



OUTSIDE INFLUENCES | JERRY HAGSTROM

The Trade Official Behind “The Revenant”

The author of the novel that spawned the new Leonardo DiCaprio movie has a busy day job—as the U.S. ambassador to the World Trade Organization.

Real connections to Hollywood glamour are so rare in Washington that it’s hard to imagine someone in this celebrity-focused age resisting an opportunity to participate in it.

But that’s what Michael Punke, the U.S. ambassador to the World Trade Organization, has done. On Wednesday night, Punke could be in Los Angeles for the premiere of *The Revenant*, the movie based on his 2002 novel about a true-life adventurer who was attacked by a bear and left for dead by members of his own hunting party. The movie is a major Hollywood production starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hardy and directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

Instead, according to the travel schedule released by the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, Punke is in Nairobi helping Trade Representative Michael Froman slog through what promises to be a difficult WTO ministerial meeting. The agricultural issues on which Punke has worked since he was a top trade aide to then-Sen. Max Baucus in the early 1990s threaten to be some of the most difficult to resolve.

Punke has given no interviews associated with the film’s release and did not respond to an email from *National Journal* this week. His brother, Tim Punke, and friends told *Maxim* last year that the government would not permit his participation in the film’s publicity. He could, of course, have resigned his position and jumped to Hollywood, but that wouldn’t be in keeping with his reputation as a dedicated trade specialist and government official.

Fortunately, in an interview in 2013 at the U.S. mission in Geneva—never published until now—Punke told *National Journal* about his upbringing in the rural West and his evolution as both a policymaker and a novelist. Here is his story.

Punke was born in Lovell, Wyoming and graduated from high school in Torrington, Wyoming, where his parents were teachers and the main industries were a sugar-beet refinery and a cattle market.

Punke was a debater in high school and went to the University of Massachusetts to be on the debate team, but he left to spend three semesters studying in France, where, he said, he became “very interested” in international affairs. He transferred to George Washington University to finish his undergraduate work and graduated from Cornell Law School in 1989 with a specialization in international law. He came to Washington to work for Hogan & Hartson, where his boss was the late Sandy Berger. Punke had maintained connections to Montana since his family traveled to Billings, the nearest city, for Christmas shopping, and he left the firm to go to work for Baucus. When Bill Clinton was elected president, Ber-

ger went to the National Security Council and Punke followed. He later went to work for then-Trade Representative Mickey Kantor.

In 1998, after a period with a small start-up, he moved to the law firm of Mayer, Brown & Platt, where he worked on “a lot of wheat issues” and agricultural and intellectual-property relations with China.

But in the early mornings, he wrote *The Revenant* and sold the novel to Carroll & Graf. It didn’t sell particularly well, but in 2003 Punke and his wife, a Montanan, decided “we’d sort of take a chance and see if we could move back West and try and write full-time.”

Punke sold the film rights to *The Revenant* fairly quickly, but it float-

ed around Hollywood for years before being produced. “It was very galling to me that I couldn’t be the guy who got to write the screenplay,” he said. “It’s one of those catch-22s, where you can’t write a screenplay until you sell a screenplay.” Punke wrote two screenplays but has had trouble getting them produced, and he did not write the screen version of *The Revenant*.

“I have learned what ‘development hell’ means through experiences both with those two screenplays and with the development of *The Revenant*,” Punke said.

Punke and his family lived in Missoula, Montana until President Obama offered to name him ambassador to the WTO. Punke has defended the WTO as an institution that resolves a lot of conflicts between nations, but he said even two years ago that the Doha Round, the latest round of trade negotiations among the WTO membership, was in trouble because the world had changed so much since it was launched in 2001. The United States and other developed countries have proposed ending the round and moving on, but developing countries are resisting.

In the meantime, U.S. farm leaders have praised him for raising the issues of China and Brazil and other advanced developing countries increasing agricultural subsidies in ways that were not even imagined when the Doha Round began.

There are always rumors that Punke might be a future U.S. trade representative, but he seems destined to return to Montana and to writing.

“I love writing. I think it’s an amazing luxury to be able to spend time focused on things that you’re interested in and writing about them,” he said. “It’s very different from what I am doing today, obviously, but I really feel lucky to have been able to spend those years focused as much as I was on following the threads of things that I was curious about, whether it was the fur-trade era or Butte, Montana, or the history of the buffalo.” ■



Michael Punke, left, U.S. representative to the World Trade Organization, with then-WTO Director-General Pascal Lamy in 2010.

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