

HARRIMAN INSTITUTE  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of  
Timothy M. Frye

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2017

## PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with name of Timothy M. Frye conducted by Mary Marshall Clark on September 13, 2016 and on February 14, 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.

ATC

Session: 1

Interviewee: Timothy M. Frye

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark

Date: September 13, 2016

Q: Today is September 13, 2016, and I'm delighted that Timothy Frye is sitting with me in my office at Columbia University. We're beginning an in-depth recording of his time with the Harriman Institute in this session, and his witnessing of its growth during his many years here. In the second session—though we'll talk some about it in this session—we'll go more deeply into your work. Maybe I forgot to say my name is Mary Marshall Clark. And now you can say your name.

Frye: Nice to meet you. I'm Tim [Timothy M.] Frye.

Q: Nice to meet you. Just tell me, as you just did, how you came to be—well, before that, actually, before you get to Columbia, I wanted to ask you a few questions about your earlier life, and maybe how you got interested in Russia, why you went to Middlebury [College], then [University of] Rochester, and what formed you, in a way.

Frye: Sure. I grew up in upstate New York, and, as luck would have it, there was a Russian language program in my high school. They taught French and Spanish and, for very idiosyncratic reasons, Russian. My older brothers and sisters—I'm the fourth of five—had all taken Russian. My sister was a Russian language major at Colgate [University], who was the oldest of the five, and so she'd continued. My younger brother, he also was a Russian language major at

Middlebury, like me. He married a Russian woman. I got interested in it because of my sister's trip to, then, Leningrad in 1980, when I was in high school. I'd been taking Russian a little bit.

And then I went to Middlebury College, which has great Russian language programs. I went there in part to play football and to ski, and for all the other reasons, but I always had my eye on continuing Russian. It was a real challenge. I didn't know any other foreign languages. With the help of some really good teachers I was able to stick with it. A big motivator was the possibility to study in Moscow for a semester, which in mid-1980s was not an easy thing to do, or not a very common thing to do.

My junior year abroad, spring semester, 1985—we landed, I believe February seventh. It was bitter cold. I remember taking the bus from the airport through a city that was very dark, except for some propaganda signs around the city, not well-lit. This was the first time I'd ever really been abroad. I grew up in upstate New York, and I'd been to Canada a little bit. But this was my first experience, really, being in another country. The quietness of Sheremetyevo [International] Airport—because there were very few international flights coming in—made a big impression on me, as did just driving through Moscow and having it be so dark, and have all the stores have these very boring names: Milk, Bread, Fruit and Vegetables. But that was just a tremendous experience. We lived in a dorm of about seven hundred students, and there were twelve Americans, and then—actually, there was a few more, including Michael [Anthony] McFaul, who went on to become ambassador to Russia—who's also my age. It has been nice to recount those days with him.

The dorm itself was filled with mostly students from the East Bloc, Afghanistan, and socialist countries in Africa. For me, this was just an eye-opening experience. We were all learning Russian, so we had a common language. Moscow at the time was a very exotic place; just the way things were done was just so foreign that—

Q: Give me an example of the way things were done.

Frye: Well, in talking with Russian peers—it didn't happen very often. It was not easy to arrange. There was tremendous interest from the Russian side about who we were and what we were doing. But there was also some trepidation of their parents might get mad that they're meeting with foreigners. For elite kids that wasn't an issue, but for some of the peers that I met, that was an issue. When they were done with their college, they would be distributed—as it's called in Russian, *raspredelenie*. They didn't get to choose where they were going to be sent after they were finished with their education. That made a big impression on me. I've used that example in my classes to allow the students to have something they could relate to about how the command economy worked. You didn't have a lot of choice about where you were sent. Often kids from the provinces who had struggled all the way to get to MGU [Moscow State University] Engaru were then sent back to the provinces or to some smaller city where they didn't want to go.

That was one thing. The level of control over the students was also very impressive—[laughs] it made quite an impression—in the way that access to the dorms were controlled, for example, or the way the ladies who lived on the floor were able to watch and make sure—they knew

everything that was going on, which was very different from the dormitory experience in Middlebury, where you had a dorm director who was a junior, rather than a freshman, and it was much more laid back and laissez-faire.

Also, the fact of being a foreigner in Russia at that time made you, by definition, an interesting person. So whenever you met anyone, they wanted to know about life in the U.S. That was also an opportunity for me to rethink a lot of the things I thought I knew about the United States.

I was there for five months. We landed in February. This was under [Konstantin Ustinovich] Chernenko. After three weeks in Moscow, Chernenko dies, and [Mikhail S.] Gorbachev comes to power. I remember being in my little dorm room, which was, I don't know, fifteen by fifteen. It was small, and there were three of us living in there. There was a radio on the wall, and it was on all the time. We always were suspicious of that. I remember them playing the classical music and making the announcement that Gorbachev would be the one who was chosen to organize the funeral services for Chernenko. That was the sign that he was going to be the next general secretary. I remember going down to Red Square immediately after that and just trying to get the vibe. I hadn't been in Russia very long. My Russian was third-year Russian, so it wasn't very good. But I was just struck at how blasé people were about this. The flag over the [Moscow] Kremlin was flying at half-staff, and people just went about their business. There had been [Leonid Ilyich] Brezhnev, [Yuri Vladimirovich] Andropov, Chernenko, in fairly rapid succession passing away, and then Gorbachev coming to power, and people didn't know him. So for them, it was just, Oh.

Q: Was he a surprising choice to the West as well?

Frye: He was the more liberal option. [Grigory Vasilyevich] Romanov was a more conservative choice who was also a possibility. People had had their eyes on Gorbachev from early—in 1984 he'd made a trip to Great Britain, if I'm getting my dates right. He had shown himself to be a man of a very different generation than the members of the politburo, who were all—the median age in the politburo I think was in the late sixties, and Gorbachev, of course, was much younger—early fifties, I believe. So this was—after a long period of so-called stagnation, the more sophisticated observers in Russia and abroad said, “Wow, wait a minute, this is a possibility for somebody who could make some reforms to the system.” Nobody predicted the extent to which Gorbachev turned out to be willing to go at the time.

In retrospect, that was a really historic [laughs] event to witness in my first trip to Russia. I'll never forget the first time that I approached Red Square with two friends. We had ventured far from our school, the Institut russkogo yazyka im A.S. Pushkina, the Pushkin [State Russian Language] Institute. A long train ride to the center of town, and we finally got up on to Red Square, and just as we were walking up a little hill that leads on to Red Square, the lights went on. So it created this great impression of just the opulence, and the solidity, and the sheer force of the Kremlin. That was one of my most vivid impressions of my first days in Moscow.

That trip was really important. The next year, during my senior year, I was fortunate to take part in a debate competition. Very unusual [laughs] opportunity. Three Americans were chosen to go over to Russia to debate with Komsomol students on “*Sovetskoe i Amerkianskoe*

*Sotrudnichestvo V Mirnom Osvoyenii Kosmosa kak Al'ternativa Gonke Vooruzheniy.*” So the title was “U.S. and Soviet Cooperation in Space as an Alternative to the Arms Race.”

Q: Wow [laughs].

Frye: This was 1986. Gorbachev was pushing a peace offensive and a disarmament offensive. So the topic was chosen more or less by the Soviet side. We went around to each of four cities: Moscow, Baku, Azerbaijan; Kharkov, in Ukraine; and then Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. We were filmed everywhere we went, because it was unusual to have three young Americans who could speak passable Russian. The topics that we were talking about were in line with the agenda of the Kremlin. We got into disagreements with our peers, who had a very strong linguistic [laughs] advantage. But the just incredible interest towards the three of us really overwhelmed me. I hadn't realized I was the first American most of these people were meeting.

Q: So you got to see how they saw you—

Frye: Yes.

Q: —in the same way you had a real experience in seeing them.

Frye: Yes. Actually that's a—fast-forward thirty years. One of the things that's changed in my lifetime is, my predecessors used to study the scholars in the Soviet Union as an important source of information for what was going on in the Kremlin. There were lots of Western



academics like me in the '70s and '80s who would study what the *institutchiky*—those who were in these institutes that were designed to develop policy were saying—did they have influence or not? What policy agenda were they pushing? Were they successful? That was the bread and butter of trying to do political science at the time. Now I'm a co-director of a center in Moscow that's funded by the Russian government. A good number of my co-authors are Russian scholars who are trying to publish in international, peer-reviewed journals, and it really is a peer relationship. In reflecting on how my career has been different from my predecessors, I think that should really be put up front and center. For me it's been a very interesting experience, and I was very lucky in the choice of career path that I made.

When I did this debate trip, there was a video made of our debates and all the cultural visits that we had, as we were wined and dined everywhere we went. There was a one-hour long television program that was broadcast across the Soviet Union in 1986 and 1987. At the time there were only two channels that broadcast across the whole Soviet Union. So this was a popular program. When I went back to work as an exhibit guide for U.S. Information Agency for eighteen months in the late 1980s, there was a time when people would recognize me on the street. "I saw you on television!"

Q: Unbelievable!

Frye: Because there were very few Americans; and there were very few television channels. So I had my fifteen minutes of fame in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, and those days are long—

Q: That's beautiful.

Frye: —long since past. One of the things that wasn't on the television program was the Chernobyl explosion happened right before our last debate, and—

Q: I have her book on my bookshelf.

Frye: Oh, really?

Q: Svetlana Alexievich

Frye: That is a great read [*Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*].

Q: I actually teach her—

Frye: Oh, really?

Q: —in oral history.

Frye: Oh, of course, of course. That is a brutal book to read. Yes. That was a hard one to swallow. We flew out on May first, to mark the resumption of air travel between Moscow and New York by Pan Am [Pan American World Airways], which had been stopped in 1979 because

of the Afghanistan invasion. There were about twenty-five people on the flight. They served champagne, and they brought a Geiger counter out as well and ran it over us [laughs].

Q: And they gave you more champagne if you got a bad reading.

Frye: We flew over Belarus, and the pilot said, “Well, we didn’t see any brown clouds over Minsk, so I think we’ll be fine.” And then we landed in Germany, and there was this hysteria over nuclear accidents, when there hadn’t been much information about what was going on. And rightly so. But we had only heard about it in snippets the night before. Yes. So that’s how I finished my college career. That was April of my senior year. That was just an incredible, incredible trip.

Then I was part of the U.S. Information Agency’s exhibit guide program. There’s a wonderful book called *Red Plenty*, which you might want to read. There’s a chapter in there, which is a fictional account of what the guides’ experiences were. The exhibit guide program started in 1959, and it went until 1979, and then it was stopped because of the Soviet-Afghan war, and then it was resumed in 1986. I went over in late ‘87 through until January ‘89. They were a tremendous experience for the twenty-four American guides who were sent to create these exhibitions in these big exhibition halls. Ours was information technology, “Information USA.” We would spend two months in each of six cities, and we would stand there with a microphone, and six, eight, ten thousand citizens of the Soviet Union would come to our exhibit and ask us questions about life in the U.S.

That was the best job I'll ever have. I was twenty-four, able to travel, and meet some incredibly interesting people. I learned so much about the Soviet Union, about how propaganda worked and what kinds of arguments you could make that were convincing to people, and what kinds of arguments you couldn't quite make. For example, one of the questions I was asked was, "You have this horrible thing called unemployment in your country. We don't have that here. Everybody has a job. But I also know you have these things called the want ads. How can this be true that both of these things exist?" That's a great question that was informed by the Soviet propaganda—well, of course, it was true; there was unemployment—but was informed by the Soviet worldview. But also they also had information and agency on their own to try to figure out what was true and what was not, and how things worked. You could explain, and people would say, "Oh yes, well, that makes sense." I would explain, "Yes, there have been times when I was unemployed, when I was looking for work. It happens. People find work, and often it's temporary," and it all seemed to make sense to people.

There were other issues where I just made zero progress, on race relations.

Q: What were the questions there?

Frye: Oh, there were all kinds of questions about the MOVE bombings. I don't know if you remember those—

Q: Oh, of course.

Frye: —in Philadelphia.

Q: Philadelphia.

