The Diplomat’s View of the Press and Foreign Policy: A Conversation with Jack F. Matlock Jr

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Recommended Citation
In Matlock's view, the media unfairly portrayed the 1986 Reagan-Gorbachev Reykjavik summit as a disaster.
The Diplomat's View of the Press and Foreign Policy

A Conversation with Jack Matlock

JACK F. MATLOCK JR., a career diplomat who served as U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Gorbachev era and as ambassador to Czechoslovakia in the early 1980s, is Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. Matlock began his lifelong study of the Soviet Union in the early 1950s and joined the State Department as a Soviet analyst in 1956, subsequently serving in various capacities in the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. From 1983 to 1986, he was senior director of European and Soviet Affairs for the National Security Council, and was named by Ronald Reagan ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1987. Journal Editor Edward C. Pease interviewed him in early August at his home in Connecticut.

MEDIA STUDIES JOURNAL: As the world seeks a new overarching structure to replace that of the Cold War, there is some debate as to whether government or the media are setting the foreign policy agenda. From your perspective as a diplomat, who do you see leading whom?

JACK F. MATLOCK JR.: I don’t think you can make a flat statement that the media set the agenda or simply follow an agenda set by any government. It’s an interplay. Obviously, the emphasis the media give certain situations does influence government. Public officials have to account to the public and, if nothing else, they’ve got to decide either to do something or to explain why they’re not doing
something. When sensational things happen, when there are wars and conflicts, and particularly when television brings these things into people’s living rooms—this tends to deprive policy-makers of the option of ignoring them. If that’s helping set an agenda, maybe it’s not too bad.

MSJ: In 1989, Dean Rusk wrote: “I cannot think of a policy decision or initiative that was taken from editorials in the press—even the major national newspapers or television broadcasters. The reason is very simple. Foreign policy questions have locked up within them dozens and dozens of secondary and tertiary questions which are not taken into account by the news media. Further, we must bear in mind that the news media speak to the American people and not for them. The myth of the fourth estate remains a myth in my experience.”

Do you share the secretary’s view?

MATLOCK: It’s rather silly to deny the influence of the media, as the quote from Dean Rusk seems to. On the other hand, I certainly never was aware of a foreign policy decision in which somebody said, “OK, where is the editorial opinion on this issue, 80 percent for and 20 percent against?” What the press commentary tells you is not so much what the decision should be, but how much trouble you may have with the American public and with Congress over an issue. It’s not that you read editorials to make policy, but the editorials are data in understanding your own public and, of course, in understanding how the media will present these issues.

I think Rusk was right in saying that we mustn’t forget that the media talk to the people, not for the people. That’s true. But, of course, it’s important to the policy-maker what the media say to the people, because everything is slanted to a degree. Understanding that is very important in understanding how, through democ-
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racy, you convince the public that the policy you think is best is, in fact, best.

MSJ: How has that balance between government and media influence on the foreign policy agenda shifted with the end of the Cold War? Is there a new formula?

MATLOCK: We're still very much in transition. Media coverage of stories like Somalia and Bosnia has created public issues that probably would not have existed in any significant way 50 years ago. Before World War I, it wouldn't have occurred to anyone that events around Sarajevo or in the Horn of Africa could have any remote relevance to America. You might get an inch or two in some of the more cosmopolitan newspapers, but that would be it.

That change comes from the power of television as much as anything else. I doubt that the existence of the British Empire or the other great European empires, which were put together by conquest, would have been feasible if television had existed in the 18th or 19th centuries. I don't think the British public would have stomached some of the things that happened as part of that conquest. Television is excellent at conveying a feel for violence, a feel for struggle, but not very good at conveying constructive things, institution building. It's day-in, day-out work, with very little spot news in it. The constructive work of colonialism—and I think there was a lot of constructive work—would not have been conveyed. The style of the print media of the day, reflecting the commitments and prejudices of the day, meant that the violence of colonialism, if not ignored, perhaps could be considered inevitable and limited and for a good cause. But if there had been television coverage of some of the colonial battles coming into homes in London, there would have been tremendous reaction to it.

MSJ: How do you think the climate of the Cold War affected the way Americans, and the American media, looked at the world, and how has that changed?

MATLOCK: The Cold War did give us certain standards. It was a struggle between freedom and totalitarianism and the exercise of force. The media were free to criticize our policies, and they did. But there
was no question in most media executives’ minds or most correspondents’ minds what the issues of the Cold War were. For the most part, they were on the right side of them. We were all on the same side.

Now, we’ve lost that. That particular, fundamental polarization is no longer out there. It’s always been a very complex world, but there was that basic organizing principle—the struggle between the totalitarian society controlled by very few people without any real limits on power, and an open, democratic society. That’s a pretty basic difference. Now everything is sort of mixed up, and I think the world, including the media, is struggling for some touchstones, some landmarks, some navigation points. And there’s no agreement yet where they are.

