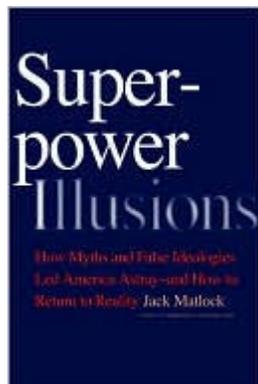


Superpower Illusions: How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray--and How to Return to Reality

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I would like to thank you all for joining us.

For this afternoon's conversation we are delighted to welcome back one of our nation's most distinguished diplomats, Jack Matlock.

[The last time Ambassador Matlock participated in one of our programs](#) he discussed his book [Autopsy on an Empire](#), which was an account of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Today he will go a bit further and talk about how the end of the Cold War diminished, rather than enhanced, America's power, giving rise to misconceived policies that still haunt us today. The title of this book is [Super Illusions: How Myths and False Ideologies Led America Astray--and How to Return to Reality](#).

One of the most important events of the second half of the 20th century occurred when the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991. Although reactions to the events and interpretations about the actual demise of the Soviet Union have been analyzed in profoundly different ways, one thing is clear: the breakup of the Soviet Union ushered in a new era of international politics.

In America many saw this as the defining moment in a new triumphalist narrative. However, Ambassador Matlock makes it clear that not only does he believe this to be fundamentally wrong, but ill-conceived.

Our guest is a fluent Russian speaker who served four tours of duty in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow and has thought deeply about how to apply the lessons of those times to the challenges we have faced since then. Between 1983, when he joined the National Security Council, and in the late 1980s as President [Reagan's](#) ambassador to Moscow, Ambassador Matlock had the opportunity to be personally involved in events that turned out to be among the most important in this crucial period of world history.

In *Superpower Illusions* he reexamines Soviet-American diplomacy during these tumultuous times to reassess the key decisions made by Reagan and [Gorbachev](#) that led to a thawing of relations between the two countries. Ambassador Matlock writes that "from the moment communism collapsed, America missed opportunities and made mistakes which over time became a part of a legacy that has not been easy to correct."

This is an instructive story about how the United States failed to exploit a triumph from the Cold War that could have built a new international order reflecting U.S. interests and principles. For example, he writes that during the [Clinton](#) years, and particularly during the [Bush-Cheney](#) administrations, the erroneous belief that the United States had defeated the Soviet Union led to a conviction that we did not need allies, international organizations, or diplomacy, but could dominate and change the world by using its military power unilaterally. The result, he believes, is a weakened America that has compromised its ability to lead.

In concluding, it will come as no surprise that Ambassador Matlock makes a passionate plea for America at this time and with this present to re-envision our foreign policy. He advocates an approach that would take into account lessons we should have learned from our experience in ending the Cold War, lessons that are consistent with a policy of cooperation, rather than one of domination, to offer concrete suggestions that can in time restore

America's strength and leadership.

Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our speaker today, Ambassador Jack Matlock.

Thank you for joining us.

Remarks

JACK MATLOCK: Thank you very much for those kind words. You know, you have summarized what I have to say so expertly that I wonder if I even need to present it.

But let me say as initial background, I am often reminded of my favorite American philosopher, [Yogi Berra](#). Now, I'm told that Yogi has said that half the things or more that are quotations he never remembered saying them. But one of these that are attributed to him I have found profoundly correct. It is that "it's not what you don't know that gets you in trouble, it's what you know that ain't so."

In looking back at so many of the attitudes regarding the Cold War, the way it ended, and what has happened since, I think they have been so mistaken and yet so widespread that they have been the basis of getting us off course from the foreign policy that we should have had. They have certainly prevented us as Americans from fully making use of the advantages that the end of the Cold War presented at that time.

There are a number of myths out there which I think are quite unfounded, but some that I would identify are:

First of all, the widespread belief that the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was a multipart documentary of the Cold War that was broadcast I think on CNN, and it ends with the Russian flag being raised on the Kremlin, the end of the Cold War being the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I was shown that last portion of that by the producer before it was released to the public, and I said, "That gets it all wrong. The Cold War ended well before that, at least two years before that."

He said, "Yes, but that's not dramatic."

I said, "Well, okay. Are you talking about drama or about history?"

So that's one of them.

The second was that the United States defeated the Soviet Union by superior military strength and economic pressure. That is simply not true, because the Soviet Union collapsed after the Cold War ended. As a matter of fact, it probably wouldn't have collapsed if the Cold War had not ended beforehand.