Frye: This was war against the Negro population, as it was in Soviet terms. Yes, it was not a particularly well thought-out or planned event. But that was common knowledge—that was a very common topic that you would see in Soviet commentary on race relations in the U.S. It's a complicated history to explain and to try to say, "Well, we've made a lot of progress. There are still problems." The mayor of D.C., where I was living at the time, was an African American. My sister had an African-American boyfriend at the time. They tried to figure out about was I telling the truth; was I lying? They would say, "Well, all the same—all the same." On those kinds of questions I felt like we made very little impact. But that was a real life-changing experience.

We had provocateurs sent from the then KGB [Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti] to ask us questions about U.S. policy in the Middle East. Why was the U.S. arming the resistance in Afghanistan when the Soviet Union had been invited in to resolve a civil war?

Q: Wow, you really had a lot of—

Frye: Oh yes, we got hit with everything.

Q: —you had to know world history.

Frye: Yes. And I was twenty-four years old. I knew very little about anything. I remember once a young woman came to our stand, and she started asking me these provocative questions. One of the people in the crowd turned to her and said, “Oh! You’ve been prepared very well.”

Everybody in the audience knew that she had been sent just to ask us hard questions. Her shoulders shrank, and she just kind of backed away quietly. So we had to deal with that as well. But it was also a very exciting time politically. Gorbachev had come to power. Glasnost had been in place for the better part of a year. Economic reforms were taking place. Relations with the U.S. were opening up in a way that they hadn’t before. It was politically a very exciting thing to witness, the trajectory of Gorbachev’s political and economic reforms.

I started in October ‘87 and left in January 1989. By January 1989 you could already see the wheels were starting to fall off, and opposition was gathering. It was a much more difficult political period than it had been at the start, when there was a lot of enthusiasm for talking about the past and for trying to open up the political and economic system. I’ll never forget, a woman in Magnitogorsk coming up to me and saying, “*Zhivoy Amerikanets.*” “A real live American. I never thought I would see a real live American.” That was 1988. It’s not that long ago, when you think about it in a more historical perspective.

That was a really exciting time. It was during that period that I decided I wanted to go to graduate school. And I first went to SIPA [School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University] and then on to the Ph.D. program. But it was those experiences as an undergrad, as a debater, of sorts [laughs], and as an exhibit guide, that really formed a lot of my

views about the Soviet Union as a place where people were trying to understand very complex political and economic changes, and were often responding in ways that made perfect sense to a situation that was very difficult for any reasonable, rational person to try to figure out what was the best thing to do.

Q: Thank you for that. It was a beautiful understanding that we got from that about how important direct engagement is. I'm wondering about how that experience influenced you to choose academia. Were there alternatives to academia you ever considered?

Frye: At the time there were few alternatives to academia. There was business, which was very small. Pepsi had an operation in Russia, but not everybody can work for Pepsi. Also I didn't have a business background, so I couldn't really offer that. There was the government National Security Agency, CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], Department of Defense, and I didn't want those jobs. There were restrictions on travel that I wanted no part of. I got this government job in the U.S. Information Agency, which was part of the State Department [U.S. Department of State], but that was only temporary. I did two nine-month terms. It just piqued my interests so much to try to figure out how the politics and the economics of the place worked, given how much of it I had seen firsthand. That made going into at least a master's program in 1989, when I started, a reasonable choice. But my initial understanding is I would go back to Washington and try to get a job on the Hill [Capitol Hill] or in a Congressional—

Q: That's what I was asking.

Frye: —Research Service [CRS] or something like that.

Q: So what changed with that?

Frye: Well, I came to Columbia, and I was in the master's program. I had an eye on academia, but I didn't know anybody who had a Ph.D. before I came to the M.A. program. I didn't really know what one was and why it was important to get one [laughter]. Then I took a course with Jack [L.] Snyder, who's now my colleague. I wrote a paper for his course, and it was on U.S.-Russia relations, U.S.-Soviet relations. It was very much a political science course, so it had a much greater emphasis on theory and empirical analysis. It was a real challenge for me, because I had never done that before. I wrote a paper for him, which he liked, and—

Q: Do you recall what it was?

Frye: Yes. It was on the political reforms in Poland, and applying this argument—

Q: You speak some Polish, right?

Frye: I speak a little bit of Polish. Unfortunately, I speak it with a Russian accent [laughter], so my Polish language teacher, Anna Frajlich-Zajac—who's just one of the brightest personalities in the Harriman community—I remember her saying to me, “Pan Tim, if you have to speak with an accent, at least have an American accent, not a Russian accent. That will go over better.”



So Jack liked this paper that I wrote on a political analysis of whether or not the reforms put forward by the Communist Party in Poland would lead to a more stable or a less stable political system. He liked the paper, and he encouraged me to apply to the Ph.D. program. I was accepted into the Ph.D. program, but at the time, only about a quarter to a third of the students was funded by the department; a third of the students had their own funds—often they were foreign students who were coming with government money; and then a third were unfunded. I was in the last category. So I said to Jack, “I can’t go. I can’t afford this.” So he said, “Let me see what I can do.”

I went off, and that summer I did an internship at Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty in Munich, which was also an interesting experience, writing about the political and economic reforms for a weekly magazine there. Then around August Jack emailed—no, it must have been a phone call—told me that there was a full time job waiting for me in the political science department, forty hours a week in a staff position as the staff member in charge of undergraduate studies, and if I was willing to work forty hours a week in the department, I could take two courses in the political science department for free. I did that in the fall and the spring semester, and then the next year I got picked up for fellowship. That allowed me to continue in the program. So it was really Jack reaching out that made it possible for me to get a PhD.

Q: That’s beautiful. That’s a great story.

Frye: Yes. He is just a wonderful human being.

Q: One of the themes in this project is to talk about mentorship, and also to talk about the community of Harriman and to look at the legacy of Harriman, partly through the cultivation of students. So I'm glad you brought that up.

Frye: Yes. Now Jack is one of my favorite colleagues.

My first year in the department I worked fulltime and I went to school halftime. One interesting thing that happened in those first two years is, since I sat in front of the departmental administrator, I interacted a lot with the faculty and other students. One day John [N.] Hazard, who was one of the founding members of the Harriman Institute, who at the time was probably in his mid- to late-seventies, came up to me and said, "I'm looking for somebody to housesit for me. I have a house at 94th and 5th, and I need someone to watch it for the two months while I go away to upstate New York." So I jumped on this [laughs] opportunity. I did that for two summers, and I got to know Professor Hazard—Ivan Ivanich, as he was known—quite well, and his wife Susan [Lawrence].

In his five-story walkup that he bought when he had just finished his stint in lend-lease in the government, he thought he was going to be an attorney, so he bought this big brownstone, beautiful building. But then the next year Columbia said, "Well, do you want to give up your law practice and come and be a faculty member?" Which he jumped at the opportunity, but he had this big house that he had to pay for. So it was very humbly decorated—and he's a very modest person anyway—but I got to live there for two summers, and he was there for part of the time. He would tell stories about being in Moscow, in the 1930s. He was there in 1936, '37, and '38,

during the height of the purges. He told stories of walking into class one day, and there's a different faculty member teaching from the same notes. And everybody knew not to ask what happened to the previous professor.

He was an amazing individual. I took a course with him. He and William [H.] Riker had a big influence on my decision to stay in academia, in part because they were both in their seventies and were both traveling broadly, were both completely engaged with the events of the day. I always thought that was really exciting, that you could be in a profession where at that age you still have an awful lot to contribute. It sounded very exciting to be a faculty member and travel around. That's been one of the great perks. So yes, so Professor Hazard was a big source of inspiration for me, to be so enthusiastic, even at his age—you know, he's—and we had this thing where we would talk about some of the streets in Moscow where the names had been changed back to their original names that they had been called in the '20s and '30s. We would be talking about different streets, "Oh yes, I remember that was called this." I said, "Oh yes, they've changed it back to that name."

Q: Why did that happen? I think I know, but just to say it for the record.

Frye: Well, partly it was some of the Communists who'd been discredited during the Gorbachev era lost the names that had been attached to streets and buildings and things like that. So the Zhdanov was a Communist who had fallen afoul and had lost his subway stop named after him. So we talked about that.

To get a sense of what it was like for him to interact with George [F.] Kennan back in the 1930s in Moscow, when there were very few Americans in Moscow. Hazard went to school with Russian kids at the Moscow State Law School. He lived with a Jewish woman, which is not what one would have expected. So yes, it was very interesting for me to talk with him about those historic experiences as well as to talk about our thoughts about what was going on in Russia at the time. It was a nice opportunity.

Q: In terms of your own Ph.D. education, who was your primary advisor? Or did you have one?

[Laughs]

Frye: My primary advisor turned out to be Jack Snyder. Although his specialty was in—is in—international relations. Technically he's very broadly read and can advise people very well in comparative politics and in lots of other areas as well. But it was an unusual choice. But we had a good relationship, and he's a brilliant reader and critic. I would give him chapters, and he would get them back to me very quickly, always with very incisive comments. But like a lot of people in my cohort, I had to scramble to find ways to develop skills that were going to be useful to me going forward, given that many of the experts on the Soviet Union had been trained to study a country that, in many respects, it had changed fundamentally.

Q: Well, themes of course have been the demise of area studies and the rise of functionalism. So I'd love to hear you talk about that as you were watching it.

Frye: Yes [pause]. Where to start?

Q: [Laughs] That's the question.

Frye: Because at the—okay—so I was fortunate because I had been a Russian language and literature major as an undergraduate. I had spent a lot of time in the Soviet Union. So for me, when I started the Ph.D. program, I had a lot of substantive knowledge about what was going on in the Soviet Union and then Russia at the time. For me the trick was to learn about how markets worked—which were being introduced at the time—about how are political parties created in a competitive political environment work, about how elections work when institutions are weak. And I saw the rise of criminal gangs having a lot of influence over local politics and over the development of markets.

These were not topics that my predecessors had studied in the Soviet period. These were just not on their agenda. A lot of them were broadly read and had good liberal arts educations and they could talk about these things, but to really develop the skills needed to study them, a lot of my cohort took courses in American politics, in the comparative politics of Latin America, which in some ways had gone through similar experiences after the fall of autocratic regimes or military-led regimes, where they tried to introduce democratic reforms and more market-oriented reforms.

At the same time within political science there were several different cleavages forming. One was between people very deeply rooted in area studies and people putting more emphasis on the science side of political science, trying to develop arguments that you would test generally and

make very broad, often comparative, statements. Both approaches have something to offer, and when either approach is done well, they bring a lot to the table.

At the same time, there was a split between more rational choice-oriented scholars, who were adopting many of the tools of economics, particularly microeconomics, to try to understand political behavior. So you would understand voters as interest maximizers, or bureaucrats as budget maximizers or turf maximizers, or politicians as vote maximizers, and try to figure out what strategies were most likely to get them the most votes, given the institutional configurations that they faced. There was a big pushback from people who did not want to see these tools imported into political science. People who often had a much more sociologically oriented training would say, “Look, individuals aren’t so important. Groups are important in politics. That’s what matters for making policy. It’s not individuals choosing or—you do a survey and you get individual observations, individual attitudes, but how those individual attitudes are aggregated into organizations that can then lobby the government, go on strike, go out and collect votes, that’s what matters in politics.” Each of these arguments has something to offer.

The time was a very contentious time within political science. I was really fortunate in that Columbia at the time was very deeply rooted in area studies within the political science department, within comparative politics. That suited me very well. This was where I had some experience and some training. But I really struggled with trying to turn that into a coherent analytical framework for understanding what was going on in Russia at this time when markets were being introduced, elections were being introduced, parties were being introduced. The area studies program did not—for me, at least—have the tools to understand these new institutions or

new practices as they were being put into place. Of course, there were important legacy effects that one had to know and take into account.

But I was very fortunate in that in my third year in graduate school I went to the University of Rochester for a year. Now, at the time, Rochester was the polar opposite of Columbia on every dimension. They had no area studies experts. There was great interaction between the political science and the economics departments. William Riker, who was the dean of rational choice theory, who brought it into political science—a very controversial figure in a lot of corners, but clearly recognized as a brilliant guy—he was interested in property rights. So he got a grant from the Smith Richardson Foundation, and he and Dave [David L.] Weimer, who's now at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, brought together nine pre-docs and post-docs to spend a year at the University of Rochester. We learned some econometrics. We learned some game theory and some rational choice theory. We learned the complete—this was the Bizarro universe [laughs] approach to social science from what I had gotten at Columbia.

