# II. Interview

Interview: *Ambassador Jack Matlock*

# To Save Mankind, We Must Come Back to Diplomacy

*The following is an edited transcript of the Sept. 3, 2024, interview with former U.S. Ambassador Jack Matlock. Having served as Ambassador to the Soviet Union during the period of its collapse, Matlock provides a unique perspective on U.S.-Russia relations from that period of time to the present—as well as insights on other crucial matters. The interview was conducted by Mike Billington of* EIR *and the Schiller Institute. Subheads have been added.*

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*Caption*

**Mike Billington:** This is Mike Billington with *Executive Intelligence Review* and the Schiller Institute. I'm very pleased to have with me today, professor doctor Jack Matlock. Dr. Matlock has been central to relations with the Soviet Union and with Russia throughout his career. He began as the Director of Soviet Affairs at the State Department. He was then Ambassador to Czechoslovakia before being named Ambassador to the USSR in 1987, serving through 1991, which, of course, was the period of the collapse of the USSR and, basically, the end of the Cold War. He wrote several books subsequently, most famously including one called *Autopsy of an Empire*, on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and another called *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended*, which we will end up discussing here today. He's associated with the famous Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, which hosted other such great minds as Albert Einstein and Kurt Gödel, among many others. So, we're very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to you today, Dr. Matlock.

Let me start by asking you to comment on the current extremely dangerous relationship between the United States and Russia. I'm going to read three quotes and ask you to comment. One is from Major General Apti Alaudinov, who is a commander of the Chechen Armed Special Forces of the Russian military forces. He is addressing his comments to the U.S. population. He said, "You probably do not see or hear that your leadership is doing all it can to launch a nuclear war, to make Russia cross the red line and start protecting itself using all these nuclear weapons. If you don't want this to happen, speak out. Go to the streets and stop your government."

The Belarus President, Alexander Lukashenko, said that Ukraine's escalation in the Kursk region going on now is an "attempt to push Russia into asymmetric actions, let's say, the use of nuclear weapons."

And Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that "the Russian nuclear doctrine is being refined at the moment," and he warned that the U.S. claim to be trying to avoid escalation is "a ruse—the West does not want to avoid escalation; the West is, as they say, asking for trouble." So, what are your thoughts on these sentiments?

**Jack Matlock:** Obviously, we've entered a very dangerous stage, because Russia has viewed the actions of the United States and its NATO allies as aggressive actions which threaten its national security. Russia is a nuclear armed power with a nuclear arsenal, which

seems to be fully equivalent, if not maybe even larger, than that the United States holds; one that is much larger than those that our NATO allies France and Great Britain hold. It seems to me it is extremely dangerous to attempt what is, in effect, an undeclared war against a nuclear armed power, which perceives, rightly or wrongly, that its sovereignty and even its political existence are being threatened. So, I think that's a dangerous situation. Not so much so that either side is going to initiate the use of nuclear weapons. But I think that a situation like this can easily result in a nuclear exchange because of mistakes. Once both sides are positioned and have placed their nuclear weapons on alert, it is very easy to mistake signals. These things happened several times during the Cold War, and we were fortunate that somehow they were not acted on.

I would also say that what we ignore in our current undeclared war against Russia is that Russia has many other means of getting at us, which would be very difficult to tolerate. For example, their capability in cyber warfare is certainly equivalent to that of the United States or any NATO member. Also, these attacks are possible in a way that would leave ambiguous how they originated. Secondly, Russia certainly has the capability to take out the communication satellites that are essential for much of the war fighting today. So, it seems to me that to run the risk of this sort of thing is absolutely foolhardy.

**Billington:** In 2010, you gave a speech which was called "Perestroika as viewed from Washington." This was 14 years ago. It was a review of relations between the U.S. and the USSR, especially between Gorbachev and President Reagan. You described Gorbachev as representing a significant shift in the Soviet leadership: from the old conservative Brezhnev generation to a younger generation. And you said that President Reagan had been trying to improve relations and discuss arms control with Moscow, and was anxious to meet with and establish relations with the new President. This then led to a series of meetings between the leaders and eventually to an arms limitation agreement. What was the impact of these events on world peace at that time?

**Matlock:** We started, I would say, at the beginning of Reagan's administration with a very, very strained relationship with the Soviet Union. The Cold War seemed to have been somewhat diminished during a period we call Détente, earlier [starting in 1969]. But after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan [1979], our President Carter actually terminated most of the ties that we had with the Soviet Union, to, in effect, punish the Soviets for their invasion.

