

Conversation Between Alexander Yakovlev and Jack Matlock, December 26, 1988

I received Matlock on his request on December 26.

At the start of the conversation, the Ambassador said that in connection with the forthcoming change of the administration in January 1989, he would like to exchange opinions on some issues of Soviet-American relations. The following moments from Matlock's statements deserve attention.

1. I personally, emphasized Matlock, hope very much that continuity would be preserved in U.S.-Soviet relations under the new administration. Bush is an experienced politician, and he was personally directly involved in developing the political line toward the USSR. Besides, the new President appreciates the fact that it is precisely the factor of the improvement of U.S.-Soviet relations that helped him to score the victory in the electoral campaign.

Of course, continued Matlock, one can expect that Bush would introduce elements of new style to U.S. foreign policy, which is not surprising, because we know that the new President, compared to Reagan, possesses a more extensive experience in this sphere, and has serious professional qualities. This, by the way, can already be seen by the cabinet that he has already formed. Secretary of State Baker, National Security Adviser Scowcroft, Defense Secretary Tower—very competent figures, inclined toward practical resolution of U.S.-Soviet problems, not toward their further complication.

Matlock especially stressed that Bush literally suffered through to say what he said to Gorbachev during the conversation that took place in New York on December 7 regarding the future of U.S.-Soviet relations. That, said the Ambassador, was serious and deserves trust.

2. Then Matlock touched upon several specific issues. In particular, the Ambassador said that "Bush's approaches regarding continuation of U.S.-Soviet negotiations on strategic offensive weapons will not be ready by February 15, 1989." This, noted Matlock, is quite natural, because the new President needs time necessary for an in-depth analysis and generally, for a serious study of this issue.

As far as the issue of chemical weapons is concerned, stated Matlock, Bush treats it as an issue of exceptional importance. However, continued the Ambassador, look at what is happening in Libya. American experts cite facts showing Kaddafi's firm intentions to build a plant for production of lethal chemical weapons in Libya. It would be good, concluded the Ambassador, if the USA and the USSR could joint their efforts in the struggle against chemical weapons.

Touching upon the Afghan problem, Matlock said that approximately a year ago, the American side proposed to stop weapons deliveries to all the warring sides, but the USSR did not accept that proposal. Nonetheless, the United States are ready to engage in full cooperation with the Soviet Union in the cause of the Afghan settlement. In Washington's opinion, Moscow is currently trying to make the Afghan opposition recognize the regime in Kabul. The United States are not against it, but at the same time, they cannot forcefully make the opposition take such a step. In Washington, they start from the assumption that the government should be created in Kabul on the widest platform possible, but that is not at all their, the Americans' business, but of the Afghans

themselves. In addition, Washington welcomes the negotiations that the Soviet side is conducting with representatives of different Afghan groups.

Matlock emphasized that the USA did not have any claims on Afghanistan and that they do not have any plans for using the Afghan territory against the Soviet Union. At the same time, the Ambassador reiterated the thought that the USA were willing to help “revive Afghanistan economically but not try to determine what kind of government it should have.” From Washington’s perspective, said Matlock, the Soviet Union now could have a positive influence on the improvement of situation in Afghanistan. Specifically, he said he had in mind stopping Soviet bombardment of the mujahaddin positions, which are being carried out in defense of the regime in Kabul, and also the need to affirm the intention to withdraw the Soviet troops from Afghanistan by February 15, 1989.

3. Matlock used most exalted expressions speaking about M. S. Gorbachev’s contributions to the improvement of U.S.-Soviet relations. Thanks to the new thinking and the corresponding practical policy, stated the Ambassador, the General Secretary of the CC CPSU became quite a popular leader in the United States. We, Americans, are very much encouraged by the existing sincere Soviet approaches to their own problems (he mentioned the recent E. A. Shevardnadze’s interview to Moscow News).

At the same time, said Matlock, sometimes he personally gets an impression that “some responsible people in the USSR” incorrectly perceive the American attitude to the Soviet perestroika (as a concrete example, the Ambassador mentioned the Saturday (December 24) show on the Leningrad TV, during which one of the leading officials of the Leningrad oblast KGB said that foreign intelligence services were making every effort to undermine the Soviet perestroika). We, Americans, stated the Ambassador, have a very favorable attitude to your perestroika, because we see in it a certain good for ourselves. Of course, deliberated the Ambassador, as a result of perestroika the Soviet Union will become stronger, but that would be a different Soviet Union, which does not threaten anybody. And considering the fact, continued Matlock, that the Soviet Union changed by perestroika will be a more democratic and a genuinely democratic country, the life will be easier for the USA too, because their defense expenditures will decrease significantly. Therefore, said Matlock, we are not doing anything in the United States—openly or covertly—that would undermine your perestroika, and I can state it authoritatively as the Ambassador. Of course it does not mean that there are no people in the United States, who would wish that the Soviet perestroika failed, but those are not the ones who determine the “weather” today: political groups of that sort do not have any serious political influence, and their relative weight in the society does not exceed 5-10%. I am convinced, stated the Ambassador, that the position of even that kind of groups can be explained primarily by their ignorance of what is really happening today in the USSR. Summarizing his deliberations on this issue, Matlock emphasized that he wanted very much that the Soviet leadership took everything he said here about perestroika with understanding.

On my part, I expressed our mainly positive views about the present state of Soviet-American relations to Matlock, emphasizing the importance of preserving and enhancing continuity in them, to which M.S. Gorbachev devoted primary attention during his meetings in New York. I underlined the importance of a joint concrete forward

movement on such important directions as reductions of strategic offensive weapons, chemical weapons, conventional armaments, and regional conflicts, without long pauses.

In the context of regional problems, while noting individual positive changes in joint Soviet-American efforts in this direction, I drew Matlock's attention to the fact that the United States so far has not shown any desire to actually encourage the Afghan settlement. The Soviet Union starts from the assumption that the USA will eventually exhibit the realism required by today's times in the spirit of the Geneva agreements on Afghanistan. A similar approach is necessary in the Middle Eastern region too, where the International Conference in particular, and the just beginning contacts between the USA and the PLO, which were favorably welcomed in Moscow, are destined to play their constructive role.

The conversation was attended by First Deputy Head of the International Department of the CC CPSU K. N. Brutents and First Secretary of U.S. Embassy in the USSR Sh. Burns.

[Source: State Archive of the Russian Federation, Fond 100063, opis 2, delo 148
Translated by Svetlana Savranskaya for the National Security Archive]