Rochester was a very small, very integrated, very unified department, where most of the faculty were very committed to this approach. Columbia was a much larger, much more heterogeneous, much more area studies focused, much more qualitatively inclined department. So for me, it was a great experience to see that there are lots of different ways to do social science. I really gravitated towards what I learned at Rochester. We ended up producing a volume that had chapters on China and a number on Russia, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, where we tried to look at the introduction of property rights and to test different arguments about that. That's been

a guiding interest to me throughout my whole career, is this political economy approach to studying Russia and the introduction of markets and political institutions.

That had a big impact on me. Then I had fellowships from the SSRC [Social Science Research Council], where I spent two years based in Boston, where I did my—I took some courses there as well. I took some more economics courses and hung out at the Davis Center [for Russian and Eurasian Studies, at Harvard University] in between trips to Russia to work on my dissertation. There, I worked closely with Joel [S.] Hellman, who's now a dean at Georgetown [University], and with Andrei Shleifer, who was in the economics—is in the economics—department at Harvard [University], and a little bit with Jeffrey [David] Sachs. And—

Q: I was going to ask you about if you worked with Jeffrey Sachs at all.

Frye: Yes. I mean, both Andrei Shleifer and Jeffrey Sachs I owe great debt to. Andrei Shleifer gave a talk at the Davis Center. I [laughs] don't know how I did this, but I went into his office, and I told him that I didn't think his argument was right, that I'd done some research on it. He said, "Well, fine. Go prove me wrong." So he got me some money, which I used for my dissertation research. He helped me get a consulting position in the Securities and Exchange Commission of the Russian Federation. At the time, the U.S. Agency for International Development was pouring a lot of money into giving advice to the Russian government. So for two summers I had a desk at the Russian Securities and Exchange Commission, and I did interviews of brokers on the equities market, asking them about how they resolved conflicts, given that the Russian state was in no position to enforce those contracts.



On some of the markets I studied, people ended up turning to big guys with big necks [laughs] to enforce contracts. On the equities market that I studied, the brokers set up these, in essence, arbitration courts, where brokers from other firms would sit in and try to resolve disputes between brokers about who had violated what contract. That system worked fairly well. The professional association of brokers still exists to this day, and they perform an important self-regulating function on the markets.

Then Andrei went above and beyond that and gave me a little bit of money to go do a survey of small businesses in Moscow and Warsaw in 1996. This was when I was still working on my dissertation. We wrote an article, five pages long, for *The American Economic Review: Papers and Proceedings*. And to this day, it's the most cited thing I've ever done [laughs]. "The Invisible Hand and the Grabbing Hand." It just looked at how—

Q: I'd love to see it.

Frye: It's effective in the classroom because it's only five pages long. It's a very straightforward argument about the development of small businesses in Russia, where they were very highly regulated. In exchange for relief from the regulation, the small business people had to pay a lot of bribes and operate in the informal economy to get away from the regulations. Then when they were in the informal economy, they couldn't turn to the state courts to enforce their contracts because the agreements they had made were illegal, so they ended up often relying on private protectors that had grown to meet the demand for their services in Moscow at the time. Whereas

in Warsaw, the government didn't do much to provide court services, but the regulatory burden was lower and the size of the informal economy was a lot smaller. It was a much less violent and corrupt market for that reason. It was kind of two paths out of the wilderness of the command economy to a functioning market economy in Poland, and a much less functional one in Russia—based on this survey of fifty brokers in each country. But it is kind of a metaphor for their paths that they've taken.

Andrei was a huge help to me. I wasn't a student at Harvard. He didn't know me. And so I've always been very appreciative of that. And then I was at a seminar that Jeff Sachs was running on the Russian rule of law. He was very interested in the topic, and he asked me to write a chapter for the volume that he was putting together. Again, he didn't know me. I just had come to this seminar several times, made some comments, and shared some of the work I had done. And he said, "Oh, you should write that up." I was very fortunate that they took an interest in me. I'm sure, when I went on the job market after my dissertation was done, that was helpful, I'm sure, to me, that I had done these projects with these very well-known people.

Q: In terms of your next job after you finished your Ph.D., what were you thinking then in terms of where you wanted to be and what you wanted to do?

Frye: Yes. It's interesting, because when I was doing my dissertation in Russia in the 1990s, a lot of my peers in Ph.D. programs made the choice to go work for brokerage houses or banks in Russia, because it was a very exciting time, and the opportunities and potential were—

Q: Mind-boggling.

Frye: —unparalleled. Yes, I mean, just really like once-in-a-lifetime opportunities. I knew a lot of people who did that. There were also a lot of opportunities in the State Department. The Soviet Union broke into fifteen different parts, each requiring a new embassy with a staff and people with expertise in the region. So a number of my colleagues in graduate school ended up taking that path. I was tempted by both, and what kept me in academia was just asking myself, “What am I going to be doing between nine and six every day?” Do I really want to be advising people about buying this firm in Russia versus that firm or buying—you know, is the stock market going to go up or down? Or do I want to be sitting and thinking and writing and reading and trying to understand this place? That was more attractive to me.

Right at the end of my career in graduate school, the World Bank made me an offer that was very tempting to go work on legal reform in Russia. They had a big \$50 million grant that they were going to pursue. At that point I was done with the dissertation, I was going to go on the job market, and I had really gone all in for academia. The World Bank had kind of come in, and this was a possibility, and it wasn't certain that it was going to happen. In the end I was so lucky that I didn't end up taking this short-term opportunity at the World Bank, because that legal reform project just fell apart.

At some point I realized that I could keep doing these kinds of short-term consulting gigs, but at some point I wanted to plan the rest of my life, and I wanted to take a shot at academia. It was an uncertain proposition because academia, there's a big stochastic element to how the job market

works. There are lots of smart people. There's lots of competition. I ended up getting a job at Ohio State [University], which turned out to be a really good choice for me. They have a very good political science department, strong Slavic studies. It forced me to learn skills that I didn't have going there. It's a very quantitatively oriented department, and a department that very much values articles, rather than books. It's more in like a Big Ten tradition. I learned a lot there, and I was treated really well. It was a nice place to be a junior faculty member, because I was treated with much more respect than I think a lot of my peers who went to the—

Q: The big—

Frye: —top Ivy League places, where the work relations are very different. At Ohio State, the assumption was we hire you, we want to keep you here forever, and we'll do everything possible to make sure you get tenure, and we want to integrate you in the department right away and involve you. So I was often asked to give input in a way that was very exciting, in a way that I don't think wouldn't have been possible if I'd been at one of the big Ivy League research institutions.

Q: So what drew you back?

Frye: My wife is also a political scientist. We met right at the end of my stay at Harvard. We were able to both land jobs at Ohio State—which for her was especially good. A very strong American politics group there. But she's also from Massachusetts. I'm from New York. I'd

always wanted to come back. She was recruited to go to Rutgers University, and for her this was a dream job because they have very strong gender politics there—

Q: Oh yes, I know.

Frye: —and she had a one-one teaching load. They had treated her very well during the post-doc year when she was there as a junior faculty member, and really let her do her research. So she was recruited initially, and then Rutgers landed a position for me, so we were going to move together to Rutgers. But these senior hires take a long time, and in the interim an opening became available at Columbia. John Huber and Bob [R.] Legvold had encouraged me to apply. So I came and I interviewed, even though I had committed to go to Rutgers. Then after a few months things worked out at Columbia, and Rutgers released me from my obligations to join the faculty there. We both ended up starting in September 2006 back here, she at Rutgers and me at Columbia.

Q: What a great story.

Frye: So we've been very lucky to make the two-couple—

Q: It's a hard thing to make work [laughs].

Frye: Yes, make work in academia, both at Ohio State and here.

Q: Yes. That's great.

Frye: For me, to come back was just a dream come true, because I like New York very much, I had been treated very well here as a graduate student. The only thing I was concerned about was I would be treated as a graduate student who made good rather than as a peer. That just has never been an issue.

Q: Well, you were director three short years later, so—

Frye: Yes.

Q: —I guess they didn't see you that way.

Frye: Well, it wasn't so much—in the Harriman community it was less of an issue, but in the political science department I wasn't quite sure. But that was not an issue at all. If anything was a problem, they thought, "Oh! You're a graduate student here. You know how things work." Of course I had no idea. As a graduate student you don't see how the sausage really gets made at any university.

Q: I should let you know that we've been given access to the ARC [Arc Committee on Regional Institutes] Report done in 2006.

Frye: Oh! Yes.

Q: So [laughs] this is a good time to—

Frye: Sure.

Q: —to dip into that a little bit, although we only have about fifteen, twenty minutes now. But we could maybe get through that in part by just asking what the atmosphere was like then. I learned a lot from the ARC Report, but I'm not sure how accurate it was.

Frye: Yes. I mean, there were—the ARC Report captured some of the strengths in the Harriman, certainly. It also had some sharper comments about staffing problems and bureaucracy problems, which was a longstanding problem in Harriman. I think even in David [C. Engerman]'s book, *Know Thy Enemy*, where he chronicles the rise of the Harriman and the Davis Center and Russian studies more generally, there's some phrase in there about the archives on the Columbia side weren't as rich as he had hoped, or something like that, because it had been run often in an informal way. That worked relatively well, but as we grew larger, that became more of an issue. So that was one issue.

One of the issues that was raised in the ARC Report, if I remember correctly, was that there was still some legacy of Cold War or of that period at the Harriman. And that, I thought, was not quite accurate. The bigger problem was that we had lost a lot of faculty who hadn't been replaced. In the social sciences, there had not been a scholar whose primary work was Russian politics for five years. When I came in as a faculty member, there were no Ph.D. students to

work with, because nobody had come to teach. Despite the bounty and the rich tradition of Harriman, the Ph.D. program in political science dedicated to Russia was not very active.

Q: So this was a big crisis internally at the Harriman Institute, for a while, then, at this period.

Frye: Yes. Particularly in the social sciences. In the language and literature, that has been consistently strong. In social sciences it's been a much more up and down process, in part because Harriman doesn't control any faculty lines. Those lines are controlled by the departments, and the departments have lots of priorities that are competing. They want scholars who work on China and Latin America and international relations and American politics and—

[INTERRUPTION]

Frye: When I was a graduate student, there was Bob Legvold, in foreign policy—

Q: I knew him very well.

Frye: —was wonderful, and Seweryn Bialer, in domestic politics. Alex [Alexander J.] Motyl, who was a junior faculty member at the time, just working on Russia. Jack Snyder also worked on Russia as well as other topics. There was Susan Goodrich [Lehmann], in sociology. In history there was Leopold [H.] Haimson—I'm going to forget—Mark [L.] von Hagen, who is somewhat older than me but still of a younger generation.



Q: I'm interviewing him on Friday.

Frye: Yes. He taught me, actually. I took his Soviet history summer as well as I took courses with Bob. There was Rick [Richard E.] Ericson in economics and also Padma Desai. By the time I got there in 2006, Rick was just leaving, so there was just Padma in economics. In sociology, Susan had left, and there hadn't been a replacement person working on Russia and the former Soviet Union. David Stark worked on Hungary, but that was a different—had a slightly different focus. In history, Dick [Richard M.] Wortman was about to retire. Mark [L.] von Hagen left shortly after I came. So we were down in just the numbers of bodies in history and the social sciences. Fortunately, having Barnard was a huge help, to have Kim [Kimberly] Marten and Alex [Alexander A.] Cooley, who worked on the region in political science. But even Barnard had more of a presence—Peter [H.] Juviler—they also had scholars working in economics as well.

Like in a lot of places, just the sheer numbers had dropped a lot in the social sciences and history. One of the things that's been nice over the last ten years is now I've got ten graduate students; eight of them are working on Russia; four of them are Russians; four are from the U.S. We got the Ph.D. program back on its legs. History now has a more or less full contingent, with the hiring of Catherine Evtuhov after a long period where we went without having a senior scholar in Soviet or Russian history. We have Tarik [Cyril] Amar, who's a junior faculty member in history, and Malgorzata Mazurek, who does Polish history. We've always been strong in Balkan history, Mark Mazower. So now I feel like there's been a generational shift and

we're starting to really reflect the balance that's needed to really have a thriving program in history and political science.