Actually, President Reagan had come to office with a very strong anti-communist message to the people. On the other hand, when he became president, he was very eager to make contact with the Soviet leadership. And even when he was in the hospital from an assassination attempt [1981], he wrote a handwritten message to the Soviet leaders trying to establish some personal relationship. Two or three of the leaders did not respond, until Gorbachev became General Secretary, and Reagan invited him to a meeting. Vice President George Bush went to the funeral of Konstantin Chernenko [deceased General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR]. Eventually, Gorbachev accepted a meeting in Geneva. From then on, we were attempting, in the United States, to develop better communication with Gorbachev. Before, both sides had been sort of denouncing the other; announcing proposals which often were designed to put the other side on the defensive. And there had been very little real diplomacy.

## A Dialogue for Cooperation

But Reagan decided that, by 1983, it was time to seriously engage the Soviet leaders. I was brought into the administration with the task of developing a negotiating strategy. In brief, what we did, instead of a lot of public accusations, was to establish a dialogue. And Reagan, in a speech in January 1983, put out an appeal for negotiations, and instead of making a lot of demands, asked for cooperation: cooperation to reduce arms; cooperation to reduce armed confrontation in third areas; cooperation to improve human rights. Instead of just saying "you are at fault, you've got to reform," we say, "we need to cooperate to improve human rights." I wanted to say, "you've got to bring down the Iron Curtain," which at that time was isolating the Soviet Union from the rest of the world. But what Reagan said was we must cooperate to build a better working relationship, not using these words that were probably offensive.

In his first meeting with Gorbachev— He wrote his own thoughts about it. And he made clear that the main thing was to establish trust between them, in order to get arms reduced. And, if we were going to improve human rights, we had to do that more privately rather than hammering on them publicly.

And the last issue, the last sentence, almost, in the essay that he wrote about what he said was, we must not call it victory. Whatever happens, it'll improve. Well, over the next three years, that diplomacy worked. It took about three years, and it had its ups and downs. But by the end of Reagan's administration, in December 1988, toward the end of his administration, when they were able to meet, Reagan, in effect, said that we met as partners, to create a better world. And at that time, I think that the diplomacy had brought about a change in Soviet policy—a fundamental change: that Gorbachev was trying to reform the Soviet Union. He couldn't do it if the Cold War pressures continued. So, that was a great incentive.

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But one of the things that, subsequently, people have gotten wrong about the end of the Cold War was that it was not a victory of the West over the Soviet Union; it was a victory for everybody. Because everybody benefited—including the Soviet Union—from that. It was done by diplomacy, not by the force of arms. But later we started to say, "Oh, we were victorious, the Soviet Union was defeated," and then later, "Russia was defeated." It got everything backwards.

**Billington:** You used the term that Gorbachev used, "a new economic mechanism," which you refer to in your articles. What was that and what was Reagan's view of that?

**Matlock:** Actually, the economic changes were gradual. And at first the changes that Gorbachev instituted didn't work—his anti-alcohol campaign and his attempt to have more disciplined work—both of them backfired. But he was trying at first to bring about reform by using the Communist Party, and he found he couldn't do that. So, gradually, he began to try to take the Party out of total control of the country. This was a complex issue.

Now, you say "Reagan's view": I think that the basic thing about Reagan's view was, yes, he hated communism, and he thought it was a lousy system. But what he objected to was the Soviet attempts to impose it abroad. His idea was that, well, if that's what they want, that's their business. In other words, he didn't start out to try to change the internal political structure of the Soviet Union. He wanted to change its external behavior. So, it was more important for our diplomacy that Gorbachev was changing his foreign policy and was increasingly cooperating for arms control. Both Gorbachev and Reagan had a vision of ridding the world of nuclear weapons. They may have been the only two leaders that thought that was possible, but they both did—and they took us several steps toward that.

I would say, at that time, we were thinking, well, Gorbachev says he's moving with reform step by step. The past attempts to reform the system had failed. We old timers knew that Khrushchev, earlier, had started reforms and then reversed them. So, we had to say, well, let's see how it's going to work out; lets encourage them—but we can't be sure what it's going to do. But, I would say that the political changes, and particularly those in the negotiating on the issues that we set forward, were more important than the attempts to reform the economy, as far as our policies were concerned.

**Billington:** You also referred to a debate in leading

Soviet circles, which drew your attention, on "the common interests of mankind." What was this and what's your thought on it?

