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Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Blames Zelensky for Last Month's White House Mugging



Photograph Source: The White House – Public Domain

On March 3, only three days after the mugging of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by Donald Trump and J.D. Vance, two foreign policy specialists blamed Zelensky for the confrontation and praised Trump for “restoring” diplomacy. The two specialists are very different individuals in terms of politics and ideology. One was Washington Post editorial writer Marc Thiessen, a right-wing ideologue, who is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a Fox News contributor. He is a Trump loyalist.

Jeff Bezos is a supporter of Trump, so Thiessen’s essay was no surprise. He is a favorite of Bezos, the Post’s owner. Thiessen would not have his position if Kathryn Graham or Ben Bradlee were still in control of the paper. The same could be said if Marty Baron, a former editor at the Post, were still at the helm. Last week, Baron wrote that Bezos’s attack on the Post’s editorial focus was a “betrayal of the very idea of free expression.”

However, the other attack on Zelensky was written by a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock, a career Foreign Service Officer, who is a leading Sovietologist and a linguist. It was as stunning and surprising as Thiessen's piece was predictable and foreseeable. I only know Thiessen by reputation, but I've shared political roundtables with Matlock and, in 1976, he was my boss when I served in the political section of the U.S. embassy in Moscow. His many writings are well known in both government and academic circles.

I share Matlock's views that there must be a negotiated end to the Russian-Ukrainian war, and that the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by the Clinton and Bush administrations was a major strategic blunder. But Matlock goes entirely off the rails with his praise for Trump and his national security team for "creating the conditions for a negotiated end to the war," and for "replacing a fundamentally flawed and dangerous set of policies" pursued by previous U.S. presidents. According to Matlock, Trump is "on the right track," and now there are "finally prospects for bringing the war to an end." Matlock even implies that the expansion of NATO was a justification for Putin's invasion three years ago.

It is particularly outrageous for Matlock and Thiessen to blame Zelensky for the "blowup" (Thiessen's word) or for bringing on Trump's "ire" (Matlock's word) because the Ukrainian leader was critical of the possibility of negotiating with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is conducting a terrorist campaign against Ukraine. Matlock believes we should be "congratulating" Trump. Thiessen believes that Zelensky's behavior "snatched defeat from the jaws of victory." He argues that Zelensky should have stayed in Washington to restore the possibility of talks, which ignores the fact that our pathetic national security advisor, Mike Waltz, told Zelensky to leave the White House.

In arguing that Trump "restored" the kind of diplomacy that Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush used to end the Cold war, Matlock reveals a certain ignorance for events he witnessed. Reagan's so-called diplomacy was successful because Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev caved into all U.S. demands, and Bush was extremely critical in private of Reagan's pursuit of arms control agreements with Moscow. If I knew this as a CIA analyst in the 1980s, then I'm sure Matlock must have had similar awareness at some point.

The very idea that Trump could even pursue a complicated series of discussions with his Russian counterpart is ludicrous on the face. Putin spokesmen are already explaining that he and Trump have a "shared vision" for various international dilemmas, including Ukraine, and that Europe (and not the United States) is the blameworthy villain. European countries, by the way, are now debating limits on intelligence sharing with the United States because they have concerns about the nature of the Trump-Putin relationship. There is no precedent for such a step. Neither Matlock nor Thiessen note that, from 2014 to 2022, Ukraine and Russia talked 200 times and negotiated 20 ceasefires. Russia broke all of them.

Perhaps Matlock needs to study the Trump diplomacy of the first term, which bungled a series of conversations with Putin, Xi Jinping, and particularly North Korean leader Kim Jung-un. The talks with Kim were particularly revelatory because they quickly descended into mindless accusations and personal insults that were reminiscent of Trump's dealings with Zelensky on February 28. Trump threatened North Korea with "fire and fury like the world has never seen," just as he is initiating his second term with warnings to Hamas that "it is OVER for you" if hostages are not immediately released. Matlock even supports the talks between Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, never mentioning that Lavrov is an experienced diplomat with decades of experience and that Rubio is a windsock who will support any view that Trump favors.

Sadly, Matlock is willing to sell our soul to advance bilateral talks with Russia, which "makes sense" to the former ambassador. I support genuine diplomatic talks to end the war, but Ukraine and the Europeans must be at the table. Thiessen blames Zelensky for refusing the White House request to wear a suit to the talks on February 28. I thought Zelensky's military dress was reminiscent of Churchill's jump suit during WWII, and quite appropriate in reminding the world that he has been wearing them since the war began and was sitting next to a man who received four student deferments for bone spurs.

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