Q: Thank you for that beautiful statement. That's a beautiful synthetic moment in the interview. One of the things I felt as I was reading the ARC Report was that sometimes there's such a criticism of the structural problems that I didn't perceive the vision that you're talking about in terms of the balance, the richness of the interdisciplinarity.

Frye: Yes. A big problem that we faced was a mismatch between the skill sets of the staff that we had and what we needed to put on 125 or so events, as we do each year, to generate programming that would be attractive to the faculty, to the M.A.—and now Ph.D. students—as well as to the public. We had a number of programs that were very much narrowly focused on Poland, or Eastern Europe, or on the Balkans, without being able or being willing to think more broadly about how the region had changed over the last twenty years—fifteen years in 2006 when the ARC Report came on. By that point, some of the countries that were part of the East Central European Center were in the E.U. [European Union], and some of the countries in the former Soviet Union had become these very nasty, autocratic, personalistic regimes.

What's been very fascinating about the region is you have this tremendous diversity in economic institutions, cultural practices, political institutions. I think there was a sense among the faculty that it was difficult to generate new kinds of thinking, to figure out how to integrate the study of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Baltic states—the Balkans into Europe, more broadly understood—or to think about Russia and what are the analogs that are most helpful for thinking

about Russia? Is it Brazil? Is it Latin America? Is it Turkey? Is it Ukraine? Thinking about why some countries had done better in some dimensions of economic and political reform; or why had economic reform proceeded better in some places rather than in others; or how identities were changing. Language use in Ukraine, for example, or national identities in central Asia that had traditionally been weak, and there were big efforts by the government to build them back up.

Well, this question has been studied a lot in Africa, in South Asia, in Latin America. So I think there was a recognition of the need to think more broadly about how regional studies, the study of the countries that most interest us, would benefit by raising our head up and figuring out where the proper kinds of comparisons lay.

Q: I guess I was actually more on your side than my question indicated, that maybe it was hard for the people writing that report to even have the depth of knowledge to know that that was the question [laughs].

Frye: Oh, well, yes, I mean—yes. I don't want to take them to task too much because it is—

Q: No, no, no, not at all. It's confusing.

Frye: My view on this is a little different than some others. My predecessor, Cathy [Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy], did a great job of promoting interdisciplinarity.

Q: She did.

Frye: I mean, really—

Q: I remember the work on Islam.

Frye: Yes. She was just a marvel; she could talk about human rights and about [Alexander Sergeyevich] Pushkin's blackness in a way that I think few people could do. She could draw together from really disparate literatures, and that was a real strength. I wanted to make that an important focus of the institute. I think that's one of the things the institute has traditionally done well. I also wanted us to recognize that disciplinary boundaries exist. There's no getting around that. Our students are hired into positions in disciplinary departments. So they're competing against other people who studied Latin America, Africa, China, and they need to be convincing to scholars in the disciplines as well as be able to draw from the rich heritage of area studies.

I thought that was important as well, and tried to push people to make Harriman the best place to study the politics of Russia, to be the best department of political science that studied Russia, or the best history department that was studying Eurasia generally. There is something of a tradeoff there, and different students have different skill sets that they bring to the table and are going to be stronger candidates by emphasizing their disciplinary credentials more, and other ones are going to be more successful emphasizing their regional studies component more. In that way, I rebelled a little bit against interdisciplinarity for interdisciplinarity's sake and wanted to recognize that, Hey, our students also need to be really well trained in history and—whatever. Sociology, political science, whatever discipline area they're studying.

It's really hard, because the demands on the students' times are just increasing. They need to know the region. They need to know social science methodology. They need to know the history of the countries that they're studying. They need to be able to go out and gather data and build contacts that allow them to do the kind of research that people who know the region well are going to appreciate and people in discipline are going to appreciate. So it's a real challenge.

Q: Well, I mean, maybe—just tracing what's happened in this interview—your knowledge of the cultural realities of Soviet Union when you were there did inform you that there was a need for both. There was a need for balance. Because you could have all the macroeconomic theories of the world—not all Jeff Sachs's predictions came true.

Frye: Yes. That's very true. I'll stick up for Jeff on one point. At one point, when he was really up to his elbows in the ministry of finance, working on the project, he and his team knew a lot about the Russian economy, a lot more than many people knew, just because they had access to the information, which was very hard to get.

Q: Well, not through any fault of his own, but, you know—

Frye: Yes, I mean, I think what ultimately he realized—actually, he has a quote from early on in the transition politics project where he says, “The economics isn't going to be the hard part. It's the politics that are going to be the hard part.” That turned out to be exactly the case. In Russia

you had very entrenched interest groups that would be harmed by the introduction of reforms, and they fought back very successfully. A very different outcome in Poland.

Q: I don't want to make you late to pick up your son—

Frye: No, actually, I've got a little more time.

Q: Okay, good.

Frye: So that's fine.

Q: All right. So let's just keep talking about what you could see that needed to happen, and your appointment eventually.

Frye: I'm a political scientist, so rules, procedures, institutions, writing things down—this, I think, is closer to my personality [laughs] and my professional training than it had been to some of my predecessors. Cathy was great in lots of ways. She really pushed Harriman out into New York and made it really a part of the cultural scene so that things happening related to Russia and New York, Harriman was often involved in, which is tremendous. I wouldn't say that organization and bureaucracy were her strongest suits. And that had also been building up for a long time.

One of the things that the ARC Report identified early on—and this was no secret to anybody that we needed to make staffing changes. I identified creating new by-laws, doing a restructuring of the bureaucracy, and creating a national advisory committee as the things that I wanted to do as director of Harriman. And we were able to do that. We wrote new bylaws that clarified a lot of things that were understood, but when there were disagreements, it was hard to figure out what had been done in the past or what was the proper practice. So we cleared that up.

With the help of arts and sciences, we were able to restructure the bureaucracy. We had thirteen staff people, which is a lot. We redefined everyone's job title, and in essence everybody had to compete for their job under this newly defined title. We let four people go. That was very painful. We were very fortunate to be able to hire one of them back. We kept the rest of the staff. I think it's made a big impact on the mood in the Harriman, and it's a much more cohesive and coherent team. It's nice to go up to the twelfth floor and to see the—

Q: Beautiful, too.

Frye: Oh, that's thanks to Cathy. She did a wonderful job redesigning the institute. But it's nice to go up now and see the staff having lunch together around a table, in a way which didn't really happen before, where Harriman had been a much more kind of closed-door client kind of place. The work responsibilities are distributed much more equitably now, where previously a small number of people had been doing the lion's share of the work. Now it's spread out much more evenly. It just works better. And that makes things easier.

Because we hold so many conferences, and you want to be sure that people get reimbursed, that their titles are correct, that they have a place to stay when they show up. All of that takes a lot of work. In addition we mount thirty-four or so courses a year, which is more than a lot of departments. And keeping track of the adjunct faculty and making sure that they are keeping the quality standards high—which they do. But that’s a lot of work.

Then we rely heavily on the faculty as well, to serve on committees, to run the admissions program for the M.A., for all the fellowships we give out—that’s a huge part of what we do at Harriman is give out fellowships to our M.A. students, to SIPA students, and to the Ph.D. students. That requires a lot of sacrifice on the part of the faculty. I think they’re more willing to do it now because they see that the staff works better. So they know when they bring in somebody to give a talk, or when they’re going to run a conference, the trains are going to run on time. It’s just much easier to work that way.

Q: That’s such an accomplishment.

Frye: It was done with a lot of help from the faculty, from the staff itself, and from arts and sciences, which really walked us through the whole process. We held a lot of meetings about what we wanted to accomplish with the bureaucratic restructuring. It was a very painful process.

Q: When you made decisions about who would stay and who would come, did you have a committee, or did you make those yourself? [Laughs]



Frye: We had a committee that reported back. A lot of this had to be done behind closed doors, because we didn't want the staff to be fully informed about this, for morale reasons, if nothing else. We incorporated Alla Rachkov and got her views on what needed to be done. She was the office manager and was a big help. But we identified directions that we wanted to build in and directions that we wanted to deemphasize. We had to build up our events planning because we had so many events and not enough foot soldiers to do the dirty work of making sure the airline tickets—

Q: The room had been secured.

Frye: —the room had been reserved, the airline tickets had been bought, that the person got reimbursed for their troubles. So that was a very painful process. But I think in the end—I think it's worked out. I think it's worked out well.

Q: So I noticed in the ARC Report—not to give too much time to the ARC Report itself—

Frye: No, please.

Q: There was a recommendation that an executive director be hired. Not a faculty director, but I think some huge—following the business school model. Somebody had written, “Wrong!”

[Laughter]

Frye: Yes.

Q: I don't know if that was your handwriting or somebody else's.

Frye: No. It wasn't mine, but I [laughter] wish it were.

Q: Like, they got that wrong.

Frye: Yes. What we did was we empowered Alla Rachkov and made her—I think her title is associate director now. She oversees all of the administrative side. And she was just a real wizard at making things happen, and was—because of that, all the work flowed to her desk. What, I hope, has happened in the restructuring is that we've elevated her so that now she can redirect that flow out to other people to make sure that the finances are working, that the M.A. admissions is happening on time, that the post-doc advertisements went out on time. Her local knowledge was really important. I think to bring in somebody from the outside, it would have taken a long time just to get up to speed. I'm not sure that would have been helpful. We have hired some people who have knowledge of Russian studies to fill some of our administrative positions, and that's very valuable.

Q: That's extremely valuable.

Frye: So we're lucky to have staff that aren't just good administrators; they also know about the region, they have language skills. That helps for the culture of the place, that there's lots of common things to talk about.

Q: So this is a direct question, but I'm—in your view, is Harriman doing what you had hoped it would through the restructuring?

Frye: Yes. In a way, my goals were modest, in that I had these really institutional changes that I wanted to make. The bureaucracy's never going to run perfectly. We could always use more staff to help with different kinds of projects and fundraising and other things that we could do more of. But I'm very happy with the way it turned out. Many of the people that we've hired have been people who came of age after the fall of the Soviet Union and have spent a lot of time in the country. That, I think, has helped a lot. One other thing that's been very helpful is, in coordination with history, we've been able to hire the Polish chair. We hired Malgorzata. We hired Tarik Amar as a junior faculty member. And now this semester we have Catherine Evtuhov, who's a senior, very well-known figure in Russian history. History is also back—not as fully staffed as it was—but now it can lay claims to being a really great place to do Russian history again.

Q: Are you seeing a change, then, in terms of the Ph.D. students you're accepting?

Frye: Yes. I can only speak for political science, but I've got great Ph.D. students. My first two went on the job market last year. One got a job at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, a tenure-track position, and one had several offers in the U.S. and chose George Washington [University], which for him is a great choice because Washington, D.C. had a lot of attraction for him. Yes. I've just got tremendous graduate students; a number of them from Russia, some from

the U.S. Harriman has been really instrumental in their study by granting them travel fellowships—

Q: That's beautiful.

Frye: It's really a luxury to be able to say to students when you recruit them, "When you want to go to the region for two weeks, a month, six weeks, Harriman can, nine times out of ten, make that happen." That's a huge—

Q: Incredible.

Frye: In addition to being able to say, "Oh, and if there are scholars you want to bring in to give a talk, or if you want to run a conference, let us know. We're glad to fund those kinds of student initiatives."

Q: That's so exciting.

Frye: So yes. I think it's become a very exciting place for people to study the region. I have a number of students working on the Baltics and Hungary, a couple students working on Ukraine, a student working on Chechnya, Dagestan, and the North Caucasus, working on legal issues and identity issues in the North Caucasus. So they're really a diverse group that are doing, I think, really exciting, exciting work. I'm very proud of them, as you can tell from this discussion.

Q: It's just a great discussion, because we've been so many decades in this one discussion [laughs], and yet it all holds together. The way in which you had those fabulous early learning experiences, led you to understand the importance of—you were going to be a different kind of scientist, but led you to the importance of contact, engagement, and cultural knowledge. So thank you so much. You've done so much more than I could have dreamed of.

Frye: Oh no, this was great. This was great. The Harriman means a lot to me. It's really enriched my life. So I'm glad to offer my insights.

Q: Great. And with your permission, we'll continue—

Frye: Sure. Sure, sure.

Q: —and we'll do more on the Moscow Institute and also your own work.

