

HARRIMAN INSTITUTE
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of
Alexander Cooley

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2017

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Alexander Cooley conducted by Mary Marshall Clark on March 20, 2017. This interview is part of the Harriman Institute Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Session #1 (audio)

Interviewee: Alexander Cooley

Location: New York, New York

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark

Date: March 20, 2017

Q: We'll start today. This is Mary Marshall Clark and I'm so glad to be with Alex [Alexander] Cooley in his gorgeous office on March 20, 2017, and this is his session number one for the Harriman Project. Good morning.

Cooley: Good morning.

Q: We will start the way we have been starting, with a kind of brief biographical sketch and so we want to ask you, what were some of the factors in your early life, or midlife, early life, that led you to want to do what you're doing today?

Cooley: Like so many of us, I think I was shaped by the way I grew up, my parents, their experiences and their identity. My father was a foreign correspondent. He specialized in the Middle East and he had lived all of his life, after his military service in the late '40s in Vienna, in the Middle East. He went to Morocco in the early '50s, founded an English language newspaper, and then spent a significant amount of time in Beirut. That's where he met my mother, who worked for the Greek embassy there. So I was actually born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1972. Then we moved out '75, at the onset of the civil war. He got a job with ABC News when they had a foreign bureau in London, and spent the 1980s in London before I came to college here. I went

to the American school there. I had always had an interest in international affairs and always, I think, identified my father as sort of having a region of specialty.

At the same time, in the late '80s, I thought it was quite quirky and interesting that there were these republics of the Soviet Union back then that had these funny names to them. You know, majority Muslim populations, and no one was talking about them or understanding them, so I had this interest in the region and when I went to college, it coincided with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and I thought this was quite an interesting place to explore a number of issues, like, how do you form a new state? What kinds of identities do they take? What's their relationship to the previous imperial past? The Soviet Past? What are the legacies?

And then in the summer of '93, I was actually a dual major in college. I was in the honors program at Swarthmore College, and I was technically an art history major and I had an international relations concentration, but I knew I wanted a strong liberal arts college, and I liked the critical kinds of engagements that art history offered. I wanted to go into international affairs, so I ended up applying to graduate school. Now I remember, '93, I had a choice of internships: come to New York [City] and go to the [Met] Cloisters, which would have been great—that would have been the art history internship—or work for a Cypriot bank that was going to go around the former Soviet Union, Russia, and Central Asia, and Armenia, selling their payment systems and Visa products, and of course I chose that. That was the final decision, but that was my first exposure to the region, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Armenia, too, parts of Russia, and Siberia.

The trip was very interesting, at the very start of their independence. So that cemented it, and I applied to political science graduate schools, again, with eyes open, with an understanding that if academia didn't work out, I might be able to pursue other kinds of related opportunities or positions, given the fact that there was a need for expertise in this part of the world, and things seemed quite malleable and new. That was the trajectory. I entered [the] Columbia graduate PhD program in 1994, graduated in 1999, went for a position in Johns Hopkins [University] for two years as a visitor, and then I think I was part of the last good job market that there was in the year 2000, the dot com boom. So I was fortunate enough to receive the offer at Barnard and I came back in fall 2001. Been here since.

Q: Great. Just for the record, could you tell me your parent's names?

Cooley: Yes, my father is John Kent Cooley and my mother, Eugenia Katelani Cooley.

Q: How many languages did you speak when you arrived in the US?

Cooley: Oh, gosh. So I grew up fluent in Greek, bilingual. My mother always actually made it a priority to speak to me in Greek, gave some Greek lessons, and I always would return to Greece in the summer. I had fluency back then in Spanish, and French as well, but none of them were really useful for this part of the world, so I started Russian in graduate school and then went to Middlebury camp, and so forth. Still, my Russian never got to the level of some of those other languages. But certainly I think the bilingualism was an asset in that Greek's not super similar to Russian, but it uses the same kind of case system and some of the same kind of nuances.

Q: When you came to Columbia, who did you primarily work with?

Cooley: Back then, my mentor was Henrik Spruyt. He was part of the IR [international relations] faculty here and he was quite famous in international relations, having researched the sovereign state and his competitors, and truth be told, my first year, I think I made the mistake that I advised everyone not to do, and I had gone straight to grad school from undergrad. So I burned out. I wasn't ready, not for the intensity of the classes, but I think others had made a decision to give up careers and come back to join academia, and I saw it more as continuing my education, almost a holding pattern, which is not the right way to approach it. I was very burned out, especially after the first year. I barely finished all the papers I had to do. They were OK, but they weren't great. I didn't have funding the first year. I got picked up the second year, so that was nice, but it was really taking Spruyt's class the second year that I found my own voice and my own set of theoretical interests, and what I wanted to do related to the region, and some of the topics and things to plug into.

He was great, and we ended up—much later—co-authoring a book, *Contracting States: Sovereign Transfers in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2009). He also left for Arizona State my fifth year, so that forced me, or prompted me, to finish, too, in 1999.

Q: So, very fast finish.

Cooley: Yes, it was quick. It was quick. I mean, I think it's also doable. But yes, I accelerated that last year, in part because I had a Harriman Institute Fellowship, so I wasn't teaching, I wasn't doing anything, so I had the time to crank [it] out really. And then Jack Snyder was also on my committee, Lisa Anderson, who was great. Rajan Menon, who's now at CUNY [City University of New York], and Alex Motyl, for the project. He was also the associate director of Harriman. So it was an interesting, very diverse committee in terms of their own interests.

Q: How did you develop your idea for your dissertation?

Cooley: The dissertation was rooted back in the idea of Soviet extrication and engagement with the external world, and in the 1990s this was the peak of American power and the talk was about all the transformations brought by globalization. The narrative at the time about the region was Central Asia joins the world, after being forgotten in the Soviet era, now it's back. A lot of what I wanted to do in the dissertation was explore the interactions between Soviet administrative legacies and these external flows and forces. It was interesting; I got an SSRC [Social Science Research Council] grant to look at the formation of two post-Soviet Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan was highly dependent on revenues from exports of natural gas. Kyrgyzstan was aid dependent. I was looking at how these different kinds of flows, and the different conditions or non-conditions associated with them, condition their extrication from these Soviet legacies. What was interesting was that I actually completely changed my mind on Kyrgyzstan after going there and conducting fieldwork.

Q: What do you mean by changed your mind?

Cooley: Well, in terms that I thought that reforms were more advanced in Kyrgyzstan than they were, and that donors actually played a strong role. They did, just not in the way we understood them, right? So for instance, technical assistance was something I became really interested in, because we hear a lot about IMF [International Monetary Fund] aid and World Bank loans, you know, the financial things, but prior to them there wasn't a lot of work that theorized, well, what's human to human transfer and technical expertise? What does that do? How does that work? How should we evaluate its effectiveness? And so I gathered all this data on just these different technical assistance projects. The tax reform project had been in the country. Back then, it was '98, it had been going for six years. The capital markets project for five years. A local government empowerment initiative going on for five years. And when you look at these, same person kind of doing them. What are the outcomes? And so then I went to the Parliament.

Back then, doing research was in some ways more difficult and in some was a lot easier, because you could actually, if you found something you were interested in, you could probably get it without too much of a fuss. So I got hold of, actually, a list at Parliament, the Kyrgyz Parliament, that had all the draft bills from that year that had been drafted by foreign donors, and there were dozens of them, but also the different versions of the bills. I noted what had been struck out, what had been added, and so it's a wonderful document in being able to ascertain what changes were added as the legislation went through, and so you see special exemptions on the tax code for gambling interests or gold sales or kind of [laughs] any connected special interest that could be inserted. But I think the story of this was then, that got me interested in the whole political economy of US aid contracting and basically how a lot of these vendors were private actors who

won a bid and then when they were in the country, watered down a lot of the projects that they were doing where it became captured by local interests. Then everyone was sort of in cahoots with everyone else, right? Keeping this thing going while claiming this mantra of reform.

Some people say it was a very cynical project, but that chapter of the dissertation became the basis of this article that I wrote called, “The NGO [non-governmental organization] Scramble,” with James Ron, which is by far the most widely read thing I’ve ever written. Back in 2002, Jim had worked in humanitarian aid and he had very similar experiences, and some in Bosnia and Somalia, so we wrote this article for *International Security*, developing a theoretical framework about sub-contracting and contracting. It was a pushback against the early NGO literature that NGOs are driven by principles and common ideals, that they operate outside of a material incentive space. We took a big axe at that. Yes, so in the end the dissertation was arguing that even though these were dependent in different ways, and even though there were conditions attached to the Kyrgyz’s aid, you still saw very strong Soviet administrative legacies coming through.

The legacies that tended to change were the ones that were the Union-wide ones, that had been governed by Moscow. Those were the ones that didn’t have constituencies, right? In the independence era, so for instance, one puzzle that you get at, you didn’t have strong militaries in the independent states. Why do you have such strong internal security services? Actually, there was, domestically, a Republican level security apparatus that was quite strong, policing, and the KGB, whereas the Soviet military was purely governed by Moscow. None of these countries actually had a strong military. Quite the opposite. They had these stranded assets and Slavic

officer corps and so some chose to go back. So yes, it's this interplay between the way the Soviet Union was organized, what stayed, what was recovered under a new name or with new sourcing, that actually the slate wasn't just wiped clean. You had these very strong forces that shape the state-building over time.

Then I looked a little bit for the original book that came out, at some comparative central post-colonial, post-imperial perspectives. Even back then, well, this was one perspective I also got out of the Harriman Institute and Mark von Hagen, at the time, talking about bringing the post-imperial lens to the post-Soviet states. I found that very appealing, and took the potential comparisons between, say, Russian extrication from Central Asia and French extrication, say, from Algeria very seriously, and interesting. Both had settlers, both had protected and selective industries, both had real exodus of human capital and so forth. Spruyt was the state formation and IR guy, and he got me thinking along those lines.

Q: Was he in political science?

Cooley: He was, he was. He was political science and international relations.

Q: So I was going to ask you, just, if we could segue a bit to the Harriman, since you mentioned Mark von Hagen. So uniquely, you came in as the Harriman was trying to reconstitute itself. So if you could just describe briefly what that was like for you as a student, and I really appreciate your comment about Mark because that, too, was my impression, that that was a real breakthrough, the post-imperial turn.

Cooley: Yes, I mean, I think the imperial turn then allows the comparative turn to take place, right? And that is so key. And I understood that that was quite profound and quite important. I also took Mark's, when he co-taught it, I believe it was '97, Legacies class. So he co-taught it with John Micgiel and there was a lot of interest in the course. Being able to show the paradigm shift from Sovietology being this protected area where political scientists, sociologists, international legal scholars were actually protected from their own disciplinary norms—you know, the funding, we're doing this other thing—to opening up the field to comparative imperial legacies. I think Mark and Karen Barkey did a great book back then on the un-mixing of peoples after empire. That was quite interesting. After empire, the nationalities debate. It opened up all sorts of kinds of intellectual possibilities. I guess what I hadn't realized back then, that this was my generation of issues, just how, in some ways, deeply those roots of privileging Sovietology ran, for many people.

Mark was always very encouraging with my own work, and he was always happy to entertain comparisons, he thought it was a healthy thing, and so I did it. I definitely think my generation was the post-Soviet generation. The generation of the '90s, so another example: one of the classes I took, in 1994, or 1995, spring of '95 was after my first year, was called "Making Markets: Political Economy of Post-Communist Transition." Back then, it was Steve Solnick. That was a class of its era, right? Just a few years, but we debated things like shock therapy versus gradualism and the importance of institutions and insider privatization. There was a lot of interesting and exciting work coming out, but there was still this assumption that somehow you

could compare the Czech Republic and Tajikistan. This assumption was that oh: they're all communist, so they all had the same starting point. I think that was also profoundly flawed.

There was this other wave of comparison, when people thought: oh, we can compare amongst the post-communist countries because they all started at the same place. Yes, so intellectually, I think Mark had produced an exciting agenda and it always felt very current by the Institute. They supported me with a Moseley/Backer Fellowship so I could finish my fifth year. I actually received a post doc, as well, which I assumed I was just going to go onto, but while I was finishing up in the spring, I was encouraged to apply for this temporary position at Hopkins that had come up because Professor Steven [R.] David had gone into administration, so they needed a replacement for two or three years. So it [the position] wasn't listed in the normal cycle and I hadn't applied for jobs in the normal cycle. So I applied, with the appeal being that it was multi-year. If it had just been one year, I would've preferred the post doc here. Because it was two years and it was a good place, teach classes, see what this was all about. I also thought if I was serious about academia, I need to try this out. I applied and was selected to be interviewed. I got the position.

Q: And what was the position, exactly?

Cooley: It was a visiting assistant professor in International Relations. So I taught. What was wonderful back then, for me, was the minimal administrative work and they just let me teach whatever I wanted to. I taught a course on international political economy, international organizations, taught a course on empires that I thought was interesting, so I did a little bit of

everything. Taught my own version of looking at markets. So that was a good time, and it was sort of a small, philosophically pluralistic department, too, so I made some good friendships there. It was good training, certainly better training than a post doc, for just seeing what this whole field was about.

Q: So I want to get back into the Harriman at that time that you were a student here. I want to ask you a question: what difference did it make that Mark von Hagen was a historian, that he was able to acknowledge the imperial turn and really began to dig deeply into the regional areas, Ukraine and others?

Cooley: I don't think I appreciated it as much, at that time. I think the projects that were being run through Harriman and some of the Carnegie projects were being run on their own terms, projects on democratization and the influence of NGOs. Jack did a big project, with Sarah Mendelson and John [K.] Glenn, so they were all present, but they were in some ways kind of narrowly constituted. Where I think Mark identified empire, immigration, people, I think that shifted the ground here intellectually into comparative post-imperial realm, but I also think it, from afar, it gave us a kind of breadth that maybe saved us from becoming a very specialized, in-house kind of technical assistance [laughter] and a provider that—you could see how that could happen, right? If we didn't adjust our own visions of what this involved, his embracing of Ukraine was absolutely huge, both intellectually and financially. Bringing in support from Ukrainian donors. I don't know if it saved the Institute, but I understand it was a big part of keeping the Institute going and making those connections.

Yes, I mean, the broadening of what was happening, I now take as a given, but it was a set of decisions whose impact is still felt now, in some ways. It really matters if you have Ukraine in the Institute or not. Harvard's Davis Center, do not. They have a Ukrainian Center but it's technically outside the Davis Center. Of course they collaborate and so forth, but it changes the calculus of whether it's just Russia or predominantly Russia, or you're doing the entire region, in quite profound ways. Again, that's something I'm not sure we fully appreciated, or I fully understood, because I just took it as a given, because I was doing Central Asia, that it should encompass everything. But that's not necessarily the case, right? In certain cases, Central Asia was grouped with Hungary and Finland, as it was in Indiana, back in the '90s when you had this department of Uralic and Altaic Studies. So I think you can point to both a material and intellectual consequence, to expanding, going to Ukraine, bringing new constituencies, stabilizing the Institute, and then broadening its appeal to re-engage in later. I also think it shut off, or it prevented it becoming more of a nitty gritty involvement in Russian reforms, kind of place, which you could imagine that it might, if you didn't have these sorts of other directions.

Q: Could you comment a bit on [Richard] Ericson's tenure?

Cooley: Actually, I only really experienced Ericson in the classroom. So, I don't know as much of his particular decisions beyond just talking to him a little bit about this project. In the classroom, he was really amazing because he was this lost generation of comparative economists. Comparative economists are really strong on methods, but also interested in how different economic systems operate, and Rick is brilliant on the microeconomic side of things. So what's amazing about the class was just going through how do you read the plan? What are the

coordinating problems? What does money mean in a system like this, where there's no relative scarcity? What are the pathologies that this creates? The informal incentives. All of this was really, really interesting, absolutely invaluable, and that also influenced a lot of how I thought about, also, Soviet Legacies, because a lot of these pathologies, especially in Central Asia, and kind of agricultural spheres—plan falsification and sort of the governance structures there, just wouldn't be comprehensible without an understanding of the Soviet system.

Rick had this really amazing understanding of, formally, how it was supposed to operate, and actually giving it the respect on its own terms. Not saying, "This was obviously just doomed and all ideological." He was really interested in the nitty gritty, the technical kind of operations, the challenges, the institutional relationships. He wrote wonderful articles, including "The Ideal Soviet Economy," how it operated and its legacies—so that was an excellent class. That also fed my own understanding, supported my own understanding, that you can be theoretical and have regional knowledge and in that sense, also comparative. In some ways I didn't—I still don't—this idea that you have to choose one or the other was quite irritating to me. [Laughs]

Q: That's got to be the best one-liner of our project. [Laughs]

Cooley: So Rick was more of a—in the classroom, my third year, I took a really good class with him on Soviet economy and post-Soviet economic legacies. So I wasn't aware, at the time, what he was doing administratively.

Q: That's a good answer. Were there others that you want to comment on, in terms of taking their classes and the general intellectual atmosphere? You had mentioned before, I just have to bring back up, that you weren't aware at the time of how deep Sovietology loyalty hit, so I would have like to hear a little more about that.

Cooley: Yes, I mean, I think we all had an understanding that Harriman was a really important institution that was trying to redefine itself. Back then, certainly in the 1990s, as it is now, the first loyalty was to your own discipline. Political science, and political science was undergoing its own kind of evolution. I think there were some instructive episodes, so I think Steve [Steven L.] Solnick was a very interesting figure, and his book *Stealing the State*. He was a comparative and political economist. Wrote a very interesting book using the metaphor, or model, of a bank run to explain the Soviet collapse, what happens when you devolve power and there's uncertainty about property rights and who owns what. Local actors start appropriating control of these things. The whole thing sort of comes down. Steve was also a comparativist and a methods guy.

There were real tensions between him and Alex [Alexander J.] Motyl that I saw, at a couple of conferences. I think Alex was also very passionate about the limits of rational choice theory. At the time, a lot of it was about rational choice and its applicability to this region. Alex creates a profound intervention with his Soviet nationalities book and reader, in which he gets people like David Laitin, who was a controversial figure at the time, a defender, again, of rational choice approaches and so forth. So Steve was the resident post-Soviet comparativist, and so when he didn't get tenure later, it was a real shock. It emphasized that Columbia, back then in the '90s

and early 00s, that in the Poli Sci department there was a perception that they just rarely tenured people in general. So, whether it was international relations or comparative or so forth.

All of these figures, the figures of the '90s generations, had quite strong influences, each in their own ways, and perhaps we can better appreciate that now than at the time. There were certainly these schisms, these methodological schisms in the Poli Sci crowd over how much to integrate with the rest of the rest, in some ways, versus not. So was that a part of the question?

Q: That was good. The last thing I want to ask you about this period, although we will come back to it, probably, is, in terms of your own student colleagues, I would like to hear a little bit about that.

Cooley: Oh sure, yes, so right, thanks for asking that. So it was really interesting at the time. Columbia admitted more students to the program than were funded. So there was a very competitive dynamic in seminars. Jack's [Snyder] nationalism class was crazy, all-out. But I think what it also created was this model of really smart grad students brokering different advisors, and filling the spaces between their specialties. In other words, we weren't on the apprenticeship model. I'm not saying we're doing that now, but back then, right, if you were going to Stanford [University] or Harvard you would get a desk and you'd be assigned a mentor and it was a much more traditional space. Here, because you had an excess of students, you also had students who came up with really original brokering topics, and I think a couple of paradoxes.

One, as Columbia was making this transition—as the whole field was more kind of a rational choice methods area—they produced some spectacular constructivists and qualitative scholars. Peers like Daniel Nexon, who’s now at Georgetown [School of Foreign Service]. He edits the journal *International Studies Quarterly*. Pat [Patrick] Thaddeus Jackson, at American University, Stacie Goddard at Wellesley. Leslie Vinjamuri, who’s at SOAS [School of Oriental and African Studies]. Fiona Adamson, also at SOAS. I could go on and on. Really original thinkers whose projects were quite distinct and new. Dan did dynastic empires, and also worked with Charles Tilly. I think it was partly because you had to be motivated to take the space.