MSJ: *Is the world too complex to be covered adequately by the news media, as Dean Rusk’s quote seems to suggest?*

MATLOCK: Only in the sense that you can’t expect any newspaper or television network to be able to convey all the nuances and all the ins and outs. I guess I basically disagree with Rusk. I think there are foreign policy commentators who are fully as capable of understanding the issues as government officials, sometimes a little better because they don’t have to feel committed to previous policies and they don’t have to live with the consequences. From the policy-maker’s point of view, the media can treat these issues irresponsibly, but that’s not necessarily bad. It doesn’t mean they have a less subtle understanding of the issues, but what they recommend is not the decision, so they don’t have to bear responsibility if they’re wrong. A policy-maker really does.

But I think that when the media concentrate on a topic, committed, interested, well-trained commentators are as competent to judge it as we are, the policy-makers.

MSJ: *Did the end of the Cold War permit the media—and to some degree the diplomatic community as well—to take off the blinders that had limited how well they could see the world?*

MATLOCK: I don’t agree that there were blinders necessarily. There was an important struggle that we all focused on, and at stake were
values that I hold dear and that I think the media by their very nature hold dear, values that tended to be concentrated on one side rather than the other.

To make the assumption that every dispute is somehow the result of simple misunderstanding and that one side has as much validity as the other is to abdicate the very basic responsibility a human being has to discriminate and to make value judgments. I don’t think everything has to be a value judgment and that there is a demon on one side of every issue, a struggle between good and evil. But the fact is that in many of these struggles, there is a preponderance of what I would consider human values on one side, as compared with the other. If there was an overall sympathy for the Western cause—and I think there was—this didn’t prevent media criticism of Western policies, and that’s one of the virtues, one of the reasons that Western values should have prevailed.

The Cold War did provide benchmarks, navigation points, though, which are not there now. So when you look at a situation like Bosnia and other struggles, it’s much harder to say, OK, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys? The challenge is even greater now, because the press, if it is reporting these stories responsibly, has got to dig deep enough to understand the nuances.

For example, Bosnia is a much more nuanced situation than we’re used to. If this had been a struggle between communists and anti-communists, one would feel a little differently, because there would have been bigger issues at stake. We haven’t yet defined the new issues that are at stake.

This is one of the problems of the post-Cold War era—if we are to get some coherence into international law and into our own attitudes, we’re going to have to work on developing a new consensus. Those who concentrate on the big issues are worth listening to, and I think this is a very important role for the media.

MSJ: So the media have an important role to play, in your view, not only in reporting the emergence of the post-Cold War world, but in forming it?

MATLOCK: We need new guidelines, which is why I think this can
be either an extremely creative period or, if we hang on to too many stereotypes of the past, an increasingly confused period.

I think the media have an extremely important role to play in calling people's attention to this. But to do it, they must not only report the day's news, but at the same time they should press for more effective means to deal with the new challenges. Media coverage can have an effect, if it is formed by some sort of vision—and it doesn't have to be mine—beyond today's developments, whether or not to bomb Sarajevo. One of the reasons governments don't adopt more creative strategies is that it's hard to think of new ideas, and if it appears that your public is not going to accept or understand them, that's a good argument against spending your time on them. But on the other hand, if the media are prodding the government to do more in these areas, it will have its effect.

M S J: But does the American public have the patience for complex, long-term solutions? When TV runs pictures of starving children in Somalia or fighting in Bosnia, with voice-overs of correspondents saying, "We've got to do something"—does that cripple the mechanisms of state to come up with a longer-term strategy?

M A T L O C K: I don't think it's crippling, but I do think the spokesmen for the government and their briefers could spend more time explaining the complexities and the dilemmas. I think many observers underestimate the American people. If something is explained cogently, the American people are remarkably good at sorting out what is right and what is wrong, what may work and what may not.

The problem is that we are barraged by one-sided reports, and this creates attitudes. I think many of the public attitudes toward Japan, for example, have been exaggerated; the treatment has not been objective at all. Occasionally we'll get an objective article, but the very idea that we would reach the point where President Bush takes auto executives to Japan to beat on the Japanese to buy more American cars, when not a single American firm makes a car for the Japanese market, was absurd! What we ought to be saying is that the Japanese have done some things extremely well, and if we want to recover these markets, we're going to have to start doing things as
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well. The media are not very good at this sort of issue. It's not just the war and peace issues.

MSJ: In your career, surely you have known of world developments that you thought were covered inadequately by the press. Can you give some examples?

