

The Strait Guys: Connecting America And Russia

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Ross: Welcome to Renegade Inc. The ongoing super feud between America and Russia has caused colossal collateral damage internationally, and everyone will feel the effects of the fallout. But what if there is a project that Russia and the US can collaborate on that would bring peace, progress and prosperity? The Inter-Continental Railway is that ambitious project connecting former foes to trade with one another which would generate commerce, not conflict, for everyone.

Ross: Rick Minnich, welcome to Renegade Inc. Lovely to have someone in the studio firstly, but also a filmmaker.

Rick Minnich: Yeah, it's great to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

Ross: Rick, you made a film called The Strait Guys and ostensibly The Strait Guys is quite a story about - I was going to say a straightforward story, and it would have been a dreadful pun - but it's a straightforward story about a train line. Where is the train line from and where is it to?

Rick Minnich: the train would start in Edmonton, Canada and would end in? Yes, and would end in Harbin in China. And that's 5,500 miles. And it would connect the existing railroad system in North America with the existing system in Eurasia.

Ross: So in a sense, it's a One Belt One Road the Chinese are constructing. Is it version two? Is it One Belt One Road version two?

Rick Minnich: Well, it should be a part of the One Belt One Road Initiative. It isn't yet, but hopefully someday it will become part of that. It certainly helping it to get developed.

Ross: So it's a story about a train, but it isn't is it? It's actually a story about national identity, cultures, people, collaboration, trade. That's what it's really about. Because what you're trying to do, what they're trying to do with this train line, is put it through countries that, let's say, haven't had the best history. Is that diplomatic enough?

Rick Minnich: Yes.

Ross: And especially at the moment, America, Russia. Just give us that context.

Rick Minnich: Yeah. The US and Russia have, as we all know, a pretty difficult relationship. So the line the train would go through Russia, China, Canada and the United States. So there are four countries involved. To get it built it would essentially require a treaty between the US and Russia, which obviously is not going to happen under the current situation.

Ross: Really good timing on releasing the film by the way.

Rick Minnich: Well, it just happened to be after 12 years, we just happened to finish it a few months ago just before a war. But curiously enough, the idea has been around for a 150 years.

Ross: But you see, that's the interesting bit, isn't it? Because when you come to the historical context of it, it's not about the last 12 years or even the last 50 years. This idea has been there and burgeoning, and it just needs birthing?

Rick Minnich: Yes, that's true. And in 1906 it was almost built. Stocks were issued. The New York Times reported about it. But then there's an intriguing the Tsars court, an adviser said, Don't do this. otherwise, the Americans will invade. And then after that, one war after another got in the way and now we have another war.

Ross: let's talk about casting. We've got Scott Spencer, George Koumal and Joe Henri. They make up the bulk of the narrative. Why are they so important and how did they come together?

Rick Minnich: OK. George Koumal is largely credited as the man who revived this one hundred and fifty year old vision back in the late 1980s, when actually the last years of the Cold War, he started pushing this. And then once the once the Cold War ended, he was able to get some momentum going on the Russian side. George fled Czechoslovakia in 1969. He's a mining engineer and ended up in the United States. So he's always had this deep desire to kind of link the east and western souls, you know, in his heart. And then the initial enthusiasm from the early nineties, when there was a lot of US-Russian collaboration since the Space International Space Station. As the 90s progressed and conditions got more and more chaotic in Russia that enthusiasm wore off, and then both countries slipped in their old ways again. And this is kind of slid into the background.

Ross: And what we see now is that frozen conflict?

Rick Minnich: Yes.

Ross: Let's have a quick look at one clip from the film.

Video clip: So far, Scott seems to be making a good impression. It turns out he's an old train buff and has arranged a ride on the Alaska Scenic Railway in a special treat for George and Joe. So here you are. Here's your name's George. Joe, there's your name, and there's Victor's name.

Video clip: Well, that is my name, too.

Video clip: Now, of course, that's yours to take home. Because another important milestone for this railway will be driving the first spike. So hey, Harley, thanks very much, have been great riding your railway. Thanks for joining us. I think one thing is important to keep in mind with this is that the Strait Guys, George and Joe and me as an assistant Straight Guy. I think our perseverance, our personal commitment is the same. We're not expecting a dime out of this. This is a way that we know that we can serve our country and serve the world. Yeah,

maybe someday I might be able to get hired with one of the consortiums but I'm not banking on it. George is at the point of his life where he knows he spent over 297,000, he told me for the first time. And I always wondered how he did these conferences in his travels and I don't expect he thinks to get any of that, let alone profit off of it.

Ross: When we watched that clip, the thing that really stands out for me is that these guys have dedicated themselves to something which they'll never see the end of. It's certainly bigger than themselves, but at the heart of it, and I come back to it after that second point is it's about collaboration, and we have a world now that is full. You know, we have got huge population issues, and what we need more than anything is collaboration over conflict and competition.

