



Transcript Q&A

20 Years On: Perspectives on the Fall of the Soviet Union

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3 November 2011

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Question 1:

I have a historical question for the ambassador; maybe it's not one that he would wish to answer.

John Lloyd:

For this ambassador? [Indicates US Ambassador Jack Matlock]

Question 1 (continued):

Yes, *my* ambassador, the American ambassador. [Laughter] Sorry. It seems to me that as an old man – I'm 81 years old – that looking back at the Second World War, after the Second World War, the Truman administration did, I think, a marvellous job of taking advantage of the fall of Nazism. It doesn't seem to me that the first Bush administration were (sic) equally constructive following the fall of communism. Is my impression wrong? Or, if it's correct, what is the explanation?

John Lloyd:

he's making a comparison between the end of the war when the Truman administration took advantage of the defeat of Germany and Japan and assisted with the Marshall Plan and so forth; but, the Bush, the first Bush administration did not have the same kind of vision of assisting the Soviet Union – or, Russia and the others – when it collapsed.

Jack Matlock:

I'm not sure that we could have usefully assisted them at the time of the collapse. Certainly, I don't think that anything we could have done – and, I mean, the whole western alliance – could have done to prevent it, given what happened. That was internally determined, and one of the mistakes we make, considering the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, or something separate – the Cold War ended well before the Soviet Union collapsed – and western policy, US and British policy, was to support Gorbachev in forming a voluntary union.

Now, I think that mistakes were made in the 1990s in that more effort was not made to bring Russia as a full member into the European security structure. The way we expanded NATO almost willy-nilly, and despite the NATO-Russia

agreement, I think ensured that Russia was going to be uncooperative in the Balkans, and clearly, a number of decisions that have been made since then have been seen by the Russians as hostile and have created great problems. So, I think we did not show the vision after, that we did after the Second World War with the Marshall Plan and the insistence that the French and the Germans make-up and Europe unite; instead, we did follow policies in the 1990s, starting in the [Bill] Clinton administration, which, I think, perpetuated a division in Europe to the disadvantage of the Russians. But the situations were quite different.

Question 2:

I'm a former BBC Moscow correspondent, and in the summer of 1991, a very new and junior member of the foreign press core there. I'd like to ask particularly, to both gentlemen, but particularly to Sir Rodric, if it's going to take three generations to get there, how will we know when we've got there, and what might we see at that point? [Laughter]

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

You're talking about a giraffe: we'll know it when we see it. I mean, we know what a liberal market democracy is. We also know that Norway, Italy, Greece, the United States, and Britain are rather different kinds of liberal democracy. It won't be – and one of our mistakes was to try and impose our path of liberal democracy on the Russians – it won't be like ours. There will be the rule of law, there will be elections – contested elections – leaders will succeed one another in an orderly way, I mean, there are lots of ways to tell if it's a liberal democracy, I don't think it will be difficult to know.

Question 3:

I'd like to ask the two ambassadors about the feelings of nostalgia that you seem to get today for the Soviet Union in Russia, particularly associated around Putin, but, apparently, also among some ordinary Russian people, not just for the [Josef] Stalin period, but even now for the [Leonid] Brezhnev period. You seem sometimes to get this idea that they have this nostalgic view that life was better then, which, in material terms, seems utterly extraordinary. Are these feelings real? Is it just about imperial nostalgia? And, what does it say about the current state of Russia?

John Lloyd:

The question is about nostalgia, that Putin has, perhaps, encouraged, but a nostalgia for the Soviet Union, which runs quite strongly. You may share it, but...

Jack Matlock:

Oh, yes. Well, he has been quoted as saying that anyone who does not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union has no heart, but he added that anyone who wants to put it together again has no brain. You know, most Russians look back – particularly, and this is true in the 1990s – look back as something of a golden age. Their life was so disrupted after the Soviet Union collapsed, and people conflate in their minds things that were not necessarily contributory.

I don't think that means that Russia is going to try to re-establish its empire. Now, I think it is very clear that any country is going to be very sensitive about other countries developing military bases, in particular, along its borders. As an American, I'm quite aware, that one of the reasons we came into the First World War was the Zimmermann Telegram, the attempt of Germany to woo Mexico; it was almost as powerful as the *Lusitania* sinking in bringing us into that war. So, why we don't, we Americans don't necessarily understand that such things as Ukraine or Georgia in NATO as long as Russia is out, is simply crossing a red line. Yes, Russia will insist on a certain security glacé, and, except for the Baltic states this will be more or less on the lines of the former Soviet Union. I don't see anything wrong with that, and I don't think it should be equated with trying to re-establish the empire.