To take that even further, one even hears things like "Russia was defeated in the Cold War." But Russia was not even a party to the Cold War. Russia was one of the units of the Soviet Union, and actually, once Russia had its own leaders, they cooperated with us very closely, even at times being disloyal to the Soviet leadership as a whole.

Another one is the widespread feeling that the United States was the sole superpower. There had been two superpowers, you see, and one of them disappeared; therefore, there must be only one. Well, yes, there were two countries in the world with enough military force to destroy it. There are still two countries in the world with enough military force to destroy it.

Neither of us were superpowers in terms of our ability to force or induce other countries to do our will, unless they saw it in their interest. One of the things that allowed the United States to be as powerful as it was during the Cold War was the feeling of so many countries that they needed us to protect them from communism and from an expansionist Soviet Union. When that was no longer a threat, U.S. power became less.

So all the speculation about a unipolar world, or even a unipolar moment, I think is totally misplaced. But the thing is, it deluded not only many of our leaders, it deluded leaders elsewhere. If you have a problem in the world after the Cold War was over and the United States doesn't fix it, it must be either because we are indifferent or because we are hostile. And, of course, much of our triumphalist rhetoric played right into that sort of attitude.

Another mistake was thinking of the Cold War as if it was a real war. Now, a metaphorical war is not a real war. The same is true of the so-called war on terrorism. And yet, we had people talking as if the Cold War was in effect

World War III, and of course the late [Norman Podhoretz](#) actually wrote a book called *World War IV*, calling the war against terrorism as if it was somehow comparable to the first two World Wars.

Of course, the Cold War was totally different and it ended in a totally different fashion. To think of it as if it were a war, again, just puts everything backwards almost, many things.

And then we get into "we won the Cold War." Yes, the Cold War ended on terms we set, but I can assure you we set terms that were in the interests of the Soviet Union willing to live in peace and not force its system on others. Gorbachev began to understand that, and by 1987 he had accepted our agenda, the one that President Reagan put forward, to end the confrontation, which was costly to both of us, but much more so to the weaker economy in the Soviet Union, in the interests of both countries. We negotiated an end which was in the interests of both countries.

Now, it seems to me that, looking back on that period, three geopolitically seismic events occurred in the late 1980s and by 1991. The three are connected but they are quite separate and they have different causations.

One was the end of the Cold War. Ideologically, the Cold War was over by the end of 1988, when Gorbachev officially in the UN rejected the [Marxian](#) class struggle as the foundation of Soviet foreign policy. That was the ideological basis of the ideological confrontation, which in my opinion is what was behind the Cold War.

Now, it took another couple of years to confirm that his actions were consistent with that. But I can tell you, as a diplomat, that after that we and Soviet diplomats—it had been changing before, but we no longer were playing the zero-sum game of the Cold War. We had the same aims, and the attempt was to work it out in a way which would not be damaging to the true interests of either side.

Every agreement Gorbachev made was in the interests of the Soviet Union, and he did it because he recognized that their previous policies had not been in their own interests.

I would say that one of the ways that Reagan first framed the issues, he framed them as cooperative issues. Going back to a speech that he gave in January 1984, he used the word "cooperation" I think something like 30-odd times, and every issue was posed not as "they must do this" or "they must do that." "We must cooperate to reduce arms and end the arms race, we must cooperate to protect human rights, we must cooperate to build a better working relationship"—which means you've got to bring down the Iron Curtain, but you don't phrase it that way.

Of course, it took a few years— not very many—for this to sink in. So the Cold War ended as a negotiated end in the interests of both countries.

Then the second thing which happened, which I call geopolitically seismic because these things really did rearrange the political geography of the world—the second thing was that the Communist Party lost control of the Soviet Union. Now, did it lose control because of the pressure we brought on it? Absolutely not. The more pressure we brought on it, the more hostile that regime was and the more they tended to crush their own people in an arms race and what not.

Gorbachev ended the control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and he was probably the only person who could have done it, because that system was one which probably could not have been brought down bottom-up. Yes, there was a good bit of opposition, but as long as the party controlled, with all of the instruments of the KGB and the military—they could easily control the brave dissidents who were willing to speak out, and they could do it without going through the massacres and mass killings that [Stalin](#) had used earlier.

But Gorbachev understood basically that the system had to change fundamentally. When major elements in the party began to object to that, he step by step took the party out of real control of the country. That's the story I tried to tell in the book you mentioned, *Autopsy on an Empire*. He did that, and he was able to do that, only because the Cold War had already ended.

