

Honoring Cuba's Ladies in White

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May 21, 2018

The Cato Institute has awarded their 2018 Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty to the Ladies in White. The award is well-deserved. A Cuban civil rights group, it was formed in March 2003 following the imprisonment of Hector Maseda Gutierrez. Gutierrez is a Havana journalist who was arrested by the Castro regime and sentenced to 20 years in prison for the crime of criticizing the government.

Since Gutierrez's arrest, the Ladies in White have only grown in numbers. They have a clear message of remembering the men who've been locked up by Cuba's communist government, whether they be their fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, or friends. The Cato Institute's decision to give the prize to the Ladies in White is important for two reasons.

The first is that it raises international awareness of a country where change may soon come quickly. Fidel Castro retired as president in 2008, and his younger brother Raul has now handed leadership to Vice President Miguel Diaz-Canel. Born after the revolution, Diaz-Canel has the opportunity to make significant reforms in Cuba.

Communism has brought nothing but political and economic ruin to Cuba. The current state of the economy is not as bad as when the Soviet Union fell (the Castro regime had been highly dependent on imports from the superpower), but it is still very sluggish. Diaz-Canel should use this moment to change Cuba for the better. He should place the country on a capitalist path, he should release political prisoners who've done nothing wrong, and he should begin the process of transitioning Cuba into a democracy.

The second reason has to do with how Americans, particularly in the millennial generation, have been remembering the scourge of communism. The number of people in the Western world who believe it is essential to live in a democracy has been declining with every generation.

Communism, socialism, and fascism are rising in popularity among millennials, according to a poll by the Victims of Communism Foundation. Communist terrorist Che Guevara is considered a hero by 26 percent of millennials, Karl Marx has 18 percent, and Vladimir Lenin, 17 percent.

The lack of faith in democracy and capitalism, institutions that have brought freedom and prosperity across the world and lifted billions out of poverty, has been partly spurred by leftist politicians in the United States. When Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., thinks of Fidel Castro, he only thinks of how he "educated their kids, gave them healthcare, totally transformed society." Paul Soglin, the mayor of Madison and one of the Democratic candidates for governor in my home state of Wisconsin, remembered the late Cuban dictator as "a popular leader who inspired generations of Cubans."

What they all omit is how Cuban exiles have actually described the healthcare system as a catastrophe, recently plagued with medicine shortages. The transformation of Cuban society entailed the genocide of tens of thousands of people and the imprisonment of many more. It also required Soviet assistance in defeating an anti-communist rebellion in the Escambray Mountains. Soglin seems to have forgotten the many Cubans who have fled their homeland and risked their lives to escape and enter the United States.

As someone who had a grandfather born in Cuba, I applaud the Cato Institute for what it has done. The Ladies in White have never backed down from the cause of freedom. Americans should not either.