## Gorbachev and the Common Interests of Mankind

**Matlock:** Profound and fundamental shift in Soviet foreign policy, but also in their domestic policy. Since the Communist Revolution—the Bolshevik Revolution—the country's policies, domestic and foreign, were supposedly based upon the Marxist idea of the international class struggle—the struggle of workers or the proletariat against the capitalists or the bourgeoisie. And the theory was that the proletariat would rise up and eliminate the bourgeoisie, and create a socialist country which would evolve into a communist country. This was the official ideology from the time that the Bolsheviks won the civil war in Russia. This was a fundamentally antagonistic policy toward the West. And even when they declared that they had achieved socialism at home, they continued to say that the international class struggle applies to foreign policy. That means that the Cold War was really based upon an ideology which said that the world was going to create a one world communist system by means of revolution against the bourgeoisie. This was the fundamental issue that created the Cold War in the first place.

And now, when Gorbachev said that we must act in the common interest of mankind, he was directly contradicting Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin. He was changing the foreign policy, because under Marxism there were no common interests of mankind; there were only class interests. And at the same time, he was saying that there should be no restrictions on the freedom of choice, meaning that every country should be able to determine its own foreign policy. So, this was absolutely profound.

**Billington:** This was about the time that Ronald Reagan met with Gorbachev, along with then President-elect George H.W. Bush. You quote Reagan after that meeting as saying that it was "a tremendous success," and that "Gorbachev sounded as if he saw us as partners in making a better world." Your comment was that the Cold War was virtually over. Can you say more about that?

**Matlock:** I think, for the reasons I just explained, that means that, ideologically, the Cold War was over. And it prepared the way for the events in 1989 and the following year, which has been called a "miraculous year," the year that the Eastern Europeans overthrew the communist system—most countries peacefully, although Romania with some violence. But it was a change which Gorbachev not only accepted, but encouraged. I would say that, ideologically, the Cold War was over in December 1988. In reality, it was over by December 1990.

This leads to another observation I would make, that many people thought that the Cold War ended when the Soviet Union collapsed. The important thing is, it ended at least two years before the Soviet collapse, and the Soviet collapse occurred not because of pressure from the West, but because of the internal pressures in the Soviet Union. It probably would not have broken up if the Cold War had not ended, because the pressures of the Cold War were keeping the system together.

## Russia Was Never a Threat

**Billington:** The following five questions come directly from Helga Zepp-LaRouche. First, the younger generation generally does not have a good understanding of how significant the peaceful end of the Cold War was. For most people, the unimaginable had happened: the Soviet bloc dissolved; there was no more enemy there. It would have been possible to create a peace order for the 21st century. Romano Prodi, the Italian political leader, proposed: "a united Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok." Can you, as a contemporary witness, tell us what the political climate was at that moment? And was this a great chance of history that was missed?

**Matlock:** I think that is true. At first, we proposed a Partnership for Peace with the countries in Eastern Europe, including with Russia and the successor states of the Soviet Union. If we had continued to follow that course, even if we preserved NATO as it was, but had NATO interact with the others under the Partnership for Peace, then, I think, that would have permitted the creation of a more comprehensive European security structure. That didn't happen. And it didn't happen because instead of the Partnership for Peace, ultimately the United States opted for the expansion of NATO. I think that was a huge mistake.

I testified, at the time, before the Senate committee which, at that point, was headed by Senator Joseph Biden—I testified strongly against it. Because it seemed to me that what Eastern Europe and Russia

needed was, you might say, a peaceful relationship with Europe and increasing integration of their economies on the basis of free enterprise and the Western system. I knew that the transition in the former Soviet Union was going to be extremely difficult, as it was difficult in Eastern Europe, but even more so. And it seemed to me that if you begin to expand NATO— which supposedly was a defensive alliance to prevent a Soviet invasion of Western Europe at a time when they dominated Eastern Europe. But now they no longer dominated Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union had collapsed, and Russia had half the population of the Soviet Union and a military in total disarray. It could not be a threat.

So, when you start actually expanding NATO, this implies that there is a threat from other people. And it was clear to me that this was going to make it impossible to have a more democratic system in Russia, if Russia felt that the United States was moving in a way that would threaten them militarily; moving into areas, making allies—military allies—of countries and areas that had been traditionally dominated by Russia.

I would say that, at first, the Russian presidents accepted this, reluctantly, but they made it clear that it shouldn't continue—particularly to the Balkans. The main thing was— It was not so much the existence of an American guarantee that it would consider any attack on one of the NATO members as an attack on itself. That didn't bother them that much. I was told by the Russian Ambassador at that time. "Look, you know, we're not going to be threatening these countries. We don't care if you give them that guarantee. The sensitive thing is putting military bases there; that we cannot accept."

