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The Seduction of George W. Bush

How the president of good and evil bromanced Vladimir Putin. And how a warm friendship turned to ice.

By Peter Baker

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In the summer of 2006, President George W. Bush was relaxing at Camp David with the visiting prime minister of Denmark when the conversation turned to Vladimir Putin. It had been five years since Bush memorably peered into the Russian leader's soul. But now hope had been replaced by exasperation.

Bush regaled his guest with stories of aggravating private dealings with Putin that underscored their growing rift. Bush was astonished that Putin had tried to influence him by offering to hire a close friend of the president's and he found Putin's understanding of the world disconnected from reality. "He's not well informed," Bush groused. "It's like arguing with an eighth grader with his facts wrong."

Putin was on his mind because Russia was about to host the annual summit of the G-8 powers for the first time and Bush feared that the session would be dominated by questions about why an undemocratic nation was hosting a gathering of democratic nations. Bush had been trying to get Putin to relax his authoritarian rule to no avail. "I think Putin is not a democrat anymore," Bush lamented a few weeks later to another visitor, the prime minister of Slovenia. "He's a tsar. I think we've lost him."

Whether Bush or anyone else ever actually "had" Putin in the first place is debatable at best. But the story of Bush's eight-year *pas de deux* with the master of the Kremlin, reconstructed through interviews with key players and secret notes and memos, offers lessons for President Obama as he struggles to define his own approach to Putin and shape the future of the two nuclear powers. The last few months have become another dramatic juncture in the volatile Russian-American relationship, with Moscow defying Washington by offering shelter to national security leaker Edward Snowden, Obama becoming the first president to cancel a Russian-American meeting in more than 50 years and then, suddenly, improbably, the Kremlin throwing the American leader a lifeline when his confrontation with Syria took a wrong turn.

Looked at in the context of time, Obama's own dashed aspirations to build a new partnership with Moscow seem to echo his predecessor's experience. Bush thought he could forge more meaningful ties with Russia in his early years, particularly after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and for a time seemed to make significant headway with a nuclear arms treaty and cooperation on Afghanistan, only to become frustrated as the two countries diverged, eventually coming into overt diplomatic conflict during the Georgia war of 2008. Obama likewise came into office intent on pushing the "reset" button and similarly saw early progress with a nuclear arms treaty and cooperation on Afghanistan, only to find his efforts increasingly thwarted by the same Putinist revanchism. Whether the recent Russian-American collaboration to disarm Syria's chemical stocks will turn out to be a more enduring foundation for change remains to be seen.

If Obama were to look back at his predecessor's experience, though, he might recognize how easy it is to misjudge Moscow's intentions by superimposing American ideas of what Russian interests should be rather than understanding how Putin and his circle of KGB veterans and zero-sum-gamers actually see those interests. Again and again, Bush and Obama have assessed Russia through an American prism and come away disappointed that the view from the Kremlin looks different than they thought it ought to.

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Bush came to office wary of Putin — “one cold dude,” he called him privately — but he was interested in forging a working relationship if only because at the time he saw the real threat to the United States elsewhere. When he met with Russia scholars before his first encounter with Putin in 2001, Michael McFaul, then a Stanford University professor and later Obama’s ambassador to Moscow, told him that keeping Russia “inside our tent” was the best course.

Bush agreed. “You’re absolutely right,” he said, “because someday we’re all going to be dealing with the Chinese.”

So when he sat down with Putin in a 16th-century castle in Slovenia in June of that year, he was predisposed to find a partner in the former KGB man even before his counterpart told him about saving his Orthodox cross from a dacha fire, a story appealing to Bush’s faith. Bush’s later public comment noting that he had gotten a “sense of his soul” disturbed many inside his own team. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stiffened even as he said it, worried that the answer might be too effusive — but she said nothing. Back in Washington, Vice President Dick Cheney and his staff were even more bothered. “A lot of us were kind of rolling our eyes about that,” Eric Edelman, then the vice president’s deputy national security adviser, recalled later. Every time Cheney saw Putin, he privately told people, “I think KGB, KGB, KGB.”

