

Former Ambassador to USSR Matlock Lambastes U.S. Policy on Russia

Jack Matlock, who served as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, 1987-91, was the featured speaker at an event sponsored by the Committee for the Republic, at the National Press Club in Washington Feb. 11. Here is a transcript of his opening remarks. A video is available on [YouTube](#).

The last quite a few years, we have been basically living outside the Washington Beltway. It's always nice to come back and see friends, though I must confess that I'm sometimes puzzled, sitting out in the boondocks, at what goes on here. Because there seems to be group-think about many things in foreign policy—it affects both the media and those in the government—that to me, I find more and more difficult to comprehend.

I didn't understand that they wanted me to talk for 20 minutes—I prepared something that I hoped I could say in 40. So, what I'm going to give you is a barebones summary of how I view the situation, and what I think we should be seeing about it, and expect you to ask me questions so that I can actually expand a bit on the details.

I think we're in a very dangerous situation right now, in regard to Russia, over Ukraine. Six months ago, a year ago, when people were talking about Cold War II, I said, this is silly; this is not Cold War II. The Cold War was about a worldwide confrontation over ideology; it was about communism, and the conflict with communism. And it occurred all over—Latin America, Africa, Asia.



Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock addressed the National Press Club Feb. 11, on the Ukraine crisis: “If the United States gets further involved in what is, in the minds of the Russians, territory which has historically been part of their country, given the present atmosphere, I don't see how we are going to prevent another nuclear arms race. And that's what scares me.”

What we're seeing now is a conflict in an area which 30 years ago would have been a local problem, in one country. How can that lead us to Cold War II?

However, as things have developed, and as I see debates now as to whether the United States should supply lethal weapons to Ukraine, I wonder what is going on.

I see all these debates, and saying, “Oh, Russia's only a regional power.”¹ What does that mean? What does that mean, particularly in their own region? And I think the elephant in the room, which nobody is referring to, is the nuclear issue. No country which has ICBMs, ICBMs—10 independently targeted warheads, very accurate, mobile (so they can't be taken out)—no

country with that is a regional power, by any means. It can mean other things.

The most important thing we did in ending the Cold War was cooling the nuclear arms race. If there are any issues for this country to face that are existential, that's it.

Now let's face it. Much as I respect and love the people in Ukraine—and I do know them. I was probably the only American ambassador to the Soviet Union who could and did make speeches in Ukrainian when I went to Kiev, as well as in Russian when I was in Moscow. I do know that country. I know its literature and its culture. I prize it. My heart goes out to the people

1. President Obama, in a press conference in The Hague, March 25, 2014.

who are going through hell in eastern Ukraine this Winter.

But, I'll tell you: If the United States gets further involved in what is, in the minds of the Russians, territory which has historically been part of their country, given the present atmosphere, I don't see how we are going to prevent another nuclear arms race. And that's what scares me.

The Expansion of NATO

Now, how did this all come about?

It does seem to me that when we ended the Cold War, we had a coherent policy—believe it or not. That's very rare in American foreign policy, particularly recently, in my time. We did. Our goal, and that of our allies, and that of the Soviet leaders, and their successor Russian leaders, was a Europe whole and free. A Europe whole and free.

Now, there's been a lot of debate as to whether President Gorbachov was promised that there would be no NATO expansion to the East. There was no treaty signed saying that. But as we negotiated an agreement to end the Cold War, first President [George H.W.] Bush, at a Malta meeting in 1989, and then later, in 1990, almost all the Western leaders, told Gorbachov: If you remove your troops from Eastern Europe, if you let Eastern Europe go free, then we will not take advantage of it.

Now, there's no way, by moving an alliance that was originally designed to protect Western Europe from the aggression of the East, you move it to the East—how are you going to keep a Europe whole and free? If you have a Europe whole and free, Russia and all the others have to be part of the system.

So later, not out of design, but simply, I think, largely because of domestic politics, and the East Europeans, who wanted protection against a threat that at that point didn't exist, but it might in the future, we started expanding NATO.

The Russian reaction at first was not that negative, but then other things began to happen. After 9/11, then-President Putin was the first foreign President to call President [George W.] Bush, and offer cooperation and support. And we got it when we invaded Afghanistan. We got their vote in the UN. We got intelligence support and other support, logistics support, in getting there.

What did they get in return?

He [Putin] also removed, without our request, a

base, a listening station, in Cuba, and one in Cam Ranh Bay [Vietnam].

We walk out of the ABM Treaty, which was the *basis* of all of our arms control treaties, and the one in which we could deal with each other as equals. We keep on expanding NATO, and not only expand it, we begin to talk about bases there, about deploying anti-ballistic missiles, for no good reason at all. Supposedly it was to defend the Europeans against the Iranians—the Iranians at that point didn't have missiles that could attack them, nor was it apparent to many of us why the Iranians would ever want to attack the Europeans. What are they going to get out of that?

The Russian reaction was again to be increasingly hostile. And, of course, we had the outburst in Munich, in 2007, by President Putin.

We didn't set out—I'll make this clear—to stick it to Russia. I don't think there was any intent. We had a lot of reasons, mainly domestic political reasons, to follow these courses. *But*, we were simply ignoring the Russian reaction, the *inevitable* Russian reaction.

And so what we began to get was a reaction from what you could say was, at best, inconsiderate American actions, to a Russian over-reaction. And you know, when you set up these vibrations, they can be amplified. Small ones can get bigger and bigger and bigger. Cosmologists tell us, for example, that maybe all of the universe began with a single singularity, and you get these vibrations.

But the process was, that we developed an atmosphere, which, even before this Ukrainian crisis broke upon us, was one of alleged hostility, perceived hostility, I should say, between us. Something that we had, which, at the end of the Cold War, we had ended. And an attitude on both sides that we were facing each other not only as competitors, but adversaries, and that we were in what you call a zero-sum game. Anything that the U.S. wanted, would be to Russia's detriment. Anything that Russia wanted, is to the U.S. detriment.

That was precisely the attitude that we put an end to, to end the Cold War.

The Reagan Memo

Just a couple of words about how we did it.

I was thinking back, when we got into all of this. Okay, you know, by the mid-80s, we were in one of the most intense confrontations with the Soviet Union. The Europeans at that point were talking about Cold War II;



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Reagan, Matlock said, understood that, in dealing with Soviets, “you’ve got to deal with them with respect,” and “in a way that you don’t expect them to do something that is not in the true interest of their country.” The two leaders are shown here at the Geneva Summit, Nov. 20, 1985. Matlock is seated at the end of the table.

the rhetoric was high. And what was the attitude, and the policies, that we followed then, in order to put an end to this?

I pulled out something I had almost forgotten about. It was a memo that President Reagan wrote, in his own handwriting, just before he met Gorbachov the first time. Simple language, but his insights into how you deal with, at that time, what’s our principal adversary. And I don’t have time actually to quote them—I have his words here—but there are four points there that I wanted to quote.

One was, he started out by saying, Gorbachov is going to be a tough negotiator, but I have to remember that he has to justify what he does to the Politburo back home. In other words, he’s not a dictator.

Second, he defined what he considered the three most important areas that we had to deal with. They were: arms control, our conflict in third areas, and the distrust between us. The distrust between us. And he understood that until we worked on that, we weren’t going to solve the others.

Human rights? He said we’re much too upfront on human rights. We will get a lot of cheers from the bleachers by beating up on them on human rights, but it will

not help the people involved. In fact, it could hurt them. And he went on to say, we’ve got to go private. It’s too important to confront them.

And he concluded this memo by saying, whatever we achieve, we must not consider it victory, because that will simply make the next achievement more difficult.

You have, in a nutshell, a description, I would say, of what, in the last 15 years at least, we have been doing the opposite. And I think what Reagan understood—he was not a specialist in a lot of these other things, he had people to work on that—what he understood was human relations. And he also understood, unlike many of

the people on his staff, that the other side are made up also of human beings, with their own politics, their own requirements. And number one, you’ve got to deal with them with respect, and you’ve got to deal with them in a way that you don’t expect them to do something that is not in the true interest of their country.

So, our effort then was simply, that we needed to convince the Soviet leader—and in this case, eventually, Gorbachov—that their past policy was not serving their interests. And it was not!

Now one thing he never did—he called the system an Evil Empire once. People would never let him forget it. He also later said it wasn’t any more. But he *never* denigrated any Soviet leader by name. He would begin every conversation, whether it was a foreign minister, or the President, with, “We hold the peace of the world in our hands. We must cooperate.”

In other words, he met them as human beings, even though he disliked the system for very good reason. He dealt with them with respect.

How the Russians See It

Now, what do we see has happened? I can give you a lot of details when you ask questions about it, but

obviously, we're in an entirely different mode with Russia. And I would say it's not *just* the President—in fact, the worst offender by far is the U.S. Congress. And what Russia has been reacting to is what they consider insufferable arrogance and humiliation for several years.

Now, they may exaggerate a lot of that, but it has led to the fact that we seem to be operating off two entirely different—and both of them unfounded—narratives. The Russians feel that we intend to create a world empire, if not an empire, at least hegemony, and that our goal is to hem them in, to surround them, and to keep them as simply suppliers of raw materials, and determine not to treat them as, you might say, equals. They know their economy is not up, they know they don't have the military that we do, but is that what we are supposed to respect when we deal with other people? Is there a gradation that the more powerful you are, the more right you are?

Our actions, in many cases, descend to that.

And obviously, this narrative picks up on some things that are half truths, some things that are other, some things that are exaggerated, misunderstandings—but, to them, this is a contest over what is their vital interest.

Now, the American narrative, of course, is quite different. It is that you have the recurrence in Russia of an autocratic system that has taken away the possibility of democracy from Russia, has turned it once again into an autocracy, and has begun to threaten its neighbors. Never mind that these neighbors were part of the country 30 years ago. And never mind that none of them fought for their independence. It was handed them.

But, you get these two narratives, and, of course, we're reading op-eds right now—to save the world system of peace, we must provide arms to Ukraine so that they can defend themselves, etc., etc., etc.

It seems to me that both of these narratives are wrong. Ours is based upon a total misunderstanding of the end of the Cold War! How many have heard *we* won the Cold War? *You* were defeated. How many have heard, the Cold War ended when the Soviet Union broke up? The fact is, we negotiated an end to the Cold War, which was to the benefit of both countries. And the understanding *then* was, that we were creating a Europe whole and free, as I mentioned.

The breakup of the Soviet Union occurred over two

years after the Cold War had ended, and it ended definitively. And it broke up because of *internal* pressures, and that breakup was led by the elected leader of Russia.

Now, you have part of their narrative now. Because of our triumphalism, ah yes, they fooled Gorbachov. In fact, some would say the CIA hired him. He betrayed us, you see. They were after us all the time, they wanted to break up the Soviet Union, they're responsible for breaking it up.

Totally the opposite of the truth. And yet, step after step, these narratives—both of which are wrong—at best exaggerated, but both have elements that are simply the opposite of the truth. And yet, both countries seem to be developing their policies on it.

Stop the Personalization

Let me add another element now, which I find particularly disturbing, and that is the personalization of the whole relationship. It's hard to read anything in most of our press that doesn't attribute all the Russian actions to one man, and that man is usually characterized in the most unflattering terms, with various names. This is true both of the media, which, of course, can call things as they wish, but also, of our officials. You know, it seems to me that if you really want to settle the situation, you don't set up, in effect, a public duel between your President and another person, particularly when the other President has most of the marbles in the nation at issue.

When President Putin says we're not going to allow the Ukrainian situation to be resolved by military means, he means it. And no amount of shouting about this is going to change that. And for the President of the United States to appear to challenge him to do other things, simply has a negative effect.

Now, I'm one who actually... I thought the President did a fine State of the Union address, as long as he was dealing with domestic issues. I know Congress is not going to approve it, but that's going to be a good platform for whoever runs on the Democratic ticket in 2016. But his comments about President Putin, it seems to me, were totally out of place, and can only have a negative effect.

So, I think that one thing that we need to do, is to get this personal debate at the top of government out. We really have to stop that, because it's got a negative effect! When you say, "I've isolated him, he's losing. Look,

you didn't like what I was doing, but this guy's losing." What's his reaction? "I'll show him if I'm losing!"

So, who wins from that sort of exchange?

An Autistic Foreign Policy

But the biggest problem really hasn't been the President. He's been much better on many of these issues than Congress. And I would say one of the most outrageous things, that did much to create the atmosphere that we are in, which is one that nobody is going to benefit from, was the Magnitsky Act. Here you have the United States Congress, which, in that year [2012], could not even pass a budget, passing a law about a court case in Moscow, where it was alleged that the lawyer was mistreated, and he died while he was in detention. That was potentially a real scandal in Moscow.

So, what does the U.S. Congress do? They pass legislation requiring the Administration to identify publicly, and take action, to deny visas to specific people who might have been involved. One of the things, when I was ambassador in Moscow, I would talk about a lot, is how we really need to respect the principle of innocent until proven guilty. Here we have a case, in another

jurisdiction—there may have been a scandal there, there may not have been—a law is passed, limited to Russia, by name, and when, I know, one Congressman was asked about it, he said, "Oh, it's not about Russia, it's about human rights."

If it's not about Russia, why did you limit it to Russia? And I would point out, that was at a time when the United States had torturers and was not prosecuting them. Was that any concern to the American Congress? It was a time that, since then, we have learned that were several prisoners on death row who were proved to be innocent. And so on. It would seem to me that the U.S. Congress should pay a little more attention. And I would just say, on the whole human rights issue, I think we Americans have to understand: yes, human rights are important, very important. But you do not protect them by public pressure on another country, particularly when you are unwilling to judge yourself.

The State Department, now for decades, has to report on human rights in every country in the world, but one—want to guess which one that is?

And what sends the Russians up the wall is the language we use, which we don't understand how it's understood outside. When we say, we are an exceptional people, we're capable of doing good things, protecting other people, and so on—they read it as saying that the rules don't apply to us, unless we want them to. And we act that way.

I'll just make one more addition here, and then we can go to questions, and that is, it seems to me when I really looked at what our policies have been—given their reaction, and this is not something the U.S. has created singlehandedly—what we have gotten has been action/reaction, insults followed by insults answered, and so on. I wonder, when I think about how the policy is made, I was wondering, how do you characterize this?

We've heard a lot recently about autism, and whether there's any connection with vaccination and so on. And suddenly, I said, you know, we have an autistic foreign policy! Let me read you—I went back and looked at the actual definition of autism:

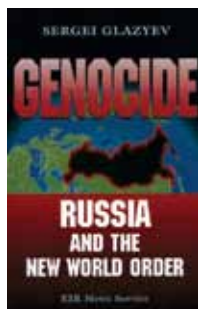
"Autism is characterized by impaired social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and restricted and repetitive behavior."

When the Congress of the United States votes over 30 times in a legislation they know is never going to become law, I would say that is restricted and repetitive behavior, and the problem is really an autistic foreign policy.

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