

HARRIMAN INSTITUTE  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of  
Stephen Sestanovich

Columbia Center for Oral History  
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## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Stephen Sestanovich, conducted by William McAllister on February 3, 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.

Audio Transcription Center

Session: 1

Interviewee: Stephen Sestanovich

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: William McAllister

Date: February 3, 2017

Q: My name is William McAllister, Senior Research Fellow at INCITE [Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics], at Columbia University. I'm here at the Council on Foreign Relations today, on the third of February 2017, to talk with Stephen Sestanovich, who is the Kathryn and Shelby Cullum Davis Professor of International Diplomacy at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs [SIPA], and the Director of its International Fellows Program.

Over his quite diverse career, Professor Sestanovich has held high-ranking positions in NGOs [nongovernmental organizations], academia and government. Before coming to his current position at Columbia in 2001, Professor Sestanovich was the ambassador-at-large and special advisor to the Secretary of State, on the new independent states, the vice president for Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, director of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, senior director for policy development at the National Security Council, a member of the policy planning staff at the Department of State and senior legislative assistant for foreign policy to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. This is over twenty years, not at one time [laughs].

Before these positions, Professor Sestanovich was a member of the graduate faculty of the New School and at Columbia. Professor's principal interests include Russia, Russian and post-Soviet politics, and foreign policy and American foreign policy. He has written prolifically on these

subjects in the popular media and in professional journals, has given innumerable talks on these subjects, and has written or edited at least seven volumes, by my undoubted undercount, including his latest, *Maximalist: America and the World from Truman to Obama*. Professor Sestanovich is also the George F. Kennan Senior Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and serves on the board of directors of the National Endowment for Democracy. Professor Sestanovich began his graduate studies at Columbia in the 1970s, before the university lost him to Harvard, where he earned his PhD in 1978. So, Professor Sestanovich, welcome.

Sestanovich: It's a pleasure.

Q: I thought to begin by just talking a little bit biographically. What are the origins of your interest in the Soviet Union, and specifically diplomacy? Where did that come from in your life?

Sestanovich: [Laughter] I'm not sure it's my life, so much as the preoccupations of American foreign policy. When I was an undergraduate, the Cold War was still a thing, and if you wanted to be at the center of that discussion—grappling with the big questions that people involved in thinking about and making American foreign policy—you had to understand the Soviet Union and Soviet-American relations. On that basis, I took courses on Russian politics, Russian foreign policy—Soviet, I guess was the word we had in all those course descriptions—Russian language, and one thing led to another.

I will say that not everybody came to involvement in the field the same way. There are the people who were poetry majors. I think Strobe [Nelson Strobridge] Talbott was more interested in Russian poetry as an undergraduate, than in American foreign policy. I know that Condi [Condoleezza] Rice claims to have read *War and Peace* twice in Russian. It's the twice that especially impresses me [laughs], although I guess after one reading, maybe the second time around it's less challenging. For me, the literature, the culture, were a kind of byproduct, a secondary benefit, a wonderful benefit. I had a reason to take courses on the Russian novel—let me assure you not in Russian—as an undergraduate, but I did that in the reverse order from Condi. That probably meant, to be honest, never having quite as profound a feel for the culture and the people and the kinds of things that literature majors and poetry majors would have in their bones. So I've always been prepared to defer to the people who know the poetry, when we're talking about [laughs] poetic issues, but for me, the policy was the place that I started.

I liked government courses. I'd taken a number of them, particularly in political theory, in American government. I actually, at that point, hadn't taken any courses on the Soviet Union or on Soviet-American relations, but the most popular course for undergraduates at Cornell [University] was American diplomatic history. In addition, the Vietnam War was raging. I think the combination of the two produced more government and history majors than you might otherwise have had.

Q: Just following on the other side of your kind of academic career, at the beginnings, why did you decide to go on for a PhD, as a way to pursue these interests, rather than say, go into the State Department as a foreign service person or some other kind of route?

Sestanovich: Well, I'll give you a serious and a semiserious answer. The serious answer is, I was aware I didn't know very much [laughs]. My father had been in the foreign service, and so that seemed attractive. But his professional experience of bouncing around from one post to another, struck me as maybe a way of never mastering anything as much as you would like. His graduate study had been interrupted. He did graduate work in history at Berkeley. By the Depression and the Second World War, graduate school seemed a great opportunity to keep figuring things out, learning more, learning enough to have an opinion that you felt you were justified in having.

Now for the semi serious answer: all my friends were doing it [laughter].

Q: We've had similar kinds of answers from men, usually, having to do with, "There was a girl that I knew." [Laughter] So yes. Let me turn to one of the major issues that the folks at Harriman [Institute] are interested in, in terms of its organizational relationship and the relationship of individuals as individuals, organization as organization, to policy, advice and influence. In particular, there's one tension that can arise for a place like Harriman, which is there can be a conflict between—or maybe there's not—but between trying to have policy influence and trying to pursue scholarly knowledge, develop people with PhDs, as well as with its certificate program and other efforts, to try and have policy influence. Do you see this as a tension, or do you think that it could do both relatively—I wouldn't say easily—but it can manage to accommodate both and that neither one has to suffer.

Sestanovich: I was a first-year graduate student in political science at Columbia, 1972 to 1973. Because I had studied the Soviet Union, I was given Marshall [D.] Shulman as an advisor, I took a seminar with Zbig [Zbigniew k.] Brzezinski, I took a class from Seweryn Bialer, and I was aware from reading the books that they had written—Bialer hadn't yet—how much there was to learn from people like them. But I was also aware of how much people in positions like this could be fixated on policy influence, on making a dent in the Washington conversation. Without in any way criticizing them, I will note that Marshall came to class late more than once because he'd just gotten off the shuttle from Washington. He'd sweep into class with this big brown, leather bag on his shoulder that was his trademark, a very elegant bag, and sit down. This was a course he was co-teaching with Bill [William T. R.] Fox. He would look at Fox and [laughs] seemed to ask, what are we talking about today.

I thought these guys were great and they were interesting in class, but I also had the feeling that Columbia was very focused on Washington. It was able to do that in part because the shuttle seemed so convenient. People didn't take the train as much in those days, they flew. In the rather self-important and super-serious way that a first-year graduate student can be, I tended to think, "Gee, why aren't they focusing on us, instead of on the senators and the undersecretaries and the big-shots that they're going to talk to in Washington. And why aren't they keeping up with the literature? And why aren't they writing new books, and doing their own research, and trying to think as hard about—" remember, I admitted, this was self-important and too serious "—think as hard about the big issues as we students are?"

Well, in retrospect, I understand that, having gotten to mid or past mid-career, they didn't have to spend as much time [laughs] as we did on it. But if I am describing fully, my reaction to the place, it was to think, "Gee, this is a little more focused on the policy world than on the subject matter that most of us students have come here to study." There's a little bit of a difference between the interests of senior faculty and students in that respect. I understand why senior faculty don't spend all of their time communing with the students [laughs] and wrestling with all the big questions outside of class, and why you might sometimes come late to class with your big brown leather bag. But though I understand that now, it was a slight turnoff for me.

The picture that I had, which tended in many ways to be confirmed, of the Harvard Government Department, was that it was more remote from Washington, confirmed in this sense. Some of my faculty advisors there did go down to Washington from time to time to testify. They were *kibitzers* of policy and snipers at Henry [A.] Kissinger. Their former colleague who had risen to great heights, but they were—as I imagined I wanted Shulman and Brzezinski to be doing [laughs]—actually primarily scholars. It's not that I think that's the only way to go, but it did suggest a focus on research and writing and thinking, as opposed to advocacy, that for a graduate student was both attractive and helpful, and kind of a good model for your own work. If you're a graduate student, your first thought shouldn't be, "How do I become Zbig Brzezinski," it's, "How do I write my dissertation?" [Laughs] "What do I write it about? What's a real problem? How do I attack it?" I think it was valuable to me, to find that there was an environment in which senior people, who were very interested in policy, nevertheless didn't spend a whole lot of time on the shuttle.



The plane connections to Washington, among other things, weren't so convenient [laughs] as they were from New York. In a funny way, Harvard was more remote from Washington than Columbia. Funny, because it's sort of reversed today. I would say that the environment of the Harriman Institute today, is one of greater distance from the policy world and of everyday debates. People aren't constantly imagining how to get themselves called to testify before this or that big hearing, or to be on some panel of luminaries. Without in any way criticizing the ethos of the Kennedy School, I do think that there is a little more of that effort to shape the Washington debate even from a distance.

Q: Right.

Sestanovich: And so even though the air connections are still not any better than they were in the early or mid-1970s, people are more in the orbit of Washington, D.C. New York is less in the orbit of Washington, D.C.