Frye: Yes, sure. Yes. Great. Thank you.

Q: Okay. Thank you.

[END OF SESSION]

ATC

Session: 2

Interviewee: Timothy M. Frye

Location: New York, NY

Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark

Date: February 14, 2017

Q: Today is February the fourteenth. It's 2017, and I'm with Tim Frye for the second session.

Thank you so much. You mentioned maybe a good follow-up area would be on policy and influence today. Following up from last time.

Frye: Yes. We ended on that note. I think it's important to mention how policymaking in general has changed from the time I started graduate school until today, whereas—it seems that when I was in graduate school there was more of a “great man” approach to policymaking, where there were a smaller number of very high-profile academics working on U.S.-Russia relations who were very prominent. I think that's become much more diffuse, where there are a larger number of people in academia and outside of academia now who are playing that role. And policymaking has changed so much with the rise of social media, the rise of think tanks; now you have a much greater business presence on Russia policy; and you have the Russian government and Russian companies also lobbying their interests.

It's a very different landscape today than it was in the 1980s or even the early 1990s. I think some people will say, “Oh, the academia is not as involved in policy-making in the way it was during the Cold War.” It's different, certainly, in part because the landscape for policymaking has changed so much. I don't know that it's anything really specific or unique to Russia that's caused it, or that the nature of academic research has changed so much. That's part of it, in that,

as I mentioned last time, the field has become much more professionalized in the sense that the incentives to conduct academic research often at the expense of more policy-related research have increased. The way that I think Harriman is involved in policymaking now is part—it's one voice in a much more cacophonous [laughs] environment. I think members of the Harriman still meet with policymakers. But also our voice gets heard through other fora.

There's a group called PONARS, the Program on New Approaches to Russian Security, that meets regularly, and Harriman's been very involved in writing memos and going to conferences where the policymaking community is present. And then our written work, I think, also has some impact. So I think it's just a very different policy environment than it was before.

Q: That's very helpful context. Could you talk a little bit more about the PONARS and—?

Frye: Yes, PONARS has been this great institution for the last twenty years of a large group of Russian, East European, Georgian, Armenian, [laughs] and U.S.-based and European-based scholars. It's a great expert community that comes together several times a year to present policy-related research that then gets broadly disseminated in the policy community. And people's expertise ranges from arms control to national security to economics to governance and corruption in economic development issues. It's a group that was funded a lot by Carnegie [Corporation of New York], and I believe the [John D. and Catherine T.] MacArthur Foundation was another big supporter. And that I think has been a very useful forum so that policymakers can hear about the particular expertise of individuals. Whereas I think perhaps thirty years ago in the—it's my impression—in the Cold War period, you had people that were Russia experts.

Q: Yes [laughs].

Frye: They were experts on a huge range of things, and they might have been spread more thinly than today when there seems to be a much broader range of people who are engaged in this network whose, then, voice can be heard.

Q: What are some of the specific issues you say you would wrestle with in the PONARS that would end up in a publication or a policy change? What are their influences?

Frye: For example, around the Ukraine conflict. A number of people were very active in trying to push forward policy ideas that could help shape the debate. I don't think you could point to any one individual or one article as being decisive, in part because PONARS is a heterogeneous group, and there are often disagreements among members of the group. But the idea is just to increase the quality of discussion around U.S.-Russian relations and Russian foreign policy, in part to try to make it less politicized. I think having members of the group from Russia, from Ukraine, from Central Asia, from Europe, forces you to really take into account a much broader range of views than you would if you were in a group of American experts on Russia where there might be greater risks for an echo-chamber effect, where we just reinforce each other's views and biases. And there you're constantly challenged.

Q: In terms of views and biases—this is a very big question, but I want to locate it in your article “Why International Relations Theory Gets Russia Wrong.” [Laughs]



Frye: Yes, I'm not crazy about the title—that wasn't my title for the article—

Q: Oh, okay.

Frye: —but, yes, I like the article.

Q: Yes, the article's good. So maybe you could talk about that a little bit—

Frye: Well, I think that the goal of that article was to recognize the duality of Russia. That a lot of the doom and gloom predictions about Russia—the economy's going to collapse; they're bent on undermining institutions in Europe— there is a demographic crisis, that attempts to build a more open and liberal political systems have not been very successful, particularly in the last five years when Russia's taken a much more autocratic turn—all those things are true, and one of the best predictors we have for how countries will evolve is what the government looks like today. One theory is that Russia's very personalist style of autocracy is not very conducive to promoting more liberal change, and that when these types of personalist rulers like President [Vladimir V.] Putin leave office, it's often quite messy, often quite violent; and that that is one line of thought on Russia. However, the other strong theory we have about political development is that countries that are better educated, that are more wealthy, and that are more urban also tend to have more open and more liberal governments and to be better governed, less corrupt.

So the two big theories that we have about how countries evolve point in two very different directions for Russia. The people who focus on the personalism of the regime have very dire predictions about the nature of political change in Russia going forward, that personalist rulers are often replaced by other personalist rulers, and that this is a self-reinforcing process. Whereas if we look at a lot of the social indicators, Russia should be a much more open, and much more liberal, and much better governed place than it is. What makes Russia interesting for me is that both of those things are true, and that both of these tendencies are present in Russia, and that's what makes it an interesting place to study. I think there's sometimes a tendency to focus too much on one of these tendencies at the expense of the other.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the last five years under Putin, and also in terms of the growing tensions with the U.S.?

Frye: Yes, a couple points. Putin's great success was that the size of the economy doubled in his first eight years in office, largely thanks to high oil prices, but also they've managed the macroeconomics of the high volatility of oil prices very well. Any country that is dependent on oil revenue for the government budget, that experiences a decline in oil prices from \$120 a barrel to thirty-five or forty dollars a barrel, that is going to be challenged. Russia has not ended up like Venezuela, where the financial situation is very grim. The Putin administration has been very good about managing the macro economy. But they have for the last five years since 2012 had slowing rates of economic growth, and the three years of negative rates of economic growth. So they have not found a formula to legitimize their rule as they had during the first decade when

Putin could say, “Are you better off today than you were five years ago?” and people would say yes. But that’s not true in the last five years.

So what has happened is that rather than using economic performance to justify their rule, the Putin administration has turned to nationalism. In part that is an anti-Western campaign of labeling all foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations as “foreign agents.” And this precedes Ukraine, and this is an important thing to mention, is that when Putin came back into power in May 2012, following the protests, he used the anti-Western card to help build a much more conservative vision of Russia that relies much less on the dynamism of the educated urban elite and much more so on state-sector employees, the security services, and pensioners nostalgic for Russia having a role as a great power. This has been very successful. His approval ratings remain high even as the approval ratings of the government, and complaints about government services, and the performance of the economy have increased in recent years. So he’s been able to insulate himself from the poor performance of the economy.

One of the tricky things to figure out is how sincere are the complaints the Russian government is making about NATO encirclement, about how bad U.S.-Russia relations are. In part I think that they’re sincere and that they would like to see better relations. At the same time, there is very much a domestic-politics story for playing this anti-Western card to try to take advantage of a rally-around-the-flag effect. President Putin has been very skilled at that, using the narrative that, “The world is against Russia. We have to unite in order to keep the values that we hold dear, our role as a great power. And the reason why all of the countries are taking actions against Russia is because we’re strong again, and they’re afraid of us.” I think we have to understand

why relations have soured. Part of it is certainly actions by the U.S. that the Russians see as threatening. But part of it also is that it's good domestic politics in Russia right now to blame the West for the dire economic situation, for example.

You know, this is not unique to Russia either. I mean, [unclear] lots of countries, when the economy starts to go south, they point to—

Q: [Laughs] We've seen it.

Frye: —foreign enemies. Certainly in the U.S. it's been true. In Venezuela it's certainly true. I recognize that relations are bad, and I think it's important for us to understand that there is some way in which having bad relations with the West is good politics in Russia right now. So there's a little bit of a Goldilocks situation where I think Putin doesn't mind having relations with the U.S. that are not great. He doesn't want them to be so bad that they spill into any conflict, certainly. At the same time he doesn't want them to be so good that he can't use the U.S., or the West, or NATO as a whipping boy to shore up support among certain circles in Russia.

Q: That's also very helpful context. What would you say is the role, then, of the PONARS, or the Harriman Institute, or the CASEs [Centers for Advanced Study and Education] in Russia that are funded by Carnegie—what is the potentially productive role, and how has all of this affected exchanges and scholars?

Frye: I think what our role, as academics, can be is to provide some source of information that is less biased and less partisan and less politicized than is much of the common currency in foreign policy debates today. To the extent that we go out, we collect evidence, that we have to make arguments transparently—or more transparently than some of the more partisan actors who are shaping policy on behalf of governments, or private companies, or even on the behalf of donors to think tanks—that we as academics have a special role to play in that we do have this incredible luxury and freedom to be able to do our research and to try to present it in a way that is perhaps more transparent and more open to scrutiny, in a way, where we have to tell people how we collected our data. What are the possible shortcomings in the data and the analysis? What are some of the limitations to our studies in ways that people who lobby on behalf of a certain position get the luxury of being able to pull punches and not having to tell the whole story?

So I think our role is less to argue that the U.S. should do  $x$  or Russia should do  $y$  as to collect data, to make arguments, and then to use our findings then to say, “Based on our findings we should expect  $x$  to happen, if the U.S. or Russia takes some certain policy initiative,” or, “If we want to try to promote economic development in Russia, here are some recommendations that we would make based on the surveys of businesspeople that we’ve done,” for example. For example, some of my research is about how businesspeople perceive the courts in Russia. And for collecting ordinary debts in ordinary business practices they seem to work quite well. But in higher-stakes conflicts, either economic or political, the courts don’t work very well because they’re very much subject to political pressure.

So one recommendation might be that in Russia the courts, for example, are territorially congruent with the political jurisdictions. You have courts in each region of Russia, and there's a governor in each of those regions. One thing to reduce the level of political pressures that governors can put on the courts would be to make the political jurisdictions and the legal jurisdictions not congruent, so that you would have several governors, or several political jurisdictions, within one court so that the judge could be subject not to the pressure of one person but to the subjective of competing governors, for example, as a way to try to give them more ability to evade pressure. So that's the kind of research that I think scholars of my generation are comfortable making, based on our academic research that goes through the peer review process, and then say from that, here are some suggestions about policies that might be helpful.

Q: What are you working on now?

Frye: I have a book on property rights in Russia where I've done surveys of businesspeople 2000, 2004, 2008, 2011, and then some surveys of the mass public about how firms resolve economic disputes. One of the chapters, for example—I was very lucky in that roughly half of the businesspeople were interviewed prior to the election of December 4, 2011, and roughly half were interviewed after. So it's this nice—

Q: That's very nice.

Frye: —almost experimental setup where we asked businesspeople questions about the security of their property rights. In this election United Russia saw its vote share go from sixty-four

percent of the seats down to around just over a majority. One of the interesting findings was that for firms that were more dependent on the state—that is, firms that did a lot of business with the state, that were state-owned or that were in sectors where it was easy for the state to put pressure on them, they saw their property rights as stronger after the elections than before, in part because the position of the dominant political party, United Russia, had become weaker. So that was kind of an interesting finding, which shows the dangers of the concentration of political power on economic actors—because it's no secret in Russia, there's a big problem of hostile takeovers, in the very real sense of the word, where your economic rivals collude with state agents in order to take over your firm. From my research, it showed that after this electoral disappointment for United Russia, some sector of firms saw their property rights as more secure, that their firms were less likely to be taken over in the near future when United Russia was weaker.

Q: It's so interesting because this is exactly the development of new theories that actually apply to Russia as it exists, not borrowed theories from the U.S. or somewhere else.

Frye: Yes, I mean, I've benefited a lot from this resurgence in political science on the study of autocracies. It's a really interesting branch of research right now that recognizes there's a lot of heterogeneity among autocracies. There are differences between, say, very personalist autocracies, one-party autocracies, like China or the Soviet Union or the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party] under Mexico, and military autocracies, like [Augusto] Pinochet's Chile. They fall apart in different ways. They make policy in different ways. The leader's tenure varies a lot so that military regimes often have shorter tenures for rulers than personalist regimes, for example. Levels of corruption tend to be higher under personalist regimes than under one-party

or under military regimes. This is a very interesting and vibrant source of research, and it's one where Russia has contributed a lot.

