

Lunch with the FT Life & Arts

**Former CIA director William**

**Burns: 'Imitating autocrats is not**

**a winning formula'**

The ex-spy chief on the risks of Trump's  
operation in Venezuela, what the US gets

wrong about regime change — and why  
Putin badly misjudged Ukraine

**Amy Mackinnon**

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Among the upscale eateries in Washington's swanky Georgetown neighbourhood, Martin's Tavern — the city's oldest family-owned restaurant — is a humble choice. With its wood-panelled walls, Tiffany lamps and white tablecloths, it is evocative of a bygone era.

“I like the lack of pretension,” former CIA director William Burns tells me later, explaining his choice. Both Martin’s and Burns have seen their fair share of history. According to Martin’s lore, the restaurant has served every US president from Harry Truman to George W Bush. Booth number three by the window is where John F Kennedy proposed to Jacqueline Bouvier. The Tavern is also where Burns and his wife, Lisa Carty, went on their first date as freshman diplomats.

I have arrived early to secure our booth in “The Dugout,” a windowless enclave at the back of the restaurant, reminiscent of a log cabin. A large fish in a red Santa hat hangs above the entrance, mouth agape.

During the second world war, William Donovan, the swashbuckling director of the CIA’s precursor, the Office of Strategic Services, would huddle in The Dugout and plot with his team. Today, three wooden booths and a table are squeezed into the space. A toddler in a tartan pinafore with neatly brushed hair wanders past our table periodically. Not the most discreet place for lunch with the nation’s former spy chief, I think, as I slide into my seat.

I see Burns, tall and slim in a black wool coat, making his way through the crowded restaurant. As he settles into the booth, he tells me he is looking forward to spending Christmas with his family and new grandson.

Soft-spoken and quick to smile, Burns is one of the most decorated diplomats of his generation. During his 33-year career in the foreign service, Burns served as US ambassador to Jordan and Russia. Under President Barack Obama, he was appointed deputy secretary of state and led highly secretive nuclear talks with Iran.

**[The CIA] had a lot of good fortune in recruiting more Russians over disaffection with the war, once the war started**

Following his retirement from the US State Department in 2014, he served as president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a global affairs think-tank, before being asked by Joe Biden to serve as his CIA director. Burns describes the request as “unexpected”.

I ask what the transition was like, heading up the CIA having spent decades at the state department. “One former senior CIA friend of mine once described the mood of the workforce, waiting for a new director, as kind of like the Scottish tribes waiting for the English king,” he says.

He found the agency’s workforce to be quick on their feet. In his first weeks on the job, Burns said he had a “bad habit” of talking through his thoughts out loud. “I’d find I’d have, at the end of the day, a 14-page single-spaced plan of action, and for all I knew there were planes flying,” he said. “So I was much more disciplined in thinking out loud there.”

About 20 minutes into our conversation, I suggest we should order some food. We quickly scan a pair of large menus, their offerings hearty and American. “I do not have the most sophisticated tastes in the world,” Burns tells me. I assure him that he’s in good company.

He opts for the shepherd’s pie, deeming it a fitting choice for a chilly winter’s day. I go for the faux meat burger, with a Caesar salad instead of French fries. Our waiter informs me that there is a surcharge for the upgrade to a Caesar. I decide to push the boat out. We each order a Diet Coke.

Burns was the first career diplomat to become CIA director. Biden sought to capitalise on Burns's background, dispatching him to deal with some of the most vexing challenges of his term. By his own count, Burns racked up more than a million miles of travel during his tenure.

Over the course of his career, Burns has sat down with some of the most prominent villains of the 20th and 21st centuries. Who, I ask, was the most memorable? "Gaddafi was the weirdest, by far," he says, recalling the deceased Libyan dictator's habit of pausing mid-conversation, to silently stare at the ceiling for several minutes to gather his thoughts. "He was such a weird dude."

Who was the most difficult? "Putin," he replies. "He's just so stubborn." In the autumn of 2021, as the US gathered intelligence on Russia's plans for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, it was Burns who was dispatched to Moscow to deliver a warning to the Russian president that America was on to him.

Russia was in the midst of a wave of Covid infections, and Putin had retreated to his home in Sochi, on the Black Sea coast. They spoke for around an hour on the phone. "He was utterly unapologetic," Burns says. "He made no effort to deny it." The CIA director returned to Washington convinced that Putin was going to go ahead with his war.