Finally, the Soviet Union breaks up. Did we bring that about? No. In fact, we didn't want it to happen. We were determined to support the reestablishment of independence of the three Baltic countries, which we had never recognized legally as part of the Soviet Union. But we would have been very happy to see a voluntary federation among the remaining 12 Soviet republics.

As a matter of fact, the first President [Bush](#) made that very clear when he visited the Soviet Union in June 1991. He gave a speech that became rather infamous in Kiev. [Bill Safire](#), the late columnist in *The New York Times*, called it his "[chicken Kiev speech](#)," which was a very clever phrase but completely misrepresented the message of the speech.

He endorsed directly Gorbachev's effort to bring about a negotiated union treaty and he said two significant things, not just to the Ukrainians, because we had briefed the press this is for all the non-Russian Soviet republics. He said freedom and independence are not synonymous; you must choose freedom.

And he warned against suicidal nationalism. What did he have in mind? He had in mind the civil war already going on in Georgia, when the Georgians had attacked Tskhinvali. It was not the [South Ossetians](#) who attacked Georgia, but the Georgians who had begun that civil war by attacking their minorities.

So the point was—and people have often asked me, "Why was it that you had that policy?" Well, it was because the Soviet Union was changing, and it was changing very, very fundamentally. By that time East Europe was already free.

The Baltic states, despite the fact that by the summer of 1991 they had not been officially recognized, Gorbachev had carefully avoided using any authorized violence—there had been violence in Lithuania and a little bit in Riga, but it was clearly something that he was not behind, and in fact it ended.

So the situation was that he was definitely moving in a democratizing direction within the Soviet Union. He had welcomed the non-communist leaders of the various East European countries, which had democratically gotten their independence. He even agreed that a united Germany, with East Germany simply absorbed into West Germany, could stay in NATO.

We were seeing the consummation of, I would say, the end of all of relics of the Cold War which had been so important.

Now, what were the possibilities when the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed? I think there was a possibility for the United States, which did emerge as by far the strongest country in the world both militarily and economically, to at that point promote multilateralism and regional solutions to local and regional problems.

We no longer had a reason to maintain thousands of bases abroad throughout the world. We no longer had a Soviet Union confronting us in an ideological struggle. Instead we had a democratizing Russia, with less than half the people of the Soviet Union and an economy and a military that had been virtually destroyed. The need for us somehow to confront the communist monolith, what was perceived as the communist monolith, was no longer there.

So I think that the strategy should have been to negotiate carefully a withdrawal of the United States as a direct participant in problems far from our borders, encouraging with our cooperation regional solutions. Now, obviously that would have to be done in a phased way, but I think that was the possibility.

I don't think there was ever any possibility that we could create an empire or a [Pax Americana](#) or that the American people should accept the duties as a world policeman. I discuss in my book the various fallacies that got us into that.

I feel that President Clinton really ignored many of the opportunities, not so much because he had bad policies but because he had no strategy in foreign affairs. His concentration, of course, was on the economy, and he had some real achievements there, particularly a balanced budget. But there was a lack of attention, particularly in his first term, to some of the possibilities.

One of the most prominent ones, of course, was after the [Oslo Agreement](#) to operate more actively to help the Palestinian-Israeli settlement there. It was clear—it had been clear all along—that as long as Israel continues the settlements in the occupied territories there is not going to be a solution, and that is not in Israel's interest. Well, nothing was done until almost the end of his second term. This is one of the things.

I think it was another strategic error to begin expanding NATO the way it was done. Now, I'm quite aware that the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe needed some assurance that history was not going to repeat itself. But you don't do that, it seems to me, by expanding what had been a Cold War instrument. You do it by creating new institutions. There will be stability and security in Europe only when the major powers of Europe are all part of a system to do it.

There should have been—and I think it was negotiable—a way to bring Russia, with the full responsibilities, into the security structure of Europe, with a full voice but also responsibilities. That also, in my opinion, would have helped us solve the problems in the Balkans before the violence occurred, or, if they could not be solved in other ways, we could have had whatever action was taken authorized in the UN by following up the initial expansion of NATO with the attacks on Serbia when Serbia had not attacked any NATO country and we had assured the world, including the Russians, that NATO was incapable by its very constitution of aggressive action but only would

respond to attacks on its members.