Q: I want to come back to this later, just talk about Harriman—or maybe we'll talk about it now, about—I was referring to later, thinking about your ideas about Harriman and the kind of directions it could go in. But is it your sense that maybe Harriman could use more of that now, of trying to have a more policy influence. And if so, how could it kind of go about that, either organizationally—I mean, there are always individuals like yourself who could make their own connections I suppose—but as an organization, is there something that you would like to see it do, to foster that kind of relationship more than it has now?

Sestanovich: Well look, research institutes are different and graduate programs are different, and there's certainly no shortage at SIPA, where I have my appointment, of interest in influencing the policy world. There's no shortage of faculty members who are in demand in Washington, or at the UN [United Nations], or at the major foundations, or on *Charlie Rose*. That's as it should be, because Columbia is a world-class university, with people whose voices carry, but that doesn't mean that every part of the institution has to be focused primarily on that kind of influence.

It's probably more a question of balance, and I probably overdid it as a young graduate student, in thinking about the way in which, back in the '70s, people were so preoccupied with shaping the policy debate. Probably I didn't understand fully how one did that, and I surely underrated the significance of it, because while I was thinking about what the hell to write my dissertation about, these people were helping to conduct the foreign policy debate at a time when it was essential to have good people contributing to it. So, I'm in no way disparaging that kind of role, where serious academics can win themselves a platform that enables them to speak truth to power, or even to money [laughs], or to the media. I'm all for it, and I think our institution has to do that and does do it. But it's always a question of balance and of trying to define the identity of the institution you want to have.

It's all in all, probably good for SIPA, for Harriman, for Columbia in general, not to measure our achievements, and what we have to offer our students—because remember, this is an important part of what we're supposed to be doing—simply by the splash that we can make in public

debate. I say this as somebody who writes for the *New York Times* [laughs], and does enjoy the opportunity to be on *Charlie Rose*.

Q: Following up on something you said before, about Harvard. I assume that when you were talking about—just to, at least for me and perhaps for the listener, to kind of—in terms of names, as you mentioned Brzezinski here, and Shulman, I assume that you were talking about people like Graham [T. Allison] and folks like that, who are in the government department, who are more committed to scholarship than—although not immune to the idea of having some kind of policy influence.

Sestanovich: The people that I studied with were Adam [B.] Ulam, Richard [E.] Pipes, Stanley Hoffman, Sam [Samuel P.] Huntington. Merle Fainsod had just died, but his influence was very much felt, not least among the junior faculty and graduate students who had started in the program when he was still teaching. These were all people who had a voice in public discussion. Stanley never missed an opportunity to write an elaborate analysis of what was wrong with Henry Kissinger's foreign policy [laughs] in the *New York Review of Books*. We all thought that was immensely entertaining, and not only that—came out of what Stanley had written in other places and really, on completely different topics. So there was a kind of convergence between what he wanted to say on policy and what he wanted to write on more academic questions.

Q: Picking up analytically, on this business about how policy influence happens, there seem to be two models out there, at least from our conversations that we've had with other people. One's an active one in which it seems mostly to be characterized by people themselves, carrying their

information directly to Washington, perhaps mostly in positions like Brzezinski and Shulman. The other is a kind of participation in—a kind of passive model—in the sense that you contribute to the discourse in general and somehow, perhaps, some influence from—like the book that you just described, by Colton, where he generates policy suggestions from his research—that that somehow filters into the policymaking. I was wondering if you had a sense that both of those are in fact operating, or maybe that the discourse one is perhaps so removed that it's hard to actually see that it has an impact, that it really has to be carried by individuals into positions of power otherwise it gets too diffuse to make much of an impact on people's thinking.

Sestanovich: I think there are big questions today, about each of those models that you describe, and that's because both government and the academy have walled themselves off from each other to a greater extent than used to be the case. I think it's simply harder today, for an academic to have the kind of effect on discourse that you describe. It's also harder to—and less likely and less sought—to take positions in the government. Now, we have some exceptions to this that are worth keeping in mind; there are very important ones. There's no doubt that Mike [Michael A.] McFaul and Condi Rice both had significant impact—both before going into government, in the writing and talking that they did—on the way in which people in government thought about Russia and Russian-American relations.

There are certainly cases where academic contributions to knowledge can get people's attention in Washington, and create some buzz. But I think it's probably true that the academy, with its disciplinary conventions and the professional requirements that it creates for promotion, makes it harder to do the kind of work that people in government are going to be able to benefit from. I

don't want to just blame the academy, because I think policy institutions are also less interested in reaching out for academic knowledge. They are in their own bubble, inclined to reach out to academics for support and validation and reinforcement, but less for new ideas, even for new information. This is, itself, kind of damaging. It creates a sense, in both the academy and in government policy shops, of sort of self-satisfaction and autonomy, "We don't need the other guys." I think that has been detrimental to both sides.

Q: Picking up on something you said there, and relating it to your own experience, I was really struck by your saying that it was harder, even now, for academics to have influence on the policy discourse, which is part of what you were talking about in terms of the siloing of the two. Quite often, at least in the past, we've thought that a lot of the discourse came from academics. I was wondering if your—given that you've had experience in government, that when you write popular pieces, your pieces in the *Wall Street Journal* for example and the *Times* or *Atlantic*—do you think that gives your words some more kind of entrée to break through the siloing, because people say well, "You know, he's been in government, he kind of—he gets it. These things are thoughtful but also, we can do something with them." Or is the siloing so intact that that's a tough thing to break through, even in the discourse?

Sestanovich: Look, I think when academics go to Washington, what they usually discover is that nobody in Washington has heard of anything [laughs] that they've written or become familiar with their path-breaking conclusions. That's usually kind of deflating. People discover that if they want to make a dent in what people in policy institutions are thinking, they almost have to learn to talk in a different way.

When people say there's a Washington bubble or a White House bubble or an Executive Branch bubble, it's a real thing. It's probably inevitable in a chain of institutions this long, and with so many people producing so much, that they have to read just to keep current with what people in the rest of the government are saying. They don't have a whole lot of time, or inclination, to reach out for ideas beyond the boundaries of their own institutions. There are exceptions to that and there are ways of making a small dent. I can give you a couple of examples.

The Congress is always interested in getting ideas that challenge policy as it's being pursued by the Executive Branch. So they want to have witnesses come and say things in hearings that give them intellectual weapons with which to take on the administration witnesses, the people who come from the State Department or the Pentagon. That way of cultivating influence is actually—it's probably an old one. I think it's surely what Marshall had been doing when he got off the plane and came late to class, offering views that congressmen and senators could use in beating up on—I'm using his name to refer to something broader—beating up on Henry Kissinger [laughs].

I think it's also true that being the things one writes can get you invited to sit down with the secretary of state or the secretary of defense, or the president or the vice president, to shape their views a little bit, give them some extra armor against ideas they don't like, or some weapons to actually do battle with ideas that they don't like. But even there, I think it's worth describing the limits of it. By and large, people are looking, in Washington, for reinforcement. They want to be confirmed [laughs] in the belief that what they already think is right. They want allies. That's

good. Where academic ideas can help tip the scales, that's great. But we shouldn't think that what we're doing is bringing in a new perspective that leads everyone in Washington to realize that they've been completely on the wrong track, and now should do things utterly differently.

A leading Soviet think tank writer, named Andrei [A.] Kokoshin, once said, "The reason bureaucratic politics matters so much in Washington is that nobody has any ideas." He said this by way of explaining to his Soviet colleagues, why it is that Americans were so entranced with the analytical perspective of bureaucratic politics. But he was also being snotty about the state of policy discussion in Washington—snotty but not completely wrong [laughs].

Q: As you were talking about this, I was also reminded—in some sense of the flipside of what you were talking about earlier, about how academia, and its creation of career paths has made it more difficult for academics to participate in government in Washington—is that, I was thinking of Robert Michels' book—I can't remember the name of it, from a hundred years ago—about the German Democratic Socialist Party, and that the folks in Washington, in part for their siloing is that the relevant actors are the secretary of state, or the deputy secretary of state, or whoever, and those are the people inside that bubble. Those are their relevant actors for their careers. So, somebody coming down from Columbia, or whatever, is not that important to them in those terms. So why are they going to listen to them? Does that make sense?

Sestanovich: We've had this conversation without referring to one of the things that's changed in the landscape of policy discussion in Washington, and that is the flowering of the think tank. For a lot of people in Washington, think tanks are what they mean by the academy. They think of

academic research as being what gets done at Brookings [Institution], and Carnegie, and RAND [Corporation], and CSIS [Center for Strategic and International Studies], and the many other institutions that have grown up and expanded in the past several decades. And they're not wrong about this. Think tanks have, in a way, found as much of a market as they have had, in part because they've solved the problem of the kind of thinking and vocabulary that can have an influence in Washington. They do very respectable research, present their conclusions with less reliance on academic jargon. They're not worried so much about whether they are presenting research in a way that could get them tenure, but that doesn't mean that the quality is any less or that it shouldn't be taken seriously by policymakers. To the contrary, they're getting serious work that doesn't carry the academic baggage that has hobbled more mainstream academic work that's simply less accessible to people in positions of responsibility. And not just less accessible but also less immediately relevant to what it is they have to do.

