annexation of Crimea. The trend was obvious by 2012. What happened?

McFaul blames Russia's domestic politics. "To win the re-election in 2012 and marginalize his domestic opponents, Putin needed the United States as an enemy again" (410). The argument has a ring of truth. Putin has proved himself to be a master of manipulating the public opinion, and blaming Russia's problems on the United States has been his favourite technique for rallying the populace around the flag. One could only add here that McFaul's nuanced understanding of the Russian-American relationship would have benefited from accounting for the impact of American domestic politics on the state of this relationship. This dimension is missing from his analysis, thus creating the impression that just one man with "steely blue eyes and stern scowl" is singlehandedly responsible for derailing this otherwise healthy relationship. But, to borrow the title of one of the chapters of McFaul's memoir, it always "takes two to tango."

McFaul concludes on a sober note. The perceptions of "American exceptionalism" and of the "positive role of American global leadership" have diminished since Donald Trump came to power. America's "global stature" has declined, allowing Putin to "fill the leadership void" (448). It is hard to disagree. In reality, however, this decline began earlier than the rise of Trump, with the application of double standards, with interventions on made-up pretexts, and with power without responsibility. These years of squandered opportunities eroded America's global stature and allowed autocrats like Putin to claim – only too justly – that the United States

does not practice what it preaches. This is the ultimate tragedy of the American foreign policy, one to which Obama was not even the main contributor.

What of McFaul, then? “My life’s work of trying to bring our two countries closer,” he says, “of trying to integrate a democratic Russia as a responsible and important stakeholder in the international community of states, seems like a failure” (423). He hopes for better times ahead, when Putin disappears, replaced by someone else who is less KGB. In the meantime, McFaul himself cuts a tragic figure: a Russophile, vilified in Russia; a long-time proponent of engagement now calling for sterner sanctions against Moscow; a good-humoured guy caught up in the violent tides of history; and a democratic activist who in the end gate-crashed someone else’s unfinished revolution.²

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² Read also Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political Change from Gorbachev to Putin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2015).