But that's precisely what happened. And even though the treaty that unified Germany stipulated that there would be no foreign bases in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, and also no nuclear weapons, there began to be plans from later to station bases in the East European countries. Particularly sensitive was the placing of anti-ballistic missile bases in Poland and Romania. It was claimed that we needed to put these bases there in order to protect from possible missile attacks from Iran. Well, look: At that time, Iran didn't have missiles capable of it and didn't have any grievances with our West European allies. It was sort of an absurd reason. And second, the missiles actually being deployed could, with a change of software, be offensive. This also happened as the United States withdrew unilaterally from most of the arms control and arms reduction agreements that we had negotiated with the Soviet Union during the Reagan and first Bush administrations. So, we were walking away from the very agreements that allowed us to end the Cold War, and for no good reason at all that I could perceive.

I think that this policy was one that was bound to be seen as provocative by the Soviet Union, especially when it came to the question of membership in NATO of former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine, neither of which qualified for a NATO membership by normal criteria. In fact, when the United States persuaded its NATO allies to declare that Georgia and Ukraine would eventually be NATO members—that was in 2008—at that time, I would say two thirds of the people in Ukraine did not want to be in NATO—and why we would want to bring a country into NATO when two thirds of their people don't want to be there was always a mystery to me.

But at the same time, there were increasing efforts by both the United States and members of the European Union to try to draw Ukraine and Georgia away from Russia. Well, these had been territories that for centuries had been part of Russia. Russia had led their liberation from the Soviet Union—the Russian President Yeltsin. But the assumption then was going to be they would certainly live in a cooperative relationship with Russia, though independent. And I think that the attempt to pry particularly the Ukraine away from Russia was a fundamental mistake on the part of the United States and its NATO allies.

**Billington:** Helga [Zepp-LaRouche] included a couple of questions that were specific to Germany. Let me mention those. She said that Chancellor Kohl, at the time, signed 22 agreements with Gorbachev, which included a security guarantee for Russia. But these were later lifted. How do you see the way in which the course of history was set at that point?

## Not 'One Inch' to the East

**Matlock:** Actually, President Bush and his Secretary of State definitely assured Gorbachev that if he would agree to German unification, there would not be any change in mutual NATO jurisdiction to the east—not one inch. Gorbachev was given the same assurances by the German Foreign Minister [Hans-Dietrich Genscher] at that time, and by the British Prime Minister [Margaret Thatcher]. These assurances were never actually formulated in a formal legal treaty. They

were part of the negotiation, and at that time there was no intent to expand there. And when the treaty which allowed the unification of Germany was negotiated, there was a provision that there would be no foreign troops stationed there and no nuclear weapons.

That is still a valid treaty: that you can't put these weapons in the former German Democratic Republic—in that territory. But we have started putting these weapons in NATO countries even further to the east. I would say that is certainly a flagrant violation of assurances that were given by several Western governments during the lead up to the German unification. I was present at a number of these [negotiations] when the assurances were made. And now that the records have been declassified and are clearly available, one can see from the historical documents that these assurances were given.

**Billington:** Helga also mentions that on the 5th of May of 1990, at something called the Two-Plus-Four talks, Secretary of State James Baker stated that all the rights and duties of the four powers had to be transferred to a perfectly sovereign Germany. In other words, it should not be attempted to singularize Germany and impose discriminatory restrictions on a sovereign state, which could only lead to resentments, instability and conflicts. But, as I'm sure you know, in the recent bilateral agreement between the U.S. and Germany, to station U.S. medium-range missiles in Germany in 2026, is this not such a singularization, since it does not include any other allies? And are you not challenging that concept?

**Matlock:** I think that the deployment of nuclear weapons in German territory was not part of the agreement that unified Germany. If that deployment was in parts of Germany other than the former German Democratic Republic, it would not specifically violate the agreement that united Germany, because it said nothing about what could be done by the other parts of Germany. And, of course, American bases were there then and have continued. I do think, however, it is an extraordinarily dangerous thing to do. It may be legal, but it is dangerous. And I wonder about the sanity of the German government that would accept that. Because if these weapons are ever used, who is going to suffer? Germany, for heaven's sakes—and not the U.S.

We went through our whole issue of deploying these missiles in the past in order to get Russia to remove its intermediate-range missiles, which could hit Germany and our other European allies. And we succeeded. This was one of the great successes of the Cold War. But since then, we've had the United States walking out of that treaty—so it is no longer valid. But the whole problem is that the deployment and the possible use of nuclear weapons in Central and Eastern Europe is a much greater danger to Germany than it is to the United States. Why any German government would accept that is beyond my comprehension.