In Washington today an in-and-outer career can be one in which you go between think tanks and government positions. A university pedigree can be useful, but it's far from essential. I tend to think that even in the think tank world, it's valuable to have a PhD, not just for the title that it gives you, but for the immersion that it represents in sustained, disciplined, academic research. Both of those are important for getting yourself an audience, for making a dent, for finding the community of people in Washington who are interested in arguing about whatever issue you've taken up.

It's interesting now, the in-and-outer path often is one that means you take an academic position after you've been in government, rather than before. That's certainly my experience. I had junior



academic positions before I went into the government, but having been in government [laughs] I've now spent fifteen years at Columbia. There are people in other institutions who have had the same experience, at the Kennedy School, at Johns Hopkins SAIS [School of Advanced International Studies], at the Hoover Institution and Stanford [University]. I think it's too bad if that's just a one-way street, but electoral politics can sometimes provide the answer. I think it's good for people to rest and recharge in an academic setting, but you can get kind of—you can get too comfortable in the university.

I'm not somebody who believes—as Henry Kissinger once said—that in government, what you do is draw down the intellectual capital that you built up in the academy. I actually think it's almost exactly the opposite. People in government are building intellectual capital all the time, but they don't have an appropriate outlet for it. They are [laughs], in a sense, conducting research, on all the questions that we think are interesting, in their daily life. They're even thinking about it and coming to some conclusions, often not fully formulated conclusions, that with the opportunity that a university provides they can begin to make use of. I find that academics who go straight into government, often find that that intellectual capital that Henry Kissinger bragged about, was not quite as relevant or helpful as they thought. They had to begin acquiring some new capital from the new experiences that they were exposed to in government.

Q: That's a really interesting insight, because it's almost a reversal of an institution like Harriman, who's thinking, "Oh, how can we have influence in Washington." In fact what's happening is Washington is providing the raw data, if you will, for academics, like yourself, to

think and write at Harriman or in academic positions more generally. That's a very nice insight about how that's reversed.

Sestanovich: But here, too, I think it's important to push people to do it in the right way. I feel a lot of people who acquire intellectual capital in government positions don't spend it as fully as they should, in the years that they have outside of government. What we want them to do is to reflect fully on their experiences and analyze them beyond just putting their recollections down on paper in a way that will position them for a good job in the next administration when their turn comes round. You could say that we give people—and they're smart and thoughtful people—a unique extra round of education in government; and that they damn well ought to use it for everybody's benefit.

I could make the point about Henry Kissinger, whose memoirs are easily more significant and interesting than what he wrote as an academic. I'm not sure that Henry Kissinger, in his government work, was really drawing all that much—with the possible exception of his first book, *A World Restored*—on intellectual capital he built up in the academy. I think he was probably unlearning a lot of things [laughs] that he had decided in his life as a professor. However, his memoirs really are a fantastic trove of analysis that show you what kind of intellectual capital you can build up in government.

If Henry Kissinger was drawing down his intellectual capital in government, you don't see it in the memoirs, but it was very important that he actually wrote them. He reportedly held off doing the third volume of them, in part because that was when his ideas and policies became more

controversial. The Henry Kissinger of the first two volumes of his memoirs is a hero who is dominating the policy process and overseeing a pretty successful refashioning of American policy. The Henry Kissinger of the third volume is a much more troubled figure, who has to cope with a lot of pushback, internationally and domestically, to what he wants to do. Writing that volume would have made it harder for Kissinger [laughs] to retain influence or become secretary of state again. He obviously held off writing that volume until he thought he had kind of passed the point of [laughs] hireability.

Q: This part of our conversation has been really interesting in that one of the things that you've drawn out is how the Harriman Institute—or institutes like that—are, in terms of policy influence, are kind of being maybe replaced by think tanks. So that's in the policy of influence world.

Within academia, I'd like to get your thoughts on this concern about area studies and an institute like Harriman—which was initiated as an area studies kind of place, to bring together political science, economics, literature, you were talking about earlier, history—and this general concern about the, I don't want to say collapse, but the decline of interest in area studies, perhaps as a function [of the] rise of the more functional institutes like security studies or environment or things like that. So I'm wondering, how do you think of area studies as a conceptual intellectual approach, and especially vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe in the past and/or—or now, with Russia and the former Soviet states. Does it have this kind of utility for doing good scholarship, or is it a model whose time has come and gone perhaps?

Sestanovich: It's a crucial issue, not just for institutions trying to design their mandate, and staff themselves, and fund their work, and justify what they're doing. It's also really crucial for people who want to choose their own career paths and research interests. I admit, I'm kind of two minds about it. There was an indispensable role played by people who knew the parts of the world that they were talking about, who had the languages and the cultural familiarity and the historical knowledge, and just the instinctive understanding of how other places worked. You couldn't really contribute to thinking about the Soviet Union, for example, or China, or take the other big kind of problem issues that have occupied American foreign policy in the past half century and more—Iran, and—

Q: The Middle East in general.

Sestanovich: —he Middle East in general, Latin America, [laughs] when it makes its rare cameo appearance in American foreign policy. You couldn't really illuminate what we were facing in those cases, without that kind of knowledge. And so that's why you tended to get people with funny sounding foreign names. I remember hearing an eminent scholar, whom I will not single out, complain about how so many Russia experts came from Eastern Europe. And we know whom he had in mind, even if he was expressing a certain kind of [laughs] ugly prejudice.

But I think that that model does seem a little dated in a more interconnected world, at a time when most regions, when all countries, are kind of open to a lot more international influence, and when there's a much broader familiarity with the world. We don't need scholars who can pull out their stamp collection for us and tell us—we don't only need scholars who know jokes about

Radio Yerevan. And in any case, to have influence, you have to have all of the analytical tools that modern academics provide you. Just relying on your deep cultural knowledge, and your stamp collection, won't cut it quite as well. For that reason, people need modern training. The only thing I'd add to that though, is they can't be limited by it. They need, in addition, the sort of policy vocabulary that enables them to frame problems in a way that make sense to the people that truly need the knowledge in order to make decisions.

My prediction is that area studies will continue to have a place in academic research and the institutions that support it; the Harriman Institute, the various regional institutes at Columbia that look at the Middle East, China, Europe, Africa, Latin America. They will have an ongoing important place in the university, but they won't do their work in those institutions in the same way that people did in the past. And that's as it should be.

Q: Is this a function, do you think—a result of not only perhaps the rise of these functional institutes, but also of the increasing disciplinary-ness of people's training and careers, that each discipline has become somewhat more siloed in how the career expectations of where you publish, and that sort of thing, and who your colleagues are, who your reference group is, is much more disciplinary based than, if you will, area studies based?

Sestanovich: Look, think of it this way. I mentioned Stanley Hoffman. In the 1970s, one could still be a French expert, or a German expert, or a British politics specialist, at Harvard. But the moment was passing and the junior faculty at that time were already aware that if you wanted to do really interesting work in the field, you had to be more comparative. You had to be able to

compare the experience, and integrate the experience, of Northern Europe and Southern Europe, and protestant and catholic Europe, more and less industrial Europe. That wasn't just a disciplinary convention. Europe itself was changing, and if you were going to be a credible, respected scholar, whom policymakers, Europeans, journalists, other audiences for academic work, would pay attention to, you had to broaden your focus. You had to have something to say that took account of the way in which the subject that you're interested in is changing.

I will say though, that some of these silos don't break down so easily. At the Council on Foreign Relations, twenty years and more have gone by since we created a center for geo-economics, a term that was devised by a past president of the council—

[INTERRUPTION]

Sestanovich: A past president of the council, Les [Leslie H.] Gelb, coined this term, I believe, not just as a fundraising gimmick, but as a way of saying we need to understand how economics fits into our political processes, into international relations in general. Yet, I think it's still the case that people who are primarily interested in politics, and people who are primarily interested in economics, don't talk to each other and understand each other as well as they used to. In Soviet studies, we actually were kind of brought together as area studies people, with economists. We always wanted to know what the economists were saying about the fate of the Soviet Union or the Soviet economy.

My own experience as a young academic and then a junior policy person, was that it was extremely important to be able to hear from both parts of our own area studies field. In some funny way, that we haven't really institutionalized, we're all doing a little more political economy than we used to, but we're not as good at it as we should [be], and the political scientists don't understand the economics and the economic research as well as they should, and the economists don't pay as much attention to the political research as those of us who do it [laughs] would like. So I think we're still—we're facing new silos. In a way, I think we've overcome the narrow compartments of area studies. We've found a way to encourage people to do serious comparative work, without losing their knowledge of Radio Yerevan jokes and stamp collections, and a feel for the countries that they're working with, not letting them become mere case studies in the dataset. I think we're still—we're not good at bridging the gap between political science and economics.