Well, instead of a UN resolution, we say, "Well, NATO can make this decision" and you bomb another country, because of, yes, human rights violations. But in so doing you inadvertently send a message to the world, to other countries: if you don't have nuclear weapons, you can be a target of the U.S. Air Force. I think this is one of the things. Of course, if Serbia had had any nuclear weapons, we never of course would have bombed them.

So these things led to problems, and of course the Bush Administration. As I said, I think that the Clinton Administration did not take advantage of opportunities. Actually, at the time, they made, for reasons which seemed humanitarian and maybe good intentions in many respects, but nevertheless we know where the road paved with good intentions can sometimes lead.

The Bush Administration destroyed those opportunities. I think we went so far away from legality and multinational dealing with issues—and this is particularly true in the decision to invade Iraq; I think also by declaring a war on terror and then, even though it was not a war declared by Congress—and could not have been, because it was not against another country—the administration began to act as if this gave the president war powers, and we get all of the problems that we are now trying to deal with—with Guantanamo, with torture, and so on—where it seems to me that there's only one legal way to go to war, according to the Constitution, and that's a declaration of war. This gets us back to the problem of looking at a metaphor of war as if it's the real thing.

As I point out in the book—and I had finished the final draft and the final touches on it last May—I had great hopes for the [Obama](#) Administration because it seemed that as the general direction he was going to turn us in the right direction, and I think in general he has.

One of the issues I have not mentioned yet, and I should have, is the whole matter of nuclear weapons. With Reagan and Gorbachev, and then followed up pretty effectively by the first George Bush, we were on the road to a goal of abolishing nuclear weapons. We could have gotten the Russians onboard certainly in the early 1990s up to the mid-1990s, until we started some of the other things that created the difficulties with them.

That was sort of put on the back burner. Then, with the walking out of the [ABM Treaty](#), by negotiating an agreement for reductions without verification, and indeed taking weapons off deployment and storing them rather than destroying them, we go against all of the things that we had so painfully negotiated in order to end the Cold War and start the major reduction of nuclear weapons.

So we are left with this problem today, and we as yet have not been able quite to conclude the agreement for further reductions. I'm told that they are very close to it at the moment, but there are problems there.

In any event, I do think that the Obama Administration turned the general direction of our policy. In speeches in Cairo and speeches in Prague and others, I think he has set forth a policy that I would strongly support.

In practice, however, it has been extraordinarily difficult to bring the full weight of our policy behind it because there are so many vested interests pushing in a different direction. And of course, I think it's probably natural that in his first year, clearly, he had to avoid another depression, he had to deal with the financial crisis.

He has put forward, and I think quite properly, health care reform, the first of it, and we all are aware of the various difficulties that he has run into politically.

And I quite understand that some of these other things in foreign affairs he is not going to be able to push to the degree I would like to see until the public can see some achievements on the domestic side. I think there are those achievements.

At the moment I do see a direction that our politics is taking which has me very worried. I think that the great divide that we see now, the contention, the unwillingness of the Republican leadership to cooperate it would seem in anything, is not good for the country.

I would simply look back. I know very well when I was working in the Reagan Administration—and by the way, I was a registered Democrat the whole time; they never asked me because that was irrelevant—I saw how Reagan could work very carefully with [Ted Kennedy](#), for example, with [Tip O'Neill](#), and how despite differences we were able to put together policies that were supported substantially by both parties. That was because I think our leaders at that time were not so confrontational, not so divided.

That atmosphere I think really began to end around 1994 with the victory of, you might say, the [Newt Gingrich](#) wing of the Republican Party, and we don't seem to have gotten away from it since.

I've talked longer than I really intended to, but that will give you an idea of what's in the book.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. That was a wonderful, illuminating talk.

What, if any, difference was there in the dynamic of the Baltic states becoming independent and democratized as compared to the new Islamic states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union?

JACK MATLOCK: That's a very good question.

First of all, the three Baltic countries had been independent between the two World Wars. That's a vitally important thing in terms of one's heritage.

The republics in Central Asia had never in modern times been independent states. But within the Soviet Union, given their nationality policy, the way that it had been worked out, they were given state structure, which was by the constitution actually one which had more rights than American states, because even in Stalin's constitution there was a right of secession, although this was put in totally hypocritically you might say, because as long as the Communist Party was in control there was no way anybody could raise the question.

Nevertheless, the fact was that, particularly during the [Brezhnev](#) period, the long Brezhnev period, most of the party cadres in these republics were taken over by people of those republics.

Stalin had handled it differently. He always made sure that the second secretary was a Russian and not of that nationality, and the second secretary had the real power.