Bush nonetheless stepped up his courtship, inviting Putin to his ranch outside Crawford, Texas, and later to Camp David. Putin liked to brag that he was the first foreign leader to reach out to Bush after the World Trade Towers fell and that he had overruled his own hardliners to allow American troops into former Soviet-controlled Central Asia as a jumping off point for Afghanistan.

Even when Bush abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty over Russian objections, the two tamped down the dispute and agreed on significant reductions in their respective nuclear arsenals. Cheney resisted codifying those cuts in a treaty, but Bush decided to sign one anyway, because Putin insisted. “Putin is at huge risk,” Bush told aides, “and he needs to fight off his troglodytes.”

Then as later, Bush would attribute Putin’s demands or paranoia to those around him, essentially exonerating the Russian president himself. During a trade dispute when Russia cut off imports of American chicken drumsticks (known colloquially within Russia as “Bush legs”), Putin in a private conversation with Bush asserted that Americans deliberately sent bad poultry to Russia.

“I know you have separate plants for chickens for America and chickens for Russia,” Putin told Bush.

Bush was astonished. “Vladimir, you’re wrong.”

“My people have told me this is true,” Putin insisted.

If Bush was willing to blame that misinformation on Putin's advisers, he could hardly have missed the fact that it was the Russian president who fought him publicly and powerfully on the Iraq War, joining his counterparts in Paris and Berlin. Even then, Bush was forbearing, intent on preventing a broader rupture in the relationship. Rice at the time privately summed up the policy this way: "Punish France, ignore Germany and forgive Russia."

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But as he moved into his second term with a sweeping inaugural pledge committing himself to work toward "ending tyranny in our world," Bush could not overlook Putin's domestic centralization of power. The Kremlin had taken over independent television, eliminated the election of governors, forced defiant oligarchs into exile or prison, and ousted Western-oriented democratic parties from parliament. Many in Bush's circle personally knew Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oil magnate who had been abruptly arrested on financial charges when he fomented opposition to Putin. So when Bush headed to his first meeting with Putin after that second inaugural address, he resolved to press the Russian, albeit in private.

Sitting down for a long, private discussion in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, in February 2005, Bush made his points about freedom, and Putin grew defensive. As he often did, Putin tried to make equivalences, justifying his actions by comparing them to situations in the United States.

"You talk about Khodorkovsky, and I talk about Enron," Putin told Bush. "You appoint the Electoral College and I appoint governors. What's the difference?"

At another point, Putin defended his control over media in Russia. "Don't lecture me about the free press," he said, "not after you fired that reporter."

"Vladimir, are you talking about Dan Rather?" Bush asked.

Yes, replied Putin.

Rather was in the process of stepping down as anchor of the CBS Evening News after a report accusing Bush of not fulfilling his National Guard service turned out to be based on fraudulent documents. Bush explained to Putin that he had nothing to do with Rather losing his job. "I strongly suggest you not say that in public," he added. "The American people will think you don't understand our system."

But Putin understood his own system. When the two leaders emerged for a joint news conference, a Russian reporter handpicked by the Kremlin challenged Bush on the same grounds Putin had just been citing in private.

"Why don't you talk a lot about violations of the rights of journalists in the United States?" the reporter asked. "About the fact that some journalists have been fired?"

“People do get fired in the American press,” Bush answered. “They don’t get fired by the government, however.”

The encounter stuck in Bush’s craw, and he was still dwelling on it a week later when he filled in Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair during a videoconference. “It was fairly unpleasant,” Bush told him. “It was not hostile. It was like junior high debating.” He recounted the Dan Rather exchange. “Seriously, it was a whole series of these juvenile arguments. There was no breakthrough with this guy.”

Bush was exasperated at the memory. “I sat there for an hour and forty-five minutes or an hour and forty minutes, and it went on and on,” he said. “At one point, the interpreter made me so mad that I nearly reached over the table and slapped the hell out of the guy. He had a mocking tone, making accusations about America. He was just sarcastic.”

Aggravated as he was, Bush was not ready to give up on Putin. He had become a project of sorts. Bush thought he could still draw Moscow more into the Western world by tempering his public criticism and instead pushing Putin gently in private, thus maintaining his influence rather than completely alienating the Russian. When it came time for Putin to host the G-8 in St. Petersburg in 2006, Bush recognized how important the validation of the moment was for Russia, a sign of its reemergence on the world stage. But he foresaw a barrage of complaints from lawmakers, advocates, and journalists about Russia’s domestic repression. “I think we are headed to a firestorm with Putin,” Bush confided in Blair during another call.

