

My Lost Summer. My Hopes of Building Bridges of Friendship to Russia and Prevent Nuclear War. Scott Ritter

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I had hoped to make the Summer of 2024 a memorable one—building bridges of friendship to Russia, working to develop knowledge and information as an antidote to the poison of Russophobia in America, and trying to prevent a nuclear war between my country and the Russian Federation.

The U.S. government had other plans.

Growing up in a military family, I was immersed in patriotic themes built around the notion of service to one's country.

On the wall of my bedroom my parents hung two framed posters. The first showed President John F. Kennedy's face in profile, with the famous words from his inaugural address superimposed over it: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

The second was a poster showing an American prisoner of war behind barbed wire. "The Code of Conduct," the poster's title read.

"I am an American fighting man," the poster read. "I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense."

It was destined that I follow in my father's footsteps to serve my country as a Marine, and to abide by the code of an American fighting man. When I was commissioned, I took an oath "that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter, so help me God."

While the oath legally applies only while serving in "the office on which I am about to enter," the adage "once a Marine, always a Marine" means that this oath was, and is, a lifetime commitment.

Service to my country. A cause I am willing to give my life in defense of. Against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

This is my creed.

This is my mission statement.

I had made trying to prevent a new arms race between Russia and the United States one of my life's missions. This has been the case since I was selected to be part of the On-Site Inspection Agency (OSIA), a Department of Defense organization created to oversee the implementation of the landmark 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.

I am a historian by academic training, and as such I often look to the lessons of the past to guide future actions. Between late April 2023 and mid-January 2024, I had traveled to Russia twice, spending a little more than 50 days during which time I visited 16 cities and met hundreds of Russians in all walks of life, to get a better understanding of the Russian perspective on life.

I took my inspiration from the words of President John F. Kennedy, who in a commencement address to American University delivered on June 10, 1963, implored the American people "not to see only a distorted and desperate view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats."

I traveled to Russia because I wanted to inject hope into the American narrative about Russia.

"No government or social system," Kennedy said, "is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue. As Americans...we can still hail the Russian people for their many achievements—in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage."

I traveled to Russia to witness firsthand the virtues of the Russian people.

"It is an ironic but accurate fact," Kennedy noted,

"that the two strongest powers are the two in the most danger of devastation. All we have built, all we have worked for, would be destroyed in the first 24 hours. And even in the cold war, which brings burdens and dangers to so many nations, including this Nation's closest allies—our two countries bear the heaviest burdens. For we are both devoting massive sums of money to weapons that could be better devoted to combating ignorance, poverty, and disease. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons."

I traveled to Russia to prevent a Third World War.

"In short," Kennedy declared,

"both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race. Agreements to this end are in the interests of the Soviet Union as well as ours—and even the most hostile nations can be relied upon to accept and keep those treaty obligations, and only those treaty obligations, which are in their own interest."

I traveled to Russia to help prevent a new arms race.

So,

” Kennedy concluded, “let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

I traveled to Russia for the sake of my children’s future.



The author (right) with Valery Yakovlev, in front of an SS-25 missile produced by the Votkinsk Factory

I returned from my second trip to Russia in mid-January 2024. Within a month, I began to strategize about how best to continue and expand my mission of overcoming Russophobia by countering it with fact-based analysis.

I drafted a paper for my journalist colleagues, where I laid out my thesis in detail. “Relations between Russia and the West have been in a state of gradual deterioration over the course of the past two decades,” I noted. “The reasons for this decline are many, rooted in economic, social, political, and security issues derived from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the chaotic situation that developed in Russia following this collapse, and the West’s negative reaction to the emergence of Vladimir Putin as a Russian leader unwilling to conform to its vision of what post-Soviet Russia should look like.”

This deterioration has led to the politicization of reporting and analysis regarding all matters pertaining to the broad spectrum of issues that, in their totality, define relations with Russia today. As a result, journalistic coverage of

Russia has been haphazard at best, and lacking the kind of informed insights that are garnered through more in-depth examination of events that both consider and incorporate a Russian perspective. While there is a need for balance, that cannot be had by deliberately ignoring, downplaying, or misrepresenting the Russian point of view.

An objective review of the western media coverage of Russia since the initiation of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in February 2022, I observed, “suggests a prejudice against the Russian perspective that has clouded editorial judgements and journalistic accuracy, resulting in reporting which fails in its mission of being unfailingly accurate and timely in its predictions,” shortcomings, I concluded, which do not serve the public at large.

“2024 will be a year where Russia can be expected to dominate the global news cycle in a wide range of issues, including economic, social, political, and security, all of which are within the remit of legitimate journalism.”

My goal was to position myself to be able to provide additional journalistic capacity to cover what I called “the Summer of Russia.”

There was, I believed, a deficit of quality reporting about Russian issues that not only accurately reported on events as they occurred, but also provided accurate predictive analysis about events before they happen. This kind of quality predictive analysis is what separates intelligence from simple reporting, and given my background as an intelligence analyst, was something I believed I could accomplish by traveling to Russia and witnessing important events firsthand.