Brezhnev began to let, in effect, the local nationality, the titular nationality, take over the party structure. So that, for example, in Kazakhstan, although Kazakhs make up at times a minority of the population, they had maybe 80-90 percent of the party cadres.

So what happened—and this is one of the reasons that those of us who understood the process that was going on under Gorbachev's reforms thought that the 12 non-Baltic republics would be better off sticking with them in a voluntary way, because Gorbachev's central committee at that time was actually protecting the democratic forces and keeping them from being suppressed. This was particularly true in the five Central Asian republics.

Now, breaking up at the time they did, in four of them the party secretaries simply took over as dictators. And since there had not been any substantial privatization, they got the whole enchilada—the economy, the politics, the police, everything, even a part of the former Soviet army that was stationed in their republic.

In the case of Tajikistan, they had a civil war over it. And of course they had a civil war briefly in Georgia that kept coming back at times. And you had something very close to a war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

I would say the premature breakup meant that the democratizing forces, which were very real and moving very rapidly under Gorbachev, simply were wiped out.

And the same thing happened in Belarus, Central Asian Belarus in particular.

Each of these republics is unique. It's difficult to talk about them in general.

In the case of Ukraine, there was what I call an unholy alliance between the communist managers in the east and the Ukrainian nationalists in the west, a problem that has still divided Ukraine. The prime minister just resigned yesterday finally. The new president is trying to put together a government. Ukraine has still not produced, I think, a truly effective government here, and we are now on close to 20 years of independence.

So I think that's the reason many of us worried about it at the time and would have preferred at least a few more years of Gorbachev's reforms.

QUESTION: You talked about about democratization under Gorbachev. I would like to hear from you how do you see [Putin's](#) Russia. Even though [Medvedev](#) is there, we still call Russia "Putin's Russia," and probably you know why; where Russia had moved from Gorbachev as you described, all the process, to Putin's Russia. Thank you very much.

JACK MATLOCK: Clearly, Putin's Russia is one where we have seen a reassertion of autocracy and autocratic

methods. But it has been combined with, I would say, a very rough capitalism based mainly on simply the seizure—theft I guess would be the word—of most of the property that happened in the 1990s.

People have characterized what happened under Putin's Russia as a backtracking on democracy. I think that is incorrect. Russia did not have democracy.

I would say that Russians were freer in most essential respects in 1991, the last year of the Soviet Union, than they have been since, because what they had after that was close to chaos. It was much more like anarchy. They saw the state property go from the hands of an exploitative communist party to the hands of a few oligarchs and criminals who simply stole it.

The thing that people missed, I think, in this is that you cannot simply isolate political freedom and the prospects of democracy from economics. Sure, as the second President Bush often said, people everywhere desire freedom. Well, yes, if they have sustenance, shelter, and safety, of course they do. But suppose you don't have any of those three and the government is incapable of giving it to you.

And yet, in talking about in the abstract political freedoms—and, oh yes, they had polls, and they could elect people to the [Duma](#), and the people of the Duma for the most part were bought by the oligarchs and the constituents had no control over them whatsoever.

So this façade of democracy was, I would say, no more effective in the 1990s for most Russians than the façade of socialist democracy was under communism. It was just a different box.

And things became much less predictable. The thing I would hear often when I visited in the 1990s were complaints that "Everything is so unpredictable. What's going to happen tomorrow?"

Putin gave them predictability and, by making use of the rising energy prices, oil and gas, he began to put Russia back on the map as a power, and he used it very calculatedly in that fashion.

On the security side, the feeling that Russia had been clipped at the end of the Cold War, had been promised, as they were politically, that we would not take advantage of the liberalization of Eastern Europe—and that was an agreement that Bush made in December 1989 at the meeting in Malta, the understanding that if he withdrew from Eastern Europe and let Germany unite, that we again would not take advantage, and in the case of the German reuniting, they were told explicitly NATO would not extend its jurisdiction to the east.

Now, these were not legally binding agreements, they were nothing that could be enforced, but they were the result, free, that we would particularly not move Cold War-type structures into that area but would bring them into Europe.

I think what happened, and what Putin has used politically, is the feeling that they were tricked, that we did not incorporate them into a united Europe. We had told them we wanted a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals and we end up re-dividing it, just pushing the line further and further east, to their disadvantage.