For me, it was quite interesting coming from a place like Swarthmore where you have these small seminars and they go until midnight and four hour interactions in a class of five that—my intro IR in grad school class had eighty people. Forty of them were in the PhD program, forty were terminal MAs, and just two short papers and a ton of reading. It was a culture change, coming to Columbia from Swarthmore, but I think that diversity was really interesting, and produced some really wonderful scholars in the area of international relations.

Q: That’s exciting, thank you. So, going to Hopkins. Did you enjoy teaching?

Cooley: I did, yes! I did. I thought what was interesting about Hopkins was, back then, what I know now of the administration, there was no real committee for syllabi. You just made up your own syllabus and taught the class that you wanted to. There was self-scheduling of classes, so everyone was teaching Monday and Tuesday mornings, so the students would complain, “I would love to take your class, but there's three other Poli Sci classes Monday, Tuesday mornings

nine, ten to eleven.” Hopkins was academicky, right, in doing that, and Dan [Daniel H. Deudney] is a very colorful, very broad guy in IR, also very distinct take on international relations and what it’s about, and Mark Blyth, who is now at Brown. He’s a political economist. He had been a contemporary here in that we graduated the same year, but he was on the tenure track there. So Mark and I became very close, and we would talk a lot about our projects. That was very formative for me.

Looking at job searches, being involved in job searches there, where you see the process, the applications, the kinds of research programs. All that, I think, was really formative to me in terms of just getting to present my own work and understanding my own work. When I applied, I was lucky enough to have some offers from Williams, Northwestern. _____ was really the main offer, it’s a wonderful department on its own terms. Again, I think the chance of coming to Barnard was too good to pass up, and returning. There’s a sense, I think, when you’re a grad student in New York, you don’t want it to end because you enjoy life here, and life here is life in New York, but then you get a chance to come back to New York and do what I really enjoyed, and I still consider myself very fortunate.

Q: So, when you’re talking about competing offers, it’s about whether to take the Barnard offer or the Northwestern offer?

Cooley: Yes. Williams is a wonderful institution and the students are great, but I do remember I have this—this is 2000, mind you, a long time ago—and so I do remember trying to call my

girlfriend back then, now my wife, and seeing that my Sprint phone actually wasn't picking up the signal in Williamstown.

Q: That was a metaphor. [Laughter]

Cooley: This is not going to work, but you know. I mean, Williams is a great place and we could be happy there. Yes, it really was a time of peak endowments. There were a lot of jobs, a lot of shuffling going on.

Q: So in terms of your motivations for coming to Barnard, how did that fit with your own work and your own desire to do research? Did you want to be in New York for a reason?

Cooley: What I really like about Barnard was the idea of this complex relationship of being devoted to liberal arts but having access to Columbia kinds of resources and affiliations, and truth be told, my first three years at Barnard, I kind of stayed away from Harriman. I used the libraries, I taught the classes, and so forth, but I also felt a little strange coming back and seeing Bob [Robert Legvold] and Jack. It just put me in a different kind of role I was unfamiliar with. I thought that was interesting, and frankly I was just so busy with the courses and the work, and trying to get my own book out. The next projects, and things. At the same time I did join a grant at [Albert A.] Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies that Kim [Kimberly] Marten, Page Fortna and I worked on, which actually provided some resources to travel to Japan and South Korea for the [military] bases book. Then I used those travel experiences to leverage my own grant for working on the post-Soviet and European cases in the bases project.

In essence, that whole intellectual detour happened at Barnard. I had been interested in bases as this sovereign space. Even while I was at Hopkins I wrote this article, which got published in *International Security*, which in that sense helped me get a job, about [military] bases as these special kinds of categories of post-imperial dots, and how do you govern them and how do you transfer sovereign control, and what's been the pattern? 9/11 hits, and you think one of the really interesting things I'm looking at is not Afghanistan, but behind the scenes of the focus on Afghanistan. There's always a lot of concern. What are the dynamics there? Is it going to be a quagmire? Whatever. But in the meantime we had established these military bases in Uzbekistan, in Kyrgyzstan, and nobody was talking about the potential effect of the US military presence in these countries, and what they were going to do, and stuff like that. In essence, I didn't know it at the time, but it was like going to grad school again. Taking these trips to Okinawa, to South Korea, to Turkey.

Q: How many did you visit? There were 800 or something at the time you were—

Cooley: I did research about eight of them. Korea and Japan. Obviously the Central Asia ones, I went to Romania a couple times, because they had also these new style bases being set up. Then the southern European cases were really interesting to me. Italy, Greece, Turkey, Spain, profoundly interesting. Actually, the really profound one was the Azores, in Portugal.

Q: How so?

Cooley: Well, I wrote a chapter in this very eclectic book called *Base Politics* that the chapters were comparisons between southern European and East Asian cases that you normally wouldn't think about. The Azores I compared with Okinawa, and called them both triangular island politics. The Okinawa story is a story about the US military consistently aligning with the Tokyo government on the main island, in an era that Okinawa's perceived as always—because they wanted something, they sacrificed Okinawa for it. With reversion, Okinawa becomes an administrative province of the US military, under the Peace Treaty, until reversion, in the 1970s. Or how Okinawa hosts 75% of US military facilities, in Japan in general. Okinawans talk about their special burden, and they talk about the collusion between Tokyo and Washington. In the Azores, it's the inverse. This is what is just so interesting, is Azores consider themselves of a North Atlantic identity. So their relationship to the Portuguese mainland is profoundly different.

In fact, they object to being labelled an EU [European Union] ultra-peripheral region, as they were, or when they got transferred from Atlantic Command to European Command, when Atlantic Command was disbanded. Their ties, especially with Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and these Azorean North American communities are quite strong. You get the immigration currents going over there. So there, the story's quite different. There, when you had in the early '70s, the Revolution of the Roses, and the end of Salazar having a military government here, and the move into a communist hard-left government, the preparations were for independence backed by the US and the CIA. The Azoreans are very conservative. They do not want to be part of that. Eventually it didn't play out that way, but there, the politics of it is that the Azoreans are very accommodating to the US and actually feel like they don't get enough credit for that from the mainland government. I have never encountered a case before where

there was this enthusiasm for the United States, and this association, and away from home country. It's also just a beautiful place.

Q: Great place to do research.

Cooley: Yes. I think that's the case. All of these, it was like going to grad school again because I didn't know any of these country's histories, in terms of how the US military was very—there were these episodes involving the bases in US military all of these countries that were profound symbols. Whether it's the US in 1953 and Spain, legitimizing the [Francisco] Franco regime at the time that he was excluded by the western Europeans, by doing a basing agreement. To what bases meant for a country like Italy that was so intertwined with domestic politics. In a weird way, here you had a country 40% supporting the Communist Party, and yet the communists have to make more and more public concessions on the bases and NATO [North American Treaty Organization] so that they can be viewed as a legitimate mainstream party that's capable of governing.

The politics plays out all sorts of different ways, and what was so interesting to me is why is the bases issue such an explosive issue, signifying national sovereignty in some areas but not in others? Why do you get these populist politicians? For such politicians, in some ways—and this is also the Greek part in me, very interested in the same dynamics in Greece—the bases are such a political piñata in some cases. And in some cases, they're not and you'd expect them. For instance, the whole business of CIA flights and [extraordinary] renditions, under the Bush administration. To me, in a different era it would have been absolutely explosive domestically,

and it was a political issue but it was an issue that most of these countries wanted to make go away pretty quickly. So that, to me, was a project about not the military role of bases, but just their political role. Why is this activated in some areas and not others? That was inspired by Central Asia, but there was only one chapter on Central Asia.

It actually took me on this five year detour all around the world, but it was very enriching and I'm glad I've done it. I don't keep up with it as much as I would like to, just because something's got to go, but the bases, the Central Asia story, then, gets picked up again in *Great Games, Local Rules*, in more nitty gritty of what are the underlying quid pro quos and understandings that happen in places like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Q: Very good, thank you. I want to ask two questions, which we're not supposed to do, but I think you can handle it. One is just to mark the turning point on 9/11, in terms of how you thought about the world and how you had to relate to it, since you subtly brought that up. Let's start with that question, and then we'll ask another one.

Cooley: I think it hit all of us hard in different ways. Trying to figure out, qualitatively, what was and wasn't different, whether these emotional militaristic impulses were justified. If so, why. I think it was a shock to all of us. I do think it took a while in my own mind to sort out what was going on. I think the question of the US unilateral power was also bound into 9/11. Back then, it was debates about not withdrawing from the world as we are now, but whether US power really should be completely unchecked and unbound. In some ways, the bases debate and the Posture Review is about that, in the sense that what FIFE [phonetic] and a lot of people in the Bush

administration were pushing for, in terms of strategic policy planning, was the right to use this network of military facilities for any purpose, any time that they wanted to. The doctrine of strategic flexibility, when before, bases were very legalistic foundations. They're there for this purpose, and host countries are consulted. I think the intellectual climate was about Americans' role, and if so, what are institutional checks? Why are they important, and so on? As well as just the initial shock of, why did this happen?

Later, as the Central Asia part is percolating, it starts becoming more interesting to me. I only really start putting things together in the late 2000s, as to the next project.

Q: That was my second question. When it began to—

Cooley: But one other thing on 9/11, is I was teaching the intro IR class at the time, the Columbia-wide one. That was really a very intense experience. It was this balance between reassuring students on kind of a personal level, also admitting that you know what? I don't know anything about Al Qaeda, but here's what we know. Here's what's coming out. I'm not going to pretend I'm a terrorism expert. There was a lot of that going on. And then a lot of these students [were] just absolutely stunned. Parents wondering about pulling them out, smell of charred rubber floated all the way up here that week. That's something I'll never forget.

Q: I remember that so well.

Cooley: Yes. So, there was a renewed interest in the world, but not just in terrorism. In, just, America's role in the world. I think that's the way to put it, and I think it put international relations, in some ways, back on the map in terms of real-world pressing circumstances.

Q: My second question was, when that started to percolate in terms of your next book?

Cooley: Then I get these two other books out, my first two books, which are about Soviet administrative legacies, logics of hierarchy, and loosely related to the dissertation on the base politics. The basing book. I start really taking an interest in what is going on in Central Asia itself, because Central Asia before had always been Central Asian comparative perspective, the bases, administrative legacies, NGOs, things that I would study in Central Asia in comparison to other parts of the world. I start seeing what's going on in Central Asia. Russia's backlash against the US presence, China's rise. These base politics becoming more intricate. The rise of new kinds of organizations. I take a profound interest in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, this organization founded in 2001—actually a couple months right before 9/11—that's China, Russia, four out of the five Stans, and they have a much different purpose. There's concern with this kind of authoritarian club that's forming, that they're coming on with new norms to push up against the old norms. It's interesting to me, and I initially just want to find out more about this. I applied to Open Society Foundations. I [was] lucky enough to receive an inaugural grant to be one of their Global Fellows, and I think that also sends me on a path of, OSF's very clear, it's nice you're doing academic stuff, but we're actually interested in you taking a much more public role. Doing public talks about your research in a place like Brussels or Washington or so forth.

Then as I was doing the research, and also I'm on leave, it's a post-tenure leave, I have this grant, I also start becoming, you can't understand the SCO without understanding the US presence and all the dynamics going on. Then I go back and it's like, look, I think there's a book in this, actually. I would rather not do a policy report. I would rather just do a book. They're like, well, who's the book for and what's the audience? They were concerned I was just going to do an academic thing. I'm like, "No, I think I can do it in a much more engaging way," and I had a really good talk with Dave McBride at Oxford [University] after a recommendation from one of my colleagues. He has this trade academic space and he's very, very driven. It was difficult because I also had an offer from my old editor. He's not old, but editor who had helped me so—

Q: Who was that?

Cooley: So supportive. Roger Hayden at Cornell. This would've been the third book in the series *Great Games*, but I went with Oxford because I wanted also to try something new and diversify. In the end, I think the adjustment worked well. I think it worked well for them, but yes, *Great Games*, *Local Rules* started as a book on this SCO broader research project. All of these things that I was observing, I would say, "Why are they sanctioning fake election monitors? Why are they all the time obsessed with talking about US hegemony? Why do they have this secret internal security services, antiterrorism center? What does it do?" So a lot of these issues, I think, had a much broader significance, and I think the real conceptual breakthrough I made with *Great Games*, *Local Rules* was starting to see, and trying to sell people, on this, that Central Asia is actually a very forward-looking region. That's the critical part in this. Really embracing that and saying to people—because the Great Game is so used and abused as a metaphor of imperial

competition in the past over the fate of Central Asia. There's something to that, and the skillful way a lot of these Central Asian rulers push back, and so forth, and the intrigue.

Actually, right now it's exactly because they are at the center of all these different influences.

The US, China, Russia, as well as Turkey, the EU, the Gulf. They're actually a window. I mean, more of a window in a multi-polar world. Declining US influence, certainly soft power, a world of growing Chinese economic engagement, a world where Russia really questions liberal democratic norms and doesn't curry favor with these regimes. That, to me, was the critical part of it, seeing Central Asia as this window of things that are going to happen elsewhere.

The other thing that that project does in general, I start also working with OSF. I serve on their advisory board in Central Eurasia Project, that's dealing with Central Asia. I started witnessing a lot of the consequences of this backlash in the region. I become a big proponent of saying, "This isn't going to stop at Central Asia." The backlash, the techniques of the backlash, the accusations. Western hypocrisy, double standards and illiberalism. The spotlight effect on US inconsistencies. The accusation of NGOs being fifth columns, these kind of treasonous things. All of this starts spreading elsewhere. You see it in the Middle East. Now it's just come back home in the last year. Brexit, the rise of the Trump wave. That book actually does a lot of different things as far as I'm concerned, but I think the part that maybe doesn't get enough credit is trying to get people to understand Central Asia is really much more worldly than we typically think of.

Q: Stunning book.

Cooley: Thanks.

Q: And you know, I guess I learned a lot about China that I hadn't realized before. It's a tremendous influence.

Cooley: That's the other part of this. I start dealing with China. I think a lot of us in the post-Soviet realm were trained in Soviet legacies, right, in Russian influence. You have to pay attention to China. I start being invited to a couple of these Shanghai Cooperation Organizational conferences, so that in itself is instructive. You see the different scholars, the different kinds of research projects that they have. The way we approach it versus, say, a scholar on China or Iran. Actually, my first time there in 2009 was just a few weeks after the Ürümqi riots in Xinjiang, which the Chinese state put down these demonstrating [unclear]. What really struck me about that conference is just seeing some of my Chinese colleagues in some ways just struggle to put their own lens on, right? I think, in some way, just like we struggled through post 9/11.

Basically you had very distinguished academics making the kind of argument, well, we've given these people everything. We've given them preferential treatment, we've given them scholarships, we've given them transfers in Xinjiang, and still they riot, ergo they're evil. They're evil, it's a characteristic, like a name. That I found also really interesting. Yes, I think we've all opened up to China because we can no longer ignore it, and seeing how over the years Chinese scholars and analysis has engaged with the region, how it's become much better, much more sophisticated, is also quite interesting. Also the contrast between the way the Russian

analysts and scholars approach Central Asia versus Chinese, also really telling. The Russians tend to be very opinionated on Central Asia, and there are some excellent Russian academics on Central Asia. There are also a few who haven't been there in a while, [unclear] since the 2000s.

Whereas China always downplays its own role, it's always, "Well, we have no ambitions. If you were to go just a few minutes outside of Shanghai, you'd see such poverty here." That, I think, is quite telling in the sense that China, back then maybe another [unclear], it's a little bit different now, very much wants to play its role as a fellow developing country, but it's not encroaching on Russia's sphere of influence. Of course, it recognizes Russia as a great power. Then it's doing all this stuff behind the scenes, whereas, for the Russians, they really want to be publicly acknowledged that they're the region's leading power. They want the base that has a 49 year lease and has a big Russian flag on top. That's really important. Whereas like, for the US, "Don't call it a base! It's not a base! It's a transit center!" Right? "It's just a place with airplanes!" So there's a sociology of bases, and determining what it means for these countries' own identity, and I think it's interesting.

Q: Fascinating. A question occurs to me, since one of the themes of the whole project is influence, and influence on policy. During any of these times, where you're really branching out into understanding local politics, are you involved in any policy circles?

Cooley: What's interesting is I've felt, I'm not doing any full-time or any extensive policy advising. I am invited to certain things at the State Department or certain contractors who are involved with different government projects in the area. I'm doing these kinds of things, but I

also am trying to move the debate about the bases. I am, in writings, and I get some pushback, certainly online, that we have understandings of what these quid pro quos are. You can't divorce your presence in a country and a country's politics, because you're roped in with it. You're entangled with it. It doesn't matter what your intentions are, right? I understand that your intention is to create a parking lot in Kyrgyzstan. I get it. That's the intention, but the point is that once you're there, you're profoundly intervening in the local economy, just through your normal contracting. The allocation of a food service contract or a construction contract, or whatever it is. Certainly the fuel contracts are what are huge there. A million dollars in very shady, opaque awards that go through these offshore companies that are registered in Gibraltar, and it's another thing.

That part of it, to me, was quite profound. I would always made the argument that this is not, in the circles, that this is shady and it's going to be politically problematic, and that it always becomes politically problematic. One of the lessons of base politics is that when you have democratic transitions, this stuff is used as a political piñata. The US propped up the previous dictator and his cronies. This was the standard line, and DOD [Department of Defense] and a lot of that policy community, they kind of knew it but they didn't want to hear it in public, and then Kyrgyzstan just explodes, literally, explodes and implodes in 2010. Then we get this congressional hearing about the relationship between the fuel contracts and the [Kurmanbek] Bakiyev regime. I'm invited to testify and give congressional testimony there. It was actually a great experience, and I remember it wasn't so much like a told you so moment. It was a real chance to just lay out the general theoretical reasoning of, this happens to us again and again and again.

It's not so much we don't learn; we just don't position ourselves for it.

What was great, back then, was a total democratic congress, in the end of 2010. Actually, the report came out in 2010. The hearing was in April, so it was before the House flipped. I also remember now-Senator Jeff Flake, he was the minority leader at the time and he was great. He asked great questions. I felt like it was an actual hearing with a purpose, which was to gather information about this. So, as a result of the hearing, this report came out that found no smoking gun of corruption in the fuel contracts, but found all these suspect things, including creation of fuel smuggling that is based in Omsk and Siberia. Jet fuel was being certified as being used for civilian purposes, and it was coming down in massive quantities every day in Kyrgyzstan and the Russians knew about it and were playing along with it because they were worried about Kyrgyz too and everything. So you have these networks tied into it.

All the point being here that it was gratifying that there was that coda to it, but also that nothing ever works like clockwork. But it was gratifying to see that yes, these issues that a lot of us were trying to flag actually were making a difference, and had a real impact in the region. I think that was policy influence more by agenda setting, with our congressional testimony, as opposed to me being involved in a room with someone. I think people pretty much knew my views when I was going in the room, but I also, and still do, I take great pride—I'm interested in issues of democracy and rights and transparency—but I can also talk grand strategy on these things, in different, related settings. I think being in a position in academia with tenure, I don't believe in sugar coating things, and positioning yourself for the next thing. Whatever the topic is, I try and give very honest advice on it.

I've never made this connection before, but it's interesting. I think the other thing that sort of experience, and since, has taught me—I occasionally do State Department, when they had State Department outreach—

Q: You're not doing it today?

Cooley: Well, yes, I was there during the transition. Did a great event on authoritarianism in the region.

Q: Oh really? That must have been great.

Cooley: I think it also made me realize just how complex policy relevance is. There's policy relevance of the type of the State Department's policy planning. That's one small part of policy relevance, right? Policy relevance is think tanks and setting the agenda. It's in liaising with congressional staffers, congressional research services. In other words, there are so many ways in which you can be involved in policy. It's not the high policy paradigm of the '70s and '80s, and I think those experiences in Central Asia made me understand that, made me appreciate that. Also, I had a more profound understanding of Brussels and the EU. I gained very good contacts within the European Union in terms of their own Central Asian—the special ambassador, the envoys, the infrastructure there, the parliament. I would go to Brussels a couple of times a year just for talks and meetings. I got a much better sense of their kind of apparatus, dealing with a lot of these same issues. How much to devote to values, how much to devote to strategy?

