



## **IN MY OPINION**

by Irene Mandra

Dear Members,

I am not writing this month but am sharing a wonderful article written by Norman Kass.

### **A LOOK AT THE USRJC: THE FUTURE IN RETROSPECT**

We all have calendars showing memorable events which have occurred in the past or which lie ahead. Those committed to accounting for our missing service-members may even have an entry for the U.S.-Russia Joint Commission on POW/MIAs, or USRJC, whose twenty-fifth anniversary coincides with the release of this newsletter. Hailed as an example of the cooperation possible between our Nation and the Russian Federation once the Cold War ended, the Commission was established under presidential direction as a bilateral commitment to a shared humanitarian objective: to resolve the fates or clarify loss circumstances involving all those in uniform, both Americans and Russians, who have not returned from the field of battle.

A quarter of a century has elapsed since this unique and commendable venture was launched. During that time, the optimism expected from a relationship free of ideological rancor and sabre-rattling has, if anything, deteriorated into a state of open hostility, mutual suspicion and virtual rejection of any program, humanitarian or otherwise, that is based on cooperative interaction. What does this mean for the Commission, its goals, viability and its long road back from an extended period of anemic performance? What is the likelihood that the Commission will be around, or even be remembered, when its next anniversary comes along?

The stark contrast between what we hoped for in February 1992 and what we observe today makes the choice of a suitable action plan for the Commission's immediate future clear-cut and straightforward. Two options come to mind. First, if the decision is made to allow the Commission to drift along with no well-defined set of objectives prioritized or adequately resourced, there is little need to tinker with what is now in place. As an example, the USRJC has consistently encountered long delays in the appointment of new members to replace those vacating their positions. It is not at all unusual for those positions to remain vacant for months, if

not years. This has been particularly evident in the case of congressional appointees, whose stature as elected officials with legislative clout and authority has made them singularly effective in dealing with Russian counterparts. Long delays in filling these vacancies become all the more problematic when combined with the glacial pace at which the Commission's support structure is being reconstituted; the lackluster backing of the Commission by the president, to whom its chairman ostensibly reports; and the overall lack of coordination and energy among components of the U.S. government responsible for assuring that the USRJC has the wherewithal to carry out its mission. Taken together or individually, these and other chronic shortcomings leave little doubt that the Commission will continue to fall far short of the objectives it was set up to accomplish.

For those who believe that our government is capable of – and our POW/MIAs and their families are deserving of – a much more professional and competent course of action than what I have presented above, I offer an alternative approach. This approach accepts the fact that disagreement, controversy and conflict have been and are likely to remain inevitable components of the overall U.S.-Russia relationship. They have been in evidence throughout the Commission's lifespan. From the Russian perspective, they include such irritants as NATO expansion and the Balkan Wars of the 1990s and early 2000s. A comparable U.S. concern would be the espionage activity that Aldrich Ames conducted on behalf of the Russian Federation. Then we have the reciprocal ousters of diplomats in 2001, first by the U.S. and then by the Russians later that year. The common denominator of all these events is the fact that none of them was able to derail the USRJC from its mission. Regrettably, a similar mantle shielding the Commission from the effects of discord and conflict does not exist in today's world. If it is to pursue its humanitarian work effectively, the Commission's status as a presidential initiative committed to accounting for our POW/MIAs must be restored to a pre-eminent position unhampered by political turbulence or other intrusions.

The restoration process which I believe must occur would begin with a dialogue between the Trump and Putin administrations leading to an exchange of proclamations in which both leaders reaffirm the validity of the diplomatic notes signed by Washington and Moscow in 2007. Companion statements would underscore the importance which both presidents ascribe to the USRJC's work and their readiness to lend their names and resources to assure that its mission, spelled out 25 years ago, is carried forward. Discussions between the White House and the Congress would then commence without delay to select and appoint Commission members with appropriate qualifications and an active interest in accounting for our missing service personnel. Dedicated resources from the National Security Council would be engaged to activate a well-defined, open communication conduit to the White House and pre-empt a recurrence of the foot-dragging that has stymied past initiatives. Adequate analytical and logistical resources would be provided as a

matter of urgency, not a topic of negotiation or interagency haggling. And alliances, or, in the language of the day, “partnerships,” with family organizations, NGOs, and research institutions, among others, would be explored and established to optimize the prospects of discovering and sharing information that might assist families in learning the fates of their loved ones.

One final point in this restoration, or, perhaps, “make-over” proposal. We need to give the USRJC a contemporary dimension to augment its work on past conflicts. Bilateral discussion should take place to determine where the USRJC’s standing and capabilities can be applied to today’s (and tomorrow’s) engagements in which our military personnel may become unaccounted for. Defining a role of mutual support and assistance in current and future conflicts expands our range of bilateral cooperation and increases the likelihood of more productive relationships overall. With strife and violence now raging in the Middle East and Ukraine and more looming in Europe and elsewhere, such an undertaking will require careful thought, imagination and resolve. The potential results for the accounting process, however, cannot be overstated.