Now, many of their troubles were internal and were their own problems. But the fact is that that perception played, along with the whole weakness and the near-bankruptcy of Russia in 1998, when of course they defaulted on their government loans and came very close to bankruptcy—the feeling was that we simply wanted to turn them into a colony, that we were surrounding them with bases. We didn't stop in Eastern Europe, but then we began to talk even of places like Ukraine and Georgia, which gets very traumatic when you are talking about places that were part of the Russian empire for centuries.

So under those pressures we got a resurgence of Russian nationalism, not nearly as vicious as we got under [Hitler](#) and a resurgence under other conditions when after World War I the Germans felt they had been defeated and pushed upon. But at the same time much of the Russian nationalism that we have seen and the current feeling that they have been pushed out and therefore they've got to push back has fed that.

I am not blaming us for what happened under Putin. The Russians have supported it on the whole, full *kamir* [phonetic] one might say. And I don't think it is good for Russia. But it is something that they are going to have to work out.

I think that every country—and I make this point pretty strongly in my book—has to work out the circumstances of democracy. I do think that this is the tendency in the world. I do think that democracy is the future. But it has to be consistent with the society and the culture and the values of each society. People have to build it for themselves.

To think that we have any leverage over Russia, that we can affect these decisions, except negatively, by what is

seen to be hostility, I think is a mirage. So I've said it's not that I don't value democracy in Russia, but to use that as an excuse for not cooperating where our interests are identical or very close is simply self-defeating, because we don't have the leverage to have them adopt the sort of system we have. And of course, some of our recent behavior calls into question how devoted we are to democracy. I have to be frank.

So I think Putin has done Russia a disservice in many ways by bringing an autocratic system back in, one which is still too much run by a corrupt system of oligarchs and bureaucracy. But at the same time we have contributed to some degree by our foreign policy I would say in making that a popular thing in Russia.

I think if we can get back to more cooperation, and I would say specifically now that President Medvedev has spoken of negotiating, you might say, a new security structure in Europe, we should take that seriously. There's not much content in it yet, but we should say, "Yes, we should consider a new structure. We need to have Russia involved. We want Russia to be a partner, taking full responsibility along with whatever few privileges there are." I hope we are working in that direction.

Meanwhile there are other questions here and I won't continue on this, except to say that we still don't know to what degree Medvedev's policies are going to be different from Putin's and who is going really to be the successor to Medvedev as president.

Formally speaking, the Russian president has much more power over foreign policy than the prime minister. However, we know that power in Russia, like in many places, has not always followed the formal lines. To use a hackneyed phrase, much of Russian politics is like a dogfight under a rug. If you're not under that rug with them, you don't really have that much feel for who is doing what to whom.

So we are still seeing a fascinating, for me, effort. Certainly, Medvedev talks a different line and is personally quite different. Whether that will produce different leadership in Russia we still will have to see.

QUESTION: Ambassador Matlock, I wonder if you could comment on the significance of the [Reykjavik meeting](#) between Gorbachev and Reagan in 1995. I know you were there.

JACK MATLOCK: Yes.

QUESTIONER: My sense is—and maybe this is one of those myths which creep up in the public mind—is that Gorbachev made quite a strenuous effort to get us to drop [Star Wars](#). The president resisted, and Gorbachev went back and decided that [perestroika](#) really was the only way for the future.

JACK MATLOCK: Yes. Again, a very good question. It's one that in my Reagan and Gorbachev I spent two chapters on, one on the Reykjavik conference itself and one on the implications.

They came very close to concluding an agreement which probably would have been unworkable, which was actually to eliminate nuclear weapons in ten years. The emotions of the two of them I think got so intense that they got past what was going to be politically possible at that time. I don't see how we possibly at that time could have actually formulated treaties to bring this about unless other things happened.

Now, you know, one of the myths is that Gorbachev by demanding ten years in laboratories was trying to kill the [Strategic Defense Initiative](#). I've never liked the Star Wars concept because, knowing it from the inside, we had already by that time decided that any space-based defenses were impossible—in fact, [Andrei Sakharov](#) taught us that—because it's much easier and cheaper to bring something down out of space than it is to put it up.

So we were never thinking primarily—out there in the public we did have a lot of speculation—but within the administration it was very clear that if we had missile defenses they were going to be land-, sea-, or possibly air-based, they were not going to be space-based. So the whole imagery of Star Wars was simply inappropriate. But it stuck on. That's one thing.

Keeping it in ten years in laboratories would not have killed it. In fact, we needed another ten years in laboratories. When I got back from Reykjavik, one of the first things [John Poindexter](#), who was still national security adviser, then told me was, "We can accept eight, and maybe even ten. I should have spoken up there. So why don't you write me a paper and let's look at the other things we have to do along the way other than arms control to make the scenario at Reykjavik feasible."

