

Why a War May be the Only Solution Americans Can Bring to this Conflict

What passes for expertise on Russia in the US today is corrupted by partisan politics, which distorts fact-based analysis

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The US used to produce experts on Soviet and Russian affairs like Jack Matlock. Today we get the likes of Michael McFaul. The decline of popular interest in Russian-area studies, combined with intellectual laziness on the part of the average US citizen, is to blame.

On February 21, Russia’s President Vladimir Putin gave what will most likely go down in history as one of the most important [speeches](#) in modern history. It was a brutally honest example of how current events are shaped by the forces of history. What is important about this speech isn’t so much the content—that is now part of the historical record—but rather how it was absorbed and interpreted by those who watched it.

As an American imbued with more than a little first-hand insight into Russian affairs, I have been struck by the inability of the American people to comprehend the historical foundation of Putin’s speech. It is not my place to either attack or defend the details put forward by the Russian president. I would hope, however, that my fellow citizens would be able to engage in an informed, intelligent, and rational discussion about the speech, given the immense geopolitical ramifications attached to it.

Unfortunately, the average American, lacking both the intellectual training and the critical resource of time, is ill-equipped to participate in such an exercise. Instead, they have subordinated this task to a category of public servant known as the “*Russian expert*.” Under normal circumstances, one might find the existence of such a class a relief; after all, Americans are willing to entrust their financial security to “financial managers.” Why not surrender the intellectual machinations required to make sense of something as complex as Russian affairs and all that topic entails to the hands of the specialists, men and women schooled in the history, economy, culture, and language of Russia?

This isn’t the first time Americans have been called upon to entrust critical Russia-related

analysis and the decision-making derived therefrom to so-called “experts.” From 1945 through 1991 the US and Soviet Union were engaged in a massive geopolitical conflict known as the Cold War. I happened to be an eyewitness to the final years leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to a speech which, in its own way, was as impactful as the one given by Vladimir Putin this week.

On June 28, 1988, I was in the second week of work as a member of the advanced party of US inspectors dispatched to the Soviet city of Votkinsk, located about 700 miles (just over 1,000km) east of Moscow, in the foothills of the Ural Mountains. Our job was to work with our Soviet colleagues to make the necessary preparations to receive the main body of 25 inspectors scheduled to arrive on July 1, 1988, when portal monitoring operations began, a month after the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty entered into force. On that date, we would begin our treaty-mandated task of monitoring the activities of the Votkinsk Missile Final Assembly Plant, located some 12 kilometers outside the city of Votkinsk, to make sure the Soviets no longer produced ballistic missiles that had been banned under the terms of the treaty.

The advance party was billeted in a well-kept Dacha situated in the woods on the outskirts of the city. Built to house the former Minister of Defense Dmitry Ustinov and his entourage during their frequent visits to Votkinsk, the Dacha was equipped with a well-stocked kitchen, a pool table, and a lounge where one could watch Soviet television. On the evening of June 28, I was surprised to find my Soviet hosts gathered around the television screen. That evening, Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), [had convened](#) the 19th All-Union Conference of the CPSU. At first blush, I gave the event no thought—just another communist party “yes” fest with officials falling over each other in fawning admiration of a totalitarian leader. I said as much to one of my hosts, an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“You couldn’t be further from the truth,” he replied. “This is a revolution!”

Over the course of the next three days, during breaks from what was a very busy schedule, I joined my Soviet hosts as we watched history unfold before us. Gorbachev was introducing real reform—perestroika—to the Soviet people. He was being challenged by the communist party, in the form of his deputy, Yegor Ligachev, and by reformers, in the person of Boris Yeltsin. The conference had turned into an ideological battleground, where the future of the Soviet Union was being decided live, in public, before the Soviet people, for the first time in its history.

If you had asked the average American citizen about the importance of the 19th All-Union Party Conference at the time it transpired, they wouldn’t have been able to provide an intelligent answer. Even though the Soviet Union had been elevated to the status of an “Evil Empire” with which the US was prepared to engage in all-out nuclear war to constrain, the American public at that time, much like their counterparts today, was satisfied to leave the heavy thinking in the hands of a class of civil servant, the ‘Soviet expert’ who would monitor the situation and advise the political leadership, and, as needed, the public.

Among those who constituted this ‘Soviet expert’ class were a category of military officers known as ‘Soviet Foreign Affairs Officers,’ or FAOs. Provided with advanced linguistic training and graduate-level education before attending a year-long finishing school, the US Army Russia Institute, located in Garmisch, West Germany, a Soviet FAO was a subject-

matter expert whose mission was to provide critical insight to policy makers about Soviet issues and, as needed, carry out specific military tasks—such as implementing the INF treaty.

The disparity between the Soviet FAO and his or her civilian counterpart was played out live in Votkinsk. The advance party consisted of five persons—three military officers (two FAO-qualified and me) and two civilian civil engineers. At night, when the work was done and the television turned on, you would find the two civil engineers playing pool or reading a book, while the three military officers were glued to the television set.

