Alumni Corner: Stephen Pomper

By **Katerina Wright**

Stephen Pomper is the Senior Director for Policy at the International Crisis Group. During the Obama administration, he served as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights at the National Security Council. He also served as Senior Director for African Affairs. Prior to moving to the NSC, he was the Assistant Legal Adviser for Political-Military Affairs at the Department of State. He also worked as an editor at The Washington Monthly. He was an associate at Cleary in the New York (1993-1994, 1997-1999), Brussels (1994-1997), and Washington (2001-2002) offices.

When did you start working at Cleary, and why did you choose the firm?

I was a summer associate at Cleary between my second and third year of law school, in the summer of 1992. I was drawn to the firm for a very specific reason: I was interested in Russia. My dad was a Russian historian, and my mom and dad actually met in a Russian studies program and had spent time in Moscow in their early marriage. My sister was actually born in Helsinki because my parents were living in Moscow in 1963 when my mom was pregnant. I had lots of associations with, and interest in, Russia—I also had done some academic work on the Soviet Union in college. Cleary had this fantastic practice that it was building representing young reformers in the post-Soviet government who were basically restructuring the way that Russia did business. In the summer of 1992, I spent some time in New York, then some time in London and also in Moscow. Then, in my third year of law school, the firm created an opportunity for me to go to Moscow and be an intern in the office that they were in the process of setting up there. I knew it had to be Cleary because there was no other firm that had comparable ties at the levels Cleary had to the Russian government that was doing work as interesting as Cleary was. So I joined the firm as an associate in the fall of 1993 after I graduated from law school, and spent a year in New York. Then in 1994, I moved to Brussels and started working on the Russian account full time. I worked with David Sabel at first and then also with George Bustin. We were working with the Ministry of Finance on restructuring an enormous amount of Soviet-era debt. I spent basically three years based in Brussels, but doing a lot of traveling around working with sovereign and bank creditors restructuring their debt.

That was in a corporate capacity, in terms of practice group?

Yes, it was a transactional practice, but a very specific one.

Were you ever based full-time in Moscow, or was all your work based out of Brussels?

We were based in Brussels for three years, which is where David and George lived. We flew back and forth to Moscow several times a month, and to all the places in the world where the Russians had Soviet-era debt—and there were quite a few of those places. So there was a lot of travel. At the end of three years, there was a choice about whether to go to Moscow, or to go back to New York, and for a variety of family and other reasons New York made more sense.

Do you have any favorite memories of your time at Cleary?

It was a really interesting time to be in Moscow, particularly when I was there as a law student. One of the memories I have is being asked to find office space where the firm could work, and this was at a point when there was not a lot of Western-caliber office space, so trying to find a place where maybe half a dozen lawyers could comfortably work, and have the amenities to run a modern law office was not an easy task. We ended up finding space for us, in what had been the Swiss Consulate. It seemed like nice space; it was, however, in a basement—a sort of half-basement. If I remember this correctly, we actually took this space, and then I went back to law school. Then I came back to the firm in the fall of 1993 and started reconnecting with my former colleagues who had had to work in this subterranean space. None of them were remotely grateful for my help! They were pretty unhappy to have been working in a basement for a year. The firm fairly quickly moved them to an office above ground.

I have to tell you, although under a very different political circumstance, I worked for a consulting firm after college and helped with the opening of our office in Paris, France. We were trying to look for office space, but ended up on the 6th floor attic, at the very top with all the sun. Basement or attic, you know?

I thought they would be placing me on their shoulders, and showering me with gratitude because we had managed to find space that would function the way it needed to, but it wasn't a very comfortable space. Anyway, the good news for the Moscow presence is that better office space quickly came online.

That experience sounds very relevant to what you've done since leaving Cleary. What were the skills that you took away from Cleary that were useful?

The debt restructuring work that we did for Russia required a generalist set of skills. I was very fortunate to work with lawyers who really helped me develop those skills—drafting, being on quick on your feet, really understanding what the needs of your client were, and finding a way to put that onto paper. Frankly, as a government lawyer, who was often juggling 20, 30, 40 matters at a time and didn't necessarily have the time or resources of a private sector lawyer to drill into all of those things, I found those kinds of generalist skills very useful. I was really grateful to have that kind of mentoring while I was at Cleary.

Shifting gears, where did you head off to first after leaving Cleary?

