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## **NEWSLETTER V**

By John Ritter

Here I am back in the United States trying to assess whether I did a good job of showing Russian law students how American law, lawyers, and judges keep U.S. government and wealth under control and widely spread around a large nation. In Petrozavodsk where I taught, the law students were unimpressed with the size of the U.S. because Russia is 3 times larger. And to say we control our government did not fly because they believe we are unable to control President Bush and the military, and they know our police and legal system are tied down with unnecessary technicalities like the Miranda rule. One of my students thought the U.S. controlled police and government officials better through widespread citizen use of video cameras than laws, because she had seen American TV videos of police beating criminal suspects and Congressmen counting bribe money. She argued that when all the Russian oil money filters down to average citizens video cameras will be in widespread use and will be as important to Russian democracy as American.

I then tried to stress the role of lawyers and the legal system in helping free enterprise spread money around the country to make people well off and able to have video cameras and political independence. But my law students were a step ahead of me because they had read the materials on the website for this lecture, [johnaritter.com](http://johnaritter.com); not only did they know there were over one million lawyers in the U.S., and that U.S. lawyers make a lot of money, but that the richest American lawyers were the personal injury lawyers who get rich because of the contingency fee. So I decided to try some classroom questioning: "Does Russia allow contingency fees?" Nobody knew because injured people do not make enough money in lawsuits for a lawyer to ask for a contingency fee. Then I asked, "Why does the United States tolerate and allow contingency fees when the majority of common law and civil law countries outlaw them as unethical and litigation-provoking?" One Russian law student answered with the best explanation I ever heard from a student: "Because if you make a lawyer your partner in a case he will work harder." How does a 21-year-old law student, I wondered, know about one of the biggest practical problems in law practice -- lawyers who get hired for a case and then sit back and do nothing but go through the motions of being a lawyer?

I learned as much from my students as they did from me. For instance, when they asked what American law did to protect racial and ethnic minorities, I explained that our laws were color-blind and treated everyone equally regardless of race, color, sex, or religion. This surprised them because Russia has over 150 ethnic minority groups, many protected by specific laws, and some religions even occupy a seat in Parliament with rights of democratic representation similar to a geographic region.

One of the better examples of Russian students knowing as much or more about the U.S. than their American professor came in my last lecture in Petrozavodsk -- to 30 English-speaking future government employees at Northwestern College of Public Administration. The College asked me to speak about American culture, so I gave some examples from the Simpsons' television show which I knew was popular on Russian television. I explained that much of it was satire of current American culture. So one student put up his hand and threw a curveball at me: "Is South Park representative of American culture?" Having only seen that TV show once and not caring for it, I said, "Yes, but only to the extent that America tolerates and allows distasteful ideas and language is it representative of American culture."

It is November now and I escaped the Russian winter by taking the train from Petrozavodsk to St. Petersburg (no planes fly in or out of Petrozavodsk after October 15<sup>th</sup> because the airport has no de-icing equipment). Four days in St. Petersburg, the Paris of Russia and one of the beautiful cities of the world, was a highlight of my trip; all I could think as I saw it was what a crime for the Germans to bomb it for a year. Feeling the cold Russian weather was a treat for this Floridian who sees too much sun and no seasons in the state's year-round summer. Spending a month teaching law was even more of a treat because it allowed me to think and talk about law as a learned profession and to escape the commercialism of looking at law only as a business.