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Q&A: Matlock, Reagan's Soviet Teacher, Never Stops Learning

By Justin Lifflander

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Maximizing depth of knowledge and providing unique insights were key elements of Matlock's career success. **Igor Tabakov**

Career diplomat Jack Matlock has befriended many world leaders, but perhaps none taught him a more important lesson than U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

"Reagan was the most impressionable student I ever had," said Matlock, who served as Reagan's top Soviet adviser before moving to Moscow in 1987 to serve as ambassador for 4 years. "He always appreciated having things explained to him. He was comfortable with his lack of knowledge, unlike some leaders."

Matlock, 84, is also comfortable with the fact that he might not know something — but that does not mean he is content to leave it that way.

Jack Faust Matlock

Education

1950 — Duke University, North Carolina, BA, summa cum laude
1952 — Columbia University, New York; MA in Russian Studies;
2013 — Columbia University, New York; PhD "Translating Leskov"

Work experience

1991-2012 — Various academic positions at Columbia University, Mount Holyoke College, Hamilton College, Princeton University,
1956-91 — State Department, including ambassador to the Soviet Union, Moscow (1987-91); ambassador to Czechoslovakia, Prague (1981-83); charge d'affaires, U.S. Embassy, Moscow (1981); deputy chief of mission, U.S. Embassy, Moscow (1974-78); vice consul and second secretary, U.S. Embassy, Moscow (1961-63);
1953-56 — Russian language and literature instructor, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire.

Favorite book: The ones I return to most often include Shakespeare's tragedies, Proust, and Nikolai Leskov's stories.

Reading now: "Zhizn i Sudba" (Life and Fate, 1986) by Vasily Grossman and "Mating" (1992) by Norman Rush.

Movie pick: "Casablanca" (1942) directed by Michael Curtiz; "Master i Margarita" (2005) directed by Vladimir Bortko.

Favorite Moscow restaurant: U Pirosmani, 4 Novodevichy Proyezd.

Weekend getaway destination: My wife Rebecca's farm in Tennessee.

Matlock mastered five foreign languages during his 35-year career in the U.S. Foreign Service, 11 of which saw him posted in Moscow. Those skills helped him understand complex situations, which in turn built his reputation for clear, timely reporting and insights —

including being the first to predict that the Soviets would not invade Poland during the 1981 Solidarity uprising. At one point, he even found himself warning Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev of the impending 1991 coup attempt.

Matlock worked with Reagan and his team to implement their mission to bring down the Iron Curtain. But he knew what language to speak to accomplish the goal.

"We were sensitive about what words we used. We didn't say let's bring down the Iron Curtain. We said, 'Let's develop a better working relationship.' That was the euphemism for opening up to bring about a better flow of information," Matlock said, speaking in an interview while visiting Moscow this week to commemorate the 80th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and the U.S.

After leaving the State Department, Matlock spent 22 years at the highest levels of academia, teaching international relations and diplomacy while keeping the mantra of his intellectual quest in view. His mantra can be seen in a small font in the upper right-hand corner on his website: "Can we learn from experience?"

But his students and friends know it's rhetorical. His learning shines through in his writings and commentary, including three books that he's authored about his experiences. The themes are consistent: a little less meddling in sovereign affairs, a little more attention to the details of communication, and a little less publicity during discussions of sensitive topics will all go a long way to help any two parties achieve their goals, especially Russia and the U.S. today.

The learning never stops. Matlock earned his doctorate from Columbia University this year — an effort that he had started while still a graduate student there in 1952. He settled on an analysis of idiomatic expressions of 19th-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, who was known for his ability to provide a comprehensive picture of contemporary society.

Many of Leskov's fans, including Matlock, see the relevance of Leskov in how Russia functions today.

"People ask me if it makes sense to try to do business in Russia. I tell them to read Leskov's 'Choice Grain' and then decide," Matlock said.

The satirical story "Choice Grain" (Otbornoye Zerno) depicts bourgeois morality through a tale of 19th-century merchants.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What fired your initial passion for Russia?

