The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Ambassador McFaul

May 30, 2011



The New York Times reported Sunday that U.S. President Barack Obama would appoint his top adviser on Russia and Eurasia, Michael McFaul, as the new ambassador to Moscow. It is an interesting choice, indeed.

As a former Stanford University political science professor, McFaul would be the first U.S. ambassador to Russia in the past 30 years who was not a career diplomat. What's more, he has been the most authoritative U.S. commentator on Russian events and trends for the last decade and has spent a great deal of time in Moscow, where he has cultivated a wide circle of acquaintances.

While attending a reception at the U.S. Embassy on the day of the U.S. presidential elections in 2008, half of my acquaintances said they were hoping for an Obama win. The reason was that McFaul, who they said was their close friend and colleague, would likely be retained as Obama's top adviser to Russia. I only hope that McFaul won't disappoint his Moscow acquaintances.

In academic circles, McFaul is part of a new wave of Russia specialists who came to prominence following the end of the Cold War. This generation of Russia experts — the most

prominent of whom, in addition to McFaul, are Timothy Frye of Columbia University and Daniel Treisman of the University of California at Los Angeles — are different from their predecessors. In the past, such specialists were characterized by their particular bias in relation to their country of expertise. But it is impossible to say whether the members of this new generation are "for" or "against" Russia. It is simpler for Frye and Treisman to be neutral because their work is almost completely academic in nature.

It has been more difficult for McFaul to maintain neutrality because he regularly contributes articles to Foreign Affairs magazine and even his scholarly work is largely geared toward the general public in the United States, where, like in most countries, the leaders and citizens tend to view the world in black and white. But in his articles and books, McFaul has an uncanny ability to dig deeply into "insider" details while simultaneously maintaining the air of a dispassionate observer.

It is logical that McFaul is the architect of the Obama administration's policy on Russia, which was best articulated two years ago when the U.S. president spoke before the graduating class of Moscow's New Economic School. No wonder he has been called "no drama Obama." The call for a reset in U.S.-Russian relations is completely devoid of needless drama or sensationalism. Washington explains its plans objectively and then lets Moscow choose its response from a menu of possible relationships.

If the Kremlin wants close cooperation, it can have it. If it wants another Cold War, it will get that as well. Unaccustomed to taking responsibility for its relations with the United States, Russia's ruling elite was initially thrown off guard by Obama's Moscow speech. But the record of the past two years indicates that it has regained its footing.

Relations with the United States have returned to normal, and that might be better than if they were pigeon-holed as simply "good" or "bad."

Konstantin Sonin is a professor at the New Economic School in Moscow and a columnist for Vedomosti.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/30/ambassador-mcfaul-a7295