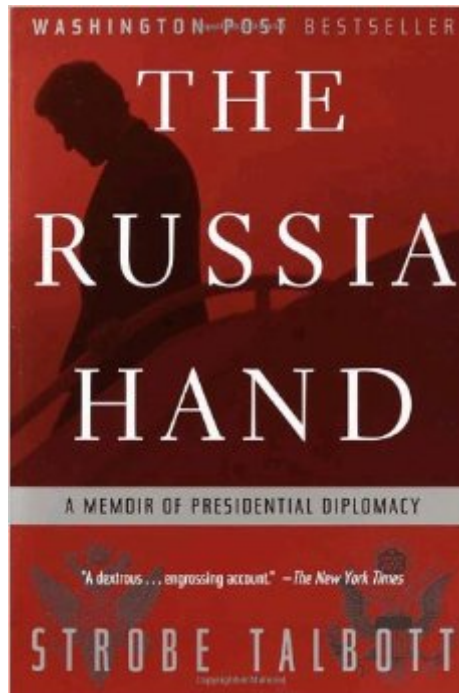


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The Russia Hand: A Memoir Of Presidential Diplomacy



Synopsis

During the past ten years, few issues have mattered more to America's vital interests or to the shape of the twenty-first century than Russia's fate. To cheer the fall of a bankrupt totalitarian regime is one thing; to build on its ruins a stable democratic state is quite another. The challenge of helping to steer post-Soviet Russia-with its thousands of nuclear weapons and seething ethnic tensions-between the Scylla of a communist restoration and the Charybdis of anarchy fell to the former governor of a poor, landlocked Southern state who had won national election by focusing on domestic issues. No one could have predicted that by the end of Bill Clinton's second term he would meet with his Kremlin counterparts more often than had all of his predecessors from Harry Truman to George Bush combined, or that his presidency and his legacy would be so determined by his need to be his own Russia hand. With Bill Clinton at every step was Strobe Talbott, the deputy secretary of state whose expertise was the former Soviet Union. Talbott was Clinton's old friend, one of his most trusted advisers, a frequent envoy on the most sensitive of diplomatic missions and, as this book shows, a sharp-eyed observer. The Russia Hand is without question among the most candid, intimate and illuminating foreign-policy memoirs ever written in the long history of such books. It offers unparalleled insight into the inner workings of policymaking and diplomacy alike. With the scope of nearly a decade, it reveals the hidden play of personalities and the closed-door meetings that shaped the most crucial events of our time, from NATO expansion, missile defense and the Balkan wars to coping with Russia's near-meltdown in the wake of the Asian financial crisis. The book is dominated by two gifted, charismatic and flawed men, Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, who quickly formed one of the most intense and consequential bonds in the annals of statecraft. It also sheds new light on Vladimir Putin, as well as the altered landscape after September 11, 2001. The Russia Hand is the first great memoir about war and peace in the post-cold war world. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

The devil is in the details, but the "angels" call the shots (and in this story the "angels" are no angels). This is the short version of Strobe Talbott's exhaustive, intimate memoir of the transformation of US-Russian relations during the tumultuous 1990s. Bereft of the old adversarial structures of the cold war, and lacking any type of transitional plan, the diplomatic establishments of Washington and Moscow were compelled to feel their way through a stubborn morass of suspicion and ignorance and emerge with something like a policy of institutionalized cooperation. By this account and many others it was a tough row to hoe. The meat of the book covers the period of Clinton/Yeltsin diplomacy between 1992 and 2000, a time when the Russian nation was reeling from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the social upheaval brought on by free market economic "shock treatment." National pride had suffered a series of body blows as the Soviet Empire fell apart and lost its coveted place as the "other" major power on the international stage. In 1992, while publicly basking in cold war "victory", the US political establishment was inwardly wringing its hands over how to handle its volatile, battered, erstwhile enemy. Internally in Russia political wars continued to rage among nationalists, communists, and liberal market reformers, and it was nowhere near apparent that the nation might not suffer a political hijacking or economic meltdown which would lead the nation back down a path of despotism and isolation. This was a moment of limitless opportunity and unfathomable risk for the US and the world. The stakes were huge, and the outcome unknowable. Enter the diplomats. Under the direction and tutelage of Mr. Talbott in this country and Yuri Mamedov in Russia, the two little armies of bureaucrats started the decade long brainstorm over nuclear arms, NATO enlargement, the worrying linkages between Russia and Iran, the disposition of Soviet era debt, and myriad other potentially explosive issues. It was no easy business, and progress was halting. Time and again Talbott's team ran into roadblocks and obfuscation from their Russian counterparts. Some of it was related to the long Russian predisposition to hiding behind opaque bureaucracies; some had more to do with national pride. Most often, though, US Russian progress was stymied by forces inside the Russian establishment with a vested interest in arresting diplomatic progress where it took hold. Bill Clinton understood all this.