A: My attention was first drawn to Russia during World War II, when I followed the resistance to the Nazi invasion with great attention and admiration. When I heard Russian spoken for the first time on the radio — It was Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky's speech in San Francisco when the United Nations was founded — I had an aspiration to learn to understand a language that was important but seemed totally incomprehensible. But there was nobody in Greensboro, North Carolina, where I grew up, who spoke Russian.

Finally as a freshman at Duke University I read Constance Garnette's translation

of Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," not as a class assignment but just out of curiosity. It bowled me over, and I registered for a course in the Russian language the first year it was offered. I later took my graduate degrees in Russian literature at Columbia and have never regretted that choice.

Q: You famously declared that you wanted to become the ambassador to Moscow when you entered the Foreign Service. How did your colleagues and superiors react to that?

A: My colleagues were probably not surprised. One said he wanted to be the first Foreign Service officer to become secretary of state. But the course supervisor wrote something in my personnel record like: "Matlock's ambition is obviously excessive, but he seems level-headed enough to bring his aspirations in line with reality as his career progresses."

Q: Have you noticed any common personality traits between you and your peers during your meetings in Moscow with other former U.S. and Russian ambassadors?

A: Each of us has a distinctive personality, but I believe we all share a conviction that the basic interests of our countries are compatible and that both countries would benefit from cooperation rather than confrontation.

Q: How did it happen that you managed to warn Gorbachev about the impending coup attempt in August 1991?

A: Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov called on me when Boris Yeltsin was visiting Washington in June 1991. During our conversation he wrote a note asking me to get a message to Yeltsin that a conspiracy was being organized to remove Gorbachev. As we talked of other things, I wrote on his note in Russian, "I'll send a report, but who is behind this?" Popov wrote four names: "Kryuchkov, Yazov, Pavlov and Lukyanov."

President George Bush had a meeting scheduled with Yeltsin the same day. Yeltsin had just been elected president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, and Bush wanted to persuade him to cooperate with Gorbachev rather than oppose him.

In any event, I received an encrypted telephone call from Washington instructing me to "warn" Gorbachev, but without naming names, since we had no independent confirmation of the information.

I told Gorbachev that we had information that was more than a rumor and we could not confirm it, but President Bush found it sufficiently disturbing that he wanted to inform him. The information, I said, was that a conspiracy was being organized against him and could take place at any time.

Gorbachev thought we were relying on an erroneous intelligence report and did not want Bush to think that his position was weak — Bush was planning to visit Moscow in July — so he laughed off the information but thanked Bush for notifying him.

The next day, when Bush spoke to Gorbachev on the telephone, he mentioned Popov's name, and this was on a telephone line maintained by the KGB.

When the coup attempt did take place in August, three of the persons named were leaders

of the infamous putsch, and the fourth seems to have been sympathetic.

The final ironic twist to this incident is that Bush's slip in naming Popov on a telephone line monitored by the KGB may have contributed to the failure of the attempt to replace Gorbachev in August. Vladimir Kryuchkov, who was organizing the effort, must have learned that he had a leak and therefore stopped planning. One of the reasons for the failure of the August putsch was poor planning — everything seems to have been improvised at the last minute.

Q: What elements of the leadership styles of Reagan and Gorbachev made it possible for them to work together?

A: Reagan's acting skills gave him a strong desire and the unique ability to understand the role his opponents were playing and find a common language.

President Reagan understood that the best way to increase respect for human rights was by private diplomacy. He noted in his diary early in his presidency that we had been "too up-front" in our human rights policy and needed to refocus on private channels. He also recast our comments to avoid direct demands on the Soviet government to do something but instead sought to establish a dialogue over how we could cooperate to improve respect for human rights.

Reagan's leadership style was quite different from Gorbachev's, as were the political systems they headed. But what brought them together was the conviction that they could make a difference — that they were not bound by the policies they had inherited — combined with a passionate hatred of nuclear weapons. They wanted to put the world on a track aimed at eliminating those weapons that have no military utility and are capable of destroying humanity.