That winter, US officials began a remarkable effort to declassify what they knew about Moscow's intentions in a bid to warn the world — but also to thwart any attempts by Putin to craft a false narrative to justify the war.

## Menu

### Martin's Tavern

1264 Wisconsin Ave NW,  
Washington DC 20007

Shepherd's pie \$26.95

Diet Coke x2 \$7.90

Meatless burger \$22.95

Swiss cheese topping \$2.00

Caesar salad \$4.95

Coffee \$3.50

Double espresso \$6.50

Operational fee (6%) \$4.48

Tax \$7.94

Tip \$19.00

**Total** \$106.17

Not everyone was persuaded. Right up until the invasion, a number of US allies in Europe remained sceptical that Putin was preparing to launch an all-out attack.

Even Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took some convincing.

The CIA was the only US government agency that remained on the ground throughout the Russian invasion, playing a quiet but pivotal role in aiding Ukraine. Burns travelled to Ukraine 14 times during the war, making the long trip from the Polish border to Kyiv by train. He grew to like and admire Zelenskyy.

On Burns's 10th visit to the country, the Ukrainian leader stopped midway through their meeting and presented him with a certificate entitling him to a free upgrade on the train. "He didn't lose his sense of humour," he says. Did it get him a better cabin on the train? "Same seat, same train."

America's warnings about Putin's plans proved to be startlingly right. Their expectation that the Russians would rapidly overwhelm Ukraine was not. Why was the US so off-base about how the war would unfold?

"We expected them to be much more effective," he says of Putin's army. Any western military would have moved quickly to take out the country's air defences as well as its command structures. "The Russians didn't do that. Partly because they were so cocky, they didn't think they needed to." He comes back to that word a lot to describe the Russian president. Cocky.

In the lead-up to the war, only a very small circle of Putin's advisers were privy to his plans to invade. US expectations of how the war would pan out failed to appreciate how this secrecy would also warp the war plans. "It was underestimating what happens when the circle is so tight that you're not doing what you normally would do in terms of vetting a war plan or battle plan," he says.

Frustration with the war, which has cost Russia an estimated 1.1mn casualties and a good deal of economic pain, also created an opportunity for the CIA. "We had a lot of good fortune in recruiting more Russians over disaffection with the war, once the war started."

Our food arrives. Burns's shepherd's pie is served in a small cast-iron skillet. My burger is hearty and the side salad is dressed to perfection. I tuck in.

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**The phrase “interesting times”** has been uttered a lot in Washington over the course of 2025. I figure that if anyone could help me make sense of this, it's Burns, who has had a front-row seat at some of the most historic junctures of the past four decades.

"This is an era in which we're no longer the only big kid on the geopolitical block," Burns says. "I would argue that we still have a better hand to play than any of our rivals. The question is how do we play it?"

One of the most significant cards in that hand, Burns says, is the US's network of allies and partners around the world — something Trump has shown little regard for. "That network is what sets us apart from relatively lonelier powers like China and Russia, even though their partnership is becoming a more formidable one," he adds.

Russian revanchism and the rise of China have brought to a close America's three decades as the uncontested global hegemon, while the race is on to dominate new technologies that are shaping the future. "The revolution in technology," Burns says, "is truly unlike anything we have seen in human society since the beginnings of the industrial revolution two centuries ago."

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**This [Venezuela] action feeds a dangerous geopolitical shift, in which might makes right... It plays into the hands of Moscow and Beijing, and undercuts our allies**

As CIA director, Burns put significant emphasis on mastering new and emerging technologies. Analysts need to learn how to use large language models (LLMs) to sift through the vast quantities of data churned out in the modern age, he says, while operations officers need to know how to navigate so-called "smart cities" where cameras equipped with facial recognition technology abound.

In his second term, Trump has pursued a more aggressive foreign policy in the western hemisphere. Throughout the autumn, the US military put Venezuela's strongman leader Nicolás Maduro under increasing pressure with a build-up of troops, warships and fighter jets in the Caribbean.

The Venezuelan people would be better off with a different leadership, Burns says. "But our record on regime change is not exactly pristine."