Some of the most intense and nasty political debates I saw in Brussels were over Central Asia policy, over Uzbekistan and sanctions. For instance, the [EU] Commission wanting the sanctions off Uzbekistan after the 2005 crackdown on people, and berating NGOs and their agendas. The NGOs objecting, saying, “No, I thought we were going to have the values-based foreign policy.” I think some ways Central Asia also sparked in the EU this debate about, What kind of political organization are we? Are we just another country with a foreign policy that has interest in strategy? Or are we devoted to rule of law and this different normative presence abroad?

Q: I know one of your other very strong hats is human rights, and so we'll thread that into the conversation as we go along. Very important. What was the reception to your book? Was it what you wanted?

Cooley: Yes, I mean, I think in terms of publicity, the book gets picked up in a number of different circles. Ahmed Rashid discusses it in the *New York Review of Books*. There's an interesting review of it, a round table, in *Asia Policy*. All sorts of people there, all generous at the time to contribute, James Sherr and so forth. That was nice. There's a tendency to just have a *Foreign Affairs* piece, have a *New York Times*.

Q: I read the *Harper's [Magazine]* interview too.

Cooley: Yes, the *Harper's* interview. What I think is misleading is that there are some complaints about the title of the book. But you know, the title, to me, is exactly the kind of

tongue in cheek thing about it. When I was telling people like the *New York Times* or *Foreign Affairs*, “Please don’t use *Great Games* in the title,” and they went ahead and they do it anyway. It’s like, whatever.

Q: That’s their hook.

Cooley: Yes, that’s their hook. I think, for the most part, there was some pushback online. Some articles in a Central Asian website back then, “Registan,” which was actually tied into US security and intelligence contractors, that didn’t like stories, negative stories, about the US military. But I think it’s just part of being in the public arena. If I had a frustration, it wasn’t over criticism of the book or anything I would have written. I think it was more that people weren’t getting that the great games anecdote was actually very cynical, and was about Central Asia as a type of multi-polar, future-looking region as opposed to a past land of imperial competition. That it’s actually the opposite of what people were invoking. I think there was a little bit of frustration there, but on the other hand I think, over the next two, three years, the terms of debate about the international relations of Central Asia shifted into this triangular understanding (US-Russia-China) of what was going on. Certainly now, no one would dispute that Russia actively tried to counter the US presence in the region.

I don’t credit myself for that. I think I found [an] interesting space to make the comment at the time, but a lot of these issues, these framings of what was going on, were very consistent with what I observed there. The policy community offered different answers as to what we should do, and is it worth being engaged or not. Some denied that were in any type of geopolitically

competitive situation, while others embraced it. So, I thought the book sparked discussion. I think the one thing, practically—and again, it’s all a learning process—that I wish I had done more was, everyone was telling me, “Oh, you have to have a current affairs hook and short-form pitches.” I feel like I saturated the airwaves with the *Harper’s* interview and the *New York Times* piece and the *Foreign Affairs* piece, all within a short period of time. Actually, I think it would have been better to roll them out sequentially and more organically, and hook into some different themes. It was like a little bit too much of a PR [public relations] splash.

Q: These are learning experiences.

Cooley: Yes. I feel like maybe some people also assumed that there was a lot of hype behind the book when I was just trying to increase interest, but I think with *Dictators Without Borders [Power and Money in Central Asia]*, also telling my co-author, “I think it’s just better if we do something every month or every other month over the course of a year and have this slowly roll out with different organic hooks and stuff.”

Q: Understood. We’ll talk about that book next time. You said for the first three years or so at Barnard you really stayed on the Barnard side of things. When did you start to be more actively engaged with the Harriman Institute, and can you talk a bit about Tim [Timothy H.] Frye’s directorship?

Cooley: Yes. I do my three years at Barnard and then I’m eligible for a leave, and so I take my leave. I go overseas, I’m in Brussels, mostly, and I’m doing research for the bases book. I come

back in 2005 and I've become more engaged in 2005, when Jack is an acting director and he organizes a book talk for me in 2006, in the spring. I start getting more involved in Harriman then. I have a good relationship with Cathy [Catharine Theimer] Nepomnyashchy. I don't realize what she's doing internally, at that time, as much. I'm still junior faculty so I'm not attending the Ex-Com [Executive Committee] meetings or anything like that, in terms of the formal governance. I think I was on library committee. I didn't do very much for that. Cathy and I start becoming closer at around that time, too. I would have to look at the year Tim came, but I wasn't on the formal hiring committee—

Q: Two thousand and nine.

Cooley: Two thousand and nine, right. I'm involved a bit in his job talk and give some feedback on him, and my understanding is [he's] being also brought in with the directorship in mind. The really formative experiences with Harriman start taking place—I should mention just an aside that also becomes important. The other strand of policy-related work I'm doing, apart from Central Asia and the book and the bases, is work on Georgia and the US-Georgia relationship. I'm doing that with Lincoln Mitchell, who's an Associate here at the Institute. He wrote a book very critical of Georgia's Rose Revolution and back then, when Georgia was the darling, especially of the Bush administration here and the ideological affiliation—some would call them the neo-con affiliation—I'm doing a lot of work on Georgia, a lot of work on this conflict in Abkhazia. Also going abroad, doing research on that, so I'm engaged with him here, too.

With Cathy, I am brought into the fold really in 2008, when we go to Turkmenistan together as a trip. She had invited new president [Gurbanguly] Berdymukhamedov in 2007 to [the] Columbia World Leaders Forum to give a talk, and this is my take on it, anyway. That was the same World Leaders Forum where President [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad of Iran was also invited, and that was a very controversial visit. Many were critical of the ways President [Lee Carroll] Bollinger handled that. The story, for us, was the fact that Cathy was telling me there was a bit of back and forth trying to convince the president's office to give Berdymukhamedov, also, a presidential welcome. Cathy was making a very strong point. "Come on, this guy's the president, he's a new president, please just send it."

What was fascinating about that time was, Bollinger gives a very standard, good, warm welcome. "You come here on the condition that you take on scripted questions, good luck with your reform efforts," and pretty much leaves, right? My sense was that Berdymukhamedov compared himself to Ahmadinejad, right, and thought that Columbia respected him so much that he had a great time, so he issues this invitation to us to send a delegation to Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan's a very closed, it's not an exaggeration to say, North-Korea-style place. We go there over spring break with Cathy and it's a real eye opener. It's a real eye opener.

We go there, and I think the understanding is we're going to try and develop some cooperation [with the] Ministry of Education. It is this window, is Turkmenistan opening up. Because the old guy was absolutely bat crazy and egotistical. He renamed months after family members, had rotating gold statues of himself. He wrote a little book, philosophical book, which everyone in the end was studying twenty, thirty hours a week, in schools and for civil service exams. That

kind of level [of social control]. The new guy seemed just more of an “I’m for economic development” kind of guy. We go there and we see a lot of this in action, and we see a lot of, also, the creepy excesses and the president’s horses and we get the Potemkin tours and things. That was interesting. We kept cooperation and I think we invited them to an education conference, so they came here, but you could tell they were very nervous. They read these prepared statements. There was nothing analytical.

Then we go back, a year after, and I think Cathy, under suggestions and pressures from a lot of us, had written a letter of concern about journalists being arrested. So the second time we go, they’re kind of shunning us. We only get our visas at the last moment. We do not get the royal treatment this time, but I mention it, though, what was so gratifying about the second time was because we didn’t have an official program immersed in this creepy protocol, I did a lot of lecturing at Turkmen universities. This was the first months of the [Barack H.] Obama administration in 2009, so the second time there. Gave talks at the diplomatic academy, gave a talk at the bureaucratic management academy. I gave a first talk on the importance of international rankings, and it was great. I was getting really good pushback, like, “Why should we believe any of these rankings when here, if you get the president’s word you’re good?” That’s a sign of certainty, or some guy from the central bank told me, “Why should we believe any of these ratings when Lehman [Brothers Holdings, Inc.] was given an investment grade rating a month before?” Absolutely legitimate point.

Q: Great question.

Cooley: Yes, great question. Another guy remembered, “*The Economist* had a rating of 100 greatest literary works and this Turkmen poet wasn’t on it.” Yes, that’s a tragedy, what can I say. That was really gratifying, because that was the first time there was an actual back and forth and that was satisfying, but on the high politics level, something wasn’t right. I remember also going into the office of the Turkmen vice premier, a level above the Minister of Education who was very *Great Games, Local Rules* style. The first thing he does when we go in there he takes out of his drawer some letter of interest from Harvard. He sort of waves it to us, kind of thing, and says, “You see? We’ve got a lot of interest.” [Laughter] It was great, it was great.

Around this time now, there’s an incident in which the Turkmen state starts preventing Turkmen students from attending American universities in the region, especially the American University of Central Asia. The reasons behind it are sort of unclear. The problem is that they start on some of these public, on the record kind of responses saying, “We don’t have a problem with American universities in general. We have a partnership with Columbia University.” Now we start getting into the realm of, We violated Do No Harm, right? Then I also remember Berdymukhamedov was at the Ritz [Carleton], I think it was 2010, and there had been something that was also cosponsored by the Eurasia Group, and he had also invoked Columbia University in his speech and then Ian Bremmer was there. He was like, “I’m so happy to hear that you like Columbia University. I teach at Columbia University!” And his public remarks. I’m watching this and my face is just dropping. I get out of there and I call Tim up immediately. It must have been 2010, I guess. I call Tim up and I say, “We just can’t—we violated the Do No Harm aspect of this.” I think it was a lesson in, there’s outreach and engagement, and that can all be good and be transformative, but sometimes you have to be careful that you don’t get pulled along like the

US military, right? Implicated in these local agendas in which you wanted no part in. That's when we pretty much wrap up the Turkmenistan projects.

I also went with Cathy to Georgia and Abkhazia with Lincoln [Mitchell], and a trip there, and that was also very interesting, being in this disputed territory, a place like Abkhazia which really breaks off from Georgia in 1993, effectively. It is just this slice of the Soviet Union, because it's just had an embargo on it. This is 2010 I'm there, or rather, 2008 I'm there. In June, right before the Russia-Georgia war, and I remember I'm in a meeting with Cathy, with Lincoln, with David Philips—who is now in the peace building program and was part of the mission there—and I remember just in [Mikheil] Saakashvili's office, it's late. It's like eleven, midnight, he just looks exhausted. We knew something was up. It was very tense, and his last line, "Oh, we know our air defenses are only going to hold up a couple of hours, but what can we do?" That kind of thing. We just looked at that like, What's going to happen there? Then the Georgians made a play to get south Ossetia back, the other disputed breakaway territory, and then Russian military came in and pretty much destroyed Georgian armed forces in this weeklong war that became a proxy for the contestation of the post-Soviet space.

That was an interesting time. That was also a Harriman trip that was Cathy-inspired. Cathy really loved Georgia. She took Georgian herself. She wanted to do more in Georgian studies. She tried raising money for a Georgian studies chair in the end, and we still have a Georgian studies account. As great as that is, it's nice to have it, I don't see overwhelming demand for Georgian studies. It's a nice part of what we do. I would just prefer that we have it on the books and not call it a program or a center. But those are the three trips. I did two in Turkmenistan, one in

Georgia with her, and towards those latter years she really took on this ambassadorial, expeditionary role. She wanted to go to these places and meet the people and see what they could come in contact [with]. What was so great about Cathy in all these roles is that she was so human and so disarming in her demeanor—and especially in Turkmenistan, these guys would just use these slick pitches from these oil companies and consultants, and she came there really without an agenda. The minute they started figuring that out, they really did warm up and open up to her, and she would kind of go on and ramble and whatever, but she would really unlock them in doing that. It was a very different kind of style, and it was actually, I think, really effective on a human level.

Even though we got implicated in all these other kinds of institutional questions, I did think she connected with people in that kind of outreach. At the end of the day, we weren't quite sure—maybe we weren't realistic in what we could achieve in terms of what the end goal of it was, and that in the end, in a place like Turkmenistan, it's actually not the Ministry of Education that's making the final call. I think that's—whatever their preferences are. That was a learning experience, too, seeing Cathy in action. I bonded with her on all those trips.

Q: She died unexpectedly, and—

Cooley: It's just still shocking to me. [Pause] It was summer, she had just gone on the Trans-Siberian Express, the summer of 2014, and she'd been calling me. I saw two calls from her, and I finally called her back and she was like, "Are you sitting down?" I'm like, "Yes, what's going

on, Cath?” She’s like, “I have stage four cancer.” I’m like, Wow, and it was just one of those moments.

Q: Very sad.

Cooley: Yes, and she still wanted to teach Legacies [Harriman MA course], she still wanted to be involved and help her students and do things, and she entered the treatment. In the end, it happened pretty quick, as it does. By March of 2015. Yes, that was really tough. Cathy was just such a vibrant presence, and had been involved and was significant in all kinds of ways. The legacy, the space where we are now. It’s not only a nice office, it’s Cathy having the vision to redo the entire space—and to be very fair, some of us were skeptical. Why are we going to allocate all this money in changing the physical thing? Cathy was absolutely right. The space actually matters. It’s not just that we have this gallery space, which is a nice touch. It’s this actual atrium, this feeling of community that we have here. It’s the seminar room, it’s the graduate students who hang out here, that the space is actually a big part of our identity and what we’re doing. Cathy saw that.

She also really profoundly believed in having big discussions, big debates, treating everyone kindly, having really mixed audiences at places, or bringing grad students along and introducing them to former ambassadors and full professors. This was in her DNA, the way she socialized with people. It was a profound loss that we still didn’t really process, and I think in some ways it was the trigger for me thinking about a project like this, because Cathy—but a few years earlier it was Marshall Shulman, Bob [Robert L.] Belknap, and all of a sudden, we’ve lost a lot of

institutional memory. We have the files, and we have the things, but this assumption that everyone knows what Harriman is and what it's doing—not really. It made me think about just going in. I think there's a twofold motivation. One was to preserve and get people's narratives and testimonies on the record. We still miss some, with [Edward A.] Allworth and so forth.

Q: Well, let's talk about that a bit, and thank you for the words on Cathy. We might return to her, because I think it should be an important part of this project to really capture her.

Cooley: Yes, I actually have more and more thoughts about the era that she was in. I think she was also responsible for this review in 2006, but also a different era, different set of circumstances. That was the peak of globalization, pre-financial crisis, the university was going global. Cathy was in a situation, which is sort of defending what area studies is and what it does. Some of the criticisms, I think, were very legitimate, but there was an agenda. There was an agenda to disarm area studies, and Cathy fought like hell for that, because she, of the Slavic tradition, understood or was trained in multi-disciplinary approaches. That was her thing. She saw the value of engaging as much in economics as literature, law, political science. That was really something she tried to impart.

I hadn't realized the specific criticisms in that report. I had heard rumors about it, until I was in the position that I did, and we were told that we were going to be externally reviewed and then I looked it up and it seemed like an important document, also, for the oral history.

Q: It's been very crucial to give us insight into what kinds of questions we should ask, not really literally retracing that analysis, but—

Cooley: I also think that this was—again, so much of my own research identifies 2005 as a tipping point in terms of where the world is heading.

Q: Say more about that.

Cooley: Two thousand and five is the peak of a lot of things. It's the peak, for example, of EU—NATO expansion happens in 2004, 2005 is the last year where the number of democracies in the transitioning world increases. Every year after they decreased. Something happens in 2005, 2006 that this backlash against global norms, liberal democratic norms, US hegemony, whatever you want to call it—and I'm still not sure what it is—that starts gaining a lot of influence, and of course with the financial crisis, everyone's not looking at that. They're worried how we're going to get ourselves out of this hole, but that also accelerates that on the other side. The university is not immune to that. The university is part of that, and the university is thinking of itself as, “Why do we need regional studies institutes? It's all about global. In fact, the campus should go global.” This is a point in time where all these universities are thinking that global should mean setting up campuses in the Gulf [laughs] and somehow that becomes identified as the global. Columbia doesn't go quite in that direction, but it establishes these more global centers, non-degree conferring, but these expeditionary lily pads out there.

Q: The Committee on Global Thought.

Cooley: Yes, Committee on Global Thought, and changes to the curriculum. There's that going on, and regional studies is conceived of as, well, regional institutes should cooperate with each other about the global. I mean, that's the kind of way, that's the kind of prism. Now, Cathy, to her credit, she convened a number of conferences on regional studies and their enduring importance. No one really wanted to listen. There was no bandwidth there. There was no convincing there, and I've actually learned a lot from that in the sense that I have no interest in convening workshops to defend regional studies. The pendulum swung back. You see now, profoundly, what the problems are with not having regional knowledge, the state of the world now, and so forth. I also think that you're not going to change disciplinary norms, so I'm not going to waste time convincing economists or political scientists they should study the region. If they have interesting research projects, we're very broad, we're flexible, and we'll fund them and we'll support them.

That kind of basic understanding, even though ironically we're moved into [Columbia Graduate School of] Arts and Sciences in 2010, away from SIPA. All of these sorts of changes, at the time, and I think SIPA, I wasn't fully informed about the decision. I don't know if they'd have it back, whether they'd do it again. I understand that they didn't want to carry the burden of some of these other regional institutes that don't have as many resources as us or Weatherhead [Center for International Affairs]. I'm also a firm believer that you use the geography and the resources that you have, and I think the counterfactual you have to ask is, if the Kennedy School were in New York City, would it have regional institutes? The answer is, maybe it would. Or it wouldn't be configured in the approach that they have, that then we're trying to emulate in that way. I

think it was a mistake. I understand why they did it. I give credit that SIPA, they thought they had to evolve and go in a particular direction, but I also think that there are other ways in which you can make regional studies more relevant to both the academic endeavor and to leadership and policy training, as opposed to cutting off ties. In fact, we still have a good relationship with a lot of SIPA students who come to us for support in classes.

Q: That's good. Let me just take a look at where we are. I don't have my watch on, but we've done about an hour and forty minutes. Do you want to keep going?

Cooley: I can go until noon, if that's all right.

Q: Great, that's great. Lots of questions I'll probably have after this session about that particular period of time. Let's talk about a bit about, well, then Jack came in to be the acting director after Cathy died, but then Tim was chosen. Talk to me about his tenure and what he was able to do.

Cooley: Tim comes in and it's a really difficult situation for him, in the sense that he has just been hired. He's also returning, so he doesn't want to make any profound interventions or step on people's toes. He's also in Cathy's shadow, considerable shadow to be in, and they have this year of co-directorship. I think it's a tough spot for him. The biggest issue he is dealing with—so he has the post and he's also dealing with that fallout. One of the biggest criticisms, and valid ones, is the staffing.

Q: Governance issues.

Cooley: Yes, governance issues, and how do you reorganize the staffing to be more responsive, to do more? You have this endowment, you do all these things, but you're not getting a lot of payoff for it, and so part of it, as I understood the critique, isn't just that you're anachronistic or you're Cold War or whatever. It's like, What are you doing? What are you actually producing? Tim recognizes that. His work on the staffing issue, the behind-the-scenes work—absolutely critical. I take over the Institute at a time in which also there's some new hires, and which the staffing is functioning really well, and I feel this capacity that we can do things. That's all thanks to him, and sorting that piece out, promoting Alla [Rachkov], essentially making Alla the operations manager and chief of staff. That's big. But another couple of things that he did, giving us bylaws, governance, and that's really important. The sense that we study Abkhazia, we don't have to be governed like it. Initially, part of where we had gotten that was quite low was this sense that it was us versus administrators, and Tim tried to change that culture a bit. Any time you become defensive, you think, "Oh, the administrators are coming after us." You get in this combative mode, and he really changed the tone of that.

Other things: I think he first floated the idea, maybe we should move to two-year postdocs. Great idea. It's really worked out well. This is a massive asset that we have now, because we went from having four one-year positions where they wouldn't do anything, and under the old financial manager we were squeezing everything we could out of them, give them a minimal fellowship with no health care, one year. We never saw any of them. To this idea, if we could actually pay them, bring them here for two years, they could also teach a class every spring, give them renovated desk space—which, we renovated that part right before I took over—and lo and

behold, they're a great group. They're here, they're involved. They're also the ones doing cutting-edge research. They chair and serve as discussants on various events. They're really a key part of our community.

Q: They probably also really change the level of influence that you have as an educational institution.