Over the course of the next two years, I bore witness to two critical events transpiring in parallel—the implementation of the INF treaty, and the implementation of perestroika. Both played an important role in shaping the events that led to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. As trained Soviet experts, the FAOs and I were able to provide invaluable insight into the phenomenon of perestroika in the hinterlands of the Soviet Union. That which empowered us was the education we had received in Russian history and affairs from an American academic establishment that had, since the end of the Second World War, been prepared for just this task.

The Soviet FAO, together with their counterparts in the State Department and US Intelligence Community, were the beneficiaries of an education system which had seen an explosion in Russian Area Studies during the Second World War, when the Soviet Union was considered an ally, and which only grew after the war ended, and the Soviet Union was reclassified as an enemy. The unique [circumstances](#) which gave rise to the study of Russian Affairs in the US allowed for the retention of academic integrity in the face of ideological pressure to paint the Soviet Union in a negative light.

One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon can be found in the person of Richard Pipes, a renowned American academic who specialized in Soviet and Russian history and who taught at Harvard for decades while advising various US presidents, most notably Ronald Reagan, on matters pertaining to Soviet policy. Pipes was decidedly anti-Soviet, and the advice he provided was decidedly hardline in nature. His writings, however, were derived from historical fact subjected to proper analysis and scrutiny. His book, *The formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and nationalism, 1917-1923*, was mandatory reading for any student of Russian studies (indeed, it should be mandatory reading today, given the correlation between its subject matter and the content of Putin's February 21 speech.) I have a first-edition copy of Pipe's book in my personal library, and I have made extensive use of it over the years as I try to discern what is transpiring inside the former Soviet Union, and why.

Every one of my Soviet 'expert' counterparts was a byproduct of an American system of education designed to empower those who participated with critical fact-based discernment skills, capable of separating fact from fiction and filtering out personal and institutional bias. The result was a system that produced people like Jack Matlock, the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union during its final years, and George Kolt, the CIA's top Soviet analyst. Both will go down in history as predicting the collapse of the Soviet Union (the thing about experts is that while their advice might be prescient, it is still held hostage by politicians who answer to a domestic constituency which is often unmoved by fact-based analysis.)

The end of the Cold War, however, brought with it the end of both the Soviet expert and the academic establishment that produced them. By way of example, I had been given two classified commendations by the Director, CIA, for my work in the Soviet Union. But in 1992,

after being invited to CIA Headquarters to interview for an analytical position, I was told by the head of the new Russia analytical unit that I was too imbued with “Cold War” thinking; the world had moved on.

Russia became a playground for a new category of ‘expert,’ the political and economic ‘exploiter’ who viewed Russia as a defeated power subject to the whim of the American victor. This class was dominated by the likes of Michael McFaul and his ilk, people who viewed Boris Yeltsin not as the by-product of Soviet and Russian history, but rather a malleable tool in their effort to transform Russia into a compliant “democracy” subservient to their new American masters.

Russian-area studies stopped being the go-to major when it came to interacting with the former Soviet Union, replaced by business and economics degrees sought by people whose purpose wasn’t to understand Russia but rather to exploit it. Interest in Russian studies [dwindled](#), a byproduct of a decline in interest and numbers, in terms of graduate students and faculty. Moreover, the system became infected by the reality of “garbage in, garbage out”: as the old Cold War Soviet specialists were retired from their posts in academia, they were not replaced by people possessing similar academic discipline, but rather a new generation of academics governed more by political perception than fact-based reality. Again, Michael McFaul comes to mind, a man driven not by the complex history of the Soviet Union and Russia, but rather his own vision of what Russia should be.

It is the Michael McFauls of the world who dominate the mainstream media today, people whose academic pronouncements are in keeping with government-approved dogma and, as such, sympathetic to the media corporate executives who work hand-in-glove with the government to spoon-feed what passes for “objective truth” to the American people. Jack Matlock [still writes on Russian affairs](#), his articles providing a fresh, fact-based look at the reality of what is transpiring in Russia today. A public debate between he and McFaul would be most welcome by those who truly seek insight into what is happening in Russia (I consider myself a student of Ambassador Matlock, and if he is not able to throw down the gauntlet of debate, I am—consider the challenge made, Mr. Ambassador!)

The American people are being poorly served by the new class of Russian experts to whom they have relegated all intellectual examination of current Russian affairs. Maybe when gasoline prices skyrocket, and inflation further shrinks their already burdened paycheck, the average American citizen might sit up and take notice. By then, however, it will be too late.

Vladimir Putin’s speech of February 21, just like Mikhail Gorbachev’s address at the 19th All-Union Party Conference in June 1988, should be viewed and assessed with expert eyes, trained to discern fact-based intent and relevance. This happened back in 1988, and we were able to effectively manage the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is not happening today, and we may very well find ourselves neck deep in a conflict which we do not understand and for which we have no answer other than war.

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