He cites the "Pottery Barn rule", invoked by former secretary of state Colin Powell in the lead-up to the Iraq war: You break it, you own it. "Things can often go haywire and you always have to question your assumptions along the way," Burns says.

Two weeks to the day after we discuss Venezuela over lunch, Maduro is standing before a judge in a New York courtroom, having been seized from his compound in Venezuela by US special forces.

I follow up with Burns by email to get his thoughts. He is quick to distinguish the tactical execution of the operation, which he describes as “superb”, from the overall strategy. “We now own a risky and uncertain outcome in Venezuela and the region,” he writes.

“This action feeds a dangerous geopolitical shift, in which might makes right, and the world is managed by big guys sitting around a small table, cutting deals and carving up spheres of influence,” he adds, linking back to our earlier conversation. “That, it seems to me, plays right into the hands of our rivals in Moscow and Beijing, and further undercuts our allies and partners.”

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**Since Trump returned to the White House**, he has waged an aggressive campaign to shrink the federal workforce and bring it to heel, convinced that his first term agenda was thwarted by a “deep state” of career public servants. By the end of the year, some 300,000 government workers were expected to have left or lost their jobs.

“There’s a crying need for serious reform,” says Burns. “I just don’t think this was about serious reform. I think it’s been done in a way, largely, that’s about traumatising people and creating a kind of looking over your shoulder culture.”

He adds: “Imitating autocrats is not, in my view, a winning formula for succeeding.”

The final weeks of 2025 brought a flurry of diplomatic activity as US, Ukrainian and European officials worked to come up with a peace deal — although Putin doesn't appear ready to climb down. "I don't think Putin is serious today because he is too convinced time is on his side," he says, adding that the way in which the war is brought to a close is likely to have ramifications far beyond Ukraine's borders, as the world enters a new and as yet unnamed era.

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**Even the creepiest of adversaries, you have to deal with... It's not that you have to trust them or indulge them**

Beijing has watched Moscow's experience closely, says Burns, who travelled to China in the first year of the war. "The one thing the Chinese were not at all polemical about was the war in Ukraine. They listened carefully. Because they knew they had gotten it wrong before the war started. They thought the Russians would roll right over the Ukrainians," he says. "I think that honestly had fuelled some of Xi's doubts about issues such as Taiwan."

Our waiter clears our plates and we order some coffees. A double espresso for Burns, a black coffee for me.

Trump has shifted the Overton window of US statecraft. His norm-busting, mercantilist approach to foreign policy has, at times, revealed there to be more latitude than we may have realised, I venture.

There is a lesson in Trump's willingness to talk to adversaries, Burns replies. "Even the creepiest of adversaries, you have to deal with... So that they understand where you're coming from and vice versa. It's not that you have to trust them or indulge them.

“I think the challenge though is always the follow through . . . Human nature and the relations between states and terrorist groups being what they are, things can ultimately unravel.”

Burns was intimately involved in the Biden administration’s efforts to broker an end to Israel’s war in Gaza and to secure the release of hundreds of hostages held by Hamas. It was, he says, the most challenging chapter of his tenure.

In October, Israel and Hamas agreed to a US-brokered ceasefire deal that also secured the release of remaining hostages. Why was Trump able, I ask, to get the deal done? “To his credit, he was willing to be very direct,” Burns replies, noting that Trump took advantage of the failed Israeli attack on Hamas leaders in Qatar to lean on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

“The second factor is timing,” he says. Not only had Hamas been badly degraded by Israel’s military action, but so too had its other major adversaries in the region: Iran and Hezbollah.

Was there a moment when he felt that Biden should have been tougher with Netanyahu? “There were times, when [Hamas leader] Yahya Sinwar was killed at the beginning of October [20]24, that objectively it was ripe for a deal. And yet it still dragged on until mid-January,” he says. “I don’t know, it’s always hard to answer questions like that.”

It’s been a turbulent year, for the world, for the United States. But Burns is nonetheless optimistic about the country’s long-term future. He paraphrases the 19th-century French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote that America’s greatness lies not in being enlightened, but in its ability to correct its faults.

“Though our political system is in such a state, there’s reason to doubt that sometimes,” he says. “But I think we’re capable.”

*Amy Mackinnon is the FT's US-Europe foreign affairs correspondent*

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Bill Burns