Q: Let me conclude this first part of our interview—which we'll pick up this afternoon—with two further questions about area studies; one very abstract, one very concrete. The very abstract one is, I was wondering, also, if part of the decline or problematic impact on area studies has to do with this valuing—in political science, in sociology, in economics to some extent—of kind of more universalist theorizing, that asks for certain distance from particular locales—be they a specific country or an area—and if that kind of valuing of that kind of intellectual enterprise, inside academia, which seems to have grown—I know from our own profession, in political science, has grown over time—if you think that has had some kind of negative impact on the interest in sustaining area studies.

Sestanovich: I'm sure it has. Has it been intellectually bad as well? I think the drive to uncover patterns of politics that are true across periods of time, countries, geographic regions, it's understandable and produces results which are valuable as long as you don't let their connection to real life get lost. I mean, if you're—just to take us back to policymaking again. If you're a policymaker and you're thinking about the political evolution of the post-Soviet states, say, and you hear an academic presentation about the—let's just take something very general [pause]—the role of the military in political development across continents, whether it's Latin America, the Arab Middle East, Eastern Europe, in the interwar period. You honestly can't apply that, in any crude way, to the countries that you're looking at, or you're going to make terrible mistakes, because these conclusions are never anything other than probabilities. But it might give you an interesting lens for thinking about what it is that you're looking at in the evolution of only a dozen or so states that emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union. It might give you an inclination to watch for variables that you might not have thought were important. It might have given you a new feel for the kinds of constraints that operate on political leaders in those countries. So it can help to enrich area studies, if we use the tools in the right way.

Take the work that [Daron] Acemoğlu and [James A.] Robinson have done on the development of inclusive political systems and economic development. That's an analysis that can't tell you how to predict the results of the Uzbek succession, or whether Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan are going to do better, but [you] would certainly want to be familiar with that perspective, if only because [laughs] when you go to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, you might discover that even there, some people [laughs] have read these books. So, I've gotten away from your question probably.



Q: No, you haven't actually, because it's a really nice answer, because it reminds me—what you're talking about, it reminds me of Paul [R.] Krugman, the greater modeler, of his beef with the freshwater schools, that they take their models too seriously, and so have predictions about the real world—that Eugene [F.] Fama still says there was no bubble [laughs], because his model says there was no bubble, or couldn't be a bubble; they don't exist. That sounds like the kind of thing that you're describing and warning against.

Sestanovich: Well, there's always a market in Washington, for a highly developed, data driven, case study driven, crackpot theory. Because, as I said earlier, in Washington, people are always looking for ammunition, and if you can tell somebody that there's actually a serious intellectual basis for some nutty view that they have, they will invite you to their hearing [laughter] and offer you the opportunity to present it to the whole world, or at least to their subcommittee. In that respect, Washington is not always as rigorous a filter of good theories as it ought to be, because there's such a value placed on contention and on being able to help a contender for power with his campaign to show that he's got all the answers.

I remember when I first started working at CSIS, in the late '80s, after I left the NSC [National Security Council], one of my very brilliant colleagues there gave me a caution about publishing only in newspapers and less rigorous outlets. He said, "The journalists don't always know quality. They don't always know who's right, and they can't always identify the best ideas and the best researched ideas. They're looking for—just as the policymakers are—controversy and ammunition." It is a kind of warning, to people who want to influence policy debates for good

reasons, that is they want to help the country come up with the right answer. And the warning is of course this: that the demand for your ideas, and your research, and your brilliant conclusions, may not [laughs] always depend on whether they're right. The demand will depend on whether they are useful. There's a lot of corruption that lies along that path.

I think honestly, in some maybe unspoken way, it's what has kept some academics out of the world of hocking their ideas to policymakers. They find that the audience isn't entirely worthy of them [laughter], to put it in a somewhat obnoxious way. They also get a little exasperated with people who are not simply interested in truth—or even in whether their ideas will have a good effect—but are instead interested, primarily, in whether their ideas will advance their own careers. That's something one has to be wary of in getting into the world of policy debate. It's very easy to lose sight of what you actually believe. As my wife likes to say, in Washington, intellectual honesty is not always the surest route to professional advancement [laughter]. You sometimes have to cut corners. It's often a sign that you're actually getting somewhere [laughs]. You're being invited to cut corners. That kind of political discourse is frustrating for a lot of academics. They have no trouble with controversy—I mean academics are born to argue with each other—but they have trouble with the idea that you have to figure out how to make your ideas useful, without corrupting them.

Q: Let me—

Sestanovich: I've gone on too long.

Q: No, no, that's fine. There's so much in what you say that I would want to pick up on, but let me just go to one final question.

Sestanovich: Yes, and I'll try to give you a shorter answer.

Q: No, believe me, your answers are wonderful. They seriously stimulate my mind about so much more to ask. But just to conclude on the area studies, I wonder what your thoughts are. We couldn't have this conversation—we'll more about the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, Harriman, as an area studies locale, folks there, self-admittedly, didn't see it coming. Perhaps nobody else did either, but just in our conversations, they didn't see it coming. As an area studies place that didn't see it coming, the question naturally arises, was that a real failure for area studies, not to see the collapse of the Soviet Union?

Sestanovich: Yes [laughs].

Q: Would you care to elaborate [laughs]?

Sestanovich: Why don't we take this up after lunch?

Q: Excellent, that's great.

[END OF SESSION]

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Session: 2

Interviewee: Stephen Sestanovich

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: William McAllister

Date: February 3, 2017

Q: Welcome back, Steve. I'm talking again, with Stephen Sestanovich, on February third, the second part of our interview. Where we left off this morning was my asking you, does the inability of an area studies—the people in an area studies institute like the Harriman—their failure to anticipate the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, does that say anything about the failure of area studies, or nothing at all?

Sestanovich: [Laughs] I tend to be on the tolerant side when it comes to assigning blame for predictive failures of this kind. It seems to me, that when you have an earthquake that nobody predicted, one should not go around trying to figure out who was especially culpable. When the Shah of Iran is overthrown, and the Shah himself didn't see it, and his police informants didn't see it, and his closest advisors, and even his opponents didn't see it, why would we blame the CIA for an intelligence failure? Similarly, with the Soviet Union, very few people saw the collapse coming, and so nobody is especially to blame. But different people may have different reasons for their failure not to see it. People in the area studies biz, the sort of Russia specialists, may, some of them, have been—to use a term I applied earlier to a policy community—gotten into their own bubble. They may have had their own contacts in Moscow, they might have seen that people lived better and thought that that represented a kind of success of the regime. They may have bought some of the claims that the regime made for itself, as to its legitimacy. They may have been impressed by military power. They may have stayed out of circles where they

would have been exposed a little more, to disgruntlement. But even people who were pretty plugged into intellectual trends, who saw some of the internal discontent, tended—as I think many of the discontented themselves did—to discount that, to have a kind of fatalistic attitude toward the possibility of any kind of meaningful change.

I remember being on TV shortly after I got out of the government, in a sort of mini debate that Steve [Stephen F.] Cohen and I had, on the *MacNeil/Lehrer Report*. It was at just a time when [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev was allowing for more, not just flexibility in the media, but actually, some kind of freedom to organize factions within the Communist Party. There was this idea that there could be organized opposition to the general line of the party. Steve's view was, this is no big deal—this is actually how the evolution of the party was intended to take place by those who were its reformers. He understood, which was exactly right, that Gorbachev thought you could have, within the party, a kind of reform wing and a conservative wing, and that they could coexist. That didn't have to be wrong but it was wrong. I think it was wrong for a reason that I, luckily [laughs] just happen to identify in this disagreement. I said, “When you allow organized political opposition, whether it's internal to the party or outside it, you are encouraging people to feel their grievances, and you're giving them a sense that they can mobilize to gain support for those grievances.”

What is the group within the party that isn't winning going to do? The answer is, reach out beyond the party, try to find ways of influencing an internal debate within the party, by bringing in external forces. What do we call that? Democracy. That means the freedom to associate, to convince people of the rightness of your views, and to try to help them to carry the day by

getting more people on your side. If that meant leaking public criticisms of the internal party deliberations and of the stupid dinosaur types who are resisting reform, that was going to happen. In any case, that was not anything that we could look at and measure, in looking at Soviet politics, because Soviet politics was changing and we didn't know what the rules were going to be.

I remember, on a visit that I paid to Moscow, in the mid-'80s, when I was at the NSC, and as was the practice at that time, the embassy officer who was responsible for human rights, would take a visiting official around to meet with people in the dissident community. So we had coffee in the apartment of a group of dissidents, and they would sit around and talk to me, [laughs] sort of give me their view of what was going on. I was very impressed by the modesty of one of the eminent figures there, Alexander [Y.] Lerner—who was a guy who I think had been a mathematician, academician of some sort, who had been fired from his position for his oppositionist views—and he was a night watchman, or something of that sort. He said you know, “We don't understand our politics. We have no real experience of politics, so we can't give you any political assessment of what's going on. We don't have any inside information. We don't understand the processes that govern politics in our country. You are more experienced than we are. We have to rely on you.”