**Billington:** The former General Inspector of the Bundeswehr, General Harold Kujat, recently said that the Ukrainian war threatens to become what he called "the primal catastrophe of the 21st Century." However, from the side of the West, there's not even the option of the use of diplomacy to resolve this crisis. What do you think about the disappearance of diplomacy as a means of conflict resolution?

**Matlock:** Obviously, diplomacy has disappeared. And we're down to publicly threatening, and more than just threatening, actually feeding a war, which is turning out to be catastrophic for Ukraine. And I'll tell you, unlike most people who comment on this, I know Ukraine very well. I'm not only fluent in Russian, but I can also understand and read Ukrainian, and I've been there many times. I was a great supporter for the preservation of the Ukrainian heritage. Every time, when I was Ambassador, and had public speeches in Ukraine, I read them in Ukrainian, not in the Russian language.

## Ukraine Is on a 'Suicide Course'

However, the current Ukrainian government is on a suicide course if they continue the hostility to Russia. The invasion of Ukraine never should have happened and would not have happened if the United States and NATO had given legal assurances that Ukraine would not be brought into NATO. This should have been given all along. What people forget is how countries react to what they see as a hostile military alliance on their border. The United States entered World War One against Germany in part for the reason that Germany was trying to conclude a treaty with Mexico [in 1917] that would be hostile to the United States. We considered this a cause for war. Why don't we understand that trying to remove Ukraine from Russian influence and put military bases there would be, in their case, absolutely unacceptable and worthy of defense?

What is happening is that there is increasingly

damage to Ukraine, and the longer this war continues, the more damage there's going to be. People have to understand that we have not followed the developments in Ukraine; the way Ukraine, with Western encouragement, was increasingly hostile to the Russian speakers in their East. Russian speakers made up 45% of the Ukrainian population when they got their independence. And when they got their independence, the Ukrainian constitution guaranteed equal rights for Russian and Ukrainian speakers and those of other minority languages. These rights were taken away gradually, and more and more attempts were made which were offensive to those in the East.

And then in 2014, you had a coup d'état against the leader, the elected president, backed by the United States and European Union representatives. Obviously, to any Russian leader, not just Vladimir Putin, that would have been an absolutely impossible, hostile act, which they had to react to. And in particular, they were not going to lose their naval base in Crimea. Another thing we need to remember is that these borders that, right now, the Ukrainians say they want to recover, were created not by nature, but by the decision of two men, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin—all except Crimea.

Crimea was added as something that actually made no difference at the time, by Nikita Khrushchev, a communist leader of the Soviet Union, so that these were not preeminent historic boundaries. And the irony now is that the Ukrainians, largely those in the West, which are dominated in their thinking by neo-Nazis—we tend to ignore that, or when Putin points it out, we say he's lying. He's not lying. And the thing is that there were a lot of reasons that Russia would resist militarily when they saw the increasing involvement of the United States and the West in the internal politics of Ukraine, and also trying to remove Ukraine entirely from any Russian influence. It's a tragedy for Ukraine that this is going on.

And I would say, furthermore, that the sort of economic sanctions that the United States and the EU have imposed on Russia are normally sanctions that are imposed only during a state of war. And under the United States Constitution, only Congress can declare a war. Congress has not declared war, but repeatedly, the President has simply done acts which are normally under international law, are matters only permissible during war.

And furthermore, I would say the economic sanctions against Russia are failing to do what they were intended to do. They were aimed to destroy the Russian economy, but they have not. They have only tended to make it more autonomous, and, of course, have made it turn to China, Iran, even North Korea. In other words, these issues, which before, they were cooperative with the West. This is something which, in the long run, is going to be very much disadvantageous to the United States and to Western Europe.

Again, I don't understand how current leaders don't understand that. I have characterized our policy, and I would also characterize the policy of our NATO allies in Europe, as myopic and tunnel vision—myopic because it doesn't look into the past, and tunnel vision because it cuts out any evidence that would contradict the current narrative that is being peddled. And, furthermore, I've at times said it's autistic for that very reason. It concentrates on certain things and ignores others. And I do think that this is not going to end well for the United States or its military allies.

**Billington:** In terms of Germany. One last thing along the lines of what you just said, which is that you found the German decision to accept these U.S. advanced missiles on their territory to be inexplicable. What would you wish to tell the German people in face of this danger, in light of the specific history that Germany has with Russia, both in respect to the Soviet Union and the Second World War, but also with Russia in respect to the unification of Germany?