I sent him that memo the day before he resigned over [Iran contra](#). The whole Iran contra thing took out of the White House the very people who understood enough of the various issues to get us back on the negotiating track.

A second issue there was whether we ban ballistic missiles. That was Reagan's proposal. It was one that if we had

gotten the other things we wanted we were willing to drop. But Gorbachev never really entertained that one, and it was an important one. We've never come back to it since.

But it's one thing we need to think about, because the weapons of surprise, the weapons that start wars, the weapons that destroy infrastructure, are ballistic missiles. Once a war starts, they're useless except just for destruction because you have to be mobile if you're actually fighting one, particularly the sort of wars that we fight now. But that was never seriously entertained. So it wasn't just that.

I must say that at the time I thought that the ten years would not kill it. Reagan was under the impression that it would, and we never really had a chance to convince him because of Iran contra and other things that happened in Washington.

Later, when I was researching my books, I asked Gorbachev, "Were you trying to give him an out because this wouldn't have killed it?" He said, "No, I was trying to kill it. I thought it would." So the irony is that it wouldn't have.

I think it's also an irony that one of Gorbachev's big mistakes was not engaging Reagan on what the idea was, because Reagan was very sincere in saying, "This is only a research project to see if they are feasible. I'm not asking for the right to deploy, and I will not ask for the right to deploy, unless we eliminate our strategic weapons, because to have a defense when those weapons are still there can be threatening to the other side." He understood that. He said, "I ask you only to let this go forward as we reduce our weapons, and we will share."

When Gorbachev said, "Don't be silly. You won't even share automated milking machines with us," he said, "No. You can have access to our labs to make sure we are not doing anything offensive."

If Gorbachev had said, "Okay, let's do it together," Reagan would have said, "Fine." He would have had hell to pay with the bureaucracy, but I knew him well enough then that he would have insisted and we would have had a joint program—something that, by the way, Putin has offered and of course the second George Bush turned down.

It's an important issue because it's still an issue, and now that we are actually deploying missile defenses and doing it in a way that the Russians feel could theoretically give us a first-strike advantage if they worked—it hasn't been proved yet they will—I think there is every reason in the world to have a joint program. I would bring the Chinese in that too, because I don't think we are going to get the reduction of those nuclear weapons down to the levels we need to reduce them, which is theoretically to zero, unless we deploy missile defenses in a way they can't be used against each other while we still have them. But that hasn't happened yet.

Now, in a broader sense what did Reykjavik give us? When Gorbachev looked back the following year, after his anger had subsided a bit, what he saw in his mind was a man on the other side of the table who was desperately trying to find a way to eliminate nuclear weapons. That was the issue that the two eventually bonded on. Today you will find nobody who is more energetic in defending Ronald Reagan as a man of judgment and real weight than Mikhail Gorbachev.

They were two dreamers. They shared that dream. It's one of our great, I think, mistakes that in the 1990s we threw it away. Whether we can get it back I don't know.

QUESTION: What in your view is the basis for Gorbachev's statement in 1984 or 1985 that class war was over? And to what extent do you think that Reagan's first term of militancy and increasing defense budgets and so on was a factor in persuading Gorbachev that the class war had to be over?

JACK MATLOCK: A very good question. The whole matter of the theoretical foundation of the Cold War, which I think was an ideological one. As I point out in my book, I trace the origin of the Cold War back to 1917. It began to take military and geopolitical form after World War II, but the ideology goes back to the [Bolshevik Revolution](#).

In 1988 there was a very active debate, which very few people here paid attention to. I was ambassador then and I was paying attention to it because the ideology had always fascinated me and I knew it was important. That was precisely whether the foreign policy of the Soviet Union was ultimately based on the international class struggle, meaning are we supporters of a proletarian revolution against the bourgeoisie to create a Marxian communist society. This had been the ideology from the very beginning of [Lenin's](#) time on, and it had never been dropped until it was challenged in 1988, philosophically challenged by [Yakovlev](#), and he did it in a speech.

Then he was answered by then the number two, [Ligachev](#), to the point that in the summer of 1988 I asked [Shevardnadze](#), the foreign minister—I had no instructions from Washington—just "What is your philosophy now?"

He said immediately—it was what Gorbachev and he, Shevardnadze, were talking, as if this was not the basis of the foreign policy.