Rick Minnich: Absolutely.

Ross: This rail line is the epitome of that, isn't it?

Rick Minnich: It is. It is. If you look back in history, railroads have really been the engine that have drive driven development in the United States. It was the Trans-Continental Railway that connected the east and west coasts. In Russia, it was the Trans-Siberian Railway that connected this enormous country. And the Inter-Continental Railway would be the extension of that. It would really be linking continents. It would link Asia and North America and, you know, the entire world would be connected by rail as a result.

So it's really kind of like the ultimate globalisation project in my vision, in my mind. Scott and George and Joe, the Strait Guys, they say that they've done projections that it would transport three percent of the global trade, which is the equivalent of the Panama Canal. And because of the curvature of the Earth, it's a shorter distance going through the Bering Strait way up north and would be about one week faster than going by ship.

Ross: And also, the green credentials are there, aren't they, because ship is famously polluting?

Rick Minnich: Oh yeah, absolutely. The Inter-Continental Railway would be powered by renewable energy sources like tidal power plants and hydroelectric along the route. Plus, it could be used whenever, wherever you have a railway, it's a great opportunity to run power lines and fibre optic cables and stuff along along the alignment.

Ross: So from where I'm sitting, what I see is that this is all ready to go. The only big problem is human beings are getting in the way. A different way of saying it is life is very easy. It's people. that complicate it.

Rick Minnich: Yeah, you could say that. I mean, actually, whenever the Strait Guys were presenting their project, basically we follow them along the route, the proposed route, through Alaska to the Bering Strait and in Russia. And they presented to various groups, stakeholders along the way and these Alaskan villages and stuff. And one of the first questions is always, how much does it cost? And when they say \$100 billion, jaws would drop. But then Scott was always quick to say, Well, the International Space Station cost a hundred billion dollars. And you know, it's due to be decommissioned in the next years. But

this Inter-Continental Railway could be in place for the next hundred or 200 years. It's really a long-term investment.

Ross: Put a different \$100 billion for the military industrial complex, that's chicken feed in comparison. And actually, this has got a social benefit as opposed to blowing people up in far flung places.

Rick Minnich: The Strait Guys like to say that the Inter-Continental Railroad would bring peace, progress and prosperity to the entire world.

Ross: Yeah, but the neocons are so cynical, they'd say hang on we're going to bomb....

Rick Minnich: Yeah, yeah, sure. You can take that from the cynical thing. But if you really think about the thought behind it is that if you are doing business with someone and you're intricately linked in an economic way, you will think twice before you start a war with that other party.

Ross: One hundred percent. We often quote on this programme Alibaba founder Jack Ma. And he was at Davos or one of these talking shops. And he said, You know, what do you see the problem with the US at the moment? He says too much war and not enough investment. That's diametrically opposed to the One Belt One Road strategy coming out of China. And what you're getting at as a filmmaker - and I'd love to know why you picked this up - is that actually we can promote prosperity, peace, abundance and trade if we do this.

Rick Minnich: Yes.

Ross: What's not to like?

Rick Minnich: That's what I keep asking.

Ross: So what are we doing? I think you need to get your spade out and start digging.

Rick Minnich: I think maybe you have to really go back to following the money trail and this inevitably takes us back, unfortunately, to the military-industrial complex in that there's just more money to be made in war than in peace. And or at least that's the perception of the people in power at least in the United States. Short-term.

Ross: But long-term, the Chinese think in 200 year blocks.

Rick Minnich: Yes. That's why I would say the 21st century is the Chinese century. I've been there several times, and I've seen for myself just how advanced they are. And it has to do with long-term thinking. And just look at how much they're investing all over the world with the new Silk Road. They've had huge investments in Africa. It's long-term thinking. And I think in the United States that that type of mentality just doesn't exist. I think it's tied to the election cycles too much. Politicians are looking for short-term gains that will get them re-elected so they can stay in office and have more power. And they're not really looking for, you know, investing. Investing in infrastructure just isn't sexy. It's like it's a long-term thing, building new bridges and railroads and things.

Ross: If you look at American infrastructure, it's shot. I mean buildings are crumbling, bridges are crumbling. You've mentioned mentality. Let's just talk about mentality, specifically American mentality and Russian mentality. Before we started shooting this, you were talking about the Russian's being a lot more broader mentality, a lot more cross-border collaboration. The Americans may be a little more insular. They want total control. I suggested to you, maybe that's an insecure way of going. Why is it that your fellow countrymen, the Americans, don't understand that if they take one step towards somebody to collaborate, actually that person will step as well? You can do something together. Why do they need total control all the time?