Cooley: I think so, I think so, and reputationally. Now, all these things go together. That's my own governing philosophy: if we are well governed, if we show that we have vision and that we are self-reflective and that we're not afraid to tangle up and be involved in big debates, then even though people might not agree with all the initiatives and all the things, they'll respect us that we're players and we have a voice. That, then, allows us to do other things. When you're defensive and you're crouching inwards and you're trying to hold onto what you have, I think the natural inclination is to tug on those threads even further, and that's how I feel about this policy-regional studies debate, and that's my second big motivation. The first motivation being capturing knowledge. Turning this from this perceived liability to an asset, looking at us. Let's talk about this evolution of policy relevance, because it's not just us. It's a story about think tanks. It's a story about funding sources. It's a story about changes in the university. It's a story of disciplinary norms, and it's a story of, just, the world changing.

All of these things are bound into this idea that somehow area studies is or isn't policy relevant, and making this kind of a case for that, for what I think has gone on in a lot of other places, everywhere with its own flavor, of course, I think was really important. Tim lays out a lot of the

important structures on which we can start grafting things now, going forward. The other thing that he does is that he's determined to get a Russian imperial historian. He rightly calculates that and he comes to the Ex-Com with it, that we need more faculty and we can't have a serious regional institute without a couple of historians of Russia. We've also lost Bob [Robert] Legvold. We're losing faculty. Rick [Richard] Ericson. We're losing faculty who have an interest in the region, so that's also a big part of what he does. He then has to deal with a lot of bureaucratic things, organizational things, or he comes up with this idea of creating three deputy directors as a way of keeping people placated. That was quite innovative, I think, and smart, to handling the directorship transition and competition, which he did well.

I would be curious to hear his take. Maybe because he was just new and didn't want to step on toes, I think maybe he didn't feel like he could have done bolder stuff. Maybe just didn't have capacity to do it. I mean, he left it in the sense that he really could, but again, everything is in place now, really, because of Tim. Cathy offered a public face and engagement, but there was this chaos underneath and unclear responsibilities and unclear outputs. Tim gets that edifice in place, and now we can all start thinking about these different projects and roles.

Q: Thank you. It seemed to me that he just, he addressed most of the base concerns of the ARC [Administration Reforms Committee] report with great fidelity.

Cooley: He took it seriously, and again, very skillfully doing it in an effective but quiet way. In a way that didn't reify, "Oh, they're coming for us!" I think faculty were reassured by the way that he did it.

Q: Tell me about the competition for the directorship. Kim Marten came in for a year, as interim, and what was it like? What was the process like? When did you become interested? Start anywhere you want. [Laughs]

Cooley: I was approached to be interim director. I didn't want to do it because I was starting with the chairship at Barnard and I just thought, You can't do both. This is a full-time job, being a chair is a full-time job, and it wasn't for me. When they came up with Kim as being acting director, I had no issue with that. I thought she would be good. I did think it would set up an expectation at some point, which is only natural. I thought Kim was very effective. I did some things back then under her year that were to bear intellectual fruit, like, we organized the workshop on offshore Central Asia. That first conference then led to the special issue [of *Central Asia Survey*], which then led to the collaboration with John [Heathershaw] on that book. I know Kim tried to resurrect the NAC [National Advisory Council], dust that off and get that functioning again. She really wanted to focus on development issues and networking. It's a tough spot, because frankly, you can't have a lot of impact in a year. I see this place and I wonder if there could be impact in three or five years. You can only set a few major things up.

Q: It's a long-term proposition.

Cooley: Profound things are, right? Because, structurally, there's a process and you have to follow the process. You've got to bring people on board, and even if you want to go quickly, institutions just don't move like that. I was doing things related to Harriman in terms of some of

my own work. *Great Games* came out. We're getting some attention there. Then the last two years, Tim asks me to become deputy director for programming. I'm doing programming, anyway, and I think it's a nice way of learning about the Institute. Frankly I hadn't been systematically engaged, really, until he asked me to do that in 2013, those last two years where I start learning about the staff and the programming. I start conceptualizing about programming and what interventions we can make, and what kinds of events we can throw and what types of dialogues we can help to facilitate. I had been involved in the Core Project with Jack, on the human rights we did together. That was a nice attempt to bring together academics and practitioners to study these various topics, and the backlash, the rankings. It became part of the rankings project with Jack.

I knew a little bit there, but I started thinking more in depth about how to conceive of programming. What's Harriman's role? What should you bring in? What's your value added, as opposed to someone else? And that's where I thought Harriman should be a strong voice of academic research, but academic research in dialogue with other kinds of communities. Not just policy communities. Practitioners, recent grads, alumni. In other words, that academic component should always be there, but it's not exclusively what we do.

Q: Thinking of your father being a journalist.

Cooley: Yes, maybe, maybe. So programming started to have that kind of face to it. Of course, it starts getting tricky with the Ukraine crisis. What's going on? Then you start getting this anti-Russia backlash, I start getting criticisms about, Oh, why is Harriman having this event and that

event? The other thing I realized in my programming years, and this has also shaped my work with OSF, that the social media world is a full contact sport. Online especially. You're going to get pushback and you're going to get burned. You better be used to that, and you need to have an understanding of why you're doing something and a good reason for doing it. Criticism is part of it, but I remember we had once this situation of this Azerbaijani oil consultant who didn't disclose her ties with SOCAR [State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic] and in fact, the *Times* had to publish a retroactive disclosure statement when they published a fluffy op ed piece by her. I remember Energy had invited her and we were cosponsoring and we basically told her, unless she chooses to disclose her ties, we have to remove our co-sponsorship. She refused, we removed our co-sponsorship, but this RFERL [Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty] correspondent found an event flyer from before that showed it was co-sponsored by Harriman versus after. So I talked to him. "Why did you withdraw? What happened in between?" I wasn't going to get into it with him, I just said, "Harriman no longer sponsored the event."

In any case, it was a real learning experience that you are in there, and I think we had the right motivations and the right set of principles. The only thing that we should have done differently—and this was a suggestion I got from Justin [Burke] at EurasiaNet, who I knew at that point even though we weren't formally affiliated—is, "Look, anytime you change something on a website, you need to note the change." You need to note that—and that's actually the fully transparent way of doing it. I was like, "OK, that's a lesson learned," and I told the staff. So I managed a few of those sorts of situations, institutional mini—not to say they're crises, but just tough situations. That was my big experience there, but it was doing while I'm running a full-time job in terms of the chairship. I'm becoming more and more interested in Harriman affairs and Harriman

governance. The directorship, it's something that Cathy had always talked to me about on a very personal level.

Q: I wondered about that.

Cooley: She had always said, "You're going to be a future director." Cathy had always encouraged me and told me that I was going to be a future director, that I should at some point, I think before she knew Tim, she's like, "You should've gotten tenure one year before!" Not that she didn't like Tim, she just didn't know what he was going to do. That was nice of her, and I always talked to her about it. I wasn't actively involved in campaigning for it. I think people knew I was interested and I let people know I was interested. My main goal was actually going to be to work on the National Advisory Council side of things, and in an advisory role, and sharpen Harriman's public vision and interactions. That's where I thought I could bring most value, and that was through my own board work I had done with OSF or Human Rights Watch and the other advisory bodies I had served on.

After having attended a couple of meetings with the NAC, I thought there were things that we could do differently to sharpen it up. It was great that we had re-established it, but we needed, in my opinion, to give it more definition and more of a sense of responsibility than it had, and change the psychology. What I saw was that the board was being asked to comment on open-ended issues and questions, as opposed to making them weigh in on very specific things and respond to specific requests. It's always a fine line, managing that. It was also too big for my tastes, anyway. I understand why it was so big. Friends of Harriman. Really, to get an effective

unit, part of what I'm still trying to do is to get the numbers down but get it more responsible and then rotate people in. It's a very historical and accomplished institution, but we also need a little more diverse experience, jobs, background. We could do with new members who are younger, who have interacted with the region in different kinds of ways, all of that. Also, then I have the oral history idea. That's my other goal that becomes formulated.

Q: Let's talk about that for a second, since you bring it up.

Cooley: I start seeing it as a kind of an institutional opportunity and obligation. What I realize, frankly, and this is the connection I make after the election, is three years isn't a very long time. I start talking to George Gavrilis about this. What would it take in terms of timeline, and he starts telling me what the timeline is, and it's like, "We have to move now." Actually, if we wait two years, the way thoughts percolate, it's just not enough time, and I know Cathy—I had talked to Alla about it—Cathy had tried to do something similar with a postdoc who I think she tasked, like, "Yes, go find some stuff out." But again, so well-intentioned, right? Just not understanding what your [oral history] norms are, what your timelines are, the resources involved, just the set-up. To me it was all an education, and George helped me realize that and working with you and your meetings did that, too. The adjustment I made is I realized, "No, this has to happen basically immediately," if it's going to happen on the scale that we want it to, and it's going to have the influence it has to.

Q: Well, we might not have had Jack [F.] Matlock [Jr.] if we'd waited. Or Mark [von Hagen].

Cooley: Yes, and there's that part of it too. I think it's driven by those two things. The desire to capture the institutional knowledge, doing a theme that's self-reflective, that takes this criticism but actually exposes it to a rigorous analysis and intellectual query, and realizing that we have been imperfect and there's all sorts of dynamics here. Then the other thing I start seeing more and more of: the time issue, as I teach "Legacies" the first time, and certainly the second time while this is going on, which is the introductory MA course, is I start to realize—we talk a lot about Soviet nostalgia in Russia. There's an awful lot of Harriman nostalgia here.

Q: Oh, there is. Absolutely.

Cooley: It becomes more and more fascinating to me what that involves. I think this is one of the areas of the project I find exciting is just this nostalgia that informs a lot of people who pass through this era in the '70s and '80s, where supposedly everyone was focused on Russia and Russian relationships and it mattered. What we said mattered. To me, it's this sort of ideal type that doesn't even hold up on its own terms, and also masks a lot of profound problems and issues that were going on at the same time. The academic battles, the exclusion of emigres. It was a terrible place for women to work in. Everyone was doing their own kinds of side deals and forging their own networks. The Institute's reputation was always very strong, but I think there was this over-idealized golden age of Harriman, when we celebrated having voice and respect and resources, more than having actual [policy] impact. That's my sense, anyway, and hopefully this is one of the themes that emerges.

I think that, again, being reflexive about this is really important, otherwise you can't go forward. Especially now, and then it all comes together. We get asked by Arts and Sciences to be reviewed. Two months in I get a note from David Madigan notifying me that we will undergo an ARC review. I have to deal with that ARC review, right now, as a governance issue, not just as an oral history issue. I think in the end, my first year I couldn't get to—I still haven't, in some ways—the things I actually wanted to do, because we had to plan for the ARC review, the MA program was unfocused and I had to make some interventions there. All that consumed a lot of time in year one that I hadn't realized, so I feel like the board matters. This year, now, we're turning to it more. Also, making Gail Buyske chair was really important, because her day job is consulting for boards, so she understands how boards operate. She's very effective. She's got great ideas; she is personally reaching out to every NAC member. She is driving, with my input, a lot of the agenda at our NAC meetings. The meetings are sharper now. Really, I hope she's a partner, if I extend, for another four years, because I think really the goal here should be the seventy-fifth anniversary. That, to me, is the strategic marker for fundraising, self-definition, development.

The oral history project becomes this capturing of knowledge, but it becomes this forward-looking opportunity as well, and then it starts interfacing with all of these issues that are coming up that are governance and administrative issues. A lot of things that have changed that I think you can't fully appreciate until you're in the seat. Doesn't mean I'm the only one who understands and who can fix it, it's just that it requires a macro perspective. For instance, take the state of the MA program. I didn't realize MA programs had become competitive over the last five years, and that topic programs now give MA candidates full rides and stipends. I hadn't

realized that, but the landscape's completely transformed. The year before I became director, only three out of the eighteen students who were accepted actually enrolled here. That's not acceptable. Exactly, so what went wrong? Well, we didn't offer them any money. Who were we offering money to?

Q: Listen, I know that problem.

Cooley: We're offering money to SIPA students. Well, we're not part of SIPA anymore. What are we doing offering money to SIPA? None of this was ill will or anything, just these kinds of legacies and different parts of the Institute doing things on their own terms, without seeing the bigger picture. Sorting that, figuring all this out took a while, and it involved a lot of moving pieces. I'm still not sure we've completely sorted it out, because I think students want to know what they're getting. What are you going to do for me? Georgetown, I think, is one of the competitors now. Well, they're in policy. They're close to the State Department. What do we offer? Oh, we offer you the Harriman name. The Harriman name is awesome! We did all these great things in the past. We've got to go beyond that, and I think part of the problem is that under Cathy's tenure, the MA program was such a success because there weren't any competitors. Under Cathy's tenure, the MA program was bringing in a dozen students and they're almost all paying full freight and tuition and it's generating oodles of pass-throughs and pools of money for the PhD students. It's this golden time, but it's just not the world we live in today. Until you experience it, I think it's hard to appreciate that and to convey to my fellow faculty members how the MA landscape is different now, to the point where I've heard some ask, "Well, do we need an MA program?" You know, we don't have an option. If we're going to be Harriman, a

regional institute, we have to have an MA program. So how do we do it in a refreshed and more effective way that reflects the needs of our students today? It's also difficult to get some fellow faculty members of the mindset that there is a zero-sum quality to it, and that gains for the MA program mean losses for PhD students.

Then there are certain things that I did that I felt like they had to be done, and I'm willing to take the hit for them because it was my first year. Cutting off fellowships for PhD students after their seventh year. We used to support a lot of Slavic students. Eighth, ninth, tenth years. I called them the Peter Pan Fellowships, and I understand this was part of the appeal of the Slavic program, pointing to Harriman's support, and one of the ways they perceived themselves as competing for good students. Very honestly, that's not the relationship I want to have with Slavic. I want to do everything I can to support Slavic students, but I want to do it on the front end. I want to help recruit top students here, I want to give them resources while they're here, I want to be involved in defining their projects, bringing in mentors, sponsoring their workshops, supporting their summer travels. What I don't want to do is give them a lot of money in year eight, nine when they're just kind of hanging on and they already have their projects and they're immersed. I don't think that's a good use of Institute resources.

Really, the policy I decided on was the Arts and Sciences policy. We're part of Arts and Sciences now. We're not SIPA, so the policy should be, you can get support up to and including your seventh year. After that, you've got to go elsewhere, so I think a lot of people were unhappy about that, just because there wasn't a lot of warning about it. But it's also the one issue I didn't want a transition period on, because if you have a transition period then you still face the same

pushback, then the next generation of grad students, “Well, why do they get it and not us?” I would much rather yank it. I think now, there’s been an acceptance and an understanding of what they want to do, and I think it’s up to me to try and give Slavic energy and institutional boosts. Also, I really appreciate the direction Slavic is going in at the moment and how it is boldly becoming more multi-disciplinary. The new hires that they have, they are important steps and in line with what the Institute wants to do as well.

Yes, I think a lot of this stuff is bound into institutional questions of our mission, where should resources go, all these kinds of allocation decisions. We still have limited resources, even though we are in a better position compared to most of our peers. That makes us lucky, but then managing that is also a challenge, because we want to continue to support quality work and new and impactful research, not just defend what we have. We got here talking about the oral history question, still.

Q: It really blended that with the intentions in your first year. Self-examination, internally as well as externally, which makes a lot of sense. It’d be interesting to compare the two.

Cooley: Yes, actually, that’s a really good way of putting it. I think the two of them informed each other, and especially when you think about, What does a forward-looking agenda look like? I think that’s a tough one.

Q: I really appreciate your talk about Cathy because I can see how she influenced you, and that you want to have the same energy and forward-looking agenda, that that is your goal, to broaden, to make it more relevant.

Cooley: I think that's right, and I also think that for me—and this is my opinion but obviously it also influences some choices I make—even though we are now parts of Arts and Sciences and got knocked out of SIPA, I actually think institutionally the future of regional studies lies in working more with professional schools. I actually think that are important partnerships—presuming you have them in your community, but we do here, we're blessed—think about the [Columbia] Journalism School. What are the issues that they're facing now? It's fake news, it's the digital world, the propaganda debates—

Q: It's the same issues.

Cooley: —it's RT and Sputnik, state-run media. It's all these issues, profound issues that impact the public sphere. So Journalism is a natural partner and we do a lot with them. SIPA, of course, but also potentially Social Work [Columbia School of Social Work], Law [Columbia Law School], Public Health [Columbia Mailman School of Public Health], Architecture and Planning [Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation]. I think all of these areas are ripe to have good contextual multi-disciplinary knowledge meet professional development and training. It doesn't mean abandoning the Arts and Sciences mission. It just means expanding what we do, but also seeking enthusiastic and willing partners. Again, I think you need the infrastructure in place to be able to do that, and especially with the Journalism School and with

SIPA, we're lucky to have that here. It's a profoundly different state of affairs than it was at the end of the Cold War. There was only one way to engage with Russia; that was high politics. Diplomacy and maybe journalism and academia.

Q: Fantastic. So, of course I forgot my watch, but it's—

Cooley: Should we pause there?

Q: I think we have about two and a half hours. We can take a pause, if that's good with you.

Cooley: Yes, that's good. We'll pick up. If we have to do another one or two, I'm fine with that.

Q: Oh, great. Thank you so much.

Cooley: Absolutely.

Q: Great session, thank you.

Cooley: My pleasure. Went by quick.

Q: [Laughs] It did.

[END OF SESSION]

ATC

Session: 2

Interviewee: Alexander Cooley

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark

Date: June 2, 2017

Q: This is June 2, 2017 with Alex [Alexander] Cooley, session number two, and thank you so much again. I'm going to test your sound levels for a second, if you just say, "Hello."

Cooley: Okay. Hi!

Q: You've got this great, booming voice.

Cooley: Nice to be back.

Q: Nice to be back indeed. I wanted to follow up on a few things from last time. As we discussed prior to this, this should really be a session on the institutional history of Harriman. One area that I feel like I didn't get enough information from is how you think about human rights work. I know you've been very involved in that outside of Harriman. Especially given what's going on these days, where does human rights fit in area studies and in Harriman?

Cooley: It's a great question. It's a tough question, I think. Human rights were a big part of Columbia [University] and of the Institute's history. It's been a research focus. Scholars like Peter Juviler, who also combined legal questions, would keep the focus on human rights. Of course, Helsinki was a big part of the whole geopolitical apparatus of the dissident movement,

the delegitimizing Soviet Union. In the 1990s, we continued the human rights trend; both academically in terms of this growing field, it was viewed as this distinct sphere in some ways. There was this literature that NGOs [Non-Governmental Organizations] were principled actors, and so we should study them in a different way in their actions than we do, say, for-profit corporations or power-hungry governments.

We placed a lot of Harriman graduates in positions dealing with the region. Just to name a few: Rachel Denver, Human Rights Watch; Steve Swerdlow, Central Asia Coordinator, Human Rights Watch; Nate Schenkkan, who's at Freedom House now, who oversees *Nations in Transit*, one of the most influential publications on our regions, and many others. We have a network of both classical scholars from the Cold War, who paid attention to these human rights governance issues. Then, post-Cold War, who went into this new third sector that just erupted and boomed in the 1990s.

One of the things that you've seen is that the region, starting in the early 2000s, started to become Ground Central for the backlash against human rights—at least as we had conceived them and practiced them in the post-Cold War era. And backlash not only in the sense that governments didn't like it, and tried to block the activities of human rights activists, but a lot of the analytical and intellectual groundwork of the backlash has been pioneered in our region. So when you think about the 1990s as a time in which NGOs were supposedly borderless—norms disseminated both through international organizations and through principled individuals and norm entrepreneurs. There was a sense that these kinds of liberal values were on the rise. They were more influential, maybe, in Eastern Europe, or in NATO and EU-aspirant countries than

they were in the East, but it was more one of degree. I think what you've seen—and actually, I'm biased on this, but I think Central Asia was a big pioneer at this—was the active combating of liberal norms, the formulation of counter-norms to emphasize security and counter-extremism, or counterterrorism. We had that too, of course, post-9/11 [September 11, 2001 attacks]. But in Central Asia and in Russia, you had these categories grow quite extensively.

