

Brian Taylor hails from Middle America—Iowa, to be exact. There the OU political science assistant professor was raised and, at the University of Iowa in Iowa City, where he earned his bachelor's degree. He spent a few years in London, where he earned a master's degree at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, where he obtained his doctoral degree. But the location that most intrigues him is not the United States, or even Western Europe. It is the former Soviet Union, a country in which he first became interested as a mid-'80s undergraduate during the Reagan administration, when U.S.S.R./U.S. tensions were particularly high.

Majoring in political science at Iowa, with a special interest in issues relating to arms races and nuclear weapons, Taylor pursued a minor in Russian. After graduation, he headed to London, where he studied Russian domestic policy. "It was a great time to study that topic," he says, "because at that time [former Soviet President Mikhail] Gorbachev was initiating his reforms." Those reforms included decentralizing the country's totalitarian government and instituting policies of glasnost ("openness") and perestroika ("restructuring"), under which the Soviet Union experienced a cultural thaw, and the roots of democracy began to take hold.

Taylor, though, was not content to study these developments from his bases in either the United States or Great Britain. He has traveled to Russia 10 times, spending anywhere from a few weeks to a year there to interview political figures, military officers, journalists and other academics and to study archived documents. He never met Gorbachev in Russia, but he did meet him at OU's 2001 Foreign Policy Conference.

"The Foreign Policy Conference was a great opportunity for all of us on campus interested in Russia to hear not only



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Although OU Russian scholar Brian Taylor has traveled to the former Soviet Union many times, he first met former Premier Mikhail Gorbachev on the campus of the University of Oklahoma.

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expertise in international affairs," he says. "For someone doing research and teaching in these areas, this is a big plus."

Political science department chairman Ron Peters, who calls Boren's emphasis on international and cultural affairs among his most significant initiatives at OU, notes Taylor's expertise as both a scholar and a teacher. "He is a leader among the new generation of scholars focusing on Russian politics since the demise of the Soviet Union, and his work has been recognized both nationally and internationally," Peters says. "In addition to his excellent scholarship, Professor Taylor excels as a teacher. Students comment upon his enthusiasm, his grasp of his subject matter and, as one student put it, his ability to answer any question about anything."

The interaction between Taylor and his students is apparent in his Russian Foreign Policy class. Engaging the 40 or so undergraduates in a discussion about who was responsible for the Cold War—the Soviet Union, the United States or both—he paces across the room, asking questions, probing for answers and praising the students for their insightful and critical thinking.

Gorbachev, but also Thomas Pickering and Jack Matlock, former U.S. ambassadors to Russia," Taylor says. "Their presence on campus also helped stimulate student interest in the relationship between Russia and America. The students thought it was amazing that a world figure like Gorbachev would be in Norman, Oklahoma. I wasn't surprised, given the stature of some of President Boren's prior guests, such as [former Secretary of State] Henry Kissinger, [former British Prime Minister] Margaret Thatcher and [Nobel Peace Prize winner and Archbishop Emeritus Desmond] Tutu."

That environment was a big part of why Taylor came to OU in 1998. "This is a great time to be at OU with the emphasis that President Boren has placed on international education. This is reflected in the International Programs Center and the School of International and Area Studies, the increased visibility of study abroad, and the addition of new faculty with

In addition to his teaching duties, Taylor has written a book—*Politics and the Russian Army*, due out in several months—and a number of scholarly articles and book chapters on topics ranging from the Soviet military to arms control to civil-military relations. He also is the recipient of several fellowships and grants, the most recent of which is through the prestigious Carnegie Scholars program.

Although he concentrates on teaching during the school year, he is still able to squeeze in some research time reading online Russian newspapers. Summers and breaks are spent writing. Over the next two years—the term of the Carnegie grant—he plans to spend most of those periods working on “State Power and Russia’s Regions,” a study of some of the country’s 89 different regional governments, several of which he will visit.

“There is a lot of commentary about the weakening of state power with the dispersal of authority from Moscow to the various regions,” he says of his Carnegie research. “What those experts haven’t considered is the police, the courts and the military—those entities that make it possible to use coercive force to do what the government wants.”

Of the lack of progress on nuclear arms control despite the end of the Cold War, Taylor says, “Observers have been both surprised and disappointed that, despite the fact that the Cold War is over, both Russia and the United States have thousands of nuclear weapons pointed at each other—a far greater number than is needed as a deterrent.”

The potential for tension notwithstanding, Taylor notes Russia’s staunch support of the United States after the September 11 terrorist attacks. “It was interesting to see the degree to which Putin so quickly and firmly allied himself with the United States,” he says. “But I wonder if it might be a temporary alliance because, while America and Russia saw eye-to-eye on getting rid of the Taliban, they don’t see eye-to-eye on other issues that arose as a result of the attacks.”

One of those issues, says Taylor, is the two presidents’ divergent views of the so-called “axis of evil”—a label for Iraq, Iran and North Korea, which President Bush has denounced for their development of weapons of mass destruction. Russia, on the other hand, has friendly relations with all three countries and does not support a possible war to remove Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.

Taylor says that the Russian populace is divided on its view of the United States. For example, members of the Russian military harbor hard feelings toward the United States because it was able to do what Russia could not do in Afghanistan—achieve a military victory—and feel threatened because of the U.S. military presence in Central Asian states that were once part of the Soviet Union. Russians still are divided over whether they should receive help from the West in order to make the transition from communism to democracy.

“Those Eastern European countries that have been the most successful—the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic—are those that have embraced democracy and capital-



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The arrival in October of twin sons Lucian, left, and Anatol has added another dimension to the lives of political scientists Brian Taylor and his wife, Renée de Nevers, both assistant professors at OU.

ism,” he says. “Those that haven’t—including Russia, the Ukraine and most of the former Soviet republics—have fared poorly. President Putin recognizes that, in order to achieve economic reform, Russia must be an ally of the West.”

Taylor shares his interest in international politics with his wife, Renée de Nevers, also an assistant professor in OU’s Political Science Department. Although they do not teach or conduct research together, both say they read and discuss each other’s work. They also spend as much time as possible with their twin sons, Anatol and Lucian, born last October.

De Nevers, who restricted her teaching load last spring to one course as part of her maternity leave agreement, says striking a balance between work and family is a work in progress for both her and her husband.

“I spend most of my time with the boys. At the same time, I’m glad that I’m teaching because it lets me keep up with my work and get the intellectual stimulation that I think I need to be a more engaged parent,” she says. “I think it’s harder on Brian. He is working full time, which in academia means that he brings work home every night and has a lot of demands on his time.”

Since the twins’ birth, Taylor has not had much time for the outdoor pursuits he enjoys, such as biking, running, hiking and skiing. Nor do he and de Nevers have many opportunities to watch some of their favorite team sports—OU women’s basketball, volleyball and soccer.

Nevertheless, Taylor still finds an occasional block of time to engage in one relatively trivial pursuit. “I watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” he says, referring to a popular television program. “I’m addicted to it.”

—DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI