

The Ambassadorial Series

A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews



Ambassadorial Series

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES
MIDDLEBURY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
MAY 10, 2021

Introduction

At a time when dialogue between American and Russian diplomats is reduced to a bare minimum and when empathy and civility fall short of diplomacy between major powers, we are pleased to introduce the Ambassadorial Series. It is a compilation of conversations with eight outstanding American diplomats who served at various points of time as U.S. ambassadors to the Soviet Union and, after its dissolution, to the Russian Federation.

The Series provides nuanced analyses of crucial aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship, such as the transition from the Soviet Union to contemporary Russia and the evolution of Putin's presidency. It does so through the personal reflections of the ambassadors. As Ambassador Alexander Vershbow observes, "[t]he Ambassadorial Series is a reminder that U.S. relations with Putin's Russia began on a hopeful note, before falling victim to the values gap." At its heart, this project is conceived as a service to scholars and students of American diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia. The interviews, collected here as transcripts, form a unique resource for those who want to better understand the evolving relationship between the two countries.

We would like to express gratitude to our colleagues who collaborated on this project and to the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies staff members who supported it. Jill Dougherty is the face and voice of this project – bringing expertise, professionalism, and experience to the Series. Floyd Yarmuth at Rockhouse is a tireless partner – guiding the ambassadors through laptop adjustments and lighting tweaks – all over a Zoom call. Robert Legvold endowed our project with deep knowledge and provided the framework for the interview questions. Jarlath McGuckin provided expert support and good humor throughout the enterprise and kept us all on track while sourcing photographs and providing the voiceover for the podcast credits. We would like to thank Alina Kazakovtceva for her help with the project's implementation. Mollie Messick edited the transcripts for accuracy and punctuation and formatted them into this e-book. David Gibson and our colleagues at Middlebury College provided guidance and support on design and branding, as well as promotional assistance for the launch. Thank you to our new friends at Bluecadet (Kelly, Alyssa, Siji, and Andy) for their creativity and professionalism. Most of all, we would like to thank the former U.S. ambassadors to Russia and the Soviet Union who took part in this project for their time and their service to the United States: Jack F. Matlock, Thomas R. Pickering, James F. Collins, Alexander Vershbow, John Beyrle, Michael McFaul, John F. Tefft, and Jon Huntsman, Jr.

Special thanks to our colleagues at Carnegie Corporation of New York, whose support throughout the evolution of the project was crucial.

The Ambassadorial Series is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Vartan Gregorian – our lodestar in bringing this project to fruition.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
AMBASSADOR JACK F. MATLOCK (1987-1991)	1
AMBASSADOR THOMAS R. PICKERING (1993-1996)	11
AMBASSADOR JAMES F. COLLINS (1997-2001)	26
AMBASSADOR ALEXANDER VERSHBOW (2001-2005)	44
AMBASSADOR JOHN BEYRLE (2008-2012)	57
AMBASSADOR MICHAEL MCFAUL (2012-2014)	72
AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT (2014-2017)	88
AMBASSADOR JON HUNTSMAN, JR. (2017-2019)	101

This series was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

Ambassador Jack F. Matlock (1987-1991)

I sent my first message that the Soviet Union might break up in July 1990, 18 months before it happened. I didn't predict it then precisely. But I said it was possible, which I think came as a very great surprise to Washington.

INTERVIEW

Jill Dougherty

Ambassador Jack Matlock, thank you very much for talking with us. It's a real honor, and a personal pleasure because we've seen each other over the years. I think we kind of met or got to know each other way back in the '70s, and certainly in the '80s. So, I'm eager to hear what you have to say.

Ambassador Matlock

Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Jill Dougherty

Thank you. You were the ambassador to the USSR from 1987 to 1991. You were also the ambassador to Czechoslovakia. And you go way back with Russia. I was thinking of that period, from 1981 to 1991, and all of the momentous events of that period. You saw it from the viewpoint of several different jobs. You were a Foreign Service Officer, then you were the senior White House official dealing with Russia. And then finally, as the ambassador. Is there any one particular event that was extremely important and made a very big impression upon you?

Ambassador Matlock

You know, looking back at that period, I think that the most important thing I would take from it is that toward the end of the 1980s, right through the end of 1991, the world went through three almost seismically important geopolitical events. When I say seismically important, I would compare them to the clash of continents and their geopolitical effect. The first of these was the end of the Cold War, which totally changed the nature of international relations, not just in Europe but the world over.

The second was the fact that the Communist Party lost control of the Soviet Union. And the third was the Soviet Union itself collapsed. Now, the thing about these three things is that almost no one expected them to happen at that particular time. They came almost as a surprise, and looking back, people tend to conflate the three, as if it was all one big event. You even have TV shows ending the Cold War when the Soviet Union collapsed. That is incorrect because these three events, though they did have interconnections, had different causes.

The end of the Cold War occurred because of negotiation between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union, and it ended on terms that benefited everybody. So, if there was a winner, it was everybody. The change of leadership in the Soviet Union, that is, the loss of control of the country by the Communist Party was something that happened internally and was led by the leader of the Communist Party – something nobody would have predicted – Mikhail Gorbachev. And it was not forced by the West. In fact, if the Cold War had continued, it could not have happened.

Then the third, the breakup of the Soviet Union, was something that happened against the will of the United States. It was certainly not a victory in the Cold War, but it was because of internal pressures pushing the country apart. These pressures would not have done so if the Cold War had continued, and the arms race, because that acted like the walls of the pressure cooker, keeping the pressure there, keeping the pressure under control. So those three things, and the fact that they've been misinterpreted by many people since then, are, I would say, the main conclusion I would draw from my experience in those years.

Jill Dougherty

Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned, with the fall of the Soviet Union, that it was against the will of the United States, if I understood correctly.

Ambassador Matlock

That is correct.

Jill Dougherty

Because, if you look at the narrative today, many people say, "Well, we wanted them to collapse. We forced them to collapse." So, you don't agree with that at all?

Ambassador Matlock

Well, obviously there were people that wanted them to collapse. I'm not saying that everybody in our country wanted to preserve the Soviet Union, but certainly, President Bush and Secretary of State Baker, the people at the top, were trying to help Gorbachev, if we could, keep the twelve republics of the Soviet Union – all except the three Baltic countries – in a voluntary federation. And actually, Bush made a speech in Kyiv, August 1st, 1991, when he actually recommended that the Ukrainians, and implicitly the other non-Russian republics, adhere to Gorbachev's democratic federal system that he was operating. We would have preferred that. Obviously, our influence had little to do with it.

But the point is, this was not a victory for the West. We didn't perceive that at the time. And we certainly didn't cause it. In fact, the fact that the Cold War was over, the arms race was over, that we were actually pursuing the same ends internationally, meant that we would have preferred to deal with a country – once the three Baltic states were free, which we never recognized they were legally a part of the Soviet Union – we would have been very happy to deal with an increasingly democratic association of the twelve republics.

Jill Dougherty

Actually, you're making a wonderful point about the end of the Soviet Union. I'm thinking back to that period, and there was grave concern in the United States that Russia would literally collapse. That there would be loose nukes, that you would have civil war and destitution. That was a very difficult period, although there's a certain triumphalism now about it, but at that period, that was pretty frightening.

Ambassador Matlock

You're absolutely correct that many people have drawn that conclusion and have insisted on treating Russia as if it were a defeated nation and also exaggerating the extent of our power. Well, of course, we are a superpower in terms of our power to destroy. We can destroy the world if we so choose; I don't know why we would choose to do so. But nuclear weapons and the power of destruction do not give you the power to change other people's societies, to guarantee or help others establish a particular form of government. And, as a matter of fact, even during the Cold War, neither the United States nor the Soviet Union was very successful at that. So, the whole idea that, somehow, we came out not only stronger than anybody else – we did. But the nature of that strength was grossly exaggerated.

Jill Dougherty

You know, I'd like to turn to Mr. Gorbachev, because he is such a, I guess, misunderstood in his own country, perhaps. But he's such an important figure in Russian history. And you were in Moscow as the ambassador for most of his time in power. So, I wanted to ask you, just in terms of your evaluation of him, let's say, as a leader, and then also as a man.

Ambassador Matlock

He was a true reformer in that he really tried to move his country in a more democratic direction. Now, when he first became General Secretary, he thought he could do so with the support of the Communist Party. But, as he began to introduce reforms, he found that the whole party apparatus was opposing him. So, he chose, in effect, to take them, step by step, out of power, and this was something that nobody would have predicted. Many would say, "Why in the world would the General Secretary of the Communist Party try to destroy the Party?"

Well, he didn't actually try to destroy the Party, but he did try to take it out – successfully over time – take it out of exclusive power in the country. That, of course, was a very idealistic thing to try to do. And he obviously was not successful eventually in achieving the ultimate end, which would have been, I would say, a democratizing, voluntary federation of the Soviet Republics. But the fact is that it was not, in a sense, his fault. His hostility between him and Yeltsin, and then Boris Yeltsin, once he was elected President of the Russian Federation, conspired with the others, actually, to destroy the Soviet Union. So, the irony is that the elected leader of Russia was really the key figure in destroying the Soviet Union. Something else that many people don't quite understand.

Jill Dougherty

And then as a man. You met him, obviously, many times. You observed him. What kind of a man was he? Is he? He still is, but when you saw him.

Ambassador Matlock

Well, obviously he, like any other human being, he had a number of characteristics. Some of them, one could say, were contradictory. I think if we really look at ourselves objectively, we'll find we all have certain contradictions. I think he became a true believer in liberating his country from the totalitarian control of the Communist Party leader. At the same time, I think, he also wanted to improve the economy. I think he never really understood a market economy very well. And he was oftentimes hesitant in taking some of the big steps that were necessary in that area.

He did also tend to trust some of the people who were with him at the time, but then broke with him, more than he should have. After all, it was his KGB chief, who had been his ally earlier and who had been named by Gorbachev, who led the conspiracy against him. And to that Gorbachev seemed to be relatively blind until it happened. But basically, I would say he was an idealist who genuinely believed in what I would call social democracy of the, you might say, the Scandinavian type and who changed his views on many things under the pressure of events. And he took enormous chances and, you might say, was only partially successful.

But his real success, I think, was liberating his country from the control of the Communist Party. And by the way, in interviewing him after all of this happened for my books, he has said that that is the proudest thing, that he destroyed the totalitarian system. Well, the fact that the Russians haven't been able to create an ideal democracy since then, that's really up to them because outsiders, or even Gorbachev, can't do it for them.

But I do see him as a liberator, and I think that though most Russians don't, at this point, see him because what happened after he left was so painful for them, the near anarchy, and so on, I do think that he does not deserve the reputation as a failure, and I would hope that, in time, Russian historians would also see him more as a liberator. After all, you might say, Moses led his people out of bondage, but he doesn't get blamed because he didn't reach the Promised Land, and I have much the same attitude for Gorbachev.

Jill Dougherty

You know, as you were talking about him, I was thinking of President Putin. And I know you have observed him as well, up close. And I'm just thinking, if Gorbachev seems, in your telling, and I totally agree with that, as kind of a man of the future who could take himself out of his circumstance and see something to which he aspired, President Putin, and I think there are many people who feel this, is still kind of locked into his Soviet-era thinking.

I mean, there was a period early in Putin's presidency where he did some economic reform, and it felt as if he were going to do something differently, but over the past decade or so,

we've just seen kind of stagnation into that old thinking. Is that correct? Do you agree with that? And could you compare the two men?

Ambassador Matlock

I guess that would be, I think, a difficult question. I think to be fair to Putin, I would say he started out being – hoping to be – an ally of the United States. He was the first to call President Bush after 9/11, he offered full cooperation in our invasion of Afghanistan, including overflights, intelligence, and so on.

What did we do in exchange? We withdrew from some of our most basic agreements with Russia. We kept expanding NATO, something that the first President Bush had promised Gorbachev we would not do if he allowed the unification of Germany and Germany to stay in NATO. Step by step we pulled out of even our most basic agreements and then, increasingly, are surrounding Russia, right up to their borders, right up to beyond their borders of the former Soviet Union, with a military alliance which they are not in.

Now, no leader of Russia, no leader of any other country could maintain a cooperative relationship and also a full democracy in their country under conditions of that sort. So that the problem in Russia, and it is a strong one, was without a certain amount of strong leadership, you get something close to anarchy, which they had in the '90s. And Putin pulled them out of that. They were bankrupt, and now Putin built up a sufficient fund, a foreign currency that they weathered the world recession relatively well. And yet, every time, increasingly, their policies differed from ours, we would try to intervene using our power in a way that put them down. And then we eventually got into a virtual demonization of him.

I would simply remind people, I'm not his advocate; he's done a lot of things that I think are damaging to Russia. But after all, the Russian people are entitled to choose their leadership, and though his popularity may not be quite what it used to be, it is still greater in Russia than any of our recent presidents have been in the United States. And I would suggest that, before we condemn him too much, we think about that.

Jill Dougherty

Well, that's a good point. If I could return just for a moment to the fall of the Soviet Union because you left, if I'm correct, I think you left the Soviet Union just a few months before that actually happened. And I guess the question for everyone, but especially for you: did you see that coming? Did you have an inkling that anything like that was going to happen?

Ambassador Matlock

That is, the breakup of the Soviet Union? I didn't. You know, I sent my first message that the Soviet Union might break up in July 1990, 18 months before it happened. I didn't predict it then precisely. But I said it was possible, which I think came as a very great surprise to Washington. And I know later, now that these things have been declassified, I was told President Bush asked for an evaluation from the NSC. And the NSC evaluation said that, well, the embassy had been unnecessarily alarmist. But the thing is, what I saw in 1990 was the

development in the Russian Republic of a feeling that Russia would be better off independent of the other republics. And they would like to establish something like the EU instead of the Soviet Union. In fact, they would use that.

And I said, if the most progressive Russians no longer want to preserve the union, it's not going to be preserved because it was very clear that predominant opinion in many of the other republics wanted to leave the Soviet Union, wanted to leave the system. So, we were watching that. And, of course, one of the lessons for the United States, I thought, would be to speed up our arms reduction negotiations and create, as much as we could of, I'd say, a more peaceful world while Gorbachev could still deliver on these major agreements.

Jill Dougherty

So, if you were "unnecessarily alarmist" at that period, when it finally happened, did the Bush administration really grapple... Did they understand what was happening? It was very chaotic at the time.

Ambassador Matlock

Well, you know, they certainly understood that Gorbachev was under a lot of pressure, and there was fear that he would be removed. I think there was the assumption that if there was a coup against him, it would succeed. Now actually, my own opinion was - and I was, already had left Moscow, had retired from the Foreign Service, then the attempted coup occurred. But I said on television that first day that I thought it would not succeed, because I knew everybody involved, and I said, these people are not prepared for civil war, and therefore, I don't think this is going to be successful. Of course, two days later it was clear that it was not successful.

But it was successful in so reducing Gorbachev's authority and that of the Soviet Union that it allowed Yeltsin and the leaders of Belarus and Ukraine to meet, and in effect simply dissolve the Soviet Union. So, now, another thing that I think we did understand, because I had been given a warning that there was a conspiracy developing against Gorbachev, I was given the warning to convey it to Yeltsin who was then in Washington. And then I was asked to warn Gorbachev. And I tried to do so without naming the people involved. He didn't take it seriously. But it turned out that the people we had identified a month before the coup were, in fact, the leaders of the coup.

An irony there, however, is that when we made that report, President Bush talked to Gorbachev on a telephone line that was maintained by the KGB and actually named my source that was the mayor of Moscow. And later, the mayor of Moscow told me that he thought that that leak was one of the reasons that full coup failed. Because Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB who was organizing it, suddenly realized he had a leak. And he had to stop planning. And, of course, the fact that it was so poorly planned - many of the people who were expected to do certain things, like arrest Yeltsin, simply refused to do it when the coup came.

So, you know, later the mayor of Moscow told me, maybe it's a good thing the leak occurred because it may have been the flaw that prevented the coup from taking place. So, basically, I would say, basically, we did understand what was going on. I think if there was any difference, it was the assumption, I believe, on most of the Bush administration, and it would not be an unreasonable assumption, was that if there was a coup, it would succeed in replacing Gorbachev and many of the reforms would stop.

My own feeling was that, at that point, it was unlikely to succeed because the country had changed to the point that they would rise up, and that people like the coup planners were not prepared to maintain a civil war. They were not the sort of people that the Bolsheviks were when Lenin and Stalin and their associates took control of Russia.

Jill Dougherty

Ambassador Matlock, let me ask you a question that troubles me sometimes. Because right now, relations with Russia are very bad; there's no question. But it does raise the issue of, can we ever have normal relations with Russia? There's always something different. It's not Belgium. It is a very different country. And I think some people would hope someday that the United States and Russia could simply have a relationship as two regular countries, and not freighted with all of this history, and sometimes animosity. But what do you say to that? Is there a way that we can have stable, normal relations?

Ambassador Matlock

I - absolutely. I think that many of the problems today are not only exaggerated, but quite distorted. Basically, U.S. interests and Russian interests are much more convergent than they are different. I mean, if we look at the real dangers facing us, well, first of all, we've got this pandemic. This is something we're all in together, this is not... We're either going to solve it as human beings, or we're going to have the problem and probably the COVID-19 problem is not the last of these. So, this is something that, clearly, it's in our interest to cooperate because, until you control it everywhere, it's not controlled.

Second, of course, nuclear weapons. If they are ever used, even partially of the ones now, it is difficult to see how mankind is going to survive. It is certainly in our mutual interest to make sure they're not used. And then global warming, climate change. These are problems that obviously affect us all. And these are much bigger problems than where you draw the line between Russia and Ukraine. I mean, that has never had any relevance to American security, and it shouldn't today. And, I think, if we understand that we do not have a formula that fits everybody. We say we must spread democracy, well, I like democracy, too. I think we should have it, but I know that people can only create democracy for themselves; outsiders can't do it.

And one thing, you don't understand another society enough. But the whole idea that if we don't like something Russia does, we have to sanction them, or we have to make them pay a price for something they're doing which they consider important in their national interest, that is not going to work. It's not going to work with Russia, it's not going to work with China or

anywhere else in the world. And what worries me today is that we seem to be reverting to the sort of competition as to who is going to control what part of the world that brought us to world wars in the 20th century. We know how they ended. We should understand that if we get into that frame of thought, all of us are going to lose.

The point is that if we solve the big problems – I've named some of them, others are the collapse of states; the migration of people, which is going to continue because of global warming and other environmental changes; failed states – all of these things are problems for all of us. And to start trying to, in effect, dictate what kind of government other people have, I think, is a losing strategy. And I do think, although I don't, by any means, approve of everything Russia has done. However, I do find that current hostility is in reaction to what they consider an American policy of treating them as losers, of humiliating them, of, in effect, demonizing their leaders. And we're doing this talking about corruption, which, of course, is there, while at the same time ignoring our own, and we've already seen from the latest election how divided we are, and how fragile our own democracy is.

So, you know, I really think we have to be a little more, I would say, objective about our own behavior, and certainly in, I believe, our own interest, we need to cooperate not just with Russia, but also to have a cooperative relationship with China. It will have competitive aspects, as any relationship will. But these should be kept peaceful, and we should begin to diminish our attempt, in effect, to police the world, or to transform it into the image we inaccurately have of ourselves.

Jill Dougherty

I have just a couple of more questions. Do you have advice for future ambassadors to Russia?

Ambassador Matlock

I have to say that an ambassador can do very little to improve a relationship unless the policy of his country allows him to, or her. The fact is, ambassadors represent their governments, their presidents, their secretaries of state - they cannot. Of course, they can advise, and I was very lucky that I had a president and a secretary of state that consulted me, listened to me. We had a wonderful relationship, but if the policies of your country are one that is trying to dominate or deny the country things that they feel are important to them, there's not much an ambassador can do to improve that. Given the fact that, if the ambassador is lucky enough to have a president and secretary of state who are, let's say, supporting good relations or resolution of problems with the country, obviously, the ambassador can do a lot and it helps a great deal.

Although it is not an absolute prerequisite, if you know the language of the country, if you understand its history, then you might say the psychology of many of the people, if you have at least the personal skills that you can become personal friends of the leaders, that they will confide in you, that also requires discretion. There were some things that I would be told by Soviet leaders that I wouldn't put in a telegram, because I knew it might leak. But I would do a

handwritten letter to the secretary of state and ask him to share it only with the president and the national security advisor.

So, I would say there are a lot of things, but an ambassador is able to, I think, much better able to interpret for his own government what is going into another country if the ambassador knows the people there. If you know them in sufficient depth that you can socialize with them and deal with them in their own language, you learn a lot more. So, I would say that preparation, you know, for successful diplomacy certainly means that you need to develop the skills that a diplomat, any diplomat needs anywhere. But if you add to that some in-depth knowledge of the country where you are accredited, and if you're able to go back there enough that you make actual friends, then, I think, that will certainly enhance the policy of any government.

Jill Dougherty

Okay. And that leads me to the very last question. You've been very generous with your time. But it's a perfect introduction to what I wanted to ask, which is, if anybody knows Russia, and if anybody has a long history of being deeply interested in that country, it is you, because you started in college. Even before, perhaps even before, but I know you studied Russia. You've taught the Russian language. Throughout your career, you have really looked at that country very deeply and I'm sure that you have very strong feelings about it.

So, asking you to pull that together with your many years of experience, is there some concept, or idea, or understanding of Russia that you have? That could help us try to understand Russia in these difficult times? Is there a truth of Russia that you understand?

Ambassador Matlock

Well, I think you have to, first of all, know something about their culture and their historical experience, and you have to have at least enough empathy to understand how they look at things. After all, this is a country that has been repeatedly invaded and occupied by outsiders. We haven't been, you know. We've been in wars, but not even the war of 1812 were we really occupied by the British. So, we have never experienced a neighbor invading us and occupying our territory for an extended period of time.

That, undoubtedly, leads to a different psychology into a number of things. And I'm naming just one of many characteristics, but also, I'd say Russia, like every other country, is full of contradictions. George Kennan once said that anytime you're confronted with two contradictory statements about Russia, the safest assumption is that both are true. But, you know, you can sort of laugh at that, but if you think about it, doesn't the same apply to us? If we're really being objective! So, the fact is that, I think, the basic thing in dealing with Russians or anybody else is not to forget that we're all human beings. Nations interacting with each other are not like billiard balls clashing, but they are human beings interacting, and common-sense skills in dealing with human beings, or the application of the classical Golden Rule, offer sometimes the best advice, I think, for a successful diplomacy.

Jill Dougherty

Well, Ambassador Jack Matlock, thank you very, very much.

Ambassador Matlock

Thank you very much for the opportunity.