On Campus

State's Man

State Department spokesman Ian Kelly '86GSAS returns to Columbia.

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With the clock ticking before his speaking engagement at Faculty House, Ian Kelly ’86GSAS was a block away, standing by the busy elevators at the School of International and Public Affairs. Kelly was cutting it close, but he wanted to return to the place it had all started; his finger instinctively hit 12.

Inside the car, packed with students and faculty, Timothy Frye, director of Columbia’s Harriman Institute, thanked Kelly for taking time to come back on this late September afternoon. Kelly wouldn’t have it any other way. “Secretary Clinton is at the White House today, so I have some time.”

Kelly, who received his PhD in Slavic languages and literature, had returned to Columbia to give a talk on U.S.-Russian relations. Sitting on a couch at Harriman, Kelly recalled his experience working closely with the Soviet Consulate, coordinating a student trip to what was then Leningrad. “That’s when I got interested in the Foreign Service,” Kelly said. “As a result of my experience — you know we have more of an interdisciplinary approach at Harriman — I found myself wanting to break out of language and literature studies and do other things.”

Now, Kelly is the spokesman for the State Department, a job he began last May after a long career abroad and in Washington. (Before Hillary Clinton chose Kelly as spokesman, he was head of the Russia desk during the Bush administration.) Shadowing the Secretary of State means days full of strong-willed foreign ministers, sensitive negotiations, and meetings that tend to end in “lateral.” Then, Kelly has to come before the State Department microphones to tell the public (what he can) about it.

At Kelly's first daily briefing as spokesman, even his boss was giving him a hard time. Clinton joked, "Not only is Ian the new face of the State Department, but as an added qualification, he is a long-suffering Cubs fan." The Secretary then turned the podium over to its "new occupant," and the true cross fire began. As detailed questions flew his way, about everything from an uprising in Sri Lanka that killed 400 people to Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's being prevented from seeing a doctor, Kelly relied heavily on a big binder, flipping through thousands of pages for official three-line statements, while apologizing for each delay. Even in such a high-profile role, Kelly's own views are seldom heard. "I can't color outside the lines," he said. "I can't give my own opinion — it's not about me."

During his talk at Faculty House, Kelly did give his own opinion, sharing his thoughts on what he has seen during his career. In front of a portable blue backdrop with "The Harriman Institute" repeated in white letters, Kelly stood at the lectern, draped his fingers confidently over the edges, and said, "First of all, let me say it's nice to be home." He then acknowledged two of his former professors, who were seated in the front row.

When one of them, Columbia economist Padma Desai, asked Kelly about the possibility of Vladimir Putin returning to the Russian presidency, Kelly chuckled. He acknowledged that Putin "performed a real service to his country" by strengthening Russia's self-perception, and even commended him for realizing that Russia needs a new generation of leaders like Dmitry Medvedev. Then, Kelly's tone darkened a shade. "Whether or not [Putin] is completely comfortable with going into the sunset, though, is a different matter."

Kelly also shared a few personal anecdotes, including the time he spent locked in the library in the basement of SIPA. It was a place without windows or distractions — for Kelly, as good a place as any to finish his dissertation.

The thesis, which is about the treatment of history in Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, turns out to contain a bit of foreshadowing. Kelly writes, "Here, I address the problem of how man participates in the forward movement of history."

It's a problem he speaks to today — just not in a windowless basement.

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