MATLOCK: One story the media undercovered because of a pretty consistent bias was the development of Reagan's policy for negotiating with the Soviet Union. There was not a secret element in that—every element was put out in briefings and in public speeches; every proposal we made to the Soviets, the president made public. And still, you had the persistent coverage—this is the guy who called them "the Evil Empire." He said that only once, although you wouldn't know that from the press.

His speech of January 16, 1984, when he first put out the four-part agenda on U.S.-Soviet relations that eventually worked, was covered more in Europe than in the States. Most U.S. commentators said, "Ah, he's beginning an election campaign." A year-and-a-half later, when briefing several TV anchors in Geneva during the treaty negotiations, they asked me, "How did all of this creep up on us?"

And I said, "Look, the president spoke about his policy toward the Soviets; he has given a number of speeches on it. I think a number of you—I'm not pointing fingers—simply dismissed it as campaign rhetoric. The campaign was a year ago, but the policy is still here. How many of you have mentioned that?"

I remember one of them, to his credit, said, "Mea culpa, I made that comment."

This was a problem. We got better coverage out of the State Department than the White House. In the White House, you could explain a policy calmly in an individual background briefing, but if you went into that press briefing room, it was like facing a bunch of barracudas. And all that Sam Donaldson and many of the others were interested in, it seemed, was simply to find some rift between somebody in the administration that they could get some drama out of. I can't think of a single one whose primary motivation was to tell the American public what the administration says it was trying to do.
MSJ: Was that an anti-Reagan bias, or a lack of understanding of the issues?

MATLOCK: The bias, as I see it, was the press’s preoccupation with conflict—if you’re covering the White House, you cover policy disputes. People do like to read this sort of stuff, it’s drama and TV is show biz. So is news.

I also think there was real skepticism that Reagan knew what he was doing, that he wasn’t senile. The press implied that his statements were either debating points during the Mondale campaign, or concluded that he was inconsistent because he was talking to people he referred to once—only once, mind you—as the Evil Empire. I mean, hell, it’s perfectly consistent to say, “That’s an Evil Empire, but by God, we’re going to change it, and I’m going to deal with them in order to change it.” That was implicit in what he was saying, but it was never interpreted that way. I’m not saying it was just anti-Reagan; it was partly bias in the way news is handled.

MSJ: To what extent is that also an artifact of the media having forgotten history?

MATLOCK: It’s partly that. I don’t want to slam the whole media. The best correspondents don’t do that—these guys know history as well as anybody else and, although I didn’t always agree with what they wrote, generally they were informed enough and had enough time to follow particular issues.

One thing I deplore is the way the media flood a summit meeting, and how that attention skews what comes out of it. Certainly, a summit is worthy of media attention, but to send hundreds of correspondents, 95 percent of whom don’t really know the issues very well, seems not only silly but leads to a circus atmosphere. I can understand that the *Kansas City Star* or the *Seattle Intelligencer* wants to have their own person’s name on its stories, but they would be much better off taking coverage from a syndicated guy or maybe a scholar or someone who could really analyze developments. When 90 percent of the people you’re talking to really don’t know the history, background briefings are a real challenge. Even local stations send their anchors; I understand they want to show that their people are
at the center of the action, but the tradeoff is that they really don’t know beans about what’s going on and they’re very dependent on what they’re told. If you don’t know the subject well enough, you either depend entirely on what you hear from somebody who supposedly does or you say, “By God, I’m not going to be led by the nose,” and you react maybe more negatively than you should.

So much of summity was treated as pageant rather than something serious, and if you don’t come to a total agreement, it is depicted as a failure. This begins to have an impact on policy-making itself, of course, because then presidents get wary and are reluctant to meet unless an agreement is assured. Policy-making would be healthier without it.

MSJ: So in a fragile post-Cold War world, the press is a bull in the china shop?

MATLOCK: I realize what I’ve been saying may seem contradictory. On the one hand, I’m saying that coverage is not always well informed, and sometimes it’s biased. But I’m also saying that the media have a responsibility to analyze, to lead and to pose the questions.

I don’t think the two are contradictory. The press’s first criterion, it seems to me, is to take seriously its responsibility of really learning the issues. It’s natural to have differences of opinion and I think it’s healthy to have the media disagreeing and probing. But I think it’s dangerous when the media begin to voice their own judgments to the detriment of those they cover—that judgment should be there, but it ought to be clearly defined as such, and there ought to be objective coverage.

The role of the commentators, either in print media or on television, is a different one. They are the gadflies, the people who try to see the future. Those who I think are most useful are those who really try to think ahead about the issues that are going to confront us in the next five or 10 years. What are the issues we’re confronting now? What should we be concentrating on? That’s an enormously important role, for both policy-makers and the public.