Then Russia started pioneering, in the late 2000s, this is really gaining momentum, the traditional values counter-norm. This idea that Western Liberalism has become morally decadent, it's hypocritical, or practices double standards. And that the traditional values agenda, while it differs from region to region, doesn't impose itself in the same hegemonic way. It respects the unit of the family. It respects the role of organized religion in public life. Then I think from the outside, it's got a pretty virulent anti-LGBT agenda, and also, disturbingly, has even ventured in normalizing domestic violence, and decriminalizing it. In some ways, I think policymakers were slow to see that this was going to be important. There was a sense of denial, that, "Okay, this is just kind of Russia trying to act up." But I didn't think we gave it enough intellectual credence, and now it is having an impact. Now you see new types of transnational alliances on the traditional values agenda.

Then China was a big part of this, too, with their idea of civilizational diversity. All civilizations are great. Civilizations don't tell other civilizations what to do in their internal affairs, and this kind of sovereign non-interference is a quality of civilization discourse. You start seeing this in Central Asia, and then you start seeing some really interesting institutional manifestations. It starts with the Russian NGO bans, and the passing of a foreign agent law where organizations

have to register, self-identify as foreign agents if they receive money from abroad. That cuts off funding, the stigmatization's too much for a lot of organizations to bear. To, then, we move to the declaring these groups "undesirable organizations," where you just outright ban them, including IRI [International Republic Institute] and OSF [Open Society Foundation], the US-Russia Foundation, the organization that's been trying to promote civil society and projects in the country. The color revolutions are a big part of this across the post-Soviet region in 2003, 2004, 2005 because to Moscow, they signal—and to the region's governments—the conflation of the democracy and human rights promotion agenda with regime change. At which point, then, it becomes a security threat. They view this kind of "values promotion" as kind of threat to their regimes and to political stability.

All that happens in the 2000s. The tipping point is about 2004, 2005. Since then, human rights activism has been on the defensive throughout the region. There's been more and more road blocks, more and more counter-norms. Even law. Even in these kinds of regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which I study, or CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States], you have these spaces under the banner of fighting extremism or terrorism, where you sanction things like bypassing national asylum laws, allowing security services in one country to conduct investigations into the affairs of another. You sanction common blacklists, and the pooling of political opponents on these kind of blacklists. Even actual abduction and renditions are legally justified. It's not just been defensive, it's created new bodies of anti-human rights law that then get invoked as justifications by prosecutors and government officials throughout the region.

I think all that has happened—unfortunately, I think what broke out in Eurasia in the 2000s, you’ve now seen replicated in other parts of the world. You’ve seen crackdowns on NGOs everywhere. The attempt to use regional organizations to push back against the idea of hegemonic Western universal norms. Not without merit; these accusations of hypocrisy and double standards being used to delegitimize the civil society space and Western doubters everywhere, from the Middle East to Latin America and African countries. Then the traditional values agenda, again. Then I guess the final wave of this, if we want to historicize this as best as we can, is then the populist backlash. Not just with Putinism, but places like Hungary, with [Viktor] Orbán, this idea of kind of embedding yourself in the liberal structure, but then promoting anti-liberalism as a way of maintaining your power base and appealing to the masses, and taking the benefits that you want from associations with the liberal order, but then openly and brazenly rejecting the values of it. Now, you have seen with Brexit and with [Donald J.] Trump, that’s come back home.

What I find so interesting is the means of clamping down on civil society or protest, or free press. Terming journalists “enemy of the people”—these kinds of narratives, they might not ultimately succeed here. Our institutions are more durable than some of my other post-communist colleagues’—although I think that’s been an interesting development too, making the post-communist analogies to Trump. But the illiberal backlash is something that’s front and center of our politics now, too, here. This is something that perhaps we didn’t look at as seriously enough as we should have, or give it analytical attention.

Human rights has had quite an arc here, from playing an important part in US-Soviet relations and its links to the dissident movement, to the wild and open, optimistic 1990s, to then experiencing these losses and rollbacks over the last fifteen years. One wave and one country after the next. Having said all that, we still have Harriman students who are really interested in human rights, and want to go into human rights in the region, and want to study and make a difference, and be placed at leading organizations. I think for that reason, it's important that we continue with that as a vector. We do receive criticism from certain friends of Harriman, and sometimes we are even accused of being too much of a human rights-promoting NGO. But that's a criticism—we need to examine that seriously. Part of what we see is Harriman students don't go exclusively into diplomacy anymore, or academia, because the world is much bigger than that. The networks and fields are much more expansive. In the 1990s, we engaged in outreach throughout the region, and the non-for-profit sphere was one of those areas. It's a space that we've done really well in and we'll continue to engage in.

I think there's a lament there, too, by some critics that somehow there's a hierarchy of priorities that Harriman should have. The high politics of foreign policy engagement and security issues like arms control or defense policy should rank above the low politics of NGOs and human rights promotions. I reject the premise of that construct.

Q: Thank you. I was struck in your book—and this may seem like a diversion question, but hopefully it's not—when you pointed out that, in fact, you concluded that Central Asian countries do want Putin as a strong man. There's a certain reality base to the way that you write. We see that in our society now, too, this desire to be governed by a strong man. I'm going to

relate this to what you just brought up about the hierarchy of needs or the hierarchy of priorities. It seems like the world is changed in a way that makes the mission that questions that hierarchy. Can you speak to that a bit?

Cooley: One of the real advantages of being at Harriman is that we're a relatively well-endowed, well-resourced, multi-disciplinary, flexible, regional institution. The responsibility that comes with that is when the world changes, you have to think about how you are going to address these changes, how you're going to position yourself, whether this is cyclical or something deeper is going on. How does this affect perceptions of the region? How does this affect your core mission?

Within this big trend of illiberalism in the world in general, I see Russia, and the study of Russia, at the front line, at the intersections of a lot of these nodes. The debates on media, for instance, are something we're really involved with; we've worked in some ways with the Journalism School about questions of state-sponsored media. Is RT a legitimate press shop or not? Why or why not? If it's just Russian propaganda, what are distinctions between other state-run media companies? Academics who study Russia and Eurasia have had an ongoing and interesting debate about, should you do RT or not? What are the circumstances in which you would appear on RT or not? It ranges from, "Never. It's all propaganda," to, "You should give equal access to—" I have one colleague who says, "I'll go, but only if it's live, because then I know it's not going to be edited or spliced and diced." Those sorts of questions. Or the whole kind of "fake news" debate; social media, its role; different modes of government influence over media content. All this stuff is very alive and our region provides plenty of fodder for this.

There's that, then I think the question of—and it's always difficult to project out—does this present a more fundamental challenge that the Institute has to address? Which is, the danger that Russia becomes increasingly viewed through partisan lenses in the American political establishment. And that the lines are drawn very starkly between those who believe that Russia interfered in the US election and is a geopolitical threat and foe, with a level of intentions to those that then go in the other way, all the way, and say, “No, Hillary Clinton messed up her own campaign. There's no evidence for collusion. Russia should be privileged as a partner.” It's important to disentangle these issues. One can be concerned about some of the evidence that's come out regarding Russian interference, and still believe Hillary Clinton ran a bad campaign.

But beyond this, I think the danger is, if Russia becomes a partisan issue, then we—and the Institute by extension—become implicated in domestic politics. I have to think about that, and think of ways to mitigate that—or turn that, ideally, into a productive exercise, an opportunity to think about, say, for instance, instances of mutual interference in each other's domestic affairs. Could we open a dialogue on that, or could we engage our Russian partners in a more historical understanding of each other's practices and norms? But just ignoring this, I think, is dangerous, and I don't think is wise in that, left to just the cable news cycle and so forth, Russia really will be demonized. Those who want better relations with Russia will also be forced to pick sides, domestic politics, or the international sphere. I think that would be unhealthy, too.

But I am encouraged that we have about Tim [Timothy] Frye, Kim [Kimberly] Marten are doing great media commentaries. They're very balanced. They provide good analysis and important

theoretical context about what's going on. They've been all over the news. I've avoided a lot of media calls on this issue, just because—I'm happy to address the issue now, for the purposes of the Institute's history. But I don't feel it's appropriate to be doing a lot of public media, and run the risk of representing the Institute's position on an unfolding scandal of what appears to be of significant proportion.

I'm also very happy to let people like Tim and Kim, who have the Russian expertise, be the educated voices in the public sphere. But I want to be very careful about how we present ourselves on this issue. But we have the obligation to address it, and to figure out constructive ways to engage with it. The core mission is always there, and always will be there; fostering mutual understanding and exposure to each other's viewpoints. But contacts and geopolitical circumstances change. You can't just lock yourself into one set of perspectives or one set of activities. Fostering exchanges may have worked in the 1980s, but maybe it's not that appropriate now. Or maybe you need different kinds of programs and outreach now. I don't know. But yes, this is a concern, and I think it's not going to go anywhere.

Also, this is an issue where, then, the politics of the region also potentially get mirrored into the politics of the Institute, too, where those who view Russia as a regional threat then use interference in U.S. affairs to underscore what they believe the Russians have been doing in the region for some time, too. Again, navigating the politics of that is tricky institutionally.

The other thing I think a lot about is, sometimes the problem is not mutual understanding. Sometimes interests are incompatible. I don't say that to be overly dramatic, I just think it then

necessitates different kinds of action, and different kinds of management imperatives. If the problem is that we don't understand Russia, we don't understand their grievances, they don't understand us, then the solution is more dialogue, more forums, more joint working groups, maybe joint papers, scholarly initiatives. But if the issue is, no, we understand each other, but our worldviews are incompatible on a range of issues—for instance, should we comment on the internal affairs and quality of democratic governance in each other's countries? Or does Russia have the right to determine the foreign policy choices of the other post-Soviet countries like Ukraine or Georgia and compromise their sovereignty? There are fundamental incompatibilities there.

One thing I would argue, instead of pretending that this can be washed away through dialogue, is to expose each other to these viewpoints and be honest about it. One of the things I found in teaching legacies when I had Dmitry Suslov from HSE, Higher School of Economics, come in and gave his lecture on how Russia views the post-Cold War region—a lot of the students were really stunned by it. These open admissions that Georgia and Ukraine don't have sovereignty, and they shouldn't. They found it shocking. On the other hand, I thought it was far more beneficial for them to hear it from him, and someone in his position than to pretend that the paradigm itself is unquestioned or unchallenged. In this case, then, the imperative becomes managing relations in a way that doesn't lead to big blow-ups, that doesn't lead to worse outcomes. Being aware of Russian sensitivities and viewpoints means maybe accommodating them in certain circumstances, but maybe not.

But I'm not, personally, a big believer in this paradigm that Russia and the US need each other to solve big-level problems. I actually don't think that's true, not in the global scheme of things. I think the US-China relationship is far more important on most global issues. Because once you get beyond, yes, a little bit on counterterrorism, or maybe something in the Middle East, Syria—maybe you do climate change, although we're the big laggards on that now—there really aren't a lot of issues on which Russia and the US cooperate in a truly impactful global way. We don't trade with each other. We don't have either the kind of robust economic relationship that could form the basis for more powerful internal lobbies like, say, the business communities. Yes, they are selected sectors and areas of economic cooperation. But I feel, in some ways, that sets up a dangerous false expectation to say that, essentially, the US and Russia can be global leaders on all these areas of governance. Also, part of what Russia wants to do is create very different global governance structures, in a kind of international revisionism.

It's tricky. None of this means that the relationship has to be as bad as it is. But it's important to be sober about what the academy can and can't do in a time like this. The real danger is that in the quest to promote cooperation and understanding, you target such low-level issues that you ignore the big stuff, in the interest of producing a paper on something that's not a priority for everyone; that's something that we agree on. This is the time to understand each other's perspectives and to think about them in a serious way. Even if we might not accept them.

Q: That's incredibly helpful. A couple of things. One is that in the focus on the present—which it seems like Harriman is focused more on that than in the past—it's a general trend everybody's talked about.

Cooley: Yes, I think so.

Q: You're really now in an interesting position about defining your methodology.

Cooley: Totally. Totally.

Q: It's so interesting to hear you talk about—you don't want to make statements on the press right now. Then, the focus on the media as a place to set potential—not agendas, but directions, is something that you're pushing back against a little bit right now as you find your own methodology.

Cooley: I think that's right. I think that's right. The focus on the media, and practice of the media as it relates to Russia, that's part of an expanding focus that we should have anyway in dealing with professional spheres of conduct. For me, this is the future of regional studies—even though we moved to [Columbia Graduate School of] Arts and Sciences seven years ago, and we appreciate the move—in some ways it's been liberating, because it's gotten us out of the whole having to be relevant to policy, which we were under SIPA [Columbia School of International and Public Affairs]. That's a bit part of what we still do, but part of being in our Arts and Sciences home, it opens us up to engage with other schools in the University. That's why I think Journalism [Columbia Journalism School] is such a wonderful partner. That's why Teachers College [Columbia University] is very interesting as a potential partner, when you think about globalization of higher ed, and especially higher ed in our region—can we train

students in that? To places like the School of Social Work—why not public health? In other words, Business School, obviously, and the Law School. They don't have to be a single focus, but these are natural partners. Architecture and urban planning, even.

Combining the resources that Harriman has, the interests in contemporary issues from multidisciplinary analytical perspective to issues of professional development and practice, that's a very natural space for a regional studies institute to be in. One, in some ways just the debates about area studies versus disciplines—to me, it's just a very 1990s kind of debate. It was interesting at the time, but it's not one I want to re-engage in, or convince schools of our value. Arts and Sciences, perhaps ironically, is a better platform to do that from, as they engage in more university-wide kind of outreach and building of our community. What was the original question that got me started on this?

Q: Just your methodology.

Cooley: Oh, the methodology, right. The other challenge of this on the methodology is, how do you deal with the transnational issues that have emerged? In the last twenty-five years, the region is no longer over here versus over there. That used to be the region, “Oh, you went over there. What did you hear? What did you see? What data did you collect? Where did you get access?” What you see in the 1990s is kind of the opposite, this idea that the region was now all of a sudden wide open to being integrated; our approaches, our methods. There was such an asymmetry of resources, of power. A lot of national archives, national institutions—even individuals in high-up places were relatively open to being interviewed, or helping out with the

research, in part because everything was collapsing internally. That's no longer the case. The barriers of doing research in the region now are high, and they're growing. Whether it's getting access, or interview procedures. Even getting research visas to go to Russia, and the sponsorship that you have to get. It's getting harder. It's not getting easier. There was this window in the '90s where it seemed easier.

That's one aspect. Then the other aspect is that at the same time, now, you have a lot more transnational influences in communities. That's something we haven't done a good job in addressing. That's something conceptually and institutionally—

Q: Can you spell that out for me?

Cooley: Yes, for instance, we know in the tristate area, there are over a million inhabitants of some sort of Eurasian origin. How can we interface with these communities? We're a university; we're not a community organization, and yet still we should be a center for—an example—conducting research on these communities.

Q: That's great.

Cooley: We should conduct outreach into these communities, in terms of our own role in the community, and our own volunteer work. In other words, I would like us to go beyond the K through twelve [kindergarten through twelfth grade] paradigm of educational outreach, which, frankly, we were never comfortable doing as an institute. I think we'd do a lot more good in the

actual Eurasian community. Tim Frye, for instance, worked on getting a public dual-language Russian school established on the Upper West Side; I think this is a great area of involvement for Harriman. Alla Smyslova's training of heritage language speakers and training of teachers can also be in this space. It's another great idea of what Harriman can do. Or creating more opportunities for scholars from abroad, or even from Russia—come over and look at the Bakhmeteff Archive [Boris A. Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian & East European Culture] here at the libraries. This is just a natural set of activities that's wide open to us. I would like to see us do more in this area. This is going to be a focus of mine.

But the way I see the communities out there is, immigrants, different generations—four, five I guess now, in the Ukrainian sense. Some groups are organized; some are not. The Ukrainians tend to be very well-organized, and also the cultural institutions are networked, whereas Russian Americans are more fragmented. Some are pro-Kremlin, some are anti-Kremlin. They break down all sorts of ways. That's a natural area, to reach out to new Central Asian diasporas; the Kyrgyz-American community is a very interesting one here, too, and we going to do a couple of events with them. Mapping out the Central Asian diasporas here is an important task. That's one category.

Second category, exiles. Recent and old exiles. We have these new exiles here, the Masha Gessens who were in Harlem, Sergei Guriev, who's a mild-mannered economist at the EBRD [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development], who effectively doesn't want to go back. In other words, how do these exile communities of the last five years compare to exile communities of other eras? Of the interwar years, and displacement from the revolution. I think

we can do a lot more on the history and role of exiles. Of course, it brings up institutional challenges. If you're going to network exiles, what's the intellectual justification of doing it? You don't want to be accused of just running an exile shop here [laughter]. But intellectually, we need to figure this out. How do you engage this, how do you study this as a phenomenon? What kind of role do they play? What kind of importance? Maybe there's some potential interest there. Also looking at the Russian community and its influence on Israeli politics. That would be one way of engaging with the issue of transnational networks. But certainly, these communities here are important. Maybe there's an opportunity, also to think about New York and Paris compared to, when you think about the European exiles and their basis. That's another area.

Professional communities is another one. When you think about occupations like finance, law, real estate, these are professional sectors where the ties are quite strong. I don't know if we can study them in the same ways. I do know that my academic searches in this area yielded very little, disproportionately to what you think would be out there, given what's there. But that's one of the reasons I started, last year, Russian legal initiative. We want to create a fabric of lawyers in the area who study Russia and bring them together once or twice a year, have a good academic agenda for doing it, get something that they wouldn't normally—put scholars who are working on things like Russian law, or shell companies, or arbitration agreements that might intersect with what they do. There may or may not be development initiatives that emerge out of that.

Those are the big major constituencies. Then figuring out a way in which Harriman can become a hub for highlighting the kind of cultural and social questions that these communities are

engaging with, as well as promoting research on these communities and with these communities. That would be ideal. But it's harder to do than in practice.

From a development point of view, we're getting to the point where a lot of these dual citizens—who have passports both here in New York and then might have one for London and might have one for Russia—are also thinking about what their philanthropic legacies are going to be, and what they want to be involved in. That's an opportunity to take the Institute forward. Now, you have to be careful in this area, especially when dealing with oligarchs and the like—witness all the controversy surrounding the Blavatnik Center [Blavatnik School of Government] over at [University of] Oxford. I'm not sure we'd make the same big move there—

Q: Can you explain that? I just don't know it. And maybe others would need the—

Cooley: This public policy institute that was endowed with a 70 million pound gift from Len Blavatnik, a Russian billionaire with both UK and US citizenship who was also a strong backer of Trump. Some faculty at the school have been reacting against these political ties, claiming they are antithetical to the mission of the university to promote an understanding of good governance.

Q: I see.

Cooley: But whatever it is, I think we have to try. It's okay to do that. One of the things—we don't have a counterpart global center. I think that's important. East Asia has Beijing in some

ways. Europe Institute has Paris. We're going to have a Turkish Studies Center, the Sabanci Institute here that will have Istanbul. We don't have a natural counterpart out there. But in some ways, the way I think about it is that we're a global center. We're a global center here in New York, we're a global node for these different communities. We occupy a unique position here, but also an obligation to think this through, and how we can integrate this into the activities of the Institute. Because to me, it's just increasingly anachronistic that the Institute can only be about sending people "over there."

Oh, one other area where we could do a better job is to also foster more intercommunity dialogues, relations. I would love to do something that's not public—we do a lot of things that aren't public—between, say, Ukrainian and Russian American communities.

Q: Oh, that would be fascinating.

Cooley: Then bring them together. Those kind of activities, I think, we can position ourselves in.

Q: That's almost fostering new cultural alliances.

Cooley: Yes. Yes.

Q: It's interesting, yes.

Cooley: Yes, possibly.

Q: Taking culture seriously in the same way that Cathy [Catharine Nepomnyashchy] did.

Cooley: Yes. Again, that's imperative. As long as we're reflective about why we're doing this, and what's the relationship to the Institute's mission. But these links between New York and Moscow or New York and Kiev—they're not going to go away.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: Ignoring them is also very odd. That's part of, also, why I want to introduce some of this in the curriculum courses on the Russian American experience class, Ukraine in New York. We didn't generate great enrollments the first time around this year, but we'll keep doing it for another couple of cycles, and then build them out.

Q: What are your enrollments?

Cooley: The Russian American course had four or five. Ukraine New York, there was a lot of original interest, but in the end [Alexander J.] Motyl only got two, which is too bad, since this guy is uniquely positioned to teach this class.