Q: What do you think of the Magnitsky Act and the Edward Snowden affair? What role could diplomacy have played to achieve desired results on both sides?

A: I believe the Magnitsky Act was a political mistake, not because the Magnitsky scandal was not a serious matter, but because it is one that only Russians can deal with effectively.

As an American, I find it outrageous that a Congress that cannot pass a budget, that threatens the nation's creditworthiness by playing political games with the debt ceiling, that has a confidence rating among our public in the single digits, would presume to teach other countries the elements of democracy.

At the same time, I would observe that the actions of the State Duma harmed Russian interests more than American ones. Russians must judge whether the emotional satisfaction of "revenge" was worth the cost.

Concerning Snowden, he violated U.S. law and the oath he took when he went to work for the National Security Agency. If he ever returns to the U.S. he will face trial, but not execution. If he had committed the same crime in China or Russia, he would most likely face execution. Anyone who thinks that communications on the internet or through cyberspace are not being intercepted by many different organizations is naXve indeed. But the greatest threat to privacy comes not from governments but from commercial organizations and hackers.

Q: How should policymakers find a balance between the benefit of "private diplomacy" and having to respond to domestic public pressures and values?

A: Of course, every government must take due account of domestic political pressures. Also, by private diplomacy I do not mean that a government should mislead the public. Private diplomacy does not mean duplicitous diplomacy. If negotiations are conducted entirely in public, then special interest groups tend to take over and prevent agreements that meet the needs of both sides. Also, if details of a negotiation are made public too soon, the media tend to treat the negotiations virtually as a sporting event. Who "won" this point or who "lost" that point. Not every starting position is actually in the interest of its proponent. It is the job of negotiators to find solutions where both sides benefit. This is exceedingly difficult if each change of position is scored as a loss.

Q: How do you see the U.S.-Russian diplomatic dynamic evolving vis-á-vis Syria?

A: It is in the interest of both the United States and Russia — and, indeed, all humanity — for the civil war in Syria to end. If the U.S. and Russia can cooperate to persuade the various parties to come to terms, that would be great. But the problem is that neither the U.S. nor Russia can force the parties to come to terms when they are determined not to.

Q: What are some new specific steps or programs that you envision that can help both sides "move past mutual grievances and deal with common threats"?

A: There are many areas where our military forces can cooperate. The NATO Partnership for Peace provides one approach that could work, and there are others. How about training forces from smaller countries for peacekeeping assignments?

Q: Do you have any ideas for cooperation programs that should be initiated by the private sector?

A: The visa agreement concluded a few months ago should make private travel and contacts easier. Individuals and groups in the private sector need to do their own thing with a minimum of governmental interference. The amount of travel and contact in both directions is actually quite encouraging.

Q: Do you have any specific suggestions on how to better curb official corruption and nourish an independent judiciary here in Russia?

A: No. This is something Russians must do for themselves. Of course other countries must be prepared to prosecute malefactors when their own laws are violated. We need more Russian-American cooperation in dealing with organized crime, which preys on both our societies, but with even greater impact on Russia's.

Q: Are there other problems that Russia is facing now where the U.S. has useful experience that could be shared?

A: Russians must determine when and where experience elsewhere is useful. After all, the United States has a very open society. Our faults are much in evidence — at times more than our virtues. But the United States may provide useful examples of how an independent judiciary benefits society and economic development. Our current Congress also provides

a negative example of how ideological rigidity and extremism can cripple a legislature.

Q: Who inspires you?

A: Former Secretary of State George Shultz has been an inspiration for his political wisdom, his practical ability to navigate political barriers, and his ability to lead a large and diverse organization and to encourage employees to work as a team. I also find Mikhail Gorbachev a great inspiration, a man who delivered his country from bondage and refused to use force to keep himself in power.

Someday Russians will give him the honor he deserves if they understand his true achievement. After all, he gave them political space to chart their own destiny. If the results are not what Russians want, they are to blame, not Mikhail Sergeyevich.

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