

## Alexey Navalny at Yale

Alexey Navalny was a courageous figure and I was honored to call him a friend. I am confident that his profound legacy will live on, as embodied in the aspirations of the Russian people – and oppressed peoples everywhere – who yearn for a better future.

I first met Alexey in 2010, when he was selected as a Yale World Fellow. I kept in close touch with him and his wonderful family in the years that followed. That was a transformational fall semester for Alexey on the Yale campus, where he was exposed to diverse cultures and perspectives, and experienced first-hand how an American liberal arts education can inspire the next generation of global leaders. Already a respected lawyer and anti-corruption advocate, Alexey left Yale determined to undertake a far more ambitious project at great personal risk: to investigate, expose, and organize worldwide opposition to the criminally repressive Putin regime.

I have fond memories of Alexey at Yale. We bonded over Yale College football, and I would spend hours discussing the rules and strategy with him. He was quite perplexed as to why the skill positions were so specialized, and why nobody would play both offense and defense at the same time. But Alexey was a quick study. Ten years later, following the horrific assassination attempt on his life with the banned chemical weapons nerve agent Novichok, Alexey was recovering in a Berlin hospital while many pleaded with him to stay abroad forever. Alexey told me, with his characteristic wit, that he would not “play armchair quarterback”: he was determined to return to Russia, confront his attempted killers, and demonstrate his defiance to Putin—knowing full well that doing so would lead to his imprisonment or worse.

Alexey’s dynamic personality and sense of humor belied an intense passion to establish a modern Russia that was far more prosperous, open, and accountable to its citizenry. Somehow surviving the Novichok attack, he went on to make an Academy award-winning documentary, *Navalny*, in which he identified the assassins and proved they were working for state security services under Putin’s direction. From prison he staunchly opposed the war in Ukraine and sought to mobilize domestic opposition to Russia’s catastrophic invasion. With each passing day, Alexey’s legend and power only grew.

Despite his illegal detention and isolation, in increasingly severe prisons and forced labor camps, Alexey never lost faith or gave Putin the satisfaction of appearing broken—grinning on videos and in staged court appearances until the very end. While his body and physical appearance literally wasted away, Alexey knew that the public evidence of his mistreatment only fomented the ever-growing discontent of the Russian people.

In the end, Putin eventually was able to murder Alexey, but he did so out of paranoia, weakness, and fear. Much like the war in Ukraine, this desperate display of faux-strength is likely to backfire by fueling domestic opposition and bolstering popular resolve. In death, just as he did in life, Alexey Navalny represents everything that Vladimir Putin is not: a brave, respected leader with strong moral character, who desires a Russian government that serves the people rather than enriching himself.

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