Rick Minnich: The US just likes to call the shots. I think that the US came out of World War Two with a clear perception that we are the good guys and we won the war. And it's easy for the United States to forget that the allies won the war and that the allies included you, Brits and the French and the Russians. And at the end of the Cold War, I think the United States has this clear perception, or at least the people who were in power in the United States, that the United States won the Cold War, or that the West won the Cold War, but specifically the United States. And they treat Russia as the defeated enemy. And I think that's the absolutely wrong approach.

Anyone who's been to Russia knows if you go to Moscow or St. Petersburg, they are far more advanced than any American city in terms of public transportation, their infrastructure, the culture and everything, are far more advanced. And Americans, I don't think that they understand that. I just don't think they're very interested. And I had the impression during my several trips to Russia while making this film, that the Russians are just more curious about the world and are more open to collaboration because they see that they can benefit in the short-term and in the long-term. And maybe that's their way of trying to get reintegrated into the world or something, getting some acceptance.

You know, what's going on right now in Ukraine is absolutely horrible, but I think part of the problem can be traced back to the fact that Russia has been exiled from the world, you know, kicked out of the G8. They kept telling us that they, you know, were waiting for the US to reach out to them. And my impression was the Russian's just wanted a seat at the table and they wanted to negotiate at eye level with other partners, especially the United States. And I think there's something in the way U.S. diplomacy works that they just don't want to see Russia as an equal and worthy partner.

Video clip: The project which we are discussing is fantastically good. We're certain that this will be the greatest project of this century. And we have the ability to report this to Putin and to your country, the American country. Trump is always striving for such projects..

Video clip: This visit to Russia is important to get to that first step of digging this railway.

Video clip: We are going to go through a very big trial. This is nothing to brag about. The sanctions imposed on us harm not only us but also the American's and many other countries. And it is difficult, nonetheless, if a meeting is held. I say this without doubt, I'll take this proposal with me and say, take this and read it. You will be gracing yourself with a truly powerful project - very powerful. And I really want Mr Trump to have his people read through the project and study it thoroughly to throw whatever is between us understanding how important the project is not only for America but Russia.

Video clip: It shows it's very encouraging to see how we can work together.

Video clip: Mr Oslakanov echoes a sentiment I've been hearing throughout my travels with the Straight Guys that Russia sincerely wants to connect to the United States and be treated as a worthy and equal partner. They're just waiting for us Americans to take the first step. But is it really this simple?

Ross: Welcome back to Renegade Inc. I'm joined in the studio by Rick Minnich and also joined by Scott Spencer, who is in West Virginia. Gentlemen, welcome to you both. In that first half, Rick and I talked about The Strait Guys, a film that he's chosen to make. But if we go back to 1992, you got on board on one of the very first conferences. Why did you decide to get on board?

Scott Spencer: Well, I think in all our endeavours in life, we always look for a way to leave the world a better place than we found it. And for me, the Inter-Continental Railway, I thought, was a compelling project that the world really needed at that time, and even more so [today](#), and as a railroad expert, I thought I could bring my railroad operating expertise to the table. And being from Delaware and so close to Washington, our founders George Koumal from Arizona, Joe Henri from Alaska and Victor Razbegin from Russia, we all thought there was a good opportunity for me to help provide a presence for the project in Washington on a as needed basis as well. So it was a good synergy and for a great project.

Ross: What do you see, especially now with what's going on in Ukraine and the world more broadly, why do you see that this is the moment to push this and get the Inter-Continental Railway working? Why now?

Scott Spencer: Excellent question, because I've had a lot of people reach out to me and say that's the end of this project. Not at all. I think no matter what our differences in the world and you look through history, all great nations will always have differences. But I think there's a lot of commonality and what we wish for our futures, for our children's future and for the greatness of our respective countries. And so when you look, as you see on this Russian version of the project and the American version as well, the foundations of this project are rooted in peace, progress and the bottom line being prosperity for all the nations involved.

This military conflict in Ukraine is going to take a great deal of healing, recovery and rebuilding. And I can think of no project that can bring such greatness and such results for all the nations involved, then the Inter-Continental Railway. Where we begin, I think right now immediately with the situation in Ukraine, I think it is vital that we have a ceasefire and a rollback of the troops out of Ukraine and a 21st century solution because this has to be in place for the life of this project. Remember, this project is going to create infrastructure that will be in service for 100 to 200 years. So there'll be any number of political differences even after the project is built. But we need a 21st century solution because, as we've seen in Ukraine, threat-based diplomacy of consequences and sanctions have failed. And unfortunately, people are dying. Ukrainians are dying. Good Ukrainian civilians have died. Good Russians have died. It's a sad loss. But a 21st century solution, when you look at our civilisation, our military is prepared to fight a conflict twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, right? But we have no such approach to diplomacy. So in this situation, we need to put in place with the ceasefire and a rollback, a crisis resolution team that is negotiating with an

ABC team twenty four hours a day, seven days a week between Moscow, Kiev and Washington to resolve the differences in a mutually beneficial way. And I say mutually beneficial because we keep saying how diplomacy has failed, but we're leaving out something in this diplomacy and that's mutually beneficial diplomacy, not just relying on threats and sanctions.