That is actually a very complicated question. When I came back to New York, I spent about a year in the New York office, and I realized pretty quickly that the kind of work we were doing in New York—securities work and mergers and acquisition—for me, wasn't what I wanted to be doing for the next 20-30 years of my life. So I tried to figure out what would be the right next step for me.

I had been a journalist before law school, and I thought that might be an interesting way to shift career focus. My wife and I picked up with our two children, moved to Washington, and I set out to be an editor for a magazine called the Washington Monthly. I did that for about a year, but it didn't quite work out. It was a tremendously challenging job. There were two editors putting out a 64-page magazine every month and also writing 5,000-word pieces for each edition. I learned an enormous amount, and there were things about it that I loved, but I realized that becoming a journalist was just too big of a jump for me to take at that point in my career. So the firm very kindly let me come back to the Washington office, where I was for about a year.

Then I found my way over to the State Department at the Legal Adviser's Office, which was a really natural move, which I wish I had thought of earlier to be honest. It allowed me to continue to develop and to trade on the legal skills I had developed at Cleary, but also do the kind of government-focused work that I had come to enjoy when I was working for the Russian government, although obviously for a very different client.

When I got over to the State Department, I realized that this was the place I belonged.

Everything I've heard is that working at State is a dream job for an international lawyer. What was it like day-to-day?

It was just fantastic, and it really is the dream job for someone interested in public international law. There is no other place where you can do exactly that kind of work. The way the office is structured, when you first come in you generally take a portfolio that is more on the administrative side. I spent a year and a half negotiating consular and embassy leases.

Interesting!

[Laughs] Well, that's not the reason why people go to the State Department generally, to negotiate leases, but it was a great way to learn how the building worked.

It has to be done.

Yeah, exactly. It turned out to be a great place to cut my teeth. From there, I moved over to the Office of Law Enforcement and Intelligence. The way the State Department Legal Adviser's Office works is that there are 15 or 20 sub-offices and lawyers rotate among them; generally one spends 2-3 years in one office and then moves to the next one. I started in the Office of Buildings and Acquisitions, and then the Office of Law Enforcement and Intelligence, and that's when I started to focus hard on national security law. My brief there was focused largely on the law enforcement dimension of counter-terrorism. I worked on extradition treaties, on UN counterterrorism treaties, the designation of foreign terrorist organizations, and issues like that, and I did that for a couple of years.

Then I moved into the field that I ended up working in for much of the rest of my career in government, which was issues relating to the use of force, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law. I did that at the working level for a number of years in the Legal Adviser's Office of Political and Military Affairs, and then I was promoted to the senior executive service and started running that office. That was just fascinating. We were working on trying to unwind the Guantanamo Bay detention facility, on the use of force in counter-terrorism operations, and the full panoply of issues related to the way in which the United States projects military force around the world. I did that until 2011, when I moved over to the White House.

I have to ask, what was it like working with President Obama? Any favorite memories working with him?

I did have the opportunity to work directly with him on a few occasions, and it was an incredible privilege, but that wasn't my day to day life. I went over to the National Security Council staff to work initially for Samantha Power, in the directorate that dealt with UN affairs and human rights issues. I worked on her team for about a year and a half, and when she left the administration at the beginning of President

Obama's second term, before she went up to New York to become ambassador to the United Nations, I stepped into her shoes and took over that directorate. That was an extraordinary experience. We were dealing with the full range of issues having to do with U.S. policy towards the United Nations and also the full human rights portfolio of the
U.S. government. It was an exciting time because there were a lot of people in the administration who cared a lot about what we were focused on—protecting civilians, international criminal justice, and human rights, including in the service of gender equality and LGBT human rights. So I felt we were in a position to do a lot of good there.

You've had such a range of experiences throughout your career. When did you transition over to the International Crisis Group?

I worked at the National Security Council for five years, maybe even a little bit more, all the way up to the end of the Obama administration. By the end of the Obama administration, I was no longer a civil servant and was a direct employee of the Executive Office of the President, so I tendered my resignation and set off to find something else to do. I was very fortunate. I spent a little time as a fellow at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum working on the report on the prevention of mass atrocities, spent a little time as a scholar at the U.S. Institute of Peace, and then I moved to the International Crisis Group, which is a NGO that has worked for 25 years on the prevention of conflict around the world.