## The Dilemma of Our Times

**Matlock:** I cannot understand why German leaders would follow the policies they are. I simply don't understand it, because I don't think it's in Germany's interest. And, of course, what we hear and what the American public is hearing: "Oh, we have a duty to defend democracy in Ukraine"—this is absurd! Ukraine is the furthest thing from a democracy. It has a government that was the result of a coup d'état. It has a government which did not carry out some key agreements, like the Minsk agreements, which would have prevented the war and would have kept the Donbas in Ukraine. It constantly violated those agreements. And, at the same time, the United States was walking away from the sort of arms control agreements which we created and reached during the 1980s and 1990s that actually protected Germany; that helped it unify.

The United States has suddenly begun a crusade to get involved in what is, in effect, a family dispute between East Slavs as to where you put the border between

Ukraine and Russia, which has never had the slightest effect on the security of Germany or of the United States or of the other NATO allies. Now people are saying: "Oh, if Putin succeeds in Ukraine, he will immediately attack the Baltic States and Poland." Absolutely absurd! There's no evidence of that whatsoever. And it is simply building up, I would say, a false statement.

But when you look at the fundamentals, you can see that, rightly or wrongly, the current effort is to say, restore the Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev-given borders of Ukraine, which at that time were a matter of subjugating Ukraine rather than liberating it. The attempt to restore those [borders] is not only impossible, but, actually, to make that a goal and to support that with weapons that not only are used in Ukraine, but now increasingly against Russia, I think that that is approaching the insane for anyone who really thinks through the past and what these nations are.

Let me also add that I think that the American people still support the supply of weapons to Ukraine, but they are being given a totally false picture of what the situation is. They're saying, "Oh, we have to support a democratic country against oppression." Ukraine is not a democratic country, and it is impossible for a foreign power to create democracy in another country. It's simply irrational. But most people, of course, in the United States, and also even in Europe, are really not thinking much about the history and what goes on in these other areas. They're drawing conclusions from broad generalizations which, upon examination, have no real factual basis. So that, I think, this is the dilemma of our times. We have governments which, frankly, are supporting a false view of these things. And I think this is incredibly dangerous.

**Billington:** Let me go back to Russia. When George Bush was inaugurated in 1989, you wrote a memo from Moscow in which you said that you were "not optimistic that the perestroika reforms would greatly improve the Soviet economy." And you said, "I foresaw problems ahead in dealing with the growing signs of ethnic conflict within the Soviet Union." Were your concerns borne out?

**Matlock:** Of course. It was these ethnic movements—nationalistic movements—that caused the breakup of the Soviet Union. But I would add that it was done under the leadership of the elected Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin. So, this idea that Russia was always imperialistic, again, is simply absurd. It simply is not true. Actually, these other republics have to thank Boris Yeltsin, the Russian President. Now, Yeltsin was much more interested in getting back at Gorbachev and removing him, than he was in preserving the Soviet Union. But at the time, the idea was that they would have a very cooperative relationship. In fact, the Soviet Union was replaced with the "Union of Sovereign States," supposedly. It was just that it was given no real power for unity. But I'm sure that most of the people who voted for independence at that time did not anticipate the development later, that they would have independent armies and borders with Russia that would make them enemies. Things evolved later, with the encouragement of some West European countries and the United States, to try, in effect, to pull these states away from Russia. And I think that that was not in the interest of anyone.

Now, George Bush, himself, was in favor of Gorbachev's proposal for a voluntary federation. And when he spoke to the Ukrainian Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, in August 1981, he warned the Ukrainians against what he called "suicidal nationalism," and recommended that they become part of Gorbachev's Union Treaty. So, at that time, the United States did not want to see the Soviet Union break up, and the idea that this was a Western victory in the Cold War gets it backwards. So, there's so much history here that seems to have been either forgotten or totally distorted, that is fueling the disastrous situation we're in today.

**Billington:** What you were just referring to was what you called the Union Treaty that Gorbachev was proposing with the former republics?

**Matlock:** Yes. As I said, President Bush recommended to the Ukrainians and implicitly to the other non-Baltic Soviet republics that they agree to Gorbachev's Union Treaty. It was Boris Yeltsin, the Russian leader, who led a revolt against that.

## 'Oh Lord, What Has Happened to Us?'

**Billington:** Let me switch over to the United States now. You wrote a fascinating commentary this year, looking back at a speech that you gave in 1982, while you were the Ambassador in Czechoslovakia, on the July 4th holiday that year. You review in this commentary that you wrote this year how optimistic you were and what an optimistic vision you had of the United States on many issues of that time, regarding the freedom of thought in America, the respect of sovereignty

for all nations, and world peace generally.