I proposed focusing on three major events—the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), held in early June, the Moscow Conference on International Security (MCIS), held in mid-August, and the BRICS summit, scheduled for October.

Unfortunately, my colleagues did not share my assessment regarding the necessity of focusing so strongly on Russia. Undeterred, I decided that I would accomplish the tasks I had set out in the paper on my own.

Well, not really on my own—by this time I had forged not just a solid friendship with the host of my first two trips to Russia—Alexander Zyrianov—but also a common vision on the importance of U.S.-Russian friendship.

I reached out to Alexander in mid-February about two concepts. The first was to capture the experiences we had shared during my two previous visits, and a future third visit, in the form of a documentary film. The second involved bringing my podcast, [Ask the Inspector](#), to Russia, where we would interview Russian officials and citizens for the benefit of Russian and American audiences alike.

In typical fashion, Alexander enthusiastically agreed, and we began a process of collaborative brainstorming that would end up with me traveling to Russia in June along with Judge Andrew Napolitano, the host of the popular podcast [Judging Freedom](#), the co-host of my own podcast, Jeff Norman, and a two-person documentary film team/support crew. The judge and I were scheduled to attend the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF), where we were to appear on at least two panels, and conduct interviews with senior Russian government officials. The Judge would then return to the U.S., and Jeff and his crew

would arrive to begin a 40-day journey that would take us and the *Ask the Inspector* podcast “from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea, and everywhere in between.”



Alexander Zyrianov (left) and the Author (right) in a Moscow restaurant, January 2024

This trip was extremely ambitious, and with such ambition came increased costs. Whereas the costs of the previous two trips had been fronted by Alexander with the goal being to reimburse at least some of the costs from the royalties from the sale of the Russian language-edition my book, *Disarmament in the Time of Perestroika/Gonka Razoruzhennia (Arms Race)* and other potential projects, this trip would require me and my team to pay the costs associated with this trip (airfare, hotels, food) upfront. In addition to raising funds through donations and the sale of merchandise, Jeff and I had found a donor who was prepared to underwrite the cost of the trip and documentary film. We prepared a detailed budget, and by early June were in the final stages of arranging for the transfer of funds.

Alexander and I were also coordinating on a follow-on trip I was expecting to make in mid-August. I had received an invitation from the Russian defense attaché in Washington, DC to attend the Moscow International Security Conference (MISC). Alexander and I were planning on filming a second documentary film about the battle of Mariupol once the conference was over. And finally, Alexander had secured an invitation for me to attend the BRICS Summit in Kazan in October.

In short, the plan I had outlined in February that had been rejected by my journalist colleagues had been resurrected in the form of an independent journalism project that would cover SPIEF, MISC, and BRICS, as well as a 40-day independent project combining the *Waging Peace* documentary project and the “ATI goes to Russia” road show.

This was literally a living, breathing manifestation of the vision set forth by John F. Kennedy in his American University commencement address: to inject hope into the American narrative about Russia, to witness firsthand the virtues of the Russian people, to prevent a Third World War, and to help prevent a new arms race, all for the sake of my children’s future.

And then the U.S. government killed it.

My passport was seized by members of the Customs and Border Protection service on June 3 as I was preparing to board a flight out of JFK airport that would take me to Saint Petersburg.

In one fell swoop, months of detailed planning and preparation were zeroed out by the actions of government officials who, apparently, feared the prospects of peace between the U.S. and Russia.

Two months later, the FBI executed a search warrant against my home under the pretext that the work I was doing with Russia required me to register as an agent of the Russian government.

There is no evidence to sustain such an allegation, because the simple fact of the matter is that I was, am, and will always be the master of my own agenda; everything I did—with Russians and in Russia—was done from a script I wrote, derived from an agenda I created, working toward goals and objectives I defined.

Yes, I worked hand in glove with my Russian host, Alexander Zyrianov. Perhaps the Department of Justice and the FBI are concerned about this aspect of my work, thinking that somehow the Russian government was using Alexander as a front to recruit me for their purposes.

The problem with this theory, besides there being no shred of fact-based truth to sustain it, is that, as I write this, Alexander Zyrianov sits in a Russian jail awaiting trial. He was arrested on June 3 (the same date my passport was seized) on charges of corruption. Since that time, these charges have been set aside as baseless. Now the Russian authorities in Novosibirsk, Alexander's hometown, are preparing a new set of charges which revolve around his fundraising in support of our U.S.-Russian friendship project.

Alexander's real "crime"? Trying to challenge the corrupt leadership of Novosibirsk by positioning himself to become the next mayor of Novosibirsk. Our U.S.-Russian friendship project had succeeded in raising his profile within Russia, much to the umbrage of those whom Alexander sought to supplant. In the end, Alexander's only "crime" was, like Icarus, to dare to fly too close to the sun.



