

November 12, 2019

Dear Members of the Academy,

I am sorry not to be able to accept the Dillon Book Award in person today. But I am thrilled to receive it, and honored that Tom Pickering -- as fine a diplomat and mentor as I have ever known -- will read this note on my behalf.

I am also extraordinarily fortunate to be in such good company with the other awardees. John Negroponte has been a superb role model for successive generations of Foreign Service Officers, including my own. And Rana Foroohar and Matt Lee are the best at their craft, and richly deserving of the Arthur Ross Media Award.

I cannot tell you how much it means to me that the Academy would honor my book in this way. One of the lessons I learned very early in my long diplomatic career was that professional satisfaction comes less from promotions and occasional accolades, and more from the respect of your peers. So I can think of no greater satisfaction, as an author and a diplomat, than your regard for this book.

*The Back Channel* is both a memoir and an argument. My hope in the memoir is simply to bring diplomacy to life for a broader readership. The truth is that diplomacy often operates in back channels, out of sight and out of mind. It may be one of the oldest of human professions, but it is also one of the most misunderstood.

In three and a half decades at State, I was lucky enough to play a modest role in some of the most consequential episodes in recent American foreign policy -- the end of the Cold War, Desert Storm and the Madrid Peace Conference; the tragedy of the Iraq War a decade later and the turbulent path of U.S.-Russian relations from Yeltsin to Putin; and the tumult of the Arab Spring, the secret nuclear talks with the Iranians, and the rise of China.

Along the way, I dealt with a kaleidoscope of complicated foreign leaders, from Vladimir Putin to Muammar Qadhafi. If you can't get color from personalities like Putin and Qadhafi, diplomacy -- and writing -- are probably not for you.

The argument in the book is straightforward. We are living through one of those rare plastic moments on the international landscape, which come along a couple times a century. We saw such moments in 1945 and 1989. Now we confront a similar time of testing -- a perfect storm of major shifts in the balance of power, and massive political, economic, technological, and environmental transformations.

While no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block, the United States still has a better hand to play than our major rivals. That is not only because of our military and economic leverage, but also because of our capacity to invest in alliances and mobilize coalitions. Diplomacy is the tool that enables us to take advantage of that capacity.

I won't belabor my growing concerns about how we are corroding that tool today.

Instead, let me close with an affirming thought. There is a lot of deeply flawed talk today about "deep states," or "the revenge of the deep state." What I see is something profoundly different. It is the honor and integrity, and the plainspoken courage, embodied by individual career officers like Masha Yovanovitch, Bill Taylor, and George Kent. Their heads held high, they are fulfilling their obligations as public servants, speaking truth to power, however politically inconvenient, and however risky it may be for themselves and their careers.

It is their decency which gives me hope in these dark times. It is their decency which gives the lie to talk of "deep states." It is their quiet decency, in a public spotlight which they never sought, which helps Americans to better understand the significance of diplomacy, and the wider value of public service. And it is their decency which gives me such pride in the profession that I love, as I know all of you do.

I accept this wonderful award in honor of our colleagues in the diplomatic arena, and in honor of all those serving the American people with dignity in these undignified times.

With profound gratitude,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Bill Burns". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Bill Burns