Q: Absolutely.

Cooley: We'll keep plugging it. Sometimes it takes a while. I know some students like to see a track record of classes. But it would be nice to do it, and also make it part of one of the curriculum routes you can take here, in addition to the security track, the human rights track, the media track and the things that we do.

Q: Before going to the institutional art questions, not literally art, but the evolution questions, I do have one more question about methodology, and it may be very premature. But just in the same way that we talked last time about how Mark von Hagen instituted a new way of understanding each group as studying the other; that you really need to—this empire is looking at that empire.

Cooley: Right, right.

Q: In terms of methodology, at what point does it become important to do self-examination in relation to the US now?

Cooley: I think it's really important. But part of the question is, which organizations are you going to look to for that comparison and that introspection? If you're going to look to the State Department, you see some of the same organizational pathologies that we've had in academia; this kind of demoting of the regional and the privileging of functional specialties. Well, that's also the case where you have trade and economic officers, and human rights officers who are not region-specific. They rotate from Ecuador to Kazakhstan, or whatever it might be. That's a focus. That's a paradigm in government, the reliance on functional experts.

On the other hand, if you look at NGOs operating in the region, they do have regional divisions and they do tweak and they manage. They also struggle with who's in the region and who's not. Is Turkey part of the Eurasia area? It's a natural conversation that a well-placed donor had. It's important to not necessarily just be locked in to what government is doing. Anytime you define a region, it's a political move. When the State Department took Central Asia away from Eurasia and put it into the newly constituted Bureau of South and Central Asia, it sent enormous geopolitical signals to Beijing and Russia that somehow they wanted to link Central Asia up to Afghanistan, take it away from Moscow.

Q: [Laughs] The intrigue.

Cooley: Yes, everything has an unintended consequence. As a regional institute in a university, getting a sense of how governments, think tanks, non-for-profits, how they're evolving and thinking about the region institutionally is also an important input for us. But my instinct is always—rather than cut something, it's always better to do more, and address the areas that we're weak in, as opposed to not do something because we didn't get it right, or because it backfired, or because someone's upset. That I don't think is the right way to manage the balance. The minute you start going that route, you start making choices and inserting yourself in ways that might become antithetical to the Institute's mission about fostering an understanding, academic research on these topics. You have to recognize not every topic is going to be treated seriously, or viewed even as legitimate by everyone associated with the Institute, and that's fine. I'll take the hit on that.

Q: Great. Let's get to some of the overall questions. One of the things that we haven't talked about so far is bringing in EurasiaNet, and I thought that would be fun to talk about. Just some line of talking about some of the ways you've tried to make certain accomplishments, and what has worked, and what is working. I'm also interested in your theory of risk, like you're interested in taking risks, big bets.

Cooley: Yes. EurasiaNet is an interesting window of opportunity as an organization—it's a news site. I had been involved in my role as an advisory board member for the Central Eurasia Project under Open Society Foundations. EurasiaNet operated under their auspices. When OSF made the decision to spin off EurasiaNet to the private sector, and give them a tie-off grant, I had still been in contact with OSF. I joined a reconstituted Eurasia program board a couple of years ago, but this was in the works even before. I had known Justin [Burke], and we had talked about it. What I saw as the potential benefit for Harriman is twofold. One is, everyone wants an online platform. But not everyone realizes the cost and the sheer effort it takes to run a blog.

Everyone wants to have their own blog, the Institute's blog. It's important to have a digital platform. In this day and age you can't deny that. What I saw in the EurasiaNet is the potential to have access to aspects of a digital platform that was ready to go with a highly engaged and educated readership, over ten thousand regular followers—and most of them with dot-edu, or dot-org, or dot-gov accounts. Potentially having EurasiaNet cover events here, the big events, research developments, to me, was very exciting. We wouldn't make them an arm of Harriman. That was a clear red line; we wanted to preserve their autonomy, both in structure and in

governance. We have a relationship between them. Nevertheless, to have them start covering Harriman affairs. Not just Harriman, other places that they could play this unique role of bringing academic analysis into the analysis of the region that they already do so well. That was number one, that we can get a digital platform that's ready to go for our most important events. I think we've done that successfully.

Then, B, was the more experimental issue. What could become of this? Could our students benefit from this by becoming correspondents, by writing book reviews? Could we host Harriman-driven multimedia content like interviews and podcasts? Could Justin, the managing editor, teach a class, which we could integrate as part of our curriculum, writing about Eurasia? Then also introduce our students to the challenges of digital media, because that's the space where students go to. Yes, maybe once in a while you get a correspondent in *Moscow Times*, or *Wall Street Journal*—Paul Sonne, who was an undergrad here. But then to actually design courses specific to things like running an online platform, data security, how to deal with social media—all these very contemporary issues for the digital world—make that part of our course and part of our curriculum to enable students who come here who want to go into that media space—we've placed students there quite successfully—to equip them even more. I think that was the vision there. It's more open-ended.

Justin just got the course approval, so he'll teach a course next year, or a half course. We'll see how that goes, and then we'll see how many students take advantage of it. I think first year, there was a little bit of hesitancy. Now, you're starting to see postdocs engage with the site, and write some commentaries.

So I have a dual hat. I'm a member of their governing board, and my Harriman Institute hat. I need to try and disentangle the two roles, inasmuch as you can do that. But I see a real opportunity in being able to experiment, and seeing what works and what doesn't. I think the process of doing that was very educational to me. I think, rightly, as it turns out, a lot of—I wouldn't say a lot, but some of our Ex-Com [Executive Committee] members were concerned why we're doing this. This was outside of their comfort zone; a digital platform—would we attract negative attention? OSF itself is an undesirable organization in Russia, so even though they'd spun off and become independent now, legally independent, would that create problems? In our meetings, when these issues were a concern, I went back to Justin, I said, "You have to address these. What's your position within the Russian media?" I then asked him to compile a memo detailing re-publication rates or where EurasiaNet articles are picked up. As it turns out, they're picked up all over from official Russian media outlets, even the business press as well as the more independent press. I brought that information to our Ex-Com members, and I think it satisfied them. I think the process worked well. The Ex-Com presenting a skepticism about it, and making me and Justin come up with sharper reasons, as well as the data backing up that would be of value here.

The process went on for about a year. There were some legal concerns. What's the relationship with Harriman? What's the relationship with Columbia? Do you use your own servers or not? All this stuff I hadn't really thought about, but I had to grapple with it. But it's one of mutual benefit. I feel, again, in the twenty-first century, given all of the public programming that we do, all the events that we do, all the hubs, that we just needed a much better digital platform than we

had. The website—it's fine. The staff does a good job keeping up with it, and everything. But again, as promoting the intellectual content, the substantial content that comes out of the Institute, we needed something in addition. EurasiaNet potentially offers that kind of platform.

And we don't want to be exclusive about it. That's one thing I've told Justin, go to Harvard [University], go to Georgetown [School of Foreign Service], go to GW [George Washington University], forge other agreements so that it's not a proprietary Harriman relationship. I think it would be self-defeating, too. It would create a backlash. We want to network other academics into this digital space, and have that. Then the final area that we want to explore is to have on the site a discussion about academic politics and academic conditions, like a state of academic freedom, archival access, geopoliticalization of academia. All of these are topics that—ASEEES [Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies] has dealt with some of them. But again, I think that's a natural spot for the site to go to. Then there are other things the site will try out that won't attract interest, and that will fail. My viewpoint on this as a member of the board of governors of the site is, "It's okay to fail. Just pull the plug quickly." It's okay to try things out. You want to try an IT kind of section, or whatever it is? Give it a shot for six months. If it's not getting either the clicks or the views, or it's just inconsistent with the other site's mission and it hasn't worked out, then pull the plug on it. That's okay. Because its core mission is so strong and its readership is so strong that it can take some chances in the things that it does. In some ways, it's a very similar risk profile to what we have. As long as we're secure in what our core mission is, we can try to have these different things.

The original contract is for three years. After that we'll re-examine the relationship, but I think the good thing for us is, it doesn't really cost us a penny. We just give in-kind services; office space, some contributions that way. We get a lot in exchange.

Q: Great. Fantastic. Building on some things we've talked about before and you've already mentioned this morning, you, and I would say Tim also, represent a real change within the Harriman Institute, and thinking, and methodology. What are the activities that you've taken on that you think best reflect your theory of global relations, and the Harriman mission?

Cooley: It's a good question. A couple come to mind. I think the oral history, in some ways.

Q: I wanted to ask more about that, too.

Cooley: Yes, yes. I think not only is it something that we needed to do, I think, as an Institute—just because I think we were losing a lot of Institutional memory with the passing of former directors, and an important professor like Cathy. But I wanted to take the mission's rich history, its accomplishments, and rather than be defensive about it—all the time saying, “Oh, but we used to do this,” or, “We used to do this”—actually turn it into a source of knowledge and understanding about broader trends that impacted the region.

I wanted to take these debates that we had with administrators or chairs of departments, or whoever, and actually turn that into something that was much bigger than the Institute itself that I think has impacted other regional institutes, and the university at large in North America. That

was the ambition. And also, learn unexpected things about ourselves, too. That's definitely part of it. So I just felt the time was right for that. Maybe it's a post-Ukraine thing, maybe it's a sense—you know, once again when these debates started flaring up, you'd see these op eds—what good is regional studies? Or the politicization of regional studies cyclically flares up when there is geopolitical turmoil. This happens so quickly. So let's take the lead on this. Rather than reacting all the time to accusations that we do or don't do this, or that we're anachronistic, or we're too Cold-War, let's take on a self-examination and try and understand why we made choices the years that we did. Then the other part of this to me is really intriguing—maybe this is the generational issue you also talk about—is, how do we historicize what we did in the 1990s? That's another part of this. And comparing it to what we were doing in the '70s and the '80s. I've been thinking a lot about it lately, because I'm a student of the '90s, a graduate student of the '90s.

Q: That's right.

Cooley: I took classes called Making Markets, on the political economy of the post-Communist transition, where everything was about the rise of global governance and globalization. I've thought about these issues a lot in my own work. Then, to think of them from an institutional perspective also. In some ways, I wanted to turn these debates into a permanent contribution that Harriman made, and also showcase the remarkable accomplishments of our faculty, and our students, and our networks.

Q: Absolutely. That I think we've done.

Cooley: Yes. And having a partner like you is so incredibly key to this, who understands both the Institution's mission and the Columbia context, and the University relationships, is a big part of this.

I think that was one. I think to give some intellectual—not redefinition, but just expansion. I think you can't be at a place like Harriman and not think about the regional institute enterprise.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: I think that's why questions of what I say, local Eurasia and transnational networks—intellectually, we need again to define where regional studies is, otherwise others will define them for us. Usually that's an unflattering exercise. There's the institutional questions, but then the intellectual expansion as well. That's why the diaspora exile professional community is so important, that we ourselves show that we're becoming more global and more transnational, the way other disciplines, or the way history is, for instance.

Q: Absolutely. You can look at the History Department website today and ten years ago.

Cooley: Yes. Yes.

Q: They're completely different.

Cooley: Completely different. I'm not a trained historian, but the more I learn about it the more I understand. Now, sometimes that creates interesting tensions. We have particular nationality and ethnic studies constituents and funds who want these issues studied in national contexts, and we try and communicate to them that the world of history is going in a different kind of direction. But there's still very rich conversation that can involve the present-day borders of countries that they want to study. I think the Institute should be going hand in hand with these trends, as opposed to just trying to buck them, or doubling down against them.

Then—what was it? There was one more.

Q: That's okay; it'll come.

Cooley: It'll come. It'll come.

Q: While you're waiting to think about that, I have another question, and you can either remember the first thing or answer the second question.

Cooley: Yes, yes. Yes.

Q: I'm just—both with you and Tim—I've been so fortunate to interview you two side-by-side. The training that you had, if you could talk a little bit more about the kind of training you had as a political scientist, because it seems to me that's part of the methodology—

Cooley: I'll do that, yes. Actually, I just remembered the—

Q: Okay.

Cooley: The last one is something we also covered. It's just also trying to make the curriculum much more contemporary.

Q: Right, and I did want to come back to the curriculum.

Cooley: Yes, and make regional studies more relevant beyond just diplomacy to these other spheres; New York-based spheres particularly, where we have contacts and opportunities. The UN [United Nations], the world of finance, the world of political risk analysis, the world of NGOs, the world of media—all these are natural partners and should be reflected in both what we do in the curricular side here, and the kinds of relationships we afford with other Columbia institutes or universities. That was the other piece of it, in terms of a more contemporary sensibility.

Q: Yes, you're really fortunate to be here right now, instead of DC.

Cooley: Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes, and this is where I get back to the—we still are very close with SIPA. We run a lot of SIPA classes, we support a lot of SIPA students. That's never going to go away. But that's where the divorce has been liberating [laughter] in some ways.

Q: It's nice when divorce is liberating.

Cooley: Yes, yes. Especially if we maintain good relations with the ex. But it's forced us into thinking through these issues in a way that we didn't have to before. We'll continue to do that. Then the challenge as a director is, how do we create institutional frameworks, especially amongst the staff, to then be able to carry this on? I think we're doing it. I think we're putting pieces together, to program coordinators who understand what our advantage here is; vis-a-vis Georgetown and what we're trying to do.

One other final area I want to mention is the NAC, the National Advisory Council.

Q: Yes, that's on my list.

Cooley: That's one thing, yes, that I thought I would devote a lot of my time to, and it actually hasn't worked out yet. I'm hoping if I get another three years, that'll become another focus in terms of also the development and consequences of that. My sense was that the NAC mirrored some of the—I don't want to say—they're not problems, but just some of the identities that Harriman had before. A lot of very devoted, very interesting, very successful people, mostly in the kind of classic foreign policy State Department kind of space. What I want to do with the NAC—yes, retain that, but also make its membership younger, more diverse, more representative of the experiences our students are going to go and have.

Q: That's exciting.

Cooley: I think that's important. Bringing people in who—maybe they can't be donors, but maybe they can provide internships. Someone like Alan Rousso, who got his PhD in Political Science, and is in external relations at the EBRD [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development]—we just concluded an internship program with him.

Q: That's fantastic.

Cooley: We're going to get our students out there. I think that's the exciting, big, big picture kind of thing, is to work on NAC issues. Then related to that, then how do you rotate people off? How do you do it in a polite, productive kind of way, and change the whole psychology of NAC— from being something that people are kind of, “oh, another NAC meeting, what are we doing?” —to give them well-defined agendas, specific strategic questions that they weigh in on, that takes advantage of the NAC's expertise and collective judgment, not make them think like we're wasting their time, and not give them open-ended missions? I think all that. I've been working with Gail Buyske, who I appointed as chair, who's just been a wonderful partner on this. Part of this is that she works as a consultant with financial institutions on their corporate governance and boards. What better person to run our board than someone who understands boards?

Q: Yes.

Cooley: She's been just wonderful in this space. I think that's a longer-term project than I had even realized and appreciated. But it's a really necessary one, because if we're going to have a

NAC, the NAC should reflect what the institutional mission is doing. I already have such high levels of commitment from people, from the members of our NAC, and then to keep it fresh and engaged—hopefully that could be another really big asset of ours, going forward.

Q: Fantastic. If we could just go to the training, the political science methodology.

Cooley: Yes.

Q: Also how that relates, then, to how you want to train your own students.

Cooley: Yes, so my methods training was pretty standard and basic in the 1990s.

Q: We did talk a little bit about it, but it just still looms as an interesting question, given the history of Harriman.

Cooley: Yes, and I think with methods, always it's important to be open-minded, but not religious about it.

Q: I like that.

Cooley: Because there's always waves of the new thing. I am very much in favor of our students being exposed to new methods across the field; not just in the social sciences, but in digital humanities and platforms. A lot of disciplines are just going to be unrecognizable in ten years'

time, and we're seeing that. I think that can and should be part of their training. At the same time, their ability in the program to broker different areas is also a critical part of this. It's not just regional studies versus economics, it's someone who's interested in public health and Russia, brokering the two. How are you going to broker the two?

Q: Right.

Cooley: Then you need a good data analysis background, and hopefully you can take the classes in that that you want or that you need. Or if you're interested in chasing down the offshore world in Russia and understanding how offshore finance operates, you need courses in finance, and you need courses in data-driven investigative journalism, and hopefully you can get that, too. In other words—I know Harvard has instituted a methods training, and they make that part of their curriculum. I'm a little more hesitant to do that. But everyone should have some sort of appreciation of what method they need to successfully broker the spheres that they're interested in. That's the key, figuring out that relationship. It's a very different world than it was in the past.

There's also some interesting questions, ethical questions—I don't want to get too hung up on this, but we're in the era of very large, natural experiments that are being run, when you're dealing with thousands of people and the settings far away, what are the ethical dilemmas of doing that?

Q: Give me an example.

Cooley: Well, for instance, you want to run an experiment on, What are the effects of giving aid versus just cash transfer? You set that up and you run it, kind of thing. Tim does a lot of survey experimental work. Especially in authoritarian settings, some of that's very creative and very pioneering, in which you get on a survey—you have items that are meant to reveal hidden preferences. So you get them to list qualities of leaders that you appreciate, and then circle the two most important ones—ways of getting feedback on an issue that doesn't necessarily put up your radar that this is a political question. Tim's the master at that. There's a lot of interesting stuff that can be done there.

Also, with GIS, information technologies, when you're talking about the intersection between understanding regions and regional developments, that's exciting. I've seen wonderful work in the sphere of regional environmental politics that really relies on that kind of GIS mapping, and things like the state of Central Asian glaciers, and the state of the Aral Sea, how it's shrinking. All that's really good. Certain media, too, looking at the impact of social media, how it's regulated, how it's controlled, the rise of bots—all this stuff that's so important in the Russian space is going to be part of what we do.

I'm all for it. I'm just always very hesitant when I hear someone say, “This is *the* big, indispensable thing.” So, yes, I want people to learn the methods, but then to retain the critical distance about which one is most appropriate for the question that they're trying to answer.

That's the key.

Q: Well, that's the methodology.

Cooley: Yes. Yes.

Q: That's great. I guess I want to ask another thing. How do you measure success? And you can take a few of your programs to talk about. Obviously with media, you can see where the hits come, and that sort of thing. But how do you measure it, and how do you think of training students to measure it?

Cooley: I think not very well. It's something we're trying to work on. One of the things I want to do is have a much more regular review of our curriculum and our classes, to begin with.

Q: How would you do that? Just have an external review?

Cooley: You could do it externally. We'll get to the ARC in a bit, I guess. One of the things we're doing is elevating the position currently held by Elise Giuliano, the lecturer in politics who we pay for. She does Russian politics, but she's also supervisor of MA courses. Elevating her responsibility to be much more involved in the supervision of the curriculum, and to be the direct reporter to the director who takes the lead in assessing whether we need this class, whether this class is actually doing the same thing as another class that we're paying for. Whether it's looking at the enrollments, looking at the quality of the course—identifying courses that we don't have that there is student demand for, and bringing those to my attention and being involved in the COI process from the beginning. We haven't had someone playing that role.

Q: Okay.

Cooley: That's really important that that gets delegated, so that's not all on the director, and it's not on all—as an operations issue. It becomes certainly an intellectual or a quality control issue, that can conduct that analytical review, and I need someone who's a seasoned PhD with—

Q: I ask with self-interest about this, running a master's program.

Cooley: Yes. That's what we're going to do. What I told Elise, “You're giving other parts of your portfolio up,” but I think it's a productive way to go. I also want this to be good for her professional development. I want her to take pride in assessing and continuously improving the curriculum.

That's the curricular side of things. The event side of things is much more difficult. Much more difficult. Frankly, I don't have any good answers because it's useful to think about it as an exercise. We talk about this sometimes in NAC meetings. But here's the dilemma we face: if it's all about enrollments and events, then we're going to lose these seven, eight person events that are specialized in, say, Soviet educational policy in Kyrgyzstan in 1960. Someone presents a book on this and they get a small audience. But, you know, it's Harriman. They're typically not going to get this engaged and specialized of audience in their home institution.

Q: I know.

Cooley: They're not even going to know where Kyrgyzstan is in their home institution.

Q: That's important.