The author (right) with Alexander Zyrianov (left) in Novosibirsk, April 2023

The Regional FSB (the Russian version of the FBI), operating on the orders of the Novosibirsk leaders Alexander had challenged, clipped his wings. They tried to do this back in November 2023, when an FSB officer threatened Alexander with arrest if he didn't resign his position as the Director of the Investment Development Agency of Novosibirsk. Alexander refused to yield to these threats and remained at his job—all the while positioning himself for a run at the mayorship of Novosibirsk.

His stubbornness and ambition proved to be his undoing—the FSB, again operating under instructions from corrupt Novosibirsk officials, arrested Alexander on the morning of June 3 as he was preparing to leave Novosibirsk for Saint Petersburg, where we were scheduled to meet the next day.

If anything, it is I who could be accused of the Russians (if they adopted the paranoid thinking that prevails in the Department of Justice and FBI) of trying to manipulate Russian elections. Alexander often said that the exposure he received through my visits enhanced his political profile. And I made it clear to Alexander that I had no problem with this. Indeed, if the FSB are half as paranoid as the FBI, there is probably a superseding indictment under seal in Russia awaiting my next visit to Russia.

I can't wait to see how the National Security Division sleuths try to spin this reality into their "Ritter is a Russian agent" narrative.

Peace, it seems, is not a popular theme amongst the powers that be in either Russia or the U.S.

I am hopeful that justice will prevail in Russia, and that Alexander Zyrianov will be exonerated of all charges of wrongdoing and be allowed to return to his family, his livelihood, and his life's passions.

I am confident that our friendship will endure through thick and thin.

As to whether our joint U.S.-Russian friendship project will be able to continue remains an open question. I know it remains one of my top priorities, given the critical role it plays in empowering my counter-Russophobia efforts and furthering my efforts to promote arms control and prevent a nuclear war.

But civilian diplomacy can only flourish in an environment where the involved parties—Russia and the United States—are open to the prospects of dialogue between their respective populations.

I once believed that the Russian government was so inclined. With Alexander behind bars, I am no longer confident this is the case.

I always knew that the U.S. government, infected as it is with Russophobia, looked askance at the kind of bridgebuilding I was engaged in. But I was also confident that my rights as an American citizen—freedom of speech, freedom of association, and (as a journalist) a free press—would shield me from the prejudices of those in power.

The seizure of my passport and the FBI raid on my home proved me wrong.

And now I'm left pondering my future. It is said that one's ability to envision the future is strongly influenced by their memory of the past.

"Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

President Kennedy's words, embedded in my mind since my childhood, resonate strongly today.

It is my duty as a citizen of the United States to work for the betterment of my nation.

I can best do this by drawing on the experiences in arms control and my knowledge and understanding of Russia to help better inform my fellow citizens about the critical importance of the former and the dangers associated with foregoing the latter.

I was, am, and will always be "an American fighting man."



The Author (left) with Alexander Zyrianov (center) and Alexander Dugin (right), May 2023

My struggle today is not on some distant foreign battlefield, but rather here, at home, on the soil of the country I am charged with guarding, and in defense of which I am prepared to give my life.

My oath as a Marine still resonates. I do not serve the president, the Congress, or any branch of government—they serve me.

They serve we the people.

I am loyal to the Constitution, which I swore to uphold and defend against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

In accusing me of being an unregistered Russian agent, the FBI and the Department of

Justice have turned the First Amendment of the Constitution on its head. Free speech, it seems, isn't free if the U.S. government does not approve of the content of the speech. There appears to be a "Russian exception" in play within the Department of Justice, where First Amendment protections are swept aside when dealing with matters pertaining to Russia.

This does not make America safer. In fact, by shutting down the various projects I had been planning on accomplishing this past summer, the FBI and Department of Justice have made the world a much more dangerous place.

One can make the argument that, by flagrantly violating my First Amendment rights, the greatest domestic threat to the Constitution of the United States is the FBI and the Department of Justice.

I certainly view them in this light.

Which is why I will fight them with every ounce of my moral and physical strength to ensure that I retain my ability to pursue the U.S.-Russian friendship project as I best see fit—not as the government dictates.

Because I believe the greatest existential threat to America today is that of a nuclear war with Russia.

Because I believe that the poison of Russophobia blinds the American people to the reality of this threat and, as such, to the need for forging a new policy path when it comes to Russia.

I believe it is my duty as an American citizen to see this mission through to the end.

And I'll be damned if the domestic enemies of the U.S. Constitution are going to stop me.

This is the battle for the soul of America.

For the survival of the American dream.

And for the survival of the constitutional republic we call home.

I will be in Kingston, New York, on September 28 with Gerald Celente, Judge Andrew Napolitano, Max Blumenthal, and Anya Parampil for the [Peace Freedom Rally/Operation DAWN/Family of Podcasts event](#), where issues such as preventing nuclear war, free speech, the Gaza crisis, and the state of American democracy will be discussed and debated.

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Featured image: The author (center) with Ilya Volkov (left) and Alexander Zyrianov (right) at Mamayev Kurgan (Volgograd) / All images in this article are from the author

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