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

Well, I'd like to take it from the other end, from the grassroots up. If you ask – I've asked Russian veterans, you know, why they thought it was much better in the old days, and ordinary people, and they say, 'Well, the girls were prettier then.' [Laughter] It sounds like a joke, but it's a reflection of the way all our memories work: things were better in the older days. If you are a Russian, I mean, we keep on failing to understand the nature of the trauma that hit all Russians in 1991. At the end of 1991, Russians were starving; the other superpower, they were starving, and I mean that literally, and we were giving them food aid. When I went to tell the Russian deputy foreign minister that we were providing – Soviet deputy foreign minister, still – that we were providing all this lovely food aid, he said, 'Thank you very much, we need it. You do realize what a humiliation it is, don't you?' I don't find that very difficult to

understand. You know, 'We won the Second World War,' they believe, 'and now look at us.'

Stalin: it's not the elite, it's not the Putin people only; ordinary people remember Stalin as a great war leader. Okay, he shot a lot of people, including a lot of their relatives, and they don't actually look back on that with nostalgia, but I think we've, one of our failures to deal with the place properly, is our failure to realize that this kind of nostalgia is perfectly understandable.

Now, that does not mean, I mean, Jack and I are slightly different from one another, I think that the inclusion of the East European countries into NATO and the EU was inevitable and a good thing. I think we handled it badly, because, among other things, despite what you read, we did, the British, at least, did officially assure the Russians we would not expand NATO to the east, so they feel double-crossed. It would have happened anyway, I think. Ukraine and Georgia is a different thing, for all sorts of reasons, look at the history of Ukraine and Russia. So, I think that you can say that we don't have to bother with all that stuff because we're hard-headed realists, but actually, part of reality is understanding the nature of the person you are trying deal with. And, if they suffer from these kind of, I think, understandable things, you need to take it into account. You don't need to give away the store just because you want to be nice to them, or because you're sorry for them, but you *do* need to have to understand it (sic).

John Lloyd:

The next questioner gave *The Reith Lectures* during Gorbachev's period and I forget whether he said the Soviet Union was going to collapse, but he will tell us. [Laughter]

Question 4:

I didn't say the Soviet Union was going to collapse, though some people have attributed that remark to me, I don't know why. I did think that there was a serious danger, and I said the Soviet Union was going to go through an unprecedented serious crisis, which it did.

I was going to ask another question. I'm impressed by the ability of the state to muddle through, even when they are in a tremendous mess, and looking for what was perhaps the decisive precipitant for the end of the Soviet Union, it seems to me this: that few people, almost nobody, in fact, anticipated that Russia would become an independent agent. And, of course, when Yeltsin

was elected president in June 1991 he was able, actually, to get up on the tank and say, 'Under the laws of Russia, the emergency committee is breaking the law and I will prosecute them and anyone else who cooperates with them.' I think, as the sort of decisive moment that is the one.

John Lloyd:

What the speaker is putting to you is: was the decisive moment, the precipitating factor, in the collapse was that Russia itself, Russia, became an independent agent.

Jack Matlock:

In my opinion, yes, and as a matter of fact, the reason I sent the message I did in July 1990 that the United States needed a contingency plan for the break up of the Soviet Union... I found Russian opinion talking more and more about the other republics as being burdens, about ways to free themselves of them, talking about the future of the Soviet Union as something like the European Union after Maastricht. And, clearly, if Russian opinion – and these were people who were being elected – did not want to preserve the Soviet Union, for whatever reason, it was going to be impossible to preserve it.

John Lloyd:

Let me get in the author of the 'batting above weight' and your former boss.

Question 5:

That's an attribution that Geoffrey Howard would strongly dispute.

John Lloyd:

My mistake.

