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US's proposed swap for Griner and Whelan met with skepticism and fury

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While some have praised the Biden administration for the deal, others are upset over the prospect of releasing Viktor Bout, nicknamed the 'Merchant of Death'

A proposal by the [Biden administration](#) to exchange notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout for WNBA star Brittney Griner and former marine Paul Whelan, two high-profile Americans currently detained in Russia, has been met with praise, confusion and fury.

While some have praised the Biden administration and state department for doing whatever it takes to bring back Griner and Whelan, others have cast skepticism on the deal, especially when it comes to releasing Bout, who has a notorious international reputation.

Many have wondered: is it worth exchanging two [wrongfully detained](#) Americans for an arms dealer nicknamed the "[Merchant of Death](#)"? Others ask if the deal should include Marc Fogel, the "[other American](#)" imprisoned in Russia after trying to enter the country last year with half an ounce of medical marijuana. Still more wonder if any exchange might encourage further hostage-taking. What about the several hundred thousand Americans who continue to be arrested domestically on marijuana-related charges?

In February, Griner was arrested at a Moscow airport after authorities found vape canisters containing cannabis oil – for which she had a doctor's recommendation – in her bags. The arrest of the Phoenix Mercury star quickly made headlines as it came amid heightened US-Russia tensions ahead of Moscow sending its forces into Ukraine a week later.

Griner has since been detained in Russia and faces a maximum of 10 years in prison if convicted of transporting drugs.

In December 2018, former US marine and corporate security executive Paul Whelan was arrested in Russia on espionage charges and was sentenced to 16 years in prison. [According to Russian officials](#), he was caught with a flash drive that contained classified information. Whelan, who also holds passports from Canada, the UK and Ireland, has repeatedly denied the charges and claims that he was set up.

The US government has denounced Whelan's charges as false and declared both Whelan and Griner were being "wrongfully detained".

On Wednesday, the secretary of state, Antony Blinken, announced that the US has made a “substantial proposal” to Russia to release Whelan and Griner. Although Blinken refused to say what the US was offering in return, a source familiar with the matter [confirmed](#) a CNN report that Washington was willing to swap Bout, who is serving a 25-year prison sentence in the US, as part of the exchange.

Prisoner swaps have been a long part of the history between the two former cold war adversaries. The first major exchange between the US and the Soviet Union occurred in February 1962 when Americans gave up Rudolf Abel, a convicted KGB spy, in exchange for American pilot Gary Powers, whose U2 spy plane was shot down over the Soviet Union two years earlier. The exchange, which took place on the fog-covered Glienicke Bridge on a cold, cloudy Berlin morning, was [adapted](#) into a Steven Spielberg thriller more than 50 years later.

The Powers-Abel exchange paved the way for further prisoner swaps. A little over 20 years later, the US conducted what one American official called the “[biggest spy swap](#)” in history. The US released four eastern European spies in exchange for 25 people detained in East Germany and Poland. In more recent memory, 10 Russian agents detained by the US were exchanged in 2010 for four Russian officials that the Kremlin had jailed over their illegal contacts with the west.

In April, former US marine Trevor Reed was released back to the US after being detained in Russia since 2019. Russian authorities had accused Reed of attacking a Moscow police officer and sentenced him to nine years in jail. In exchange for Reed, the US released jailed pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, who was sentenced in 2011 to 20 years in prison for conspiring to import more than \$100m worth of cocaine into the US.

Despite these exchanges, none have quite involved the notoriety of a figure like Bout. Born in 1967 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to a bookkeeper and a car mechanic, Bout went on to [train](#) as an interpreter at Moscow’s Soviet Military Institute of Foreign Languages.

Rumoured to speak six languages, Bout developed a decades-long career by acquiring Soviet military transport planes and filling them with various weapons that were left behind after the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. Since then, Bout has [supplied](#) weapons to conflicts around the world including Afghanistan, Angola, Congo, Lebanon, Somalia and Yemen.

For decades, governments and rebels fought each other with weapons that Bout sold to either side.