Well, he was saying—partly he was just being modest—but he was saying, “We're too close to the problem and we're in the dark. We need a broader perspective, we need the experience of living in the outside world,” but even more he was saying, “We just need the kind of intuition that comes to you if you've had a lot of experience in a lot of countries and seen when things fall

apart.” They had no idea and honestly, nobody really did have any idea when or how or whether the Soviet Union could fall apart. But you needed a kind of—intuition was what I always credited my great teacher Adam Ulam with. He often used it as a shortcut, so that he didn’t have to do as much research [laughs] as other scholars might have felt was necessary. He could kind of wing it, because he had good judgment.

This is a long way around to saying that some of the faults that we, who were specialists on the Soviet Union, had that kept us from seeing what was going on, were our own. Some were ordinary failings of the sort that anybody made. There were people who had a stake in continuing the Soviet Union, because they knew people who—they felt they knew how the system worked. Honestly, some Sovietologists probably fail to see the significance of a new opposition arising, because it was a pain to get to know the people in the opposition. [Laughs] They already knew there, the people that they knew, and so they tended to downplay what was happening.

Incidentally, that’s one reason I think, that journalists sometimes had a better sense of this than we specialists, because they weren’t so entrenched in their set of contacts. They would arrive on the scene—develop new contacts. They do, of course, inherit some from the previous bureau chief, but their job was to go out and feel what was happening that was new. So, David Remnick and Bill Keller and Fred [Frederick S.] Hiatt and people like this, who were unseen, watching the collapse, had more of an incentive to nose out the new trends.

Q: Let me ask you a question—kind of a follow-up—which is I wanted to ask you, looking back, if you think that either this is too hard a test for scholarship—to be able to predict such a

dramatic change like this—or that there's another dimension, or something else in our scholarship that we could have done, that anticipated it, or as you're saying, that it might be beyond scholarship, because it has this kind of intuitiveness to it, that you have to be on the ground in the way journalists are on the ground, in the way that academics tend not to be.

Sestanovich: Look, some of this is just guesswork. I mean, I will—let me describe a little bit of the things that I was interested in, in the government, with some academic training. I did the usual Kremlinology that people were trained to do at the time, because we understood that that was a key to understanding internal communication within the regime, and so I read, in the early to mid-'80s, all of the—partly because it was kind of my assignment in the State Department Planning Staff and at the NSC, to understand Soviet policy in the third world. How much of an effort was being committed to this? What kind of a challenge was the Soviet leadership undertaking to American positions? It had been seen, that since the fall of South Vietnam, there was a kind of upsurge in activism on the part of the Soviet Union in the third world. And what was this about, and how serious was it going to be? Big question in the U.S. government, in the intelligence community.

I read a lot of the stuff, and every leadership statement, and it seemed to me that with the death of [Leonid I.] Brezhnev, that there was a—what by Soviet standards you would have to call a debate, that arose, about the importance to the Soviet Union, of these new clients that they'd picked up; the Afghans, the Angolans, the Nicaraguans, the Ethiopians. What did they think of these people and how did that new bloc, that sort of expanded network, figure in their overall foreign policy? I thought there was a debate. I thought some of the new—I thought [Yuri V.]



Andropov, and other senior leaders, who were telegraphing that actually this was to be downgraded, that they were less committed, less enthusiastic, and certainly less interested in having a commitment to these clients trigger a clash with the United States. This didn't necessarily mean that they were interested in a renewal of détente, or in resolving all difficulties with the United States. To the contrary, I thought, this could go along with actually a rather hawkish view of the United States. If you were going to have a tough relationship with the U.S., you wanted to be able to control it, you didn't want it to flare up in a stupid place like Nicaragua.

So this was pure Kremlinology. I wrote it up actually, in a memo for George [P.] Shultz, and it got a certain amount of attention. It actually probably got me hired away from the policy planning staff, to the NSC, and I even published it in the *Washington Post*, even though there were people who criticized me for doing this. [Laughs] A now very distinguished colleague, at the time said he didn't think I should be doing this, even though he was willing to authorize it, because he said it wasn't good for us to let the Soviets know how we think, or we think they think [laughs]. At any rate, I mention this because it was a very conventional tool that I think actually was a correct analysis. It reflected what later became much more prominent in Gorbachev's new thinking, which is an ability to, readiness to, reexamine some of the tenets of Soviet foreign policy that had gotten them into this problem.

After my piece appeared in the *Post*, a pretty senior guy at the CIA, who was an advisor to Bill [William J.] Casey, called me up and he said it was so great, what I'd written, because—and this was a dig at his agency colleagues—he said, it was totally unclassified [laughs]. “It was all based on open sources and you didn't have to—” there was no hocus pocus about sources and methods.

I said, “Well, you know, great, very interesting, thank you.” That was his dig at the way in which the professionals had their stake in believing what they heard through their channels—and that tended to be what they’d always heard. Somehow, their sources weren’t picking up that there was any change, so they tended to disbelieve my claim that there was something going on.

I don’t claim to have discovered glasnost and perestroika [laughs] before it happened, only that a lot of us were alert to sources of change. Everybody thought, okay you’ve got a big transition happening. You’ve got a generational handoff of leadership, from guys in their eighties, to guys in their fifties—and actually probably in their seventies only.

Q: They seemed older at the time; I have to say. Andropov in particular.

Sestanovich: Yes. As the specialists—the people who really knew Russia—said, Russians don’t live in their eighties [laughs]. At any rate, everybody knew there was a potential for something to happen, but we just didn’t know where we were going to see it. Some people picked it up more than others, more quickly. I would say all in all, the universe of Soviet experts did not distinguish itself with anticipation, but there were plenty of people who were alive to the idea that something was going to happen.

I’ll give you one other story about that, even in the government. The CIA used to have classes for its entering officers. They would bring in outside experts and people who had been in government, not in government. I, several times, followed Bob [Robert M.] Gates in the presentation that he gave, and I discovered that the agency people were inviting me to disagree

with Gates, because his view was the Soviet Union is having economic difficulties and that's going to make them more aggressive externally. I said—not being an economist—it's possible of course that that can happen, but we should also be looking for signs that, being realistic people, they're looking for ways to limit their foreign commitments because they're having economic difficulties. The agency people, who organize these classes, wanted to have their junior people exposed to this debate. Everybody knew that there was a potential for change, but it was hard to disagree with, say Bob Gates, who was a bona fide Soviet expert and the number two person in the agency. So you had to bring in the outside experts and say, by the way, not everybody agrees with Mr. Gates.

It was a truly exciting time to be part of these discussions, because everybody was discombobulated. What we thought had been true for a long time suddenly was up for grabs; the nature, extent, durability of Soviet power, at home and abroad.

Q: I'm curious about—this is a little bit off our—

Sestanovich: And let me stop giving you longish, too long answers.

Q: No, no, no. Just, I'm just curious about—while I have you here, if I may indulge for a second, and I want to move on to two things about Harriman. Was there an appreciation of Gorbachev, as being the person who is picking all this up and understanding it, and so that without Gorbachev, maybe you would have had a Gates kind of outcome, rather than the outcome that we got?

Sestanovich: There's no doubt that a big effort went into identifying who Gorbachev was, understanding him, doing the mindreading, trying to figure out what we could learn about his experience that would tell us how he was going to respond to suddenly having the leadership thrust upon him. There were people who were on this case very early—and all honor to Jerry Huff [phonetic], for example, who fingered Gorbachev very early, as the likely heir, somebody who was of that fifty-something generation, that was going to take over—but of course nobody knew what kind of American policy would make it most likely that Gorbachev would pursue the kind of reform that you might or might not think he was most interested in. How you answered that question tended to be influenced by your own policy preferences.

If you thought it was better to have détente between the Soviet Union and the United States, you would tend to support that preference by saying, “And this will give Gorbachev an opportunity to pursue reform, and then we will have a better, safer world.” If you thought that it was better to push back against Soviet policy, you could easily defend your proposition by saying, “And then Gorbachev will be under more pressure to reform.” [Laughs] So, our tribe of Soviet experts could have the insight that Gorbachev was going to be the new leader, and that there were lots of innovative ideas that they might pursue—although I think nobody quite understood how innovative—but it was much harder to answer because this was very contingent and depended so much on the internal dynamics of the politburo. Much harder to answer what kinds of policies from the United States would actually help accelerate this.

I think some of the work that's been done in the archives since then, suggests that Gorbachev in fact was aided—even though he was immensely frustrated by it—by the tough [Ronald W.]

Reagan policies. When he came back to the politburo after his meetings with Reagan and had to say, “I got nothing,” [laughs] you know, “The guy is a cavemen, he is absolutely determined to run an arms race with us, run us into the ground and build the missile shield.” This actually helped him to say, “So we’ve got to get on a different track guys. We’ve got to end the arms race, we’ve got to have reforms that enhance economic productivity, or the underlying strength of the Soviet Union depends on dodging this bullet that Reagan is aiming at us.”