Question 5 (continued):

Did either of you ambassadors – or you, John – did either of you, were either of you surprised, as I was, that during the two-plus-four negotiations on German unification, [Eduard] Shevardnadze, for Russia – at all times, not

quite at all time, but for 80 percent of the time – was simply not fighting what one would suppose his corner was? He was always prepared, without huge argument, to agree that the new Germany would be fully in NATO, and all the different points that we had mulled over so much in the Foreign Office, and even more in Number 10, actually disappeared when you approached them

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

Well, I think Jack is probably better able to answer that. I think that the role of Shevardnadze was complicating all sorts of things. For example, at the end of the war in Afghanistan, he was opposed to the final withdrawal. He was indeed, he said famously in Canada at the beginning of that year, he said some quite remarkable things, which were not at all what he was paid to say. I think that, however, he and Gorbachev understood the logic of the situation and the logic of their own policies. I mean, once you'd enunciated the Sinatra Doctrine that they should all do what they like, and once the East Europeans – which took a year – became convinced that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze meant what they said, then the idea that you could stop the process was, I think, over. Mrs Thatcher didn't quite realize that, but it was over, even, including as far as Germany.

I think the business of going the step further and accepting that a united Germany should be in NATO was probably in part a reflection of the weakness of the Soviet negotiating position, and the determination of your government to push that through. I think it might not have happened if those things had not been true. The Soviet negotiating position was extremely weak throughout that year, and, I think, Shevardnadze and Gorbachev didn't do a bad position of preserving as much of their position as they could have done.

John Lloyd:

The question was in the two-plus-four negotiations, when Shevardnadze conducted them for the Soviet Union, it was surprising, amazing to people in London, people in the Foreign Office, and presumably to you – this is the question – that he, Shevardnadze, so easily agreed that Germany should join NATO and be reunited. Was that a shock for you and for your government?

Jack Matlock:

It was not a shock because I was present when, in February, Secretary of State [James] Baker put the question to Gorbachev; and, in affect, what he said is, 'What do you want? A Germany united outside NATO – which means

no ties on them to their future military development; it also means no American troops in Europe, because if Germany leaves NATO there will not be an American presence in Europe – is that in your country's interests? Or, is (sic) your country's interests better served by a Germany tied to NATO, which will prevent some of the developments of the past from being repeated.' He had preceded this by saying, 'assuming there is no extension of NATO jurisdiction to the east, and not one inch.' And Gorbachev answered by saying 'obviously any extension to the east would be unacceptable, but I understand what you are saying, I'll give it careful thought, and I also want you know that we are no longer trying to remove you from Europe, that we understand that you have a stabilizing role. Maybe it would be nice if you had fewer troops in Europe, but we want you to stay there.' And I told Baker on our car ride back to the embassy, 'You've got it, he's going to agree; but, he's got to fix things at home.' He saw, I think, that there would be a real danger in Germany uniting and pulling out of NATO, and then, in effect, having no NATO structure whatsoever.

Question 6:

This is for Ambassador Matlock, you were saying earlier on – I'm trying to quote you – that US and British policy was to support Gorbachev's plans to create a voluntary union. And, I think that was just demonstrated when President Bush went to Kiev and made the speech – which is outrageously called 'The Chicken Kiev' speech – when he was telling the Ukrainians *not* to separate from the Soviet Union. But, why did President Bush Sr not, at the London Summit of the G7, why did America – and Britain for that matter, and the other G7 countries—not, were they not prepared to give more support to Gorbachev, because that really was taking the rug from under Gorbachev's feet, wasn't it, just a month before the coup? Thank you.

John Lloyd:

You mean the financial support that Gorbachev was after?

Question 6 (continued):

Yes, sorry, he wanted thirteen billion dollars.

John Lloyd:

The question is why were not, in the G7 meeting in London towards the end – just before the end – when Gorbachev was essentially asking for vast

amounts of financial aid, why was the United States and the others, the UK and others, not more supportive?

Jack Matlock:

Well, first of all, he had no plans that made any sense. [Grigory] Yavlinsky had been working with Graham Allison and several others on a plan, which the Bush administration found rather attractive; and Gorbachev simply pushed it aside, turned things over to his traditional economist, and he came with nothing. Now, I tried my best to discourage him from giving the indication that he was coming to London to get aid, because it was clear to me that none of our government were in a position, given what he brought, to give him any, and that was simply going to be a disappointment. But—and I talked to several of his advisers along those lines – but, nevertheless, he gave a speech about a week before he went indicating that he expected some rather substantial aid. At that time, as I told him, ‘there is no way we’re going to find money to pour down the sand of your state enterprises. They are not economic, that’s not going to help you, and right now we are all going into a recession’ – it was mild compared to the recent one, but a recession, and I said, ‘politically, there’s just not going to be a lot of aid.’ Whether, with a different plan – I think, with a different plan he might have rallied more assistance – but whether it would have worked is very questionable.