And then you contrast those points to the opposite reality that we have today, pointing at the regime change wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria; the genocide in Gaza; the total breakdown of diplomacy; and the dismantling of the arms control treaties—which are all things that you have mentioned here today. You ascribe this decline to the "neoconservatives," and you conclude, I found this most impressive at the very end, you wrote: "Oh Lord, what has happened to us?" Have you drawn any conclusion to that question?

**Matlock:** Well, I wrote that particularly because of the fact that while we are, in many respects, condemning what is happening in Gaza, the United States, still, has continued to supply the arms that the Israeli state, now under its current leadership, is using, which meets, in my opinion, all the definitions of genocide. I think the roots of that come back to our domestic politics, where many of the people support Israel at all costs, regardless of the fact that Israel very frequently violates almost all of the standards we would expect from a nation-state, under our professed "new world order" or "rules-based new order."

Of course, the Hamas intrusion into Israel, and its terrorist acts, one can say, yes, Israel had the right to defend against them. They didn't, in fact. They had removed most of their defenses from that border, even though their intelligence must have known something about the capabilities of Hamas. But to use that attack as an excuse for the genocidal destruction of Gaza and an increasing destruction of the West Bank, I think is simply unacceptable. And it has been, I would say, in these issues, it has been the policy of the United States consistently to try to discourage these settlers in the West Bank, because the Israeli control of the West Bank and the control of the borders of Gaza is not legal under international law.

In this case, the United States, I believe, and many others, do have the power to say, "No, don't do this," by removing the means for them to do it. But while our President has said that he disagrees with the Prime Minister of Israel and so on, nevertheless, he has refused to take the one step that would prevent this from happening—that is simply terminating supplies, or the protection of Israel as long as they are involved in the destruction of Gaza. But I attribute that to our internal politics, because too many of the crucial supporters and financiers of our candidates in both parties are committed to do for Israel whatever Israel wants. And I take that more as a matter of domestic politics or a result of it than, obviously, an attempt to support a new world order.

**Billington:** You argued in an article that you wrote that was mostly about the role of intelligence agencies, that Donald Trump won the 2016 election because "Secretary Clinton, if President would continue and intensify our quixotic and destructive military interventions abroad." Is that likely to be the case this year as well, given the current circumstances?

**Matlock:** I'm not sure I put it quite that way. My view was that Clinton lost the election because she showed, I would say, contempt and disdain for a large section of our electorate in the Midwest and South, calling them "deplorables." I was appalled by the Trump victory. Now, I don't think it was primarily because of foreign policy issues. I think it was much more domestic policy issues and a result of what we have now called our cultural struggle within the United States.

Now, having said that, I think that the main thing I objected to with Secretary Clinton was her aggressive foreign policy. But now, in the case of Trump, I think that he turned out to be, I would say, very dangerous as a President. He's totally unpredictable. And one might think he might be better on this issue or that issue than somebody else, but you can't count on that.

I don't know how this election is going to turn out. It's going to be, I believe, very closely fought. But it is being fought, I would say, 98%, maybe 99%, on domestic issues. Our electorate is simply not paying attention to foreign policy. If you look at the issues that our voters tell pollsters, foreign policy may be on the list of 4% of our electorate. I think that's something that must be understood. So, this is an election which is not being driven by foreign policy—and that's the tragedy, because we in the United States are really not debating these real issues that go on. And we are being fed a particular approach by, I would say, a group in Washington who control the media and the government; we're being fed what I think is a false view of foreign policy. But, in general, for American voters, they are going to vote on the basis of how they see domestic issues: issues like inflation; issues like immigration; and many others. And those are the ones that are going to decide it. Unfortunately, foreign policy is not playing a big role.

## We Have Only Ourselves To Blame

**Billington:** You wrote about John Quincy Adams in 2018, referring to the speech he had given to the House of Representatives back in 1821. This is the famous speech in which he says that "the U.S. does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy." But then you write: "It's time we start finding our way back. Others are not to blame for our political disarray. We are." Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel on this issue?

**Matlock:** I don't see any, I would say near-term solution, but I believe that events are going to force us in that direction. Let us recognize the United States, in my view, is grossly overcommitted internationally. We are not only fueling an ineffective *de facto* economic war and, to some extent, military war against Russia, we are feeding a genocidal effort by Israel in the Near East, which is bringing us to the brink of a major war there. And, at the same time, we have our military preparing for a war with China, all of which is absurd—and we're doing that, not by taxing our people, but by borrowing money.