This was an issue that divided people a lot within the Soviet Field. There were the—not to invent any new phrase—the hardliners and the soft-liners. I think everybody knew, really, although in the spirit of the moment it was sometimes hard to acknowledge, that you didn’t know who was right. I sort of leaned toward the hardline view, and there were plenty of people in the field who had that view as well. Brzezinski was a kind of hardliner, my colleague at the State Department, Jeremy [R.] Azrael from the University of Chicago was of that view, Dick Pipes, who was at the NCS, from Harvard for a couple of years, was of that view. But there were perfectly responsible, and respectable, and learned people who had a different view of what the impact on internal Soviet politics would be.

It may be that in the end, we just got lucky. It wasn’t inevitable that Reagan was going to produce an accommodating Gorbachev. Gorbachev could have been ousted in favor of—and it [laughs] almost happened later—in favor of hardliners. So, how to handle, as a matter of American policy, this turmoil inside the Soviet Union was a very complicated question, on which expertise was very hard to bring to bear, because the truth is, we didn’t know what was going to happen.

Q: Let me turn to talking about nationality studies and human rights studies that Harriman has been involved in both. Nationality studies grew at HI in the '90s and it helped promote the Association for the Study of Nationalities, as you know. I was wondering, to start this part of the conversation, how do you conceptualize nationalities studies?

Sestanovich: Well, the study of non-Russian nationalities in the Soviet Union was always one of the liveliest subfields. It tended to divide people a little bit according to their political outlook. If you thought that nationality issues were a source of weakness for the regime, you might very well be somebody who thought outsiders should try to play on these weaknesses. In Eastern Europe, Zbig Brzezinski made a good part of his career with the idea that anti-Russian nationalist sentiment among the Soviet bloc states would be a source of opposition to Moscow, and that the United States could encourage that kind of breakup of the Soviet bloc. Within the Soviet Union itself, there were plenty of people—Alexandre Bennigsen, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, Jeremy Azrael—distinguished scholars of nationality issues, who made this same argument.

To this day, it's still a little bit, I think a matter of complicated historical interpretation, to say what the role of national division was and when. There's no doubt that Ukraine sort of put the final nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union in December of 1991. And there's no doubt that in a lot of the non-Russian union republics, opposition to Soviet rule was disguised often as something that it wasn't, like environmentalism in Georgia and Armenia, or language politics elsewhere.

All the same, I think one would have to say that the true impetus for the breakup of, and the strongest challenge to, Soviet power, came from within Russia, that it was Russian nationality and Russian nationalism that tended to be a source of opposition. A lot of the nationality scholars tended to miss this. They tended to be convinced that it was the minority nationalities that would be the source of weakness. An awful lot of Yeltsin's political strength came from representing himself as the true Russian nationalist, whose interest was not so much in keeping the Soviet Union together—so as to be able to beat up on or subdue, the Kazaks and the Azaris—but who wanted to free Russia from the burden that those other nationalities represented. In a time of economic stringency, the condescending view that Moscow intellectuals, Moscow bureaucrats, Moscow people in the street had was, “The rest of the Soviet Union is a burden to us and we're sick of it.”

So, there's no doubt that this kind of political controversy weakened the Soviet Union and people were arguing about it in a lively way all along. I will say that this wasn't the heart of the discipline or the field of studies. Most scholars regarded nationality studies as a bit of a curiosity, and even an oddity, that you were a little bit of a crank to pay too much attention to Ukraine. After all, Ukraine is just a backwater province, wasn't it? So the Ukraine Institute in Harvard was a kind of mysterious place. Frankly, in the time that I was there, I don't think I knew where the Ukraine Institute was [laughs], the Ukraine Center now. The Russian Research Center wasn't all that strong in nationality studies. Probably, Harriman had more strength in that field. But honestly, everywhere, it was very much a kind of minority fixation.

Q: Do you think it should be trying to encourage nationality studies now, or has it—in your mind, since you've been at Harriman or been at SIPA—do you think it's done much to encourage and should it be doing this? I particularly ask that question I guess, in the sense of nationality studies, have the political implication—to put a kind of anodyne word on it—for encouraging nationalism, and that presents its own set of problems. So I was wondering about both Harriman itself, as an institute, and encouraging nationality studies, but also being concerned about this other implication of doing so.

Sestanovich: Well, it's not by accident that there's a connection between nationality studies and nationalism. The most eminent, best known, active, prolific, scholars of nationality issues have often been from those countries, or the areas where those nationalities, at least in the Soviet case, dominate. They have had a kind of anti-Soviet orientation, which later, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, become an anti-Russian orientation. There are few people who make Ukraine their academic specialty who are not deeply sympathetic to Ukraine. That's fine, as long as you can maintain your scholarly integrity and your determination to find out the truth of what's going on in Ukraine; then you can help people understand it who are not Ukrainian. But it's definitely become a matter of politicization. You've got to decide which side you're on. Even recently, in the early days of the Ukraine crisis, there were many arguments among people in our field as to who had just bought all of the arguments that the Ukrainians had made, or who had just bought all of the arguments that the Russians had made, and were we corrupted by partisanship in this sort of discussion.



This, incidentally, it has its political dimension. When I was ambassador-at-large in the State Department, running the—what would otherwise have been called the bureau of the State Department—dealing with the former Soviet Union, we wanted to become a bureau in full standing, but the Congress refused this because they had been persuaded—particularly by Ukrainian Americans—that that would be a bureau dominated by Russia specialists. I remember having a conversation with Senator [Jesse A.] Helms's staff director, who said that Senator Helms did not want to have a bureau that was responsible for the former Soviet Union, because he thought that would perpetuate the Soviet Union. What he meant by that was [laughs]—I mean it was obviously, a kind of goofy idea in its way—but what he meant was that the old Soviet hands of the Foreign Service, people who'd served in Moscow in their formative stages of their career, would be running this bureau, and they would be hostile to the interests of the smaller post-Soviet states.

It was an interesting interpretation, but actually it turned out to be wrong, because one of the things that happened was that Foreign Service Officers who served in Georgia or Armenia or Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan, generally became partisans of those countries, against Russia in disputes that they had. They didn't become anti-Russian, but they tended to think that it was an American interest—because it was so defined by our presidents—to encourage the success of the post-Soviet states, so that you didn't end up with a kind of Balkan-like set of ethnic conflicts and wars. I tell the story to make the point that even outside of academia, the question of how you take seriously, the national and nationalist concerns of little states, the national minorities and so forth, without becoming advocates or partisans—complicated. People rarely succeed all together. This is why, in the Foreign Service, the term clientitis refers to something real [laughs].

Q: Let me just follow up on this in one way, and then we'll talk about human rights.

Sestanovich: Oh, I'm sorry.

Q: No, no. Thinking about Harriman, and thinking about how it deals with this issue, kind of area studies is in decline—perhaps inevitably so—and nationality studies are somewhat on the rise. They seem to me perhaps, to be in some set of conflict, because area studies means including kind of a larger area culturally, politically, or whatever. Nationality studies is more focused on a particular area. But if Harriman is—so, *a*, how does maybe Harriman try to resolve that conflict, if there is a conflict, but *b*, if it's concerned about encouraging nationalism, and it also sees as problematic, or realizes that area studies is not going to be what it once was, how does Harriman intellectually position itself or think about the relationship between—and study, taking on intellectually—these geographic spaces with different kinds of political systems and cultures and all that sort of stuff? Is there a way to think about how, in a more cohesive way, how Harriman might go about that?

Sestanovich: You know, I think the answer is probably something like what it has always been in our field. And that is that you have to keep people from falling into their own little pigeonholed, academic specialties in which they nurse their [laughs] personal research and other obsessions. And I don't mean this in a critical way. I mean that the way of keeping research honest and keeping it focused on big questions that people can wrestle with and address in a civil, and

constructive, and productive way, is not to let any field become merely a collection of boosters for the people being studied. It is important to keep distance from subjects of your research.

I am, myself, a great well-wisher of Ukrainian success. But I tend to think that people who come to conferences in Ukraine, not as full-time Ukraine scholars, and can evaluate what's happening there, and subject it to kind of critical analysis, are both helping the overall legitimacy of this kind of academic inquiry, they're also even helping Ukraine. Because it doesn't help Ukraine to hear only from its friends. I think the same is true across the post-Soviet field. There's always a kind of danger of parochial boosterism that keeps us from understanding the problems that we're analyzing as well as we should.

That's particularly true in the policy world too, because if you're responsible for American policy toward Ukraine and American policy is to support Ukraine, you can feel the obligation to shade your analysis toward all of the good things that are happening, as opposed to seeing where a little criticism, a little kick in the pants, would actually help the Ukrainians, and help Ukrainians who understand the problems, are under no illusions about what needs to be done, but can only make headway if they find that outsiders are telling the truth about them.