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

I just wanted – we were chairing that meeting, so we also saw a lot of Gorbachev and his people just before they came to London. We said exactly what the American’s said. Gorbachev didn’t listen to us; he must have been trading on his popularity in the west, he sent [Yevgeny] Primakov a week in advance, who appeared on the BBC saying ‘Gorbachev is coming to, you know, for some money.’ The amount of money was thirteen million dollars, actually, I mean, nowadays you wouldn’t even notice it, but we thought it was a lot of money at the time. And, because he didn’t have a plan, it was a black hole, and we told him in advance that that would be the case. He set himself up for humiliation, and well all had a – and us too – a scurry around trying to make the best of it.

I think the real thing is – I don’t think it’s surprising he didn’t get the money – the real thing is what happened in January 1992. By then, Yeltsin was in charge. [Yegor] Gaidar had a plan, it was a plan we thought was a good plan; he came to us and said, ‘Can we have some money? Thirteen million

dollars?’ We said, ‘No, we’ve got a recession, sorry about that.’ Gorbachev had already said to us, ‘You’ve just spent a hundred million’ or whatever the figure was, ‘on the first Gulf War, you know, this would be an investment in the future.’ We said, ‘We’re sorry about that.’ Gaidar said, ‘If we don’t get some financial support, we will have three thousand percent inflation by the end of 1992, and I will have lost my job.’ Both of which turned out to happen. So, I think the real, the real lost moment was not the summer of 1991, nothing would have saved – I mean, we would have given him thirteen billion dollars, err, million – it wouldn’t have saved him from the coup, but there is a question about whether we could have done something more constructive at the beginning of 1992 with the new Yeltsin government.

Question 7:

My question is about the Afghan war: what role might it have played in accelerating or postponing the inevitable? And what impact might it have had upon the thinking of Mikhail Gorbachev?

John Lloyd:

You wrote the *Afghantsy*, you’d better go first.

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

Well, first of all, Gorbachev came to power determined to do what his predecessors had tried to do, which was bring the war to an end. And, he was prepared to negotiate, which he did effectively, and the thing we never remember, he left behind a government in Kabul with a communist leader and an army that could defend itself, which was not at all what we had wanted... but, he was determined to do that, and he succeeded. What effect the war had on the fate of the Soviet Union is a somewhat open question. My own belief is that the effect was comparatively small. By Soviet standards, it was a small war, not many Russian soldiers went to Afghanistan, they were all in Eastern Europe and on the Chinese borders. So, it had a powerful effect on the very small number of people and their families who were involved, but more widely, I think it contributed to the general malaise – the feeling that this stuff doesn’t work – but I don’t think it was decisive in any way. But that’s a judgment, you can’t tell now.

John Lloyd:

The question was what effect the Afghan war had on the end of the Soviet Union.

Jack Matlock:

Not a lot. Not a lot, because I think there were other forces that forced that.

Question 8:

To some extent, since I put up my hand, you've answered the question about the west helping Yeltsin in the Yeltsin period. But, to go to the first question that was asked about the reaction or the attitude of the United States after the defeat of Germany, and not the defeat of Russia in war, but at least economically... Germany and Europe got the Marshall Plan, and Russia got the Washington Consensus; so, I wonder if you would like to comment on that.

John Lloyd:

The question goes back again to the Marshall Plan; and, what the question was, was that the Europeans got the Marshall Plan, Russia got the Washington Consensus: what do you think about that?

Jack Matlock:

When the Europeans got the Marshall Plan, their countries were devastated by war, but they had a system, an economic system, which, with a little pump priming, the pump was there. The pump was not there in the case of the Soviet Union, and that's why I say even if there had been western aid, I'm not sure, a massive western aid – if you look at what happened to East Germany and how much money the West German government has had to put into a very small area which was actually more developed than the Soviet Union, then you get some sort of idea about the sort of aid that would have been required to make any impact at all. And, I'm dubious.

John Lloyd:

Greece comes to mind. [Laughter]

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

Well, I can only 100 percent agree with that. Russia did not have the institutions – go back to the three generations – it needs to develop the institutions, they didn't exist; Europe did have the institutions, and that's the difference.

Question 8:

Thank you very much. I'm a former intelligence analyst in Customs and Excise, who covered the Soviet Union, and my question is based on several years working with law enforcement agencies based in Ukraine – never actually in Russia – but late in central Asia as well. Are there any opportunities for rebuilding relations with Russia on matters of mutual interest that perhaps have got... which won't necessarily change the big, overall relationship, but can perhaps go some way to building this. That question is really based, admittedly, as I say, on the Ukrainian example, where I felt that at the EU level – not necessarily talking individual states, or, indeed, the United States – there were a number of opportunities that were very definitely missed there; this was in early 2000s, mid-2000s.