Among those who favored a tougher approach was Cheney, who with Bush’s permission flew to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, in advance of the G-8 summit to lacerate Putin for “unfairly and improperly” restricting rights at home and using oil and gas as “tools of intimidation and blackmail” abroad. The speech infuriated Putin, but Bush was happy to have Cheney playing bad cop to his good cop. “The vice president put a stake in the ground with his speech, which helped us,” Bush told Blair later that month.

Hoping to avoid the “firestorm,” Bush tried to get Putin to put other tangible issues on the summit agenda to keep it from being dominated by the question of Russian democracy. In a phone call between the two leaders on June 5, Bush suggested four subjects — bird flu, Darfur, Iran, and nuclear terrorism. Putin thanked Bush for pushing ahead with Russian membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and said only “a few more moves” were needed to resolve outstanding disputes and then it “will be finished.”

Then, in an odd exchange, Putin mentioned Sergei Lavrov, his chain-smoking, hard-line foreign minister. “Lavrov just returned from London and had problems with his cheeks and lips being swollen,” Putin told Bush. “We might need to take a closer look at what Condi did to him.”

Bush, awkwardly, played along with what seemed to be a bizarre form of sexual innuendo. “Condi is not blind,” he joked.

“And she is a very attractive lady,” Putin replied.

“She is a wonderful lady,” Bush said, then tried to move the conversation along. “Listen, I’d like to get this WTO stuff done in the next couple weeks before we get to St. Petersburg.”

Soon afterward came Bush’s meeting with the visiting Danish prime minister at Camp David, where they talked about Putin. Bush said Putin had even tried to lure him by offering a lucrative job in the Russian oil industry to Don Evans, the former commerce secretary and one of his closest friends. “Putin asked me, ‘Would it help you if I moved Evans to an important position?’ What a question! ‘Will it help you?’” Bush was flabbergasted, he told Danish prime minister. “What I wanted to say is, ‘What would help me is if you make moves on democracy.’ It’s strange the way he thinks.”

Bush’s efforts to divert attention from the democracy dispute by forging a last-minute deal to admit Russia into the WTO failed after an all-night, pizza-for-breakfast negotiating session between trade officials. Bush left St. Petersburg frustrated and Putin waited until he had cleared Russian airspace to tell reporters that he would not support Bush in pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear program. ”

Bush and Blair vented their mutual aggravation with Putin during a call two weeks later. “I left St. Petersburg more worried about Russia than ever,” Blair told Bush.

You should be,” Bush agreed. “We talked at dinner. He’s okay with centralization, which he thinks leads to stabilization. I told him, ‘What happens when the next guy comes and abuses it?’ He said, ‘I’ll stop him.’ He thinks he’ll be around forever. He asked me why I didn’t change the Constitution so I could run again.”

While privately critical with allies like Blair, Bush retained his friendly demeanor with Putin himself. The next year, after a new national intelligence estimate concluded that Iran had stopped a key part of its nuclear weapons program, Bush tried to rally Russia and other nations to stick by sanctions on Tehran despite Moscow’s long history of support for Iran. When he reached Putin by telephone that day in December 2007, he buttered him up about his party’s success in just-held Russian regional elections that everyone else, it seemed, had condemned as unfair.

“The results give us a reason to rejoice,” Putin said of the elections.

“You are popular,” Bush said. “People like you a lot.”

“Other parties did well,” Putin said.

“You’re being modest,” Bush said.

Bush turned to his real purpose in calling, the Iran report. “I’m worried people will see this and want to change policy,” he explained. Bush noted a nuclear weapons program that once existed could be easily reconstituted. He hoped Russia would send a firm message to Iran that there is a “better way forward.”

Putin said he would. “In the waiting room, I have the new Iranian national security adviser,” he told Bush. “I will take into account what you told me.” But in the end, Putin remained a reluctant partner in the pressure campaign against Iran.