Q: On human rights, Harriman again, has played something of a role in developing human rights. It helped developed Human Rights Watch, as you know.

Sestanovich: Yes.

Q: From some of our conversations—conversations I've had with people—some people think that human rights studies kind of come naturally from studying the Soviet Union, because their perspective on the Soviet Union was that it was fundamentally—its fundamental principles were opposed to human rights. I was wondering, *a* if you thought that that was a correct sense of the Soviet Union, but *b*—specifically importantly for Harriman going forward—should Harriman invest itself in helping to develop human rights, especially in the context of [Vladimir V.] Putin, who perhaps has the same kind of characteristics as the people who were saying it was endemic to the Soviet Union, to be opposed to human rights.

Sestanovich: Look, Harriman has a real history here. I remember in the [James E.] Carter administration, that you had Zbig Brzezinski—a very fierce critic of the Soviet regime and an encourager of strong policies to oppose it—sitting in the White House, with Marshall Shulman at the State Department as an advisor to Secretary Vance, not really focusing on human rights, but from time to time giving testimony before the Congress about how human rights should fit into American policy. Marshall found himself, I think, in an unwise position of sort of saying that was something that shouldn't be the concern of the U.S. Government. Marshall was a man of immense goodwill and a supporter of human rights, but somebody who—as he wrestled with the choices that American policy made—was, in the end, for downplaying that theme. This was a lively internal debate within the U.S. Government, that two titans of Soviet studies [laughs] at Columbia were engaged in, on opposite sides.

Q: Shulman perhaps wanted to downplay it because he thought it was perhaps innately critical of the Soviet Union?

Sestanovich: Because he thought no short-term good could come of raising it, that it would enhance tensions between Moscow and Washington in a way that would be unproductive. Not because he didn't sympathize with dissidents, but because he felt that this was a problem—that it was beyond that capacity of the United States Government to contribute anything meaningful to. It's the same problem we were talking about a moment ago in connection with Reagan and Gorbachev. Did you promote positive evolution of the Soviet Union by being tough or by being accommodating? It's a policy that really—I mean it's a problem that has divided American scholars and policymakers, really, for as long as we've had to deal with the Soviet Union.

I think one could be in complete agreement about the nature of human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and still come to different policy conclusions. There might be other people who would say this is a problem that the Soviets are on their way toward resolving, they want to do the right thing. That, to me, would have been a more naïve view. The more sophisticated view was this just isn't something that we can affect, and by elevating it as an issue, we may actually make it harder for those in the Soviet Union to kind of open up space for dissent.

Q: What's your sense, now, of this issue, of raising the issues of human rights? Particularly, there's something I've always wondered about, in many cases, but in the case of the Soviet Union, of how much it's perceived as an imposition of western values that are peculiarly western and are used by the west in a kind of colonialist way perhaps—in other settings, not colonialist in the context of Russia. Is that an issue that—is this something that should be a matter of scholarship in terms of the Putin regime, the Putin years?

Sestanovich: Well, it's an issue that divides scholars and has divided Soviet thinkers and policymakers and activists for a long time. There are always the people who said—as there are today— “we Russians just approach these matters differently. We have our own values, we represent a different civilization.” I think there's such a long history here, I'm not sure we can get to it in a meaningful way. For Russians, it has been a fundamental issue of identity for centuries. Do they want to be part of the west, or do they want to carve out some separate civilizational status for themselves? In this way, Putin is definitely more than just a throwback to Soviet times. He's a throwback to pre-Soviet times.

Soviet leadership signed the Helsinki Final Act as a kind of acknowledgement that European norms were relevant to how the Soviet Union managed itself. They thought they could at least gamble with acknowledging that proposition. It turned out not to be a great gamble because within ten years—the Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1975. By 1985, Gorbachev was the leader of the Soviet Union, and he was prepared to acknowledge the proposition that there were, if not European norms or western norms—western was the term that bugged him—there were universal norms by which the Soviet Union should be judged. So he kind of accepted the proposition that there was no separate cultural autonomy that would justify denial of human rights, and that in any case, it should be Russia's ambition to create a society in which the universal norms would be acknowledged.

Putin is doing something pretty far-reaching when he denies that. I mean, here he's not just running against the 1990s; he's running against the 1980s and even the 1970s, and running

against a progressive tradition in Russian thought that goes back way, way beyond that. But that's something he's managed to win some popularity for in Russia. The whole idea as to whether Russia really is part of the west, it's not resolved. And I think Putin has probably set the discussion back rather significantly.

Incidentally, in this way, western scholars have a lot to—have a completely legitimate basis for interacting with Russian scholars and thinkers, because we all know the history. We know how much this has been an issue under debate for centuries. Putin can't pretend that a society that saw itself as part of Christendom, whose elite spoke French, was really cut off and carving a different civilizational path all along. They've been part of western culture, or at least in some complicated way, and that's a discussion that, not just as scholars, but as advocates of civilizational accommodation [laughs], we should participate in.

Q: To me, that's a fascinating way in which you've situated the human rights issue, in terms of the identity of the Russians.

Switching topics. One of the things that we'd like to get from people in these conversations is their own personal experiences of how things have changed about how to do research, or how to study the Soviet Union, or how to study Russia—, that's changed over their time, going—if they were in graduate school as you—up until the current example, the current instance. For example, one of the major changes—or the absence of change perhaps in some instances—but one of the major changes is the ability to travel to the source, if you will. I wondered if you have any thoughts on the past—was it infrequent in the '70s—? Perhaps you have to rely on archives here

in the States, if you were doing historical work, you as a political scientist, your sources then and your ability to study it then, as opposed to now—in terms of travel ability and access to information, different kinds of information as a result of travel, or other kinds of changes that have made your scholarship easier, but more importantly, different—how it's affected what you've been able to learn.

Sestanovich: Look, it's completely different now, and I don't want to make light of the enormous opportunities, because Russia is just a completely different place, and so are all the post-Soviet states. The kind of work that one can do there is just radically different from what was possible in the past. But there was more opportunity to get inside the Soviet Union and do research than we perhaps remember these days. Even the Soviet economists had—the western economists who studied the Soviet Union—had all kinds of techniques for [laughs] trying to figure out what was going on.

Consider the way in which, if you were a western economist, you studied the black market. I remember talking to a colleague at Berkeley, a famous guy, Greg [Gregory] Grossman, who would explain to me, the techniques that they had for trying to understand the size of the black market in any particular Soviet city. You would try to get somebody to cut your hair and then figure out what the price was, and try to ascertain the price in different places. He said the rule of thumb among economists was that a haircut told you the price of hourly wage for skilled workers [laughs]. So you could actually figure out a lot about what was happening by these techniques. There were people who would go around and they'd study the price of sausages on the black market, and try to do—this is what field research amounted to in the old days [laughs].



Q: I like that, that's very cool; that's very clever.

Thinking from your time since you've come to SIPA, and you've been associated with the Harriman Institute, lots of big events have happened. Obviously, Putin's rise, the Russian takeover of Crimea, Ukraine, U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Syrian civil war, and Turkish war now. Are there things that you see that Harriman has done or should be doing, given these events, to try and—again, this question of policy relevance—make itself more policy relevant or intellectually relevant about these events—again, as an organization, as an institute—or things that you would like to see it do, to enhance its ability to have influence, to be more intellectually relevant.

Sestanovich: Look, there are great scholars at Harriman, and the kinds of things that they do represent not just the cutting edge of scholarship, but the cutting edge of policy discussion. If you think about Alex [Alexander] Cooley's work on the relations between Russia and its periphery, base politics for example; the whole issue of what kind of relationship the United States can have with countries on Russia's periphery is right there, and people who want to inform themselves about that are going to benefit from research and analysis of that kind. Tim Frye's work about the intersections of economic and political power, that's exactly what people want to know.

I think the end of the Cold War was a time of intellectual, as well as policy disorientation for those of us in this country, in the west. Trying to figure out what the right strategy was as an

intellectual matter, of what to study in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there wasn't an obvious answer to that. What the right policy should be was also something that we felt our way toward. I feel that as a country and as an academic establishment, we've made some mistakes; we've gotten most things basically right. This is still a kind of work in progress. But I would say there's a much sharper focus and clarity about what it is we ought to be looking at today than twenty years ago.

Remember, twenty years ago, we were thinking that what we were studying was entirely the question of political transitions, where we kind of thought we understood the direction of politics in the post-Soviet states, and of economics, and cultural developments, and so forth. Now I think we have a better grip, as we do in policy terms, on the diversity of destinations, that these countries may be moving toward, and a recognition that they're not simply developing as kind of pathological byways, or unfolding of an original Soviet form. There's a lot that's been added to the modern political economy of post-Soviet states that makes up what we study now and try to understand, that we only were beginning to grasp it twenty years ago.