My research has been to try to look at legal institutions under autocratic rule. What makes Russia interesting is that at the same time that you have this risk of hostile takeover—from my research, one in eight firms in our sample in 2011 thought their firm would be the target of a hostile takeover in the next two or three years. Which is a very high number, when you consider that it includes many small firms as well as medium and large firms. At the same time, for ordinary, run-of-the-mill, non-political, low-stakes economic conflicts, the Russian court system tends to work pretty well. It's relatively fast. It's relatively quick compared to other middle-income countries. Again, what makes Russia interesting is that the situation's rarely black or white. As an academic, it's an interesting place to do research.

Q: How has your own research access changed in the last five years? Or is it still robust?

Frye: Well, it's become more difficult—there's no doubt about that—in part because in the 2000s, even, for example, it was much easier to talk with policymakers, members of Congress, bureaucrats, who were making policy. Often they sought out our insights based on our research. That's become much more difficult. And not just for foreign researchers, but I think for Russian researchers as well, as policymaking has become much more opaque and concentrated in fewer hands. One of the interesting things is that in the early Putin years, the Putin team reached out to the policymaking community and the academic community in Russia and elsewhere to comment on legislation, to help draft long-term development plans. Some of my colleagues at the



[National Research University] Higher School of Economics were involved in some of the efforts to improve state procurements, to improve how state bodies buy the goods that they need. In many countries this is rife with corruption.

One of the most interesting things that happened in Russia in the last decade was the creation of a state procurement system where you had to bid on all your purchases above some minimal threshold if you were a state organization. Hospitals, schools, state-owned firms, a big portion of the economy, when they—so my institute that I co-direct at the Higher School of Economics, when we do a survey, we have to bid it out. We have to. It's this long, convoluted process. But that was all put in place because these academics had lobbied certain parts of the government, as an anti-corruption measure, to try to put this institution in place. Those kinds of policy innovations we just really haven't seen in the last four or five years since President Putin came back in 2012.

Q: I'd love to hear a little bit more about the institute for higher education.

Frye: Yes. It's called the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development. My Russian colleague and I, Andrei [A.] Yakovlev—whom I've known since 1993—we received a large grant from the Russian government in 2011 for about \$1.8 million to set up this research institute that housed, initially, six foreign scholars and about a dozen Russian scholars. Our goal was to publish articles in international peer-reviewed journals in order to try to improve the ranking of the Higher School of Economics in the various international rating organizations. And that's still our mission. It's really a largely academic endeavor. We also do some teaching to

students at the Higher School of Economics. We teach one course a year, in part by video, and in part we have people on the ground there as well who are teaching.

Then inevitably we also have been involved in some kinds of policy discussions. That was much more common in the 2011 to 2013 period, less so during the period 2014 to 2016. Now we're on our third cycle, our third round. It's become an institution, in the sense that we have workshops every year we run in Moscow and in New York. We have, again, about a dozen and a half scholars working on a variety of projects on the political economy of Russia and other countries.

It's been a remarkable experience, and our budget, for example, has not been cut, despite the tremendous budget pressure that the Higher School of Economics as a whole has been under. All state institutions have taken cuts of ten to fifteen percent, given the drop in oil prices. Our base budget has been protected, despite the anti-Western, anti-foreign rhetoric and policies, even, that have been favored by the Russian government in recent years. The Higher School of Economics has insulated our research institute and other research institutes run by foreign scholars because they recognize that the way they will be evaluated by the Russian government is how well they've improved in these international rankings, and our institutes are one way to make that happen.

I've published a bunch of articles with Russian scholars as part of this project. We have some big data projects that we've also done through the institute that we couldn't have otherwise done.

Q: Such as?

Frye: So, for example, we've collected biographical information on all of the governors across Russia's eighty-plus regions from 1991 until the present, also on high-level regional officials within the governor's cabinet, and also among members of regional parliaments as well. Because one of the things we're interested in is the career trajectories of bureaucrats, and why do some get promoted and some not, because that's an important way to understand how bureaucrats behave is, what are they promoted and punished for?

One of the things we've found is that if in China, sub-national leaders are promoted based on the rate of economic growth in their region, in Russia, governors tend to be reappointed based not on the economic performance of their region but on the vote share for President Putin and United Russia in their region. So—

Q: Gosh [laughs].

Frye: —this is not really conducive to economic growth, but it is conducive to the perpetuation of the incumbent administration.

Q: Do you think that President Putin is setting himself up in a way that thwarts economic growth?

Frye: Yes. I mean, what's happened, I think, since 2012 is the political coalition that he's put in place has been one that wants to protect the economic status quo. A pro-growth coalition in

Russia would do much more to incorporate the well-educated urban middle classes, to try to promote more heavily a high-tech sector, to try to reduce corruption and improve property rights, because the groups that are benefiting from the economic status quo are bureaucrats, incumbent firms who already have good relations with the local government, and there's no one really speaking for new entrant firms that would like to enter these markets. In that way the Russian market has become very friendly for incumbents. And in any setting that's not conducive to economic dynamism.

The strategy I think has been to really hope for a rebound in oil prices that would then allow the government to refill its coffers and use that to stay in power. That's begun to happen in the last six months or so. Oil prices have gone back up moderately, and that's helped keep the government afloat. But there's been a lot of economic policy drift, I think, in the last four years, where there hasn't been a clear economic strategy. It's been very reactive to the sanctions put in place, and there hasn't been a clear policy line put forward.

The way it was when Putin first came to power, and even when [Dmitry A.] Medvedev was in power, from 2008 to 2012, there were much clearer economic priorities. Whereas I think since 2012 the economic priorities have been pretty hard to decipher, in part because in 2000 to 2012 there was always this balance of forces between the economic liberals in the government—the [Alexei L.] Kudrin-[Herman O.] Gref wing of government—and the more security-oriented members of the government, the natural resource lobbies and the security services. The economically liberal wing has really lost out since 2012. Their voice in policymaking has been much weaker, and I think that's been a problem.

Q: How much do you think these economic problems can, have, and will affect policy in terms of U.S.-Russia relations?

Frye: Well, it's difficult, because everyone wants economic cooperation to lead to better relations. That's something that I think everybody would like to see. The difficult thing is that the U.S. and Russia are just not natural trading partners. The U.S. and China are natural trading partners because China has very low wages, it's a very good place for U.S. companies to invest, and there's lots of manufacturing plants there. The U.S. also has good economic relations with Europe because there's common values, there's all of the institutions that make it easy for the U.S. and European trading partners to see eye to eye. Russia is stuck between low-wage Asia and high-tech Europe as a trading partner. And now with the U.S. becoming an exporter of gas, in some sense the U.S. and Russia will be competitors rather than cooperators on this really important market.

It's not easy, I think, for the U.S. and Russia to use economic relations as the foundation for a better relationship, much as many people would like that. The Europeans are just much closer, and they provide a lot of the capital that the U.S. could be providing to invest in Russia. Also, Russia's a difficult place to do business. Even when the sanctions come off, which I expect they will at some point, the underlying legal environment and institutional environment is very tough for foreign investors to—and it's tough for Russian investors as well—to build new factories, to create new firms to compete with the incumbent firms that are there already.

Much as we would all like to see economic cooperation lead to better political relations, it's difficult. It's much more likely that we'll see better relations when there're some common problems for us to solve. Like, despite [Barack H.] Obama's not-great personal relations with Mr. Putin, the U.S. and Russia were able to cooperate on building bases and transport systems that allow troops and materiel to go into Afghanistan, also allowed the U.S. and Russia to cooperate on the Iranian nuclear deal, an area where both the U.S. and Russia had an interest for that to happen. On arms control, as well, is another area where there's been cooperation, where both sides saw it in their interest to reduce their nuclear weapons.

One of the tricky moments right now is that there are not clear issues for the U.S. and Russia to easily align their interests. The closest one, I think, would be international anti-terrorism efforts, but, as we saw in Syria, the U.S. and Russia both use the fight against terror selectively to back their own candidates in the struggle for political power in the Middle East. The Russians are backing [Bashar H. al-]Assad, and the U.S. is trying to back moderate Islamic groups. This would be an example where there could have been cooperation, and it's been very difficult. So I think one thing we need to do is scale back our expectations about what's possible or what's likely to happen. I think if we have more modest ambitions, that's a much better foundation for building a relationship where we avoid the worst things from happening. A run-in between a NATO and a Russian plane, or a ship at sea, or some—

Q: It just strikes a memory in me that we did a history of the fifty years of Lamont-Doherty's [Earth Observatory] work, and how—we actually interviewed one of the Russian scientists—and

how productive it was for basically relations, on a small scale, to have that, to have the acknowledgment that research could go on despite what kind of political conflicts were at stake.

Frye: Yes. Yes, I think that's important. I think the academic research on Russia, it's—I'm sometimes struck by these articles about how when relations get really bad, people say, "Oh, there's not enough Russia experts!" Or, you know, "There's some problem with the academic study of Russia." When relations are good, nobody ever says, "Oh! It must be because there's great work the academics are doing." I think [laughs] it tends to really get—

Q: We'll make sure you get credit [laughs].

Frye: —oversold. I mean, I don't think either case is really true. In some sense we'd like our research to promote better relations and better understanding. But mostly we're trying to understand the nature of the relationship, and hopefully that will improve relations, rather than trying to reverse-engineer good relations via our research, which is probably—we want to be sure that our policy recommendations would flow from our academic conclusions rather than the other way around. That, I think, is something that my generation of people studying Russia would agree on.

Q: Well, I think you've really accomplished that. Very impressive.

If we could shift a little bit back to Harriman and some of the work you're doing, and you could talk about the dual-language school, that would be great.

Frye: Yes. So my son is eight years old now. Four years ago, when he was looking for pre-K—we were looking for pre-K for him, or kindergarten for him—I got involved with this group of parents in Manhattan who wanted their kids to study in a dual-language Russian school. So for now four years, I've been involved in this effort on and off to make this a reality. In concert with Harriman, we lobbied to try to make this happen. We held an event in the spring, I think, that was very important to bring together all the stakeholders, including the Department of Education, some interested principals of schools, and then also the families of children who would potentially be enrolled in this school. The sticking point had always been that it's difficult to find a principal willing to open up the space to create first a kindergarten class, then a K-1, then K-1, K-2, K-3, [and] K-1, K-2, K-3, K-4, K-5.

Over time the commitment to open up space increases, and that frightened away a lot of principals who have very little space to spare. This is Manhattan, after all. But we were able to convince the district school board in District 3 in Manhattan—who has been supportive of our efforts all along—and in P.S. 145 at 106th and Columbus, they're opening a dual-language Russian school in the fall that will be hopefully kindergarten and kindergarten and first-grade kids. So we've played some role in trying to make this happen, and we're hoping to be a resource for them going forward.

Q: That's beautiful.



Frye: Not that we'll be in the classroom every day, but through our cultural events that we hold at Harriman, that we would encourage P.S. 145 students to come and take advantage of that.

Q: That's great!

Frye: Yes, I'm really looking forward to seeing how this works.

Q: But what you just discussed, what you just said, must have taken thousands and thousands of hours to bring about [laughs].

Frye: I had played a very small role in it. But there were a lot of parents who were involved over the years. One of the challenges was that as parents placed their kids in other schools they would drop off from the effort, as you would expect. They were looking for schools for their kids, and then when this didn't happen, they moved on to other things, so that every couple of years we were recruiting new parents to become involved. But I'm hopeful, at least because there're so many Russian speakers and Russian-speaking families who want their kids to keep up their Russian. And hopefully there are enough Anglo-dominant speaking families that they'll want to take part in this as well.

Q: I'm just figuring if Alex's daughter is the right age to go. No, I guess she's too old!

Frye: Yes, I mean, that's part of the problem. You've got to get them young [laughter], because they have to register a year in advance. But I'm very excited about that project, partly because I

think it fits well with Alex's vision, also, of working with local communities to expand the influence of Harriman and to bring them also into the Harriman as well.

Q: So if you wouldn't mind I'd like to talk a little bit about your vision of Alex and what he's doing. Partly selfishly, because I'm going to be interviewing him soon.