And I lay all this out because this is the insurance we need for political cooperation well into the future for the Inter-Continental Railway to succeed, I think politicians tend to take the easy way out and just play the blame game. It has nothing to do, particularly, with Russia. Look internally with our own politics rather than figure out a, as I say, a mutually beneficial solution to an issue, the blame game is followed very quickly. And that can have disastrous results. The longer this conflict in Ukraine continues, the greater the risk of disaster result for all the nations involved. And that's why, again, I'm pointing out that the principles of an Inter-Continental Railway can be a basis for our nations to work together. And when people say, how is that possible? How can the United States and Russia even get past this conflict? Well, we can look ahead every 90 minutes the International Space Station is floating above us around the world. And it has been an excellent model and it should be really no nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for the cooperation that Russians and Americans and other nations have had. And we view that as a model for how the Inter-Continental Railway can succeed where most people think it's not possible.

Ross: Did you see that when you first heard Scott speak and see the vision that he was putting across?

Rick Minnich: That's when it really made sense to me when he started talking about the space station because it's a really a concrete example of cooperation that's been successful regardless of what's going on here on Earth between the US and Russia. And I think he's right. I think that once this railroad is up and running, people are going to be like, why didn't we do this before? That's as Scott likes to say. You know that once it exists, you were like, wow, we should have done this long ago.

Ross: Scott, what's one thing that has really changed your mind when you've been working on this project? Because when filmmakers work on films, they start with an idea, and by the time they finish a film, they've changed their mind on something or it has changed them. What has changed you specifically about international relations?

Scott Spencer: Rick really has been devoted and dedicated to telling this story. The world needs to know, and the world can know more about it as well by going to our website, intercontinentalrailway.com. It's also there in our pages that are in Russian as well. I wouldn't say what's changed me, but what has confirmed the goodness in our world is the opportunity I had to travel across Russia, to Eastern Siberia, to Yakutsk and to meet with Russian officials and an advisor of President Putin in Moscow. Look, when I was in those meetings, issues like the sanctions came up and I said, look, I'm a private citizen. I can only speak as a private citizen. But I do know both our nations take pride in negotiating ways that ultimately benefit our nation rather than not talking. And that's what's so concerning to me about this present situation in Ukraine. It's obviously very tragic the deaths on both sides. But the longer we're not talking directly, the greater the risk, the greater the costs. And that's why I can't speak about the Inter-Continental Railway without saying that our leaders need to talk directly and do so under a ceasefire and a rollback of the troops so we can look at options like

rolling back the sanctions in concert with that. There's all types of options that could be, as I said, mutually beneficial diplomacy.

Ross: And the Inter-Continental Railway is the event that you can hang those things off, isn't it? That's what you're getting at?

Scott Spencer: Well, it's also the great next step. I mean, look at the the pain that our world came through after World War Two and those conflicts and the difficulties we had with Germany and Japan. Yet we found ways to build those relationships to be more successful so we weren't just adversaries, but we're actually doing things constructively together. And that's why I say the Inter-Continental Railway is so beneficial for our world. For instance, the issues of the environment, the issues of the constraints of Trans-Pacific shipping on the economies of Asia as well as North America are not going to go away. And if we're going to grow successfully, there is no amount of ability to expand ports in North America, even if you wanted to tear up more land or urban areas for expanding ports, even if you wanted to spend the money. We can't do it. The Inter-Continental Railway is a relief line via the Bering Strait to the supply chain woes that we saw with ships stacking up outside of America. That's not going to go away. And remember what we're discussing here today Ross, will have an impact on this world for the next 100 to 200 years. And so you ask why I got involved? I think everybody seeks in life, as I mentioned, something that leaves the world a better place than they found it. And that certainly is the case with the Inter-Continental Railway in so many ways. It requires China and Russia to work with the United States and Canada in a mutually beneficial way.

Ross: Scott Spencer, congratulations on the Inter-Continental Railway and also for your vision from 1990 to no less, but most impressive, the tenacity to stick with it. And Rick, congratulations on the film. It's just about to be released into the world. More people should see it and understand that we have way more in common than we do have different. Gentlemen, thank you both very much.

Scott Spencer: You're welcome.

Ross: That's it from Renegade Inc. This week. You can drop the team a mail - studio@renegadeinc.com. Join us next week for more insight from those people who are thinking differently. But until then, stay curious.