By the following spring of 2008, however, Bush was turning from conciliation to confrontation with Putin. The president wanted to put the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia on a path to NATO membership. On this, Cheney agreed. But Germany and France were opposed, seeing it as unnecessarily provocative, and at a key meeting, Rice, then secretary of state, and Robert Gates, the defense secretary, expressed caution. Gates was hardly soft when it came to Russia; an old Cold Warrior, he had come back from his first meeting with Putin to tell colleagues, as one recalled it, that, unlike Bush, “I looked in his eyes and I saw the same KGB killer I’ve seen my whole life.” But he did not see the virtue in provoking a confrontation. Instead, he and Rice recommended a halfway step that would encourage Ukraine and Georgia by encouraging their aspirations without the more formal step that would precipitate another blowup with Germany and France.

Bush disagreed and resolved to make a deal with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, calculating that the French would follow Berlin. “This is about me and Angela,” Bush told aides.

But during a videoconference, Merkel refused to go along. Bush resigned himself to a fight in Bucharest, where NATO leaders would meet in April 2008. As he was about to hang up with Merkel, he told her lightly, “I will see you at the OK Corral.”

As if the dynamics were not tricky enough, Putin further complicated them by inviting Bush to visit him in Sochi, a resort town in southern Russia, immediately following the NATO summit. That could be awkward depending on what happened in Bucharest, so Bush was reluctant to accept the invitation. He also noticed the harshening of Putin’s anti-American rhetoric; at an international conference in Munich a year earlier, Putin had compared the United States to “the Third Reich.”

Bush called Putin to see if he could trust that the meeting would not be a setup. “Look, the only way I can come is if you don’t pull a Munich on me in Bucharest,” Bush told him, as he later described the conversation to aides.

Putin agreed, and Bush accepted the invitation.

Once he got to Bucharest, Bush ran into stiff resistance from Merkel, but leaders of several Eastern European countries physically surrounded her at the meeting, arguing for a stronger statement. In the end, while Georgia and Ukraine were not put on the official membership track, the alliance declared that “we agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” Will become, period, no caveats. Bush took that as a victory, but both Russia and Georgia were unhappy and itching for a fight. A long-running conflict between the two neighbors was turning hot.

After the NATO summit, Bush visited Putin in Sochi. It was their 28th and final meeting as presidents, with Putin preparing to step down in favor of his handpicked successor, Dmitry

Medvedev, while taking up the post of prime minister. Some in Cheney's office later worried that Bush had not been firm enough warning Putin not to take action against Georgia. Others came away from discussions with the Georgians fearing that their president, Mikheil Saakashvili, had interpreted his own talks with Bush to be a "flashing yellow light" subtly supporting him in any military confrontation with Moscow. Bush's staff sent further messages trying to disabuse anyone of such misimpressions, but in the dangerous international game of telephone it was unclear what message was being heard.

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On Aug. 8, 2008, Bush was standing in a reception line in Beijing about to shake hands with President Hu Jintao marking the opening of the Summer Olympics when his deputy national security adviser, James Jeffrey, sidled up and whispered in his ear. Russian troops were marching into neighboring Georgia after the smaller country shelled a breakaway republic aligned with Moscow. Years of tension had finally exploded into full-fledged war.

As he absorbed the news, Bush noticed that just a few places ahead of him in the receiving line was Putin. Bush chose not to say anything to him right then, reasoning that the ceremony presented the wrong venue for a confrontation over war. Besides, protocol demanded that he deal with Medvedev as a fellow head of state. So he waited until he returned to his hotel to call Moscow. He found Medvedev "hot," but "so was I," recalled Bush.

But Bush was dealing with the wrong man. As the opening ceremony for the Olympics commenced, Bush found himself seated in the same row with Putin, so he had his wife and the king of Cambodia shift down a few seats so that the Russian prime minister could sit next to him. Aware of the television cameras focused on them, Bush tried to avoid causing a scene but told Putin that he had made a serious mistake that would leave Russia isolated if it did not get out of Georgia. Putin countered that Saakashvili was a war criminal who had provoked Moscow.

"I've been warning you Saakashvili is hot-blooded," Bush told Putin.

"I'm hot-blooded, too," Putin countered.

"No, Vladimir," Bush responded. "You're cold-blooded."