And more importantly, he understood Boris Yeltsin. More than once Talbott invokes the importance of the personal relationship between the two men, both by turns rogues, charmers, and vulgarians, with a singular optimism and clarity of vision both for their respective nations and for the future of world security. With some funny and incisive anecdotes Talbott demonstrates again and again the power of the personal in the political process, as Clinton and Yeltsin transcend the turf wars going on among their minions below to hammer out compromises and agreements that start to assume real political and economic coherence. Not that there weren't bumps along the way. Yeltsin, though Talbott declines a formal diagnosis, comes across as a classic manic depressive, high energy and visionary when his back is to the wall, despondent and alcoholic when he feels his enemies smothering him. Clinton, though keenly attuned to the constraints on his counterpart from the factional strife in the Russian military and the obstreperous Duma, had his hands full when Yeltsin came to the bargaining table in a blustery or drunken temper. Talbott is masterful in recounting the tensions in these encounters, especially in Helsinki in the early part of the administration. In the end, this is the story of two flawed, great men who left their world a better place for having worked together. Talbott leaves no doubt that all the rest, the quibbling and arguing and messy details of diplomacy, were inconsequential in the face of Clinton and Yeltsin's determination to not just preside over the death of an old era but to define a new one. It's somewhat poignant to go back to the beginning of the book, when Clinton, in the twilight of his term, meets the rising star Putin for the first time and senses a new, more stringent and controlled era settling over the Russian nation and the face it shows the world. There's just no chemistry between the bumptious American and the cautious new leader. Talbott leads us to believe that it wasn't just chemistry, but a genuine personal friendship that put the final stake in the heart of the cold war and all the bad that came of it.

Strobe Talbott's latest book does not add much to the understanding of Russia or the role played by the Clinton administration (of which Talbott was its most senior Russia hand) towards that country. Talbott will not be remembered by the Sovietological community for those things he describes in his book, which seem superfluous and self-glorifying. He will be mostly remembered for three events. The first is the billions of dollars wasted of U.S. aid money that he personally oversaw to Russia. The government of Viktor Chernomyrdin (whose personal fortune is estimated at over 10 billion dollars) squandered much U.S. aid money yet Talbott ignored the many warning signs and continued to advocate lending and aid to the Chernomyrdin government with the excuse that Russia is too big to lose. Second, Talbott will be remembered for the disdainful way in which he treated the genuine Russian democrats that could have given that country a chance, while assisting former

communist officials. Talbott famously under-cut the Russian reformers in 1993 when he quipped that "Russia needs more therapy and less shock," referring to the program of "shock therapy" that the reform-minded finance minister Fyodorov was trying to implement. Fyodorov later mentioned that Talbott had "stabbed us in the back." Later that year, the head of the largest pro-democracy movement in Russia, Galina Starovoitova, pleaded with Talbott for assistance in convincing a foreign TV star popular in Russia, to appear in commercials to help the democrats in the December 1993 parliamentary elections. Talbott refused to even return her calls. However, both the U.S. ambassador in Belarus (David Swartz) and the democratic leader of that country at that time (Stanislau Shushkevich) accused Talbott of using U.S. aid to help communist politicians there. The third event that makes Talbott memorable are the widespread suspicions and accusations of his prior involvement with Soviet state security, the KGB. Some suspect that Talbott may have collaborated with the KGB to portray the USSR in a favorable light as Time Magazine correspondent (which he did) in exchange for access (which he had). Talbott was evasive in his confirmation hearings at the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on the specific issue of his contacts and relation with a KGB agent named Louie. These three events are not explored in his self-glorifying book, which is why those seeking to understand those tumultuous times read instead some other book, such as the account by former ambassador Jack Matlock.

Strobe Talbott's *The Russia Hand* is a comprehensive insider account of US relations with an emerging democratic Russian after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The book is also an explicit record of how diplomacy actually works. I highly recommend this book for an insight and review of American FP in the 1990s. Talbott provides insights into the particulars of the many negotiations and personal bonds (or channels) that transpired between these two former foes. Talbott explores the numerous problems that divided the US and the new Russian Republic in the 1990s; including NATO enlargement, national missile defense, adapting to capitalism and democracy, wars of the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo. This book makes great reading. Not only is it a definitive political text - it's funny! Through a motley cast of characters (Bill Clinton, Yeltsin, various negotiators) and the events that they survived Talbott gives a diplomatic thriller an air of high comedy. At times Talbott's depiction Boris Yeltsin borders on caricature. To sum it all up, I am positive that anyone interested in Foreign Policy, IR, history, or even an unfortunate student looking for a subject for a book review will highly enjoy *The Russia Hand*. This book is a necessary read for those who wish to understand how the high-stakes game of diplomacy works in practice. And the account is delivered by one of the major players - Strobe Talbott.

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