Frye: Oh! [Laughter] Alex has done a great job. One of his big programs has been about Harriman in New York and to build relations with all of the different communities—the diaspora communities, as well as people who are just interested in the region, people doing business in the region, people doing policy in the region—who are based locally. Cathy Nepomnyashchy was very instrumental in building relations with various cultural institutions in New York. So New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Carnegie Hall—we've done events with them. We've done a lot of events on ballet over the years, where we have a real comparative advantage.

Q: I know Lynn [T.] Garafola very well.

Frye: Yes. I think what Alex is trying to do in a way is to say, "Look, there are lots of other institutions out there, that are in New York, that are interested in the region, that we should have stronger relations with." Particularly given the last few months have seen a huge upsurge in interest in Russia, following the election of 2016. I know I've been doing a lot more public events.

Q: I've seen you on *New York Live* and a couple of others [laughter].

Frye: That's right. Doing television, but also doing events around town. I think that's a good thing.

Q: I think that's a great thing. It's a real opportunity for Harriman to show its influence. So let's talk a little bit about the election, if you don't mind.

Frye: Sure.

Q: Particularly timely today, since Mike [Michael T.] Flynn resigned last night. So I'm going to be the first reporter oral historian [laughter] to ask you to talk about that debacle.

Frye: Yes. The shortest-serving head of the National Security Council [laughs]. I think in some ways his resignation—which apparently was pushed on him by the [Donald J.] Trump administration, according to the latest reports—is important to building better relations with Russia. A number of commentators have said that President Trump and Michael Flynn's overtures to Russia to build better relations will now take a hit with his stepping down. But I think his actions so tainted the relationship that it would be hard to build cooperative relations, given the cloud of his contacts prior to the election and after the election, in a way, I think, that made him a target of suspicion for people who legitimately are concerned, and also for people who do not want to see good relations. In this way his stepping down, I think, is almost a necessary condition if you want to build better relations. I think he was just seen as compromised

in a way that hopefully the next head of the National Security Council will not be. Particularly given, you have Rex [W.] Tillerson as the secretary of state, who also has very good relations with the Kremlin.

Q: And yet he lost, what, a huge amount of money that he—can you tell that story? I don't quite understand that story. Or it's rumored that he lost—?

Frye: Well, so ExxonMobil, the company that he headed for a long time, and was very successful in building good relations with Rosneft and with the Russian government, and had very ambitious plans to develop energy projects in the Arctic that were stopped cold by the economic sanctions. ExxonMobil lobbied not to have the sanctions put in place or to have them be weakened. They lost on that fight, which is rather uncharacteristic for ExxonMobil, who doesn't lose political fights very often, but this is one that they did lose. I think there's a concern among some people that should the sanctions come off, the optics of this will not look good, in that you have the former head of ExxonMobil as the secretary of state overseeing the lifting of sanctions in a way that would likely be tremendously beneficial for ExxonMobil.

He has a real perceptions problem to deal with in that, even if this is his sincere desire and thinks of this as the policy that's in the best interest of the United States, I think for people who are skeptical of American foreign policy and believe that it serves at the whims of corporate interests, a lifting of the sanctions will be interpreted in this way as a gift to ExxonMobil. So we'll see whether or not that happens. Particularly among the choices that were rumored to be

the head of secretary of state, he seems to be a more levelheaded figure than some of the others. But he's never held public office. Neither has his boss. So we'll see.

Q: You're going to be really busy for the next year or two [laughs].

Frye: Well, I wish that we were not in such high demand. Because often that means that relations are not good and that—I always say that as a spectator sport, Russia's fantastic. For me, it's the gift that keeps on giving. But if you're doing business over there or trying to make policy towards Russia, it's a difficult environment.

Q: If you have some more time, can I take you down a trip on memory lane?

Frye: Sure. Please, yes.

Q: [Laughs] Thank you for all this. It's so interesting. We could go on and on about this, but it's quite early in the Trump administration, so—

Frye: Yes. It's hard to speculate.

Q: —it's hard to know. So you were—and I just confirmed this with you before the interview—in Russia the same time that Ambassador Jack [F.] Matlock [Jr.] was in there.

Frye: Yes. Yes.

Q: And as I told you, I just finished doing three sessions with him week before last. I just want to know, first of all, what your initial relationships and impressions were of him, and—

Frye: Sure.

Q: —how you related to each other.

Frye: So I worked as an exhibit guide for the U.S. Information Agency from around November 1987 to January 1989. So I was in Russia for basically that whole period. And Ambassador Matlock came to five of the six cities where our exhibit was open. We were roughly two months in each city, and then we'd have a month to travel as we packed up the forty-five tractor-trailer size containers of equipment, and it got shipped from city to city. He had a special place in his heart for the exhibit guide program. He was a big believer in cultural exchange.

He came to our exhibit and opened them up, gave the opening speech. He gave the opening speech in Georgian in Tbilisi for several minutes. In Uzbekistan he gave several minutes of his opening address in Uzbek. That made him very popular in those places. And then of course in the other cities I was in, in Irkutsk and Magnitogorsk and Minsk, he gave the opening address in Russian. He didn't open it in St. Petersburg because there's a consulate in St. Petersburg, and that was considered the St. Petersburg consulate's duties.

He would come and he would give this great speech, and then he would have dinner with all of the exhibit guides afterwards and trade stories. He was such a Renaissance man in that he originally trained as a language and literature PhD student at Columbia, an expert on [Nikolai S.] Leskov. Then he abandoned his studies to go work in the Foreign Service and had just tremendous career. I saw him on television and in public events in Moscow when he was an ambassador. I spent a lot of time on the ground there. I always was interested to hear what he had to say. Then when I came back to Columbia as a professor—I came back in 2006, and around 2010 or ‘11 or so, Ambassador Matlock defended his dissertation, and I was on the committee! I was one of the interrogators.

Q: No kidding!

Frye: That’s right.

Q: That’s fantastic.

Frye: It was great. I’m not sure if this is the longest lapse between finishing your graduate study and actually completing the dissertation, from the early 1950s until—

Q: And what was his dissertation?

Frye: It was an analysis of translations of Leskov, who was a nineteenth-century writer who wrote in a very colloquial style, roughly similar to Mark Twain in—so there were a lot of

colloquialisms, a lot of playing with language. He analyzed translations of Leskov, several English-language translations, but also some German translations as well, where he tried to figure—he'd made arguments about which translations better captured the essence of Leskov and why they made different choices. So it was very much a fun defense, and we were all very glad to see it happen. So I've always kind of had a special relationship to Jack and his wife Rebecca [Burrum], who also was at our exhibits and often took photographs of the exhibits.

Q: I was with her, actually. I met her, and she's quite lovely.

Frye: Yes, she's fantastic.

Q: She gave me her book on opera.

Frye: Yes, right.

Q: I do have some questions about the kind of diplomacy that was at work when Jack was working with [Ronald W.] Reagan and what he was able to achieve. You've already explained that reduction of nuclear arms was in the interest of both—

Frye: Right.

Q: —both countries. But Jack had a way of talking about negotiating privately and silently that I would just like to hear your perspectives on.



Frye: Sure. There have always been two tracks of diplomacy, where you had the very public style of diplomacy that both sides need in order to sell their policies to their respective domestic constituencies. But you also had the very private back channels negotiations that—particularly in, I think, in the Cold War—were especially important, because there were fewer opportunities to interact, there was less media coverage, there were fewer think tanks, there were less business opportunities for lobbying. I think probably diplomats and dealmakers had more leeway than they do now. Also, I think policymaking was much less polarized back then where there was a more or less consensus on how to deal with the Russians.

What made Reagan interesting was that he had such firm anti-communist credentials that he could make overtures that others couldn't make to Gorbachev and to the Russians and survive politically in a way that somebody with weaker anti-communist credentials would have probably suffered so much criticism at home that their efforts would have been for naught. This personal relationship, I think, between not just Reagan and Gorbachev but between Matlock and [Eduard A.] Shevardnadze and some of the other interlocutors around Gorbachev were really important. It's hard to see now, despite having very able diplomats today, who could play that role. I think it's a much more difficult environment, both domestically in the United States but also within Russia. I think the reset efforts accomplished several big policy goals: the Iran nuclear agreement, the cooperation on Afghanistan, the New START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] Treaty. But particularly post-2012, when President Putin came back into power, the opportunities for cooperation were much more limited on the Russian side as well.

Q: It's been very helpful to have you draw out these very distinctive contexts as a way of looking at the history of the Harriman, in terms of how policy can or can't be made.

Frye: Yes. There are a number of dynamics at work. There are changes within academia so that the incentives to engage in policymaking are less than they were some time ago. At the same time, I think that there is a stream of research, more evidence-based policymaking, where we can still contribute. Some of the work I've done, for example, on President Putin's approval ratings, where there's a debate about whether or not people were lying to pollsters when they answered questions about President Putin's approval rating, and—

Q: Did you say Putin or Trump?

Frye: Putin!

Q: No, [laughs] I'm teasing.

Frye: Well, actually, we've also looked into the possibility [laughter] of whether or not people are lying about the approval ratings about Mr. Trump. That appears to be less of an issue when you look at it closely. We thought about looking into that in the U.S., and then we decided that there really wasn't enough of an intuition about whether or not people were lying. Because one thing is if you look at, for example, Internet surveys and phone-based surveys where they ask about the presidential approval for Donald Trump, in the U.S. they're very close to each other.

The notion is that people are more comfortable revealing socially, perhaps, undesirable preferences in an anonymous Internet survey than in speaking with somebody.

Q: Sure. But I interrupted your story about Putin.

Frye: So about Putin, we did several surveys where we tried to tease this out. We used this kind of very sneaky technique, and we found that, no, it turns out that people were not lying, that they are answering the question honestly about their support for President Putin. Then from that you can make your own judgments about the prospects for political stability and for the Putin administration in Russia. But that's the kind of thing that I think we can do. I've also done some research recently on how U.S. sanctions influence Russian support for their own government and their perceptions of the U.S. government as well. So those are the kinds of very—

Q: What are some of the—?

Frye: One of the findings is we didn't find much evidence of a rally-around-the-flag effect in Russia. Either there was no effect, or there was actually a negative effect. When we divided the sample into groups where one group we told them, "The U.S. has levied sanctions on Russia. Do you approve of the Russian government?" And then the next group we just said, "Do you approve of the Russian government right now?" We found that priming people with information about the U.S. sanctions didn't cause them to really improve their level of support for the Russian government—which I think is interesting in that I think that's the conventional wisdom is that you levy sanctions, and then people rally around the flag in order to bolster the incumbent

government. We also found that sanctions reduced support for the U.S. government among Russians. Reminding people about the sanctions reduced their support compared to the control group that wasn't reminded about U.S. sanctions. So in that way, this information—eventually we'll publish an article on this, and policymakers can then use that to inform their decision about whether or not sanctions are a good or a bad thing.

Q: What do you anticipate once sanctions are removed? Will that produce a certain kind of chaos or opportunity?

Frye: The sanctions themselves, I think, will produce some opportunities for people in the oil and gas sector, for the financial sector. But I don't think they're going to have a—and they will have an impact on Russia's image and reputation in the world. The U.S. sanctions, though, are focused on individuals and on firms, particularly operating in the energy sector and in the finance sector, and they're not as broad-based as, say, sanctions against Iran were. In that sense I don't think there'll be a big growth spurt in the Russian economy once sanctions are lifted, in part because a lot of the institutional problems about corruption and weak property rights and the lack of competition on domestic markets are still going to be there.

Russia also is stuck in this middle-income trap, where the easy way to get growth—and a lot of countries have grown from low levels of per capita income to around twelve or fifteen thousand dollars per capita, which is about where Russia is today—by educating the public, by bringing women into the workforce, and by urbanizing, moving people from the countryside to the city. Russia's done that already. These are the easy sources of economic growth. The hard transition

to make is from this middle-income category, where you have—in order to grow, you need to build stronger institutions, reduce corruption, have policies that are more conducive to growth. That’s a much more difficult thing for countries to do. Not just Russia, but lots of countries get stuck in this middle-income trap, until they’re able to introduce policies that allow for more shared economic growth. Russia right now, in terms of wealth, is one of the most unequal countries in the world. Those that are benefiting, the very rich, are blocking further economic development because that would be a threat to their economic wellbeing.