In 2008, Bout was arrested in Bangkok after he was caught on camera trying to sell weapons for use against Americans by undercover US Drug Enforcement Administration agents. He was convicted in a New York court in 2011 and was sentenced to 25 years at a federal prison in Marion, Illinois.

Reports of Bout’s potential release have since been met with an array of emotions.

Kathi Austin, founder of the Conflict Awareness Project, a non-profit that investigates major arms traffickers, expressed concerns over the possibility of Bout’s release.

“I spent nearly 15 years chasing Bout around the globe to stop his trade in death ... My life and that of other colleagues and UN peacekeepers were put on the line to bring him to justice,” she told the Guardian.

“You cannot imagine how much I have emotionally struggled with the idea of Bout’s release ... Putin knew very well what he was doing by making [Brittney Griner](#) a bargaining chip ... In a post-

release situation ... Putin is certain to weaponize Bout in areas of the world where the Merchant of Death has a proven track record,” she said.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the nonpartisan membership organization Arms Control Association, echoed Austin’s concerns.

In a statement to the Guardian, Kimball said: “Releasing [Viktor Bout](#) ... could certainly lead to adverse consequences ... If he is part of a prisoner swap with Russia, it could damage future efforts to hold accountable those who illegally facilitate dangerous weapons transfers to warlords, conflict zones and undemocratic regimes.”

Jodi Vittori, a former air force lieutenant colonel who is now a professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, said: “Given that Mr Bout has been incarcerated since then, it is unlikely that his arms trade networks remain significantly intact.”

Nevertheless, Vittori expressed concern over the irony of such a proposal, saying: “Trading American hostages for a notorious Russian arms trafficker with the ominous moniker of the Merchant of Death sends the world mixed messages at a time when the United States is striving to arm Ukraine as it fights for its life and democracy against Russia.”

Jordan Cohen, a defense policy and arms sale analyst at the Cato Institute, cast doubt on Bout’s ability to cause harm in the short term if he is released. “US and western intelligence will likely track him and his network to make sure no sudden arms trafficking deals are happening. Beyond that, his years in prison and solitary confinement also likely diminished his ability to quickly mobilize his network,” Cohen told the Guardian.

Others have praised the Biden administration for its proposal. Michael McFaul, former US ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration, tweeted: “I applaud @SecBlinken & @StateDept efforts to bring Britney Griner and Paul Whelan home even if it means handing over Viktor Bout.”

However, he urged the state department to also include Marc Fogel in the deal. Fogel, a former history teacher at the Anglo-American School in Moscow, was arrested last August after trying to enter Russia with medical marijuana that his doctor prescribed him to treat “[severe spinal pain](#)”. Russian authorities sentenced him to 14 years of hard labor, accusing him of committing “large-scale drugs smuggling”.

“The tragic situations of Britney Griner and Marc Fogel seem very similar. So I would hope Fogel could be included in a package deal. Getting three innocent Americans back, not just two, for one real criminal, seems like a good trade to me,” McFaul, whose sons Fogel taught at the Anglo-American School, told the Guardian.

In an interview with the Washington Post, Jane Fogel said that her hopes of securing her husband’s release have been fading, saying: “There’s a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that Marc will be left behind.”

While Griner’s wife received a call from Joe Biden, Fogel’s family has been stalled at the state department’s “[mid-functionary level](#)”. In a [letter](#) Marc Fogel recently addressed to his family regarding the prisoner swap reports that the Washington Post reviewed, he wrote: “That hurt ... Teachers are at least as important as bballers.”

Meanwhile, others have criticized the irony of the state department’s proposal as hundreds of thousands of Americans remain incarcerated over marijuana charges.

The Libertarian party of New Hampshire responded to the news of the prisoner swap by [writing](#) about action on drug offenses in the US, saying: “America is mad at Russia for doing to Brittney Griner what it does to 374,000 people per year.”

Another user [tweeted](#): “I often wonder how Americans who have family members still in American prisons over weed, feels watching this entire #BrittneyGriner thing unfolds?”