We now have a debt of something like $33 trillion, much of it owed to other countries. Domestically, we have an economy which is being inflated by this money printing that is going on. I think that, obviously, forces are going to require us to change some of these policies. Whether we can do so, before one of them leads to some major catastrophe, is another question. I hope so. And it does seem to me that, in the final analysis, the American people are not going to support getting the United States directly involved in a war that is brought to them in the United States. I can't foresee the future, but I believe that the current situation cannot be sustained, either economically or militarily. And if we're going to deal with these problems without further damage and dangers to humankind, we need to come back to diplomacy. It's going to be hard to do that overnight, but it is going to require a change of thinking.

**Billington:** Let me ask one last question, which is on the intelligence community itself. You've written often, but in particular in an article I saw you wrote in 2018, that you referenced the fact that you yourself have had top security clearance for, I think it was 35 years at the time, and that you've had many occasions to measure the credibility of intelligence community analyses. You wrote that the official so-called intelligence community report that claimed it had proven that Russia had interfered in the 2016 election was, in your view, on a par with the claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction—which of course turned out to be totally false. You thank Bill Binney and Ray McGovern at the end of that article for helping with the research.

You may know that Donald Trump instructed his CIA chief, Mike Pompeo, to be briefed by Bill Binney on Binney's proof that the claim by the intelligence community that Russia had hacked the DNC computers was false. And he did brief Pompeo on that, but Pompeo refused to follow up on it altogether, and the consequences are what we know. Has there been any improvement in this problem within the intelligence community, or do you have any proposals for how to deal with it?

**Matlock:** First of all, the intelligence community, as such, did not make that determination. It was claimed that they did, but when you actually read the report, you found that it was only three agencies—the FBI, the NSA and the CIA—and selected analysts there. The State Department and the Defense Department intelligence agencies were not involved. So, the claim that this was a determination of the intelligence community was simply incorrect, and anyone who read that report could see that, if you understood it. And yet our media was carrying it as if it were an intelligence report. In fact, the State Department intelligence had refused to sign it, for the reason they simply didn't believe it.

Now, you ask about the situation today. I have a great respect for the current Director of the CIA [William Burns], but actually, the CIA and other intelligence agencies are not supposed to be those making policy. They were set up to advise the President. And normally, they were not expected to give policy advice. The policy advice would come from the State Department or, on military matters, from the Defense Department. At present, I do see that in some respects, I think that is being improved.

But the problem is, right now, I would say we have entirely too many agencies involved. The trouble comes often when you have your domestic agencies trying to dictate foreign policy, so that in many cases, some of the problems—problems, for example, in expelling diplomats and whatnot—this often comes from the pressure, not from the CIA, but from the FBI in the United States. You have to understand—well, the FBI thinks that if you have spies here; they're your greatest threat. Well, that may not be.

I don't particularly like spying, and I think when you catch them, they should be expelled. But this idea

of closing all diplomatic establishments and so on—which is going to be reciprocated, and has been—has turned out to absolutely impoverish the instruments we have for diplomacy, particularly with Russia. I think that's too bad. But my gripe is not so much with any particular agency. I do not know what kind of advice the CIA is giving the President now. I simply can't place judgment on it. But I do know that the President and the Secretary of State certainly have the right and the duty to make up their own minds and not to be led overly on policy matters by intelligence reports.

**Billington:** Well, thank you very much. Do you have anything you'd like to add to what we've gone over?

**Matlock:** I think we've covered everything. I do think that we all need to find a way back to a world in which the most powerful countries act in order to foster peace rather than taking sides in local issues that involve poverty and lead to violence. Instead of feeding the violence, we and our West European allies need to find ways to diminish the violence and to cooperate.

The overwhelming issues facing us are going to require that the rapid degeneration of the environment, which is causing all sorts of things such as mass migrations and so on, these wars exacerbate all of these, and almost nullify any efforts we've made, for example, to decarbonize the atmosphere, and so on. So, unless we can find a way to deal with this, we're not going to be able to deal with the bigger issues confronting us.

**Billington:** Let me just conclude by saying that, as I think you know, Helga Zepp-LaRouche has called for the formation of what she calls a Council of Reason, which is wise minds of our civilization, from all countries—those who have established themselves through what they've contributed to humanity in their lives—forming a Council to address the kind of disasters that you've outlined very forcefully here today in a way which can have the effect of making nations recognize that we have to go back to a sane, diplomatic architecture of security and development for all countries. We certainly encourage you to be part of that kind of effort, which I think you have contributed to through this discussion, and which we can continue discussing as we go forward.

**Matlock:** I think that's a good idea.