

# THE KOREA TIMES

## In defense of NGOs

By Casey Lartigue, Jr.  
September 23, 2014

There's an old joke about two Jewish friends, one of whom subscribes to a Nazi newspaper.

"How can you read that trash?" one friend asks the other.

"This is better than reading the Jewish newspapers," the friend with the subscription responds. "All they ever talk about is problems. According to my Nazi paper, we Jews control the banks, the media and Hollywood too. I love it!"

Most NGOs that help North Korean refugees can identify with that joke. They are small, poorly funded, understaffed, crammed into tiny offices and dependent on volunteers. Critics, however, see them as having unlimited access to taxpayer and foundation money.

I started getting such attacks even before I got into the NGO world. In the 1990s, when I was a young man working as an English teacher in South Korea, I was accused by a Korea Times columnist of writing commentaries to attract attention from foundations.

My response: Is that possible? I immediately put my articles together in a portfolio.

Whenever I have engaged in activism for free or written for fun, critics like that columnist haven't shown up to help. But the prospect of getting support sets off their "guilt by association" alarms and has them asking me to do some soul-searching. Much like authors, speakers and iPhone developers, I am delighted to have people pay me to say and do what I want.

I forgot to thank that columnist for the inspiration, but thanks in part to that personal attack I eventually landed a position at the Cato Institute, a thinktank in Washington, D.C. Later I joined Fight for Children, a nonprofit that financially supports organizations assisting low-income children.

Attacking funding sources is an old tactic. Nineteenth-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass was attacked because of his associates and supporters, to which he would respond: "I would unite with anyone to do right and with nobody to do wrong."

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., worked with communists, liberals, conservatives, labor representatives, church leaders, rich people who didn't march and poor people who did. In short, he united with anyone to further his cause and apparently didn't care who gave him money. If Rev. King had worked only with people approved by his opponents and purists, then it would have been just him \_ and maybe his wife, Coretta \_ marching.

Asked by a British reporter if he would accept communist support, Malcolm X responded: "It's like being in a wolf's den. The wolf sees someone on the outside who is interested in freeing me from the den. The wolf doesn't like that person on the outside. But I don't care who opens the door and lets me out."

Like Douglass, King and X, I don't care who wants to fund me. Funders certainly have agendas, but I have my own: to advocate for freedom. I'm as likely to go against personal and economic liberty as the organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is to serve the grilled meat of animals that were tortured in front of them.

In 1957, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against the state of Alabama when it attempted to force the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to reveal the names and addresses of its members and agents in the state. The critics' goal then, as now, was to block their opponents from uniting with people willing to finance them. They want their opponents to fight armed with cardboard weapons.

Instead of being defensive, I challenge such critics to a) guide me to funders who can replace the ones they don't like; and b) personally contribute to my latest social cause. They continue talking and questioning without helping.

I have learned that such critics are always ready with "heads-I-win, tails-you-lose" arguments. On the one hand, South Koreans are accused of not caring about North Korean refugees, but the ones who work at NGOs are accused of profiting off North Koreans. NGOs get accused of chasing government money to engage in propaganda, but also get dismissed as paid lackeys when they get foundation money.

A tiny North Korean NGO struggles to get a \$25,000 grant from a huge foundation while Harvard University or an orchestra company waltzes in to collect \$5 million, and it is the NGO that allegedly has sold its soul.

My regret is that I have failed to raise more money for local NGOs to help North Korean refugees. Many people prefer cracking North Korean dictator jokes and talking about issues like reunification that they can't do anything about. So it is an achievement when private foundations and individuals open their wallets to help North Korean refugees.

I long for the day that NGOs working to help North Korean refugees no longer have to fight with cardboard weapons.