Cooley: It's important. I don't want to lose that. And I want to make sure that the metrics that we set out don't cut out the sort of niche things that are so important as a scholarly community that we provide. That's the thing. Again, I fall back on, we need to do different kinds of events. We need to do workshops, academic workshops, where faculty take the leads. In that particular case, then I will ask for a metric. I will say, what's the product going to be? Maybe it's not edited volume. Maybe it's papers. Maybe it's memos online. Have something. Work with EurasiaNet. But in that case where the outlay is substantial, five figures and you're bringing people in, you try and get a product lined up ex ante. Or is there a publication plan, or something? For an event involving a public figure, it's a different kind of metric. There crowd size does matter, so you do want to get people to attend. I've become more and more hesitant accepting people giving talks here in big rooms, when I know I'm not going to fill the room. This is a big issue, because this can harm relationships when you get someone who's high up who speaks to a room of twelve people that takes eighty. It's embarrassing. Now, the problem is, it's New York. And there's a ton of things going on. There's a ton of things going on in the University.

Q: In Columbia.

Cooley: It's very hard to explain to the chief of staffs and publicists of a lot of these figures that I know that in Brussels, or Geneva, or wherever, that so-and-so would be a big draw. But it's very

hit or miss here. Each kind of event has its own kind of logic, and you set up different metrics.

At the same time, I think it's important that we log and we code our balance in social science and humanities.

Q: That's interesting.

Cooley: Right? So we do that. I think it's important that we record-keep on who we give money to in terms of their distribution by department and by school. We started doing that, too. This is all info that we gave our reviewers in the ARC project. I don't think we have to go data-crazy, but we need to keep some basic tabs on these things. We need to do a much better job of tracking where our students go, too. When you talk about certain metrics of success in terms of the program, ultimately, part of the success of the program has to be placement records. Like what kinds of institutions have we gotten our students in? Have they successfully used this as a vehicle for PhD programs and what they are?

Q: It just strikes me suddenly, and this is a little bit off our topic. but that one thing Carnegie [Corporation of New York] did after all of the oral history we did of them is, they asked us to come up with—or maybe you could do this for your own institute using the oral history—the ten most important grants in a hundred years. Or the most impactful. You might think of the fifteen most impactful alums.

Cooley: Very interesting.

Q: I mean, look at Matlock's story.

Cooley: Yes.

Q: He was studying here when he was studying literature, and the same kind of interdisciplinary—

Cooley: Yes.

Q: Might be interesting in years—

Cooley: That's a great suggestion, actually. I think the whole alumni part of this is a big part.

Q: What made them successful. Then highlighting them to students in historical context, but still.

Cooley: Yes, that's a great idea. Yes.

It creates a big need for some sort of culture shift, too—and this is the part I try and impart on staff, and faculty here—I want staff more aware of the kind of substantive and strategic implications of our interventions. I want faculty more aware of the operation side of things when they make requests. I don't want to burden them, say okay, "If you want to have a workshop, come up with a budget and let's use that as a—" We used to not even do that. [Laughter] I know.

It's unbelievable. It's hard, so it's this culture shift from being this source of Eurasia studies-related patronage to being just a little more self-aware of what we're doing, and why.

Again, we're in the incredibly lucky and privileged position to be able to green-light most proposals that have what we consider to be merit in these different ways. That's a wonderful position to be in. But at the same time, we shouldn't be squandering resources, or doing things just for the sake of it. It's important to have some sort of operating guidelines and principles, it's just which ones for which kinds of events and activities—that's the question there that we're still working out.

Q: Great. Thank you. I asked the hard question first, the metrics question. But I'm really interested in coming to the ARC issues are the stages of your growth and development that you've taken on, and how you see those stages in relation to some of the ARC recommendations, and where you are now in the ARC process.

Cooley: Yes. We just had the exit interview, or I just had the exit interview with the Executive Vice President and Dean of Social Sciences. That went well, and the report went well. It was a real tribute to what Tim had done in addressing that ARC report from the SIPA era. He was incredibly successful at getting the staffing redone, which involved a whole lot of thankless legwork. But the place operates pretty well now. The new hires are great, there's a sense of real camaraderie. The staff has lunch together every day.

Q: That's so nice.

Cooley: Book club together. They like each other, and they interact with each other, and it's important. Having more clearly-defined functional roles, and understanding who reports to who—all of that is really important. Management direction styles, they come and go. Mine is more my door is open, people can come in, but then I barge in on people. That's considered kind of rude in other places, but it's just the way we interact when we're kind of doing the million—

Q: Kind of an open-door policy.

Cooley: Yes, an open-door policy, with the acknowledgement that we're going to knock on each other's doors if it's important. That part of it is incredibly important, and that's something he deserves full credit for putting into motion. The part about humanities and social sciences, I think that was just a function of Cathy's role in the Institute, and I think just how the social sciences have relegated regional studies in the 2000s.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: I think it was both. I don't think Cathy had this agenda against the social sciences, it's just no one was engaging with the Institute, I think, more importantly. I wasn't even, back then. I started in 2001, so it wasn't a big part of my life. I was worried about trying to get my articles out and getting tenure.

For those two reasons, that's why it was humanities-heavy in the 2000s. I don't think there was anything structural about it. I will say, I think, also Cathy relied on certain figures who were teaching classes, who were adjuncts, who maybe didn't have the best interest of the Institute at heart, who were using the Institute in an entrepreneurial way to project themselves. That goes on in a lot of places. That piece took care of itself in the sense that we're all committed, you know, Kim, and Tim, and myself, Elise, and Jack is back in the fold now.

Q: Great!

Cooley: He really contributes and is engaged. That part of it is going well. The MA program, our SIPA certificates are also engaged. Then in terms of the Cold War mentality, that's the part Tim started, and that's the real part I want to take on; whether it's being reflective about where we're going through the oral history, whether it's about branching out into other areas other than diplomacy while retaining that core mission as one of the things that we do, to being more reflective about ourselves. When I hear 'Cold War mentality,' there's a kind of a romanticization of the Institute, and the good old days. Well, you know, the good old days were not all that good for a lot of communities. The women involved in the Institute, or émigrés who were distrusted. Not everything was that rosy. I want to be open to that, too, and the reflection and the criticism. Then, the mentality about what regional studies is, and what it's not.

That last part drives a lot of what I do. Then turning that into an opportunity to move away from that, but acknowledging what the lessons of that are, where others in my position want to fight the battle on Cold War terms.

Q: Can you say more about that?

Cooley: Yes, I think they want to say, “Well, Russia should be our geopolitical priority above everything else. That’s the mission of the Institute, is to make that happen.”

Q: Okay. I wasn’t aware that was—

Cooley: I don’t agree with that.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: I don’t think that’s our role anymore. Then it becomes also a generational question with people who feel that way and who don’t appreciate just the diversity of places our students go now, in [other] spheres.

When I first came in and I got this notice two months into the directorship, or two months into the semester, that we were going to be reviewed for the ARC process, I said, “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” especially, we were in the middle of all of the Ukraine crisis, and I wanted to do stuff on the NAC and I wanted to get the oral history going. But then I thought, You know, this might be an opportunity. The more I thought about it, it turned out to be that way, to really assess ourselves, the progress that we’ve made over the last ten years, which was, I think, substantial. Redefine what our mission is for Arts and Sciences, and then put it in a forward-looking

perspective. In that way, it's been very good. One of the things that's emerged from the ARC process is we're going to merge the East European Center. They want us to merge.

Q: Oh. Great.

Cooley: Administration is tricky. It can be a burden if there isn't a purpose to it, and you're not actually engaged in it. But if you use it as an opportunity to reflect and engage in exercises you wanted to anyway, and gather data about what you're doing, then it is a productive opportunity. Then what I'm most excited about our ARC evaluation is that this becomes, now, the baseline for my successor coming in, to then tweak it and take it in a different succession, but the major issues have been resolved.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: That's the great thing about it. In some ways the analogy I use is, Tim fixed the car and now we can drive it somewhere [laughter]. That's really key. Like, he had started driving, he wasn't just a mechanic. He's a great colleague, and he really provides invaluable advice, and this whole process has been involved as well. But that's the main legacy that comes out from here, that if and when we do this again—seven, eight, nine years, whatever the cycle is—that our baseline's a very different place than it was this time around.

Q: You're being terribly modest about your own role, when I asked this question about what you want to do, so I'm going to be bolder in my question.

Cooley: Okay.

Q: A, what have you accomplished so far that you feel enables the car to be driven, and B, where do you want to drive it?

Cooley: I think what I learned the first year was that involving myself, or learning about the micro processes of the different parts of the Institute, the curriculum and the MA program, the NAC and the governance, the events, the programming planning, and the sort of organizational composition, and the fellowships—a huge part of this is fellowships.

Q: Huge part of this.

Cooley: Yes. Understanding, in the financial part, how all this fits together allowed me to connect the big picture in a way that I couldn't appreciate before. Our committee says, "Hey, well, why are we giving fellowships to SIPA students when we're not part of SIPA anymore, and instead we're not giving fellowships to MA students, whereas MA is now competitive business?" I didn't realize MA was competitive business before I got here. But that's a big part of it, understanding the relationships between the different schools. Doing that has made me realize that we have a lot to be proud and excited about as an institute. In other words, we're going beyond the point of just wanting to please a certain group of administrators, or a certain group of department chairs, and instead add value to whoever—in terms of faculty and students in our University—wants to engage with us, and see, as a mutual thing, that they can enrich our

community in ways that we hadn't thought before, and we can support them. Getting the staff excited about that, that's really important about our role.

We don't need to take credit for it; it's not that. It's more that we can take pride in being the life blood of supporting the study of the region in different settings. The other big thing is just the sense of community amongst the incoming students. It's so powerful, and it's so nice.

Q: Lovely.

Cooley: What I've come to appreciate is the ways in which—I use this now in my kind of stock alumni event speeches, but I really firmly believe this. What I think is different about our graduating students and alumni is that they have massive visible and measurable impacts in the area that then next generations go and study.

Q: Oh, interesting.

Cooley: That they actively shape and change our own object of study.

Q: Oh, that's so exciting.

Cooley: In a way that I haven't seen—yes, at the general University-wide level, yes, sure, you see it. But here it's measurable. Like when you see the work the human rights people are doing,

or the stories the media people are doing that then get assigned in the curriculum, to obviously the policymakers, and members of civil society.

Q: That is so neat.

Cooley: That is the exciting part. Communicating that to them, making them realize that this is just the start of their connection, they're excited about that. I'm excited about that, too, because I think it's a different way to think about the students and the alumni as very actively involved, and then welcoming back—if they have ideas about programming or new types of networks, being open to that.

Expanding the boundaries of what our community is, and how we perceive it, and what it's doing, that's been important to me. On a personal level, this has been—I don't know, it's not like running a mini university. But I've gotten experience in the minutiae of a lot of different things that I didn't have experience in before. I really enjoy working on issues like the board; I really enjoy thinking about the conceptual aspects of how do you promote regional studies in this part of the world? I really enjoy the question of, what does a world-class curriculum look like? What should it be in regional studies? What are its components? Very specifically, how does it relate to the strengths of Columbia University in New York City? That's another part I've enjoyed. I think all of that—it's been fun. But none of that would have been possible without support of colleagues, and a good staff, to make it happen. That's a critical part. When they can make it happen, we can do more. Whereas if I had to handle a lot of these logistical issues myself, or bureaucratic battles, it would have been a lot tougher.

Q: It's exciting.

Cooley: In the driving mode, that's important, that the road is fairly clear. Then, I think just learning to deal that your actions are not going to be agreed upon by other people with lots of experience, and that's okay. Sometimes they're right; sometimes you have to be confident that you're right. In all of my experimentation, some of the new things that we're doing, I'm also very aware and concerned about reputational risk, maybe too much so for some people's tastes, and what we sign off on.

Q: Spell that out concretely.

Cooley: Well, I mean the Institute being associated with particular positions or platforms.

Q: How does that change from the past? Because, in a way, the Harriman wanted to be the advice center.

Cooley: Exactly. And isn't that interesting, like the go-to place for regional knowledge? I think the media space is much different now. This is a brutal—

Q: Brutal.

Cooley: The digital media space and regional studies, when it comes to Russia, it's full contact. It's like body blows. I get NAC members complaining about things that our former students have written about them, I said, "Well, don't go on cable news." The era of the venerated professor being listened to as a talking head is over. If you can't take the pushback, if you can't take the snide comments, if you can't take the scrutiny, then you shouldn't be out there in that space. It's part of what we do. It goes with the territory. Then, the question becomes, if we are doing things, we'd better have a very good understanding and justification of what we're doing. If we're going to invite someone controversial, we need to have a good justification for it.

For instance, we went through this with Bill [William F.] Browder. This was before my directorship, but I was running the social sciences programming and had gotten a lot of pushback about this guy. "This is just a charlatan. It's not a real book." We fielded a lot of complaints, and even negative blog posts about him. This is Columbia becoming immersed in activism kind of thing. I find Browder, and still do, to be a very interesting figure. I don't have to agree with the Magnitsky Act, or I don't have to think that he is without his demons, or issues or conflicts. But as a political theorist, maybe an amateur political theorist, he's incredibly influential. This is the guy who basically says, "You know what? What do autocrats care about?" They don't care about general sanctions, because they just pass them on to the cost of their societies—what do they care about? They care about having access to their money, and traveling and educating their kids. He's right about that. He's actually a hundred percent right about that. So the Magnitsky Act, in enshrining these individual smart sanctions, targeted sanctions against individuals for human rights violations. There's a real logic to that.

Now, you can oppose the Magnitsky Act, say, well, it's discriminatory, it led to a backlash, it poisoned US-Russia relations at the wrong time—all these are very legitimate policy issues and concerns. To me, Browder, even though he's not a professor, he's had an enormous influence on how we think about a lot of policy-related issues. For me, he is a very legitimate person to welcome here. I wanted to do the interview myself, because I wanted to be sort of tough, and ask hard questions. I think that's a case-by-case basis. But you have to have a good understanding of why these figures. With policy figures, it's easy. The president, and you have a foreign minister, and so forth. But then there are these peripheral figures who are outside of academia, that's tougher. What I definitely reject—and not everyone agrees with me on this—is that academics and academic research should be the only focus of the Institute. I don't think you can do that. Not in this day and age, when there's such a variety of opinion-making, and framing from all—

Q: Agenda setting.

Cooley: Agenda setting. What you can do, and what we try to do is, in these events where you have journalists, or kind of these citizen journalists or bloggers, and you bring them in, that you put them either in an academic setting, or you give them an academic discussion—you can create an event that has academic implications. But that can't just be the strict standard of what you're doing.

Q: On the question of influence—listening to you today, in particular—I wonder how you would explain your voice as the Harriman Institute in relation to creating conversations of a certain kind. So abstract, I'm sorry. What I'm hearing you say is that you're going to create

conversations that don't explode things, but move the needle somehow, that are not necessarily explosive, although the issues are.

Cooley: Well, the issues are explosive.

Q: So then how do you—?

Cooley: But there's a difference between the Institute facilitating difficult dialogues—which it has to, because if that doesn't happen here, where are they going to happen? This is why I come back to rights and governance issues that some don't agree that we should be doing. If we're not talking about media freedoms here, who's going to talk about them? Think tanks in DC that are getting their funding from some of these governments? There's not going to be a space. If we don't talk about human rights, if we don't talk about democracy, if we don't talk about protests—now, it doesn't mean it's the exclusive thing that we have to do, or even our primary focus. It's just that this is an open sphere for these very legitimate areas of studying politics and freedoms. Yes, it looks dire in the region, but that's not a reason to stop studying them.

There's a difference between encouraging difficult dialogues, difficult dialogues on Russia, on Russia policy, on Russia-Ukraine—we want to do all of that. What I say to people is, not every panel can be cable news. It just doesn't work that way. You can't just have two talking heads on different kinds of things. That's a type of event. It's a valuable type of event. But it's only *a* type of event. What I say, if people judge us by the totality of our programming—a hundred and fifty events, forty in April alone—why we don't get it right, and it's not always all balanced—I think

there is enough for every one that we have done our service to serve the community out there.

What I want to be weary of is, using the Harriman logo for issues that don't contribute to some sort of analysis and understanding, and then just get into the pure realm of advocacy, or the pure realm of a political agenda, or an attempt to be implicated in the undermining of a particular individual, or whatever it happens to be. Those are judgment calls. Those are tougher.

You have it flare up with movies. What movies are legitimate to screen, and why? It's not always easy. Again, you see what others are doing, you ask what's the larger cultural and political agenda in which this sort of film is operating in, is this of interest to our community? Then you make the call that way. I don't have the substantive expertise to make these judgments. A lot of times, we shop it around to faculty, or the staff, too, I think has become more involved in these things.

Q: That's exciting.

Cooley: Because they understand the parameters of what we do and what we operate. But then this gets back to, I am very happy to talk about Central Asian dictators, kleptocracy, these kinds of things. I'm more reluctant with a Harriman logo to go out in the news media, and talk about Russia-gate. I don't want to conflate my own opinions about things in a way that's going to adversely impact the Institute. Maybe I might be in a tougher spot if we had big Central Asian donors. Or we were the recipient of big grants from the—you know?

Q: That's true.

Cooley: It just made me realize that. Probably I do, because it's of no consequence to the Institute.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: We don't have those kinds of relationships, so I talk freely. But the Institute is a place of engagement for a lot of different constituencies in a lot of different communities. They have their own agendas, substantive and intellectual interest. Managing that balance is part of what I do. But yes, the directorship also means that you can't weigh in on every issue, and you should pretty much weigh in on the things that you are confident you have academic expertise in. Otherwise, then, you become by default—

Q: A figurehead.

Cooley: —an institutional figurehead. What you say completely reflects on the institution. Now you're making me think about it in a very useful way. I'm not sure what those clear lines are, but I internally have reactions to certain requests, and not others. I try and follow those.

I'll give you another example. David [A.] Satter came here and gave his book—very controversial book. He's saying a lot of things that a lot suspected about whether some of these bombings and early Putin years were inside jobs. Important book. It's put out by Yale [University Press]. He's a figure in the space; he gave the book talk. What I don't want to be in

the position to do is what Sciences Po did earlier this year, was disinvite him after they get external pressure.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: I think that's a terrible thing.

Q: Horrible thing.

Cooley: You invite someone, you have to follow through with it. That's why I think your criteria—they need to be set beforehand so you don't go through this.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: The tough parts are, if you start getting into dis-invitations or they're infringing on what someone can and cannot talk about, you're in trouble.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: Like, you haven't done it right.

Q: You have a complex job.

Cooley: Yes [laughter]. I had no idea. But this is why I don't—

Q: But you seem to love it. I mean—

Cooley: I do, I—

Q: You seem to love the hands-on, directorship model.

Cooley: Yes, I do enjoy it. Yes, it's been more hands-on than I thought, in part because I think working with these great staff members and colleagues on things you can see that you can have an impact, for the betterment of our community. You can reframe an issue or help solve a problem. That's rewarding. It does take time; it's taken time away from a research agenda. But that's okay. In some ways, it has focused me on a lot of the issues that the oral history itself is dealing with. To me, that's also scratched that itch, in some ways. But I think the key to administration is that you want things to be consequential. You want to work with like-minded people. I think if those elements are in play, then I think it can be rewarding.

Q: That's great. Can you talk a bit about what the merger of the Institutes will bring to Harriman?

Cooley: Yes. I don't think it's going to affect, in substance, what we do at all. Because essentially, East Central Europe uses the staff members and the resources of the Institute. There's a lot of cooperation, co-sponsorships. Part of the problem that—not just us, but all of these

centers and institutes face is a dearth of qualified faculty to engage and be involved in the governance and decisions. What I hope, by making the Institute formally part of Harriman, we can turn that directorship and that general deputy directorship at Harriman, and then give this person the East Central Europe portfolio, and something else across Harriman. That kind of humanities program check, or evaluating the fellowships, or the postdocs—whatever it is—involve them in a Harriman-wide governance thing, as well as the East Central Europe thing. That we can tailor the position, in successive years, to people's strengths, and pick someone who does East Europe who might be a social scientist or a literature professor, depending on who the director is. In other words, I think it gives us some flexibility and some options that we can conceive of Harriman governance in a more flexible, adaptive manner, because that's the challenge. Faculty have their own research agendas, and yet the need for governance is as great as it's ever been. I think a whole university faces that. It's not that any of these areas of governance aren't important—they are. When done well, I think they make a difference. It's just, faculty has more and more demands on their time, taking them away from what they love to do, and what they were trained to do. If we can figure ways to streamline that, and help that—

Q: Do you have internal faculty fellowships?