The sudden war in the Caucasus presented a dangerous test for Bush. He and his aides worried that Georgia was just the first stone to fall; if Moscow were allowed to roll over a weak neighbor, then it could next try to seize the Crimea region in Ukraine or even make a move in the Baltics, where it ruled until the fall of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the last thing Bush wanted to do was turn a volatile situation into a Russian-U.S. confrontation and spark a new cold war.

Meetings at the White House during that week of war were unusually emotional. Saakashvili had cultivated supporters in the administration, particularly in Cheney's camp. When a junior aide suggested that the United States had to step in, Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, interrupted.

“Look, I’m already in a war in Iraq and Afghanistan,” he said. He did not want another, especially with Russia.

Mullen was virtually the only American able to reach his counterpart in Moscow. Most Russian officials were ignoring their phones, but Mullen had perhaps seven or eight conversations with Gen. Nikolai Makarov, the Russian chief of staff, over the course of a few days, trying to keep the Russians from marching all the way to the Georgian capital. To avoid framing it as a proxy clash between nuclear-armed superpowers, Bush turned to President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who held the rotating presidency of the European Union, and asked him to negotiate a ceasefire. In the meantime, some in the White House kept looking for possible responses — even military ones. Among the options were bombing the Roki Tunnel to block any further Russian advance into Georgia. Cheney had received a call from a frantic Saakashvili requesting military equipment such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

The question came up at a meeting after Bush returned from Beijing. Cheney noted the Stinger request from Saakashvili. “I need to give him an answer,” the vice president said.

Rice thought there was “a fair amount of chest beating” and “all kind of loose talk” about a muscular response that would pull the United States more directly into the conflict.

Finally, Stephen Hadley, the national security adviser, cut to the chase. “Mr. President, I think you need to poll your national security advisers as to whether they recommend to you putting American troops on the ground in Georgia,” he said.

Bush looked at Hadley as if he were crazy.

“I think it is important for the historical record to be clear as to whether any of your principals are recommending to you the use of military force,” Hadley said.

At that point, Bush got it. Hadley was protecting him, calling the bluff of Cheney and the other hawks: Were they really ready to go to war with Russia over Georgia? Hadley wanted the principals to give their positions explicitly so they could not later write in their memoirs that they had disagreed with the president.

Picking up on that, Bush posed the question. “Does anyone recommend the use of military force?” he asked.

No one did. “It is a very serious matter, but, Mr. President, I think that would be a mistake,” Cheney said.

The next day, Sarkozy reached a ceasefire agreement with both sides, but he had been snookered. The Russians had insisted on a 15 kilometer “exclusion zone” for their troops, but the French did not realize that was enough to encompass the Georgian city of Gori. The Russians took advantage and moved in. They were on the doorstep of Tbilisi, intent on regime change.

Bush decided he could no longer sit on the sidelines. He sent Rice to mediate and authorized humanitarian aid to Georgia sent on military cargo planes to make a point. With American military planes on the runway in Tbilisi, he calculated, the Russians would be foolish to attack the Georgian capital.

Rice flew to Paris, Moscow, and Tbilisi to broker a new agreement. Russia agreed to pull out of Georgia but not from its breakaway republics. The war was over, but the relationship between Bush and Putin that started with soul-gazing seven years earlier was irrevocably broken. Russia suspended cooperation with NATO and later recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Bush shelved a civilian nuclear agreement he had spent years negotiating with Putin. The days of collaboration were over.

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On his last full day in office, Jan. 19, 2009, Bush put on a suit and headed to the Oval Office. He was to make back-to-back farewell calls to 13 world leaders, starting with Saakashvili at 7 a.m., and followed by Putin at 7:10 a.m. The talking points on the presidential memo consisted in their entirety of the following 14 words:

Enjoyed working with you."

"We have accomplished a lot together."

"Wish you continued success."

The biggest debate was whether to call both Putin and Medvedev. By protocol, he should have called only his formal counterpart, Medvedev. But Bush decided to call both; after all their time together, he wanted to say good-bye to "my friend Vladimir." Despite the rupture over the Georgia war, Bush wistfully recounted their many visits at Crawford and the Moscow dacha and in St. Petersburg. Over the course of a few minutes, he recalled their cooperation on Iran, North Korea, the Middle East, terrorism, arms control, and economics.

They had, Bush told Putin, "many fond memories."

The other kind went unmentioned.