The sanctions aren’t going to solve those fundamental problems, even as they might give Russia access to technology to develop the energy sector, make it cheaper for Russian firms to borrow, and also kind of get rid of the stigma of investing in Russia.

Q: Just a couple more questions. One is your view—we have a blueprint that guides us in [our] thinking about this project, and we’ve reviewed it, and things have come up in the project that are interesting. There’s some discussion about whether or whether not the Harriman Institute has done a good job on the human rights question.

Frye: Oh.

Q: [Laughs] Sorry.

Frye: Yes. That’s—

Q: Well, I mean, some saying that you shouldn't be that involved in it, others saying you should be more. So I just wanted your perspective on that.

Frye: That's a hard question, in part because we don't know what strategies are very effective in promoting human rights.

Q: Aha.

Frye: Whether or not that's our goal is a separate question. But even if we take it as our goal, I don't think there's a consensus about whether naming and shaming and giving awards to human rights activists and putting a real spotlight on the problem is more effective than back-channel negotiations to try to improve individual situations in Russia. I don't think that there's a consensus among people at the Harriman about how to do that.

One thing that I think we have done well is to try to build bridges when we can to civil society organizations in Russia, particularly journalists. This is—the [Paul] Klebnikov Foundation has been important in creating the Klebnikov Endowment at Harriman that allows us to bring over some very high-profile Russian journalists to New York to hold events and to network. We have a lot of events around the role of the press. That's an area where I think we've done what we can. But our influence is pretty limited, given all the other factors at play in determining levels of press freedom in Russia and political freedom more generally.

We've also been supportive of the Institute for the Study of Human Rights. For about the last decade we've sponsored a human rights activist from the region—not always from Russia, but from Georgia, Albania, other countries, the Balkans—to spend a year in New York where the first four months they spend in New York, where they're taking classes, and then the last four months, I believe, they're either in Washington or they're out doing more networking kinds of activities. So that's been a quiet way that we've tried to help promote human rights in the region.

Also, I think our academic scholarship has been strong in this area. You know, Cathy's [Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy] work, Nepomnyashchy's work, with Nadezhda Azhgikhina. Jack Snyder and Alex Cooley have their work on strategies for promoting human rights in the region. Some of our alumni have been active at Human Rights Watch and some other organizations. So I think this is something where we've been active, where I think it's probably a good thing that we're doing it. We don't always know what strategy works the best. But it is an area where I think we've done a lot.

One thing I sometimes worry about is that it's very easy for us to get Russian opposition politicians to come speak at the Harriman. It's much more difficult for us to get Russian governmental figures to come and give their side of the story in a way that's sophisticated. Because the incentives for most Russian government officials to come give a talk at Harriman, in a public forum where they're going to get asked all kinds of questions, they're not that great. There's not a lot of upside for them.

Q: Well, there's a very famous time that Mark von Hagen stood up in Low Library and screamed at one of the officials [laughs]. He told the story about himself.

Frye: Yes, so we had this world leaders forum, for example, where sometimes it happens that leaders from countries will face students from their own country, and the students will ask them hard questions, because they're at Columbia University where they're allowed to ask these kinds of questions that they wouldn't normally be allowed to ask in their own countries.

Q: Jack Matlock had some very passionate words about, We should consider whether or not we're a democracy [laughs].

Frye: Well, look, I wrote a piece November eighteenth, entitled "I Study Autocratic Elections, and I'm Concerned." I went through a whole list of what I thought were violations of democratic norms that we really need to be serious about. I wouldn't go so far as to say we're not a democracy, but many of the conflicts of interest that we see—

Q: What were some of the things you said?

Frye: Well, for example, for the first time in many years, we had one candidate that was unwilling to reveal his financial information in a way that is very common in autocratic regimes. We had the security services weighing in, willingly or not, on behalf of one candidate at the expense of another. We had explicit appeals against specific racial and ethnic minorities in a way that we haven't had in many years. Also the media environment talked very little about policy



and much more about personalities, and did not do as good a job as they have in the past. You had the Trump team chanting, “Lock her up!” and claimed that elections were going to be rigged. That is precisely the kind of thing we see in lots of autocracies, threats to imprison political opponents, and threats to not respect electoral decisions if they don’t go in one’s favor. Since the election I think that the conflicts of interest that we see are just astounding, in a way that we haven’t seen in a long time.

Q: Also the power of the executive office and executive orders.

Frye: Yes, well, I mean, that has been a growing problem. The Obama administration, the [George W.] Bush administration interpreted executive orders quite broadly in a way that I think they might regret. Also Senator [Harry M.] Reid abandoning the filibuster for some judicial appointments I think is something that the Democratic Party will come to regret. So yes, I mean, I do think that basic norms about democratic practices in the U.S. are at risk in a way that we haven’t seen in my lifetime, since even Watergate, which was a much more specific incident and set of practices, whereas what we see today is in some ways more troubling, where claims about election fraud in attempts to delegitimize elections, I think that is really disconcerting. We’ll see going forward whether or not that type of language delegitimizes elections in a way. So I wouldn’t go so far as to say we’re not a democracy as political life—

Q: He was not saying it. He was asking the question.

Frye: Right. No, it is precisely the right question to be asking about how far do democratic norms have to be abused before we start putting adjectives before “democracy.”

Q: What’s the most important thing for Harriman to do in the next two or three years, even, in terms of addressing A, possible points of ignorance in the American public, which has always been a role of education, and B, engaging on a more assertive, visible level with some of the issues around the threats to democracy now?

Frye: Well, I think in some ways we are very well-positioned to comment on politics in the United States, given what we know about other countries’ slides into autocratic practices. Some of the most trenchant critics of the assault on democratic norms that we see in the United States are people who have seen this happen in other countries. For better and for worse, our region, the post-communist region, is very rich in autocracies of various stripes and various colors. So I think we are in a good place to have a conversation with our colleagues who are specialists in American politics to say, “Look, these are the kinds of things that we need to worry about.”

In terms of U.S.-Russia relations, we need to keep doing what we’ve been doing, which is doing good academic work that hopefully will stand the test of time, to keep funding and training graduate students, both MAs and PhD students, to go out into the greater world and to promote a more reasoned view of Russia. I worry that Russia will become an increasingly politicized subject of research in a way that I think was really damaging in the Cold War period. I think academic researchers in the ‘90s and 2000s, when you had lots of opportunities to conduct research in Russia, using this tremendous access to data, the really rich opportunities for survey

research, opportunities to work with Russian colleagues—and I worry going forward, should relations continue to be very bad—for reasons both good and bad, for reasons having to do with what the Russian government, what the U.S. government does—is that if it becomes harder to do good academic research on Russia, I think everybody loses. The quality of the debate on Russia becomes much worse.

I think we really need to redouble our efforts to use our academic research to speak to broader publics in a way that allows us to claim a privileged position in those debates, given the incentives on both the Russian and the U.S. side to twist reality, to use alternative facts, fake news, and other sources to try to influence debate. So I think in some ways it's a good moment right now, given the heightened tension—to the problem of fake news, bias—there's a recognition, I think, of a need for more reasoned, more well-grounded, empirically and theoretically, research on Russia, to separate ourselves from a lot of the noise that's out there around the U.S.-Russia relations.

Q: I really thank you so much. Do you have anything else you'd like to share now?

Frye: Well, one thing we talked about briefly is that one of the roles of the Harriman that gets really overlooked is the support for graduate students.

Q: Yes. That's exactly what I wanted you to talk about [laughs].

Frye: I know I, as a graduate student, benefited tremendously from the opportunity to travel to Russia on PepsiCo travel grants. I also benefited a lot from the really rich programming that Harriman continues to offer. When I was director I remember the largest portion of our budget went to support graduate students, both MA and PhD students. I think that's a part of Harriman that doesn't get the recognition that it should.

Right now I have eight PhD students; seven of them working on the region, four of them are from Russia. In the last two years I've had three PhD students finish their dissertations and have gone on now to post-docs or to teaching positions. They've benefited tremendously from both the Harriman Institute and from the International Center for the Study of Institutions and Development in Moscow. They were able to do a lot of their fieldwork while based at the International Center. The relation between the Center and the Harriman has been very good for them and for other graduate students from outside of Columbia, who've been able to use the Center as a place for them to come research, network, make contacts, help with visa issues, whatever we can do to try to help out the region.

That's one part of Harriman that I think often gets lost in the high-profile events we do and the policy discussions that we have, because it takes place largely outside of public view. But it is really important. I think it also is one of the reasons why people have very fond feelings for Harriman, and feel some debt to Harriman, and why you're able probably to get Harriman alumni to talk about the institute in a way that wouldn't be possible if it weren't for this kind of real financial support that the students get.

Q: Yes, I couldn't agree with you more. In fact, it's an area that we added to the blueprint based on so many discussions. Mark von Hagen talked a lot about this. We would love to document that in some real way. We'll talk to Alex about that.

Frye: Yes. Part of our Carnegie grant is also decided to improve PhD study of Russia. So that should be fun.

Q: That's great. I'll really table that to talk to Alex about too.

I guess one of my last questions, and it's a big-picture question: do you see this period of time, this very vexed period that we're in right now, both on our side and their side—very vexed—do you see it as a door that could be opened towards the advancements of area studies or renaissance of area studies in general around the country and other universities or Russian studies?

Frye: Well, the heightened interest certainly is good, is good for the field. Hopefully we'll be able to attract more students. Certainly we've been able to attract the interest of the Carnegie Foundation and the policy community. So this is an opportunity for us to take advantage of the heightened interest in Russia. What I see as a possible path is for scholars to make the study of our region the most exciting part of their discipline. For example, in political science, all of the big issues are present in our region; ethnic identity issues, violence, corruption, transitions to and from democracy and autocracy, civil war. So in some ways our region has a comparative advantage over other regions in the surfeit of interesting academic topics there is to research.

Plus there is a strong group of academics from the region who are also contributing to those debates and can be good partners for us.

That's one way I think that we can do really deep and really thorough and really good research on our region that also is of interest to people in our discipline more broadly. That's a slightly different model than the area studies interdisciplinary model that Cathy in particular was devoted to. There still is that sense that you need to know the language, you need to know the culture. I see the graduate students entering our program as being much, much better prepared than my cohort was entering the program, because most people have spent a lot of time in the region before they come. That's really, really valuable. So I think one way to try to reinvigorate the study of our region is to recognize that, yes, there are disciplinary boundaries, and they do exist, and we need to pay attention to them—not that they should define our research, but that we should take advantage of the opportunities for research that our region affords to help improve academic and policy debates.

I think in political science it used to be the case that jobs were advertised, “We're looking for a Russian politics person,” or a China politics person or a Middle East expert— now you're much more likely to get, “We're looking for somebody to work on political economy,” or identity politics, or civil war. Candidates who studied our region should be especially competitive for those jobs. So rather than bemoan the decline in jobs specifically dedicated to Russia, we should be saying, “Ah, look, there's all these jobs that we could apply for now that we couldn't apply for in the past, because people were only looking for Russia experts.” I think probably there's

some truth to that in other disciplines as well. So that is a slightly different take on the relation between area studies and the disciplines that I think might be a useful template going forward.

Q: You're chair of political science now?

Frye: Yes, I'm chair of the political science department.

Q: So you have the agency to be able to make some of these changes.

Frye: Yes, that is true. In general I think there's a movement in the field in this direction where people recognize that it's important to have very deep knowledge of a substantive area, but it's important to use that deep knowledge of a particular geographic region to address some broader question of importance for the field, such as, why does civil war start? Or why does politics become based on ethnic identity at some points and some times and some settings but not in others? Or why do levels of corruption vary across region? And boy, these are all topics where our region should have important things to say.

Q: That's so fascinating.

Frye: It's an interesting [laughs]—it's a—

Q: It's a new way of thinking.

Frye: Yes. Well, yes, I think there are a lot of people working in that mode now.

Q: It's just great. Well, is there anything else you would like to put on the record today?

Frye: If there's anything else, I'll let you know.

Q: Let me know. Happy to do another session. We're hoping to round up everything within the next month or so.

Frye: Great. Great, great, great. Well, it's exciting. I look forward to hearing what everyone has to say.

Q: Yes! It's been incredibly rich and fascinating. Thank you, again, so much.

Frye: Oh, thank you!

Q: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]