Twenty years ago, we weren't sure whether oligarchy was a passing phenomenon or a defining characteristic, and the relationship between the state and the economy. Now I think we've got a much better sense of how that works. The more fully developed kleptocracy [laughter] is now better understood.

Q: Well, that tickles a question in my mind, that harkens back to something you said this morning, which is—and, as I think about it, this is a position of Jon Elster, who is a political

philosopher here, in the political science department, which is how much—it seems perhaps, as if we have a better idea of these things because they've already happened, and that scholarship kind of tethered necessarily. Not just in the Soviet Union, but this is what—or Russia, this is the area you can speak best to, obviously—but to events that have already happened. This is, as I said, this is Elster's position, that you can only kind of explain what's already occurred, you can't really tell us laid out principles that are going to be able to help us get ahead of and get outside that box of the empirical.

Sestanovich: Right.

Q: I was wondering, do you think that studies of Russia, or the former Soviet Union, or the states of Eastern Europe, are necessarily tethered to what's already happened, as opposed to getting outside that epistemological box, if you will.

Sestanovich: Well, I suppose it depends a little bit on what you mean by what has already happened. What's already happened in these countries, what's already happened in other parts of the world, patterns of interaction between the rich and powerful, between instruments of coercion, the unarmed parts of society, the interaction between clashing ideologies, I mean those are all topics on which we know some things from other societies that can help us look at what post-Soviet societies are going through. The Putinist proposition is that Russian exceptionalism means we can't really know what's going on there, because we have no categories that are relevant for understanding them. I think that's an effort not only to get us—to get the west—out

of their hair in policy terms, but to get the west out of their hair in analytical terms too. “If we want to study ourselves that’s our business,” but they don’t want us studying them.

I think that’s not good for them and it’s not good for us. We should be—I mean a university needs to be aware of how much it takes to understand things that are going on in another country, and how much training and research and thought have to go into making that kind of analysis. But I think we should also have the confidence to say that we can do that kind of research and training and thinking, so as to be able to come to some conclusions that may be as good as, or better than, the conclusions that people come to in other countries. That we’re not disqualified from studying the evolution of post-Soviet politics just because we’re not from there. Just as I think we should be open to the thought [laughs] that other people can understand what’s going on here because they’re not too close to the subject.

We’ve always thought that foreigners—for all of the exceptionalism of the American experiment, we’ve also thought well, actually [Alexis de] Tocqueville got us pretty well, and not only Tocqueville. I don’t know; it seems to me that that’s part of why universities are called universities — is because we think there is a possibility for scholarship and understanding that are not limited by time and place and cultural perspective. Honestly, that isn’t just an intellectual matter. For Russians, it is a matter of whether they are isolated in the world or not. My view is Putin wants to build, not just a policy fence, but an intellectual fence around Russia. That’s not good for them and it’s not good for us.

Q: Let me—

Sestanovich: I'm sorry, now we're really giving sermons [laughs].

Q: No, no, no. Again, I think this relates to a question I wanted to ask you about, about your book, *Maximalist*.

Sestanovich: Great.

Q: In that book, you argue that there's this—you didn't use this word, but in my original notes I wrote “ping-ponging”—but alternation is perhaps a better word.

Sestanovich: Pendulum swings are what people sometimes—

Q: Pendulum swings, right, yes. I think that metaphor is not correct, given the nature of pendulums [laughter]. If you took the metaphor seriously, it doesn't quite work. So, alternations in U.S. foreign policy, between engagement with the world and then this kind of retrenchment. You've mapped it nicely, from [Harry S.] Truman through [Barak H.] Obama, up to date. I was wondering, especially in this business that we were talking a moment ago, about getting ahead of the empirical in terms of scholarship. Is there—that the scholarship here can contribute to getting ahead of the empirical, by suggesting, perhaps, the Leninist question—“what can be done?”—in order to prevent these alternations, which you see as problematic, that they don't provide as much stability for the world system, for the United States relations with the world. So maybe the

way to best pose this question is, is there a way, or are there things that can be done, to dampen—at the least dampen—these alternations?

Sestanovich: Right, and what it is that scholars and analysts from outside the policy world may be able to contribute, by way of extra understanding and perspective, so that we don't keep making the same old mistakes?

Q: Exactly, exactly.

Sestanovich: I have to confess, I've become somewhat pessimistic about that, from my reading of our history [laughs]. I think that we tend to overdo it, for reasons that sometimes actually have to do with, even with scholarship and with analytical rigidity. Groupthink is a real thing in government and even in the academy, and we tend to think that if we've got a good policy, a little more of it would be even better. So, we tend to make mistakes on the high side, too much activism, over-commitment to projects that turn out not to be doable, and we tend to overdo it on the downside, under commitment to when there are soluble problems out there. I think that scholars can play a useful role in this, but I don't think they can solve it. And sometimes they've even part of it.

Q: That's—

Sestanovich: Honestly—I'll give you an example—I think some of our most intellectual presidents who are especially confident in their analytical abilities, have been [pause]—what's

the right way to put this?—Can become overly impressed by the wisdom of their approach. We now have a president who not a lot of people would describe as intellectual or analytical. It may be even harder to convince him of the wisdom [laughs] of other views. If we couldn't convince Barack Obama by careful conversation to take a different approach [laughs], how are we going to convince Donald Trump? Telling truth to power has its limits. Power doesn't always want to hear the truth and doesn't always feel that it should defer to what parades as truth. This is why—and some people think it's even a good thing [laughs]—universities are not granted a great deal of power. There's only so much that we can do.

Q: I wanted to ask you about the “Two Putins” article, but before I do, just to pick up on one thing you said about—

Sestanovich: I've got to go in about five minutes.

Q: Oh really? Okay. Well, let me pick up on the Putin piece. You write about how Putin is both confident, cagey and effective as well as defensive, isolated and unsure of himself. Is that the definitive lens Putin? I mean the measure of Putin is the definitive lens that scholars should take in terms of, or policymakers should take in terms of thinking about Russia?

Sestanovich: No, no. This was a convenient little device that I thought might appeal to some of the people in the Trump transition team [laughs]. I was trying to speak to the author of the *Art of the Deal* in language that he might understand. Although to be honest, the *Times* commissioned that piece before the election and I said to them, “Here's what I would say to a new

administration coming in,” all the more because Mrs. Clinton was expected to have a not one hundred percent positive personal relationship with Putin. And so the issue was how to understand who’s on the other side of the table. The truth is, whether you expect to get along beautifully, as Trump says he will, with Putin, or to have a scratchy relationship, which everybody predicted Hillary would, you do need to understand who’s sitting across the table. That’s something that, in my experience, policymakers do actually want to hear and they do kind of appreciate what experts can tell them.

Q: About individuals.

Sestanovich: About individuals. How am I interacting with this guy? Some people wrote to me after that piece came out and said, “I got what you’re saying. You’re trying to tell Trump, ‘Listen, this guy is not so formidable as you might have been led to believe. This is a guy who’s got problems that he’s aware of and that you should be aware of too.’” I think there are many things that university scholars and researchers can do that help people in power understand the situations that they face, but one of the things in particular that area studies experts are best positioned to do, is to be in a way cultural interpreters, to impart some of what they know about how a particular approach will be read in another country.

In the time I’ve been in Washington, one of the most common requests for information and perspective has come from presidents, secretaries of states, secretaries of defense, heads of the CIA, who are about to have a meeting with a counterpart whom they don’t know very well. The challenge for the experts is to convey that picture in a way that is meaningful, useful, clear, and



if possible also true. I've seen that done better and worse, sitting in small groups. It is something we are often called upon to do, and I think we should realize that even though we may not believe that politics is all driven by personality—we may have a more Tolstoian view of how international processes unfold—nevertheless, for the guy who has got to sit down across the table from Putin, he wants to know who is this person [laughs]. And so that is something that we should be prepared to do, to try to figure out how to—and we can do it for people on both sides of the table.

Q: It's an interesting point because when you say, "Who's across the table?" it's not just a matter of the personality—although that's part of it—it's also what the context for that person is, the political context.

Sestanovich: Absolutely.

Q: All of that comes together, history, politics. It all comes together in that person.

Sestanovich: And of course the culture—right, right. Just to end up where we started, this is where it can actually be helpful to know a little of the poetry [laughter] that is written in that language, and some of the things that may be—

I'll just give you one older anecdote that isn't just about how Putin and Trump will interact [laughs] when they sit down. When Jack [F.] Matlock [Jr.] had to prepare Ron Reagan for his meetings with Gorbachev, he gave them little bits of cultural anthropology, in addition to a

picture of the balance of power. Reagan's interest in that was one of the reasons that he liked calling in Suzanne Massie, who he felt could give him a sense of what the cultural context was, that not all Foreign Service Officers could do, although Jack was extremely good at that. Jack a Harriman veteran himself.

Q: Right, exactly. We're interviewing him.

Sestanovich: At any rate, look, I've got to run.

Q: Well, thank you. Yes, thank you very much; I appreciate it.

[END OF INTERVIEW]