What's on your plate these days? What's day-to-day life at the NGO?

International Crisis Group was formed about 25 years ago in the wake of the Cold War to try and be the world's eyes and ears on areas where conflict risks were emerging, or where conflict was raging, and offer ways out, other than simply fighting the war until its bloody end. The idea was to be different than other think tanks because we would have a network of analysts who would actually be on the ground to dig deep into local dynamics and present decision-makers with the kind of ground-truth reporting they couldn't get from armchair analysts sitting in major capitals around the world. That's the basic DNA of the organization, and it really hasn't changed much over the 25 years; that's still who we are.

I came aboard the organization in 2017 as the U.S. Program Director. The organization hadn't previously had a program that was focused on the United States, but given the outsize U.S. role in so many conflicts around the world, we realized we needed one. I did that work for about a year and was then asked to take on my current role as the organization's Senior Director for Policy. Now I work with all of our regional programs on their written outputs and figuring out our policy positions. It's close, in some ways, to the role I used to have back in government, in trying to understand how policymakers think, what their interests are, and how to shape them.

You mentioned that the Group works in preventing conflict and war. I'm sure our readers out there are wondering, how do you think the current coronavirus outbreak could lead to more instability and geopolitical conflict?

We put out a terrific report on this in March where we identified seven trends that we thought are worth watching in terms of the impact of the virus on conflict around the world. I really recommend that report to anybody who wants to look at an overview.

There are obviously a number of ways in which it could be an aggravator of conflict risk around the world. To name a few: Fragile states where governments already struggle to manage conflict risks are only going to become more fragile as a result of this, and they may not be able to manage other risks that are created by non-state armed groups inside their countries. There may be countries that see an opportunity to push the envelope in advancing their interests while their adversaries are distracted elsewhere. The victims of conflict are obviously in more difficult straits as a result of the distraction of the donor community. The kinds of efforts that the international community often mounts, or tries to mount, to deal with conflict situations like peacekeeping or mediation initiatives, those are more difficult to sustain, much less launch.

There may be some opportunities as well. You probably saw that the Secretary General of the United Nations announced an effort to try to develop a global truce, so that countries can try to focus on the pandemic. Now, that might be an aspirational goal, but it does create an opportunity for conflict actors to step back if they are so inclined. There are some armed groups in places around the world, like Venezuela and the Philippines, that have actually responded to this—imperfectly, but it is still better than nothing.

These moments in our history make it so important to have good lawyers and good thinkers out there addressing these challenges. It makes me wonder, did you ever see yourself ending up where you are today?

I was always interested in foreign policy, and I wasn't necessarily as savvy as I might have been about how to chart a course into it, and I feel very fortunate to have been able to find my way into the kinds of positions I've had for the last 20 years.

Any tips for associates at Cleary who are looking for a similar career path?

One very specific tip is that the State Department's Office of the Legal Adviser is an unparalleled institution if you are interested in public international law. They open up to lateral hiring periodically. If you have an interest in that space, if you think that is really where you would like to focus your energies, I can't encourage people highly enough to look into it. It is really a wonderful place to work and to get the kinds of skills that you

can take into a whole range of foreign policy careers in the government.

More generally, did you ever receive any career advice you found particularly helpful?

The general advice that you get when you are getting out of law school, particularly if you are a lawyer practicing at the level of a firm like Cleary Gottlieb, is to try and find a way to do what you love. That was advice that really helped me find my way into a series of jobs that I found enormously fulfilling, and that's the kind of advice I give to young lawyers.

We're just about wrapping up. To give our readers a sense of what your non-work life is like, what do you like to do on the weekends? Any hobbies?

I have three kids; one is graduated from college, one is in college, and one is still in high school. Spending time with family has been a huge focus of the last almost 25 years. My wife and I now have more time to do the things we like to do together, like to go hiking. We had two fantastic back-country hikes in recent years—one in New Zealand and the other in New Hampshire's White Mountains. This summer it will be North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan, assuming we're allowed to leave the house.

How are you and your family handling life under quarantine? Any fun tips for all of us sitting at home?

We are very lucky! Our kids are older and don't require constant attention, and we are not in a claustrophobic situation; we are in a house where each can have his or her own space. The tip that has worked well for us is to respect that space. We have sort of segmented ourselves, and we try not to get in each other's way during the day. That has helped us keep the peace!