Then, when I pointed out one of the speeches by Ligachev, he said, "Well, you know, [Shultz](#) doesn't always agree with [Weinberger](#)." Okay, that was true.

But, in effect, they were having that debate within the Communist Party. Implicitly, but very clearly, in his [speech](#) to the UN December 7, 1988, Gorbachev put it to rest. I would say that was an *ex cathedra* statement, in the sense that he was speaking then as the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and as the leader of the Soviet state.

Now, the second part of your question was the increase in defense budget. I would say two things about that.

One thing, it was necessary to give Reagan confidence that he had the chips to start negotiating. He was convinced—I think wrongly to some degree, but he was convinced—that our defenses had so deteriorated under [Carter](#) that he was acting at a disadvantage, and he wanted more chips on the table before he got into some high-stakes poker.

He looked at our defense build-up in two ways. One, you've got to convince the Soviet leaders that they can't win an arms race; otherwise they're not going to negotiate, if they think they can get an edge. He was probably right, particularly in the pre-Gorbachev period.

Second was when we start negotiating, if we don't have anything to trade, they're not going to bring them down.

So he was thinking both of something to trade and to convince the Soviet leaders that they had nothing to gain from continuing the arms race.

Before he went to his first meeting with Gorbachev, he wrote a memo—and I quote extensively from it in my book on Reagan and Gorbachev. He wrote it without any help from the staff. One of the points he made is that "what I've got to get across to Mr. Gorbachev is we don't want an arms race, but if he insists on one he's going to lose it."

He added something at the end of that also: "Whatever we achieve, we must not call it victory, because that will only make the next achievement more difficult."

And in fact, by 1987 we know from [Politburo](#) documents that are now available for those of us who read Russian, that Gorbachev began telling the Politburo: "We've got to end the arms race. They are trying to trick us into an arms race which we cannot win. It is ruining our economy and it is a trick from the West. Their military-industrial complex"—he didn't say Reagan in this case—"is pushing us into that because they know it will destroy us. We can't let them do that to us."

Then he began to talk about very, very substantial reductions and ridiculing the military leaders about all these arms they had. So he picked up, in effect, that aim.

It also meant that once we had these things, we had something to trade. Unless we had been able to deploy those [Pershing missiles](#) and cruise missiles in Europe in 1983, we could have not gotten the [INF Treaty](#). We were willing to compromise if they would simply reduce the [SS20s](#) substantially. They wouldn't even talk seriously about reductions until we deployed. Once we deployed, Gorbachev told the Politburo "We've got to come to terms. This is a pistol aimed at our head."

They had always demanded one thing, that they would at least keep as many as the British and French had in their nuclear weapons. We had said, "That's a no-go" because neither the British nor French would agree to that.

Gorbachev turns to his defense minister and says: "Get real. There's not going to be a war with Britain and France. You're crazy. We've got to get rid of these things because it's a pistol aimed at our head."

Now, an interesting point there is that we had designed the Pershings with a range just short of Moscow because we did not want them to think that it would be a decapitating weapon of their capital. They had absolutely no trust in that, any more than we had in some of their claims regarding their capabilities, and they were convinced that it was aimed on Moscow and that we could hit them with five minutes' notice.

As one person in the Central Committee I talked to at the time said, "I couldn't even get to the men's room, much less to shelter, with the sort of warning we would get from that."

So this was one of the things that we had to do, and we had to do this in direct opposition to the peace movement in Europe and in the United States.

This leads me to another thought as to how Reagan reacted. He was so different from [Nixon](#). You will recall Nixon during the Vietnam War, if you opposed it you suddenly became an enemy and that sort of thing. Reagan never considered the peace movement an enemy, and he would say: "Look, we've got the same aims. But you want a nuclear freeze. I don't want a nuclear freeze. That's not a stable situation." And he would say: "How can you tell me that the only way I can defend the American people if we got attacked is by wiping out millions of other innocent people? I can't do that."

So the whole mutual assured destruction he felt was simply morally unacceptable. That explains his attachment to the idea of defense and SDI, but also his hatred of the weapons themselves. He considered the nuclear weapons themselves the real enemy.

But how do you persuade the other side? If they think this brings them an advantage politically, they're not going to give it up. So his whole strategy was: Yes, we've got to build up to build down, because they won't agree to build down unless they see that the alternative is worse.

JOANNE MYERS: Ambassador Matlock, I think we can all agree what a privilege it was to have your eyes on history. Thank you so much.

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