Cooley: We do. Yes, we do. Those are really important.

Q: I would say, yes.

Cooley: And we don't make them contingent on serving on the Ex-Com, like I know some other institutes do. We want to encourage people's research. What I want to do is tinker a little bit—encourage more undergraduate involvement. Some ideas we have is, if you want to hire an undergraduate as one of your RAs, we'll give you a little more money on top of what you did. That's another challenge going forward. How do we get undergrads more involved, at the front end, thinking about the region? A lot of them are brilliant, and they've been in different majors, and they learn about us April of their senior year.

So that part of it is important. In general, providing resources to faculty if they want to run a workshop is important. Most importantly—and this is something that was a little more controversial that I did, but I felt strongly about it—supporting graduate students at the beginning of their careers rather than at the end of their careers.

Q: Oh, how nice.

Cooley: A lot of our fellowships when I came in were going into eighth, ninth year students, a lot of them Slavic. I understand the legacy of that. But I also thought this was having a negative impact on morale here. So the staff, there's supposed to be competitive fellowships. It's not that I don't want to support Slavic studies, I do; but I want to support Slavic studies in a way that are also consistent with institutional priorities. When you get them in year eight and nine, I call them the "Peter Pan fellowships." They're not really doing much; supporting people hanging on at the end of the careers. But instead, if we can take that same money and support them in years two, three, four, five, and give them the resources to shape what we're doing, then to me, that's

exciting. Some Slavic figureheads were supportive, some thought that this was taking a leg of support under from them that they thought was important for them to be competitive in the programming. What I've tried to do is think of new ways that we can support them, so I want to also see if we can help them with the recruiting, and offer maybe some sweeteners to incoming graduate students. Probably figuring out, well, what was the real issue behind it, and how can we do this?

But some of the students are really incredible. They're involved in amazing projects. They broker all sorts of things we hadn't thought about. It's a joy to be able to support a lot of them.

Q: Yes. That's great. I wanted to just—I know this is out of order, in a sense—

Cooley: That's all right.

Q: But I did want to get your thoughts, especially now that I know you're going to be pushed to do more on Russia [laughs].

Cooley: Yes, right.

Q: You can't avoid it.

Cooley: You can't avoid it. No.

Q: Have you had a chance to read [Robert H.] Legvold's book?

Cooley: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about it a little bit, about his methodology in his central thesis and his conclusions?

Cooley: That's very interesting. I agree with large parts of the book. Maybe this also—and I have tremendous respect for Bob—he's always had a wonderful ability to really distill the essence of the issue and summarize it, I think, in a very fair way, and also to foster this understanding. A lot of these terms and perspectives, I'm not saying they're wrong, they're just not ways I think about the world in.

Q: Yes, okay. Fair enough.

Cooley: Perceptions of each other, or that we ascribe to each other the worst kinds of motives and mistrust. I'm not saying he's wrong, he's probably right. I just don't think about the world in that way. To me, that's an interesting thing. I do think that—and Bob doesn't disagree, because we had a conversation exactly on this a few weeks ago—but I do think looking forward, before we get to the—well, let me talk about the part I disagree with. The part I'm more skeptical of is whether—what we were saying earlier about the relationship being important for world order in general, I'm not sure that's the case.

Q: Right.

Cooley: It's better to have a functional relationship than a dysfunctional relationship. But I don't know if it's integral to all these sorts of global governance issues, the way he presents them. But I think that it's a question—you can go issue by issue, and open debate on that. I do think a lot of these things can't happen until we have, really, a more open dialogue with our counterparts over what's going on now. Again, this can be in the context of comparative mutual interference, or historical era—and bring up late '40s, our involvement in European elections—whatever it is, it's going to have to get out there, because I don't think you can have the trust or the credibility on each side to address some of these issues in this way, because it's such a high-level toxicity.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: I think if Trump gets rid of the sanctions unilaterally, well, then people are going to say, boom, quid pro quo. That's it. That's exactly it. We don't know what this is going to look like in October. We're moving really fast now. But my sense is that a lot of damage is going to have been done. It's going to put people like Bob—and others who believe in improving the relationship, and bring such insight and wisdom on this—it's going to put them in an increasingly a tough spot domestically. By being associated with that. I think that's the danger.

That's what I want to try and head off and think about next. I'm not sure exactly how to do it. I think we have some mechanisms for doing that; the consortium that we have. Some of this Russia grant work, I think it's important that we include it in that, even though maybe the

funders don't necessarily think that's a priority—I actually think it is—to be able to do the things that the funders want. But passivity sometimes has its own cost. This is one of those cases.

Again, it's not having a company line, it's having enough events where we think about this in an analytical and productive way, and communicate this to our Russian colleagues. But it's also creating some really interesting reposition—or different kind of positionalities from people. We did this Trump-Putin event—is there a connection?—two days before the inauguration. We did it with Overseas Press Club. They're a great partner.

Q: Oh, aren't they wonderful?

Cooley: Yes, they're wonderful.

Q: They are wonderful.

Cooley: They get great turnouts, and they're a joy to work with. When we conceived of the event, we thought that Hillary Clinton was going to win, just like everyone else did. And let's be retrospective on what happened. Instead, it was, two days away from Trump's inauguration, we had an absolutely full house live streaming, whole thing. Masha Gessen, Paul Sonne, Kim Marten were on that panel. What was fascinating to me was, Masha Gessen was, by far, the most skeptical of anyone on there about this. She was making the point of how unconvincing the publicly released dossier was. She was right about all that. But it was interesting, entering a world where she just thinks critically about conspiracy theories, and how conspiracy theories are

used and deployed by the state, made her very averse to this. Instead of saying, we need to look at our own democratic failings. She was the skeptic on the panel.

Q: Wow.

Cooley: I thought that was really interesting. There is a potential for the Russia-gate debate and fallout to reposition people. Again, how do we use that productively? That's the challenge on this. I do not believe we are in a new McCarthy era, like some say. I don't think that's a helpful way of looking at this. I don't think people who are concerned about the fate of their democracy, or the rule of law, or external interference should be tarred in that way. At the same time, there should be the possibility of open dialogue and different interpretations on this. A lot of this is going to depend on what kind of factual report we have, whether there's a public finding of whatever the investigation—there's a lot of variables. A lot of variables over the next month, let alone in the next six months, let alone in the next year. We're past the stage that this is just a novelty or a quirk. It's clear that it's going to impact a lot of the things that we're trying to do, perhaps in unexpected ways.

Q: Fair enough.

Cooley: Yes.

Q: If you had forty programs in April, you're going to have a hundred in October [laughs].

Cooley: I know. That's—yes. At some point, I have to give a deadline, or I'm going to be thrown out the window.

Q: I hate “what if” questions, or future questions, but I just feel like I want to ask a couple. Your book, *Dictators Without Borders*, is such a good example of a new kind of field of study that's based on the real, in which you take up in the book making certain policy recommendations, or questioning policy, the context for policy.

Cooley: Yes.

Q: How much does that define a possible way forward, in terms of what Harriman will be studying in the future?

Cooley: It's interesting, I've thought about that. I'm always very aware of bringing my own research biases and focuses into an institutional setting.

Q: Sure. I understand that.

Cooley: But I do think the idea of finding enclaves and spaces where the region exists in the West and in New York, that's definitely part of—I think it has to be. It gets back to this question of redefining regional studies in a transnational way. It's a different way of understanding politics in the region, obviously with the book I feel that. That can also be part of the discourse. The hidden connections that we don't normally think of, because of either disciplinary

boundaries, or professional boundaries, that this sphere is real estate, this sphere is legal, this sphere is accounting, this sphere is PR [public relations]. Breaking that down too and seeing how these things are related is really important.

I do think that there's an interesting paradox that emerges of types of transnational networks that I try and get at in the book. Whereas we always assume transnational networks were there to network principled activists and groups and IOs [international organizations], and knowledge experts, and universities and so forth in a general, progressive, liberal knowledge-based way forward—what you see in the region is the possibly transnational illiberal networks, in which the central agent elites and authoritarian family are actually trying to improve their reputations by linking themselves to international organizations; UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization], UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund], European Union [EU], and promote themselves as charitable givers. They all have charities, organizations, cultural houses—these kinds of things—as well as their physical residency; having multiple passports, being in London and in California. Why do I say this? Because that, I think, the University potentially can find itself in the middle of either.

That's the potential danger there, that the University itself becomes implicated in the donor networks and activities of some of these figures. That brings up interesting questions, beyond just, Should we take this gift or not? What is our role? Do we give a voice to the illiberal opinions and practices, or not? They aren't easy questions, but they're ones we're going to have to confront. The University as a whole has always assumed that we're the ones socializing others. I don't think that's correct anymore. I think you have to ask the question, who's

socializing who? Yes, we can provide the tools and the critical thinking, the liberal arts and the method skills to students. But we also have to be honest about, if we return students to authoritarian settings, are they really making a difference? Or are they actually learning what they've learned here to become even better at promoting whatever their states and their governments are promoting? They're actually playing the brokerage role in a different way than we expected them to.

That's a challenge. That doesn't have an easy answer. But getting back to this way of looking at the world, again, it gets to the question of institutional passivity. That you can't expect that the University is going to be used in a way, or in a manner, that you envision, and has been the case over the last forty years. You need be on guard for that. It gets back to the question of active agendas that you try and pursue, and goals, otherwise someone will come in and fill them in.

Q: I wanted to ask a follow-up question about the issue that we brought up before we started the recorder, on denialism. What are the tough places there for you, both in work with NGOs and with foundations? How does it play out?

Cooley: It's been depressing. It's not as if the sector was so rich and triumphant before. We caricature [laughter] NGOs as being these CIA masterminds—come on! It's activists that deeply care about these countries and their particular issue in society. They want to make a difference.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: At their best, they had an important role as a safe space for enacting change, and working with institutional partners. Intellectually, what I see is the conflation with geopolitical agendas was inevitable, and that in these internal battles of a lot of these foundations and groups, those saying, “Let’s just not draw attention to the geopolitics of what we’re doing, and let’s leave the geopolitics out.” It turns out that was a naïve position, that in the end if you don’t address something, the dark cloud just increases.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: The rumor increases. If you don’t confront it head on, if you don’t reject it, if you don’t come up with a counter-narrative. The passivity, the ignoring it, does not work. Some foundations have learned that now, the hard way. What I see as so interesting in the foundational world now, when you deal with the region, is very different philosophies of how to deal with these new restrictions. Some groups adopt a more Myanmar approach, which is, Do everything you can, this is the right course. You fund research, and work, and opposition, and advocacy, and networks abroad, and the whole thing. If you have to break the law, the law’s unjust anyway, so you want to encourage that. To other groups, they’re saying, “Well, the law is the law. We didn’t write the law. We wish Russia had a very different view of the law. But it’s not our goal to go against the law.” That’s created a lot of tensions within the community itself, of what the purpose is, what their goals are. What are your obligations to institutional partners who you funded for twenty years? Do you just drop them like that because it’s illegal? Really tough questions.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: Yes, and I think reasonable people and reasonable institutions come to different conclusions on it. But you're seeing the community internally torn at the moment between some things, which makes it all the more imperative to figure out some—not new issues and approaches, but some new vectors. Exiles, I think, could be one of them, looking at that.

But yes, it's depressing. It's the arc of the rise and decline of liberalism as a norm, that post-communist sphere in the '90s was instantly transformed. All other norms were completely discredited. It's remarkable what happened. We set up democratic standards in Eastern Europe we never would have dreamed of anywhere else in the world. We set up these rankings and ratings and assessments, and everything. These ideal models we projected onto Eastern Europe. These ideal principles, sovereignty and informed policy choice, we project in this part of the world. No one makes that argument in Central America. The Russians are right about that. It's, "Oh, countries have total no foreign policy choice, and total sovereignty here, but nowhere else in the world." They're not wrong about that, to be cynical about us applying that standard in this time zone and not other places.

But then the backlash has been so intense, it's caught a lot of people off guard. From just ignoring it, to hoping it was cyclical and would go away, to then having a popular president again, and thinking that now, with [Barack H.] Obama, the US can just get the band together again in the way of the 1990s—I think both foundations and foreign policy establishments are very slow to understand the lagging effects of this.

Now the latest development is that we've gone full boomerang, the illiberalism has come into the heart of the West, whether it's populism in Europe, Brexit, Trump. They're not silver linings, but what I see as the productive things to come out of this: one is, you're going to have to confront it head-on now, now that it's reached Midtown [laughs]. To me it's like the second *Lord of the Rings* movie. They've reached the keep, the castle. They keep falling back, and they're at the last stage of this little keep, like the Orcs, and they're banging down the door [laughter].

Q: Our kids playing those video games were right!

Cooley: Yes, yes, exactly. So now you have to deal with it. Dealing with it's important. You've seen some really interesting examples of this in Europe, how Trump has actually put the skids and brakes on the momentum of populism. There's sort of new confidence in the assertion of [Emmanuel] Macron's liberal ideals, or identity, or whatever it is. That's one.

Two, it creates some opportunities for the activist community—as we were saying before—to be very self-reflective about what they do, to present what they do abroad is an extension of what they do here. That's been a problem before, because I think there has been a lot of moralizing. It's an effective tactic, if you want to create principal networks, to say we care about press freedom, and unlawful incarceration, or that line between security and liberty; we care about it as much in the States—we work on it in the States—as much as we do outside. The study of kleptocracy—picking on the book—I think that's going global right now in a very interesting way. Like the last couple of years, this is all these issues we didn't think about before, offshore vehicles and luxury real estate flows. These questions of these nodes, these fixers, these

brokers—this is all in the open now. Whether it's Trump and his association with possible oligarchs to Central Asian dictators, whoever it is—it's not that they're equivalent. It's that the nodes and the actors and the practices that they engage in are much more global and transnational than we recognized. The study of that, and acting on that is also an opportunity for more global advocacy. But I think the community is right to be demoralized; I don't think democracy and governance promotion, human rights promotion, is going to be the same as it was before. But there were problems with it even before Trump. This is making a fess-up to them in some ways.

Q: Just a couple of follow-up questions about your book as it touches on these subjects. I went to hear you speak at [George] Soros Foundation. In the after-talk I found I really interesting. You said something—and I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but—someone asked you a hard question, and you responded by raising the question, if the Central Asian—the central actors are maybe a new norm. Maybe they're displacing our idea of liberalism. That's really a tough issue. But I think it's very important to put out. Then the question that arises from that is, what is the difference between the West and the rest? What are the meaningful—?

Cooley: It's a really tough issue. Norms are norms until they're gone. So I don't think we appreciate that norms need to be actively upheld and cultivated. [Laughter] Otherwise, behavior that was once considered unthinkable becomes normalized. You see signs of that in our democracy, the way we engage with dissent, or engage with the press. In terms of how we understand globalization dynamics—in part because we were focusing too much on East Central Europe, which was over [unclear] proximity to Western Europe, and EU process, and NATO

process. We assumed that all these kinds of freedoms went together, political openness, economic openness, freedom of information and of ideas, and commitment to pluralism.

I think what Central Asian cases show is that this is not the case. That actual actors who are strategic, who don't have external constraints, will pick and choose the types of globalization that they want, and use them for their own benefit. What you see is the Central Asian cases start use of global institutions and vehicles like shell companies and overseas accountants for your own personal purposes. So to me, we need to flip this understanding of Eastern Europe, that Eastern Europe was bounded by some of the rules and norms of the European Union. Even now, they're seeing problems with that. Once you're in the club, and you start deviating, how do you get punished, or how do you get yourself back in, in the case of Hungary and Poland? I think my point is, on the Central Asian front, without strong international opprobrium, in these ways, of course becomes the new normal.

I saw this back in Central Asia, back with breaking these local rules. When you start getting Central Asia being defined as, "Well, they're Central Asians." Come on, democracy and corruption—one of the things that EU is now saying, which is driving me crazy, is not "good governance," but, "good enough governance." That you've suddenly made these degrees of concessions. The minute you go there, you have changed your standards and your norms. That's the danger that I see from this. As well as the other comparisons, the real foreign policy being used for personal and familial reasons, you're seeing strands of that here. But I do think the expectations that norms will hold just because they have to—

Q: It doesn't work.

Cooley: It doesn't work, yes. That's the big lesson, I think, when you look at a place like Central Asia, when these norms were all weak to begin with. You started seeing this a while ago. But now you're seeing it spreading to other places. Having said that, I think the one big difference between Central Asia and here, [laughter] maybe Trump wants to be a Central Asian's type dictator with no constraints or rules. One thing Central Asian dictators do, they have security services and intel services on their side. That's one lesson he didn't take from this, going to war with the intel community is probably going to be his demise, or the demise of what he wants to do in effective capacity. But yes, that's where I think paradigmatically, we need to start thinking more about authoritarian spaces all over that enable these kinds of things.

Then this leads us back to the University, that a big part of the playbook of a lot of these regimes were trying to figure out how they could get influence in DC, funding think tanks and programs. Then why not the University in these senses? We need to be really aware of that.

Q: Two thousand and sixteen taught us a lesson, in a way.

Cooley: Yes. Yes, and when you talk about norms, we're susceptible to it, too. Once a norm is breached in the University—I see academics and colleagues rationalizing it. Sometimes it's tempting. An institutional account, or a grant, or whatever it is—I don't want to make it out as, "Oh, we're just like them." I'm just saying it just requires vigilance at every point, at every decision-making point, with every proposal, so reaffirming why you're doing it in the way that

you're doing it. But yes, a lot of things are in flux now. Perhaps it's a pendulum; perhaps it swings back. But I think actively combatting illiberalism in its many forms is—it's something that we have to do a better job with, I guess, in general.

Q: I don't want to end you on a depressing note.

Cooley: That's all right [laughter].

Q: You've done so much here already. I guess, what are you most excited about in the next phase of your work here at Harriman as the director?

Cooley: Well, I thought a lot here about anniversaries. What is it that anniversaries do? How do we want to think about them and celebrate them? I think in some ways, we've done okay. But I think a lot about the seventy-fifth anniversary, and where we are. Already the seventieth is a very different place than the sixtieth, so 2006 versus 2016. What I want to do is really use the seventy-fifth anniversary as a focal point—my last year, too, if I do another term—of bringing together a lot of the things that we've been talking about, and affirming the Institute's position at the frontier of a lot of these discussions. And hopefully reinvigorating some of our development work, too. With development work, it just takes time. But it would be great to have more scholarships for MA students to take advantage of what I think is a really great program that we have here. And it would be great to permanently endow something at the center that Kim started on US-Russia relations, and to do something in the realm of local Eurasia. I think these are areas that we can work to in seventy-five; take stock in seventy-five. But I think what was jolting

about seventy was that we knew we were in the shift of something to something. In some ways, it was a lot more awkward than sixty.

Q: Yes. Yes.

Cooley: Sixty is a certain moment in time. In retrospect, we see 2006, 2005, as when it all started. But we had no idea back then that we'd be where we are now.

Q: Hard to forecast.

Cooley: Absolutely, yes. Yes. Hard to forecast. Sometimes there are events that solidify what's been happening—the information-revealing mechanisms, if you want to use that language—whether it's a conflict or a scandal. Whatever it is that makes you, forces you to pay attention to something, take stock and say, no, this is structural now, it's serious. What would be great at the seventy-five year anniversary is if we have perspective on the post-post-Cold War Harriman era.

Q: [Laughs] That's a great answer.

Cooley: And what that is, and how it's evolved. Yes.

Q: Beautiful.

Cooley: Yes.

Q: Is there anything else on your mind?

Cooley: No. We covered a lot, I think.

Q: Yes.

Cooley: Yes.

Q: Well, thank you. We'll stop here, but if you think of things and want another session, or when you read the oral histories, you decide you'd like to get another session, just let us know.

Cooley: Absolutely. That sounds really good. Thank you.

Q: Yes, it would be fun to do that. Okay.

Cooley: This was great. Yes.

Q: Thank you so much.

Cooley: It covered a lot.

[END OF INTERVIEW]