John Lloyd:

Did you have in mind particularly joint projects on crime prevention?

Question 8 (continued):

That, but also, perhaps, a little bit wider; but, yes, that kind of thing.

John Lloyd:

The question is really on what opportunities are there for rebuilding the relationship with Russia with projects that are not necessarily huge, but might change, over time, the relationship?

Jack Matlock:

I think it is necessary for – speaking as an American – for the United States to continue trying to base the relationship primarily on those common interests, which we clearly have. Now, the bigger issues that we face, with terrorism,

with the deteriorating environment, with the spread of disease, and coping with the rise of China and India and so on, these are all problems that Russia can either be part of the problem or part of the solution, and I think we should be operating in a way that makes them part of the solution, if there is to be one.

I think that we Americans, in particular, have been unnecessarily emotionally involved in their internal governance. Obviously there are problems there, and real human rights problems; but, at the same time, they are no worse than in so many other countries, where we don't make so much of it. We send, we Americans, at least, politically, tend to apply double standards, and I think the Russians notice this, and I think if we'd followed a different policy...

Now, on missile defence, I fully believe that we need a joint missile defence, with Russia and bringing China in as well as NATO and the other legal nuclear powers. I do think that it is going to be necessary, if we continue to reduce nuclear weapons, and if we are to deal with proliferation. And I see no reason why we shouldn't make it joint. I think the Russians have a lot to contribute both technically, but particularly in their geography, because I'm convinced that the most effective systems will be ground-based, and, therefore, I deplore what seems to be more bureaucratic bickering than anything else, over the current negotiations. But, maybe, I don't understand them fully.

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

I'm sure you're right, and you will have noted that two years ago we withdrew cooperation with the Russians on anti-terrorism, for reasons that seemed good to the government of the day.

John Lloyd:

I think that this will have to be the last question, so, fitting that it's not from a grey beard but from a black haired...

Question 9:

Sir Braithwaite, you spoke of the necessity to release the energies of ordinary people in Russia; this leads me to a question on the prospects for the private sector beyond energy. Given that the Kremlin has recently funnelled a huge

amount of capital to stimulate a thriving and entrepreneurial high-tech sector, do you feel this is going to be a success, given some of the issues you've outlined regarding corruption and contract law? And, I suppose, also, leveraging the previous question on common interests, do you think there are any prospects for growing bilateral trade between the west and Russia beyond energy?

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

Well, I think the first answer to that is that anybody who lived in the Soviet Union would be amazed, or is amazed, by the amount of small business that there is now. There was no service industry in the Soviet Union, for instance; there were no restaurants, there were no laundries, there were no village shops. All those things exist now. Now, this is different from a top-down, state-funded innovation programme, or whatever, and I'm sceptical about that working. But, what has happened, is what always happens: if you let people trade, they do. And that's what's happened in Russia, and in many ways – and I'm not only talking about the capital and big cities – life is much better because you can actually buy things, which you didn't used to be able to. That's because of grassroots enterprise. Building a whole range of industries other than the energy industry is different, and it's not working for a lot of reasons, but it's still better than it used to be.

John Lloyd:

The last question, really, is on private enterprise and the prospects of it for foreign investment and for trade. I mean, is there an opportunity now to ramp that up?

Jack Matlock:

I think that a lot will depend upon whether Putin is willing, really, to tackle the problem of corruption. Now, up to now, there have been, I think, spectacularly successful enterprises, particularly those in the consumer goods areas and areas of consumption. But the problems have often occurred in the energy sector, where clearly the Putin government has, and will continue to maintain ultimate control.

John Lloyd:

One small disagreement with Ambassador Braithwaite, there were restaurants in the Soviet time, but, boy, did they make slimming look attractive! [Laughter]

Sir Rodric Braithwaite:

That is exactly my point. [Laughter] We agree with one another.

John Lloyd:

We owe a great debt of gratitude, especially to Jack Matlock, who flew across the Atlantic to be here last night, and is going to fly back before he then goes back to Russia; so, he's as indefatigable as ever. And, of course, to Rodric Braithwaite, it's been a tremendous session. When we end – which, we're ending now – there will be a reception upstairs, so let us thank them both.

[Applause]