



Does it matter if North Koreans believe their own propaganda?

By: Joshua Keating – April 12, 2013

The new documentary *Juche Strong*, which was screened last night at the Cato Institute, certainly arrives with good timing in the news cycle. You can read interviews with filmmaker Rob Montz here and here.

The trailer above gives the impression that the 18-minute documentary has a bit more of an irreverent *Vice* feel than it actually does. It also makes it seem as if Montz is somehow an apologist for the North Korean regime. (One particularly cranky audience member at Cato seemed to have that impression last night, asking Montz if he had been influenced by Leni Riefenstahl.)

That's definitely not a fair critique. Montz repeatedly used the word "evil" in describing the regime at the event last night and the film doesn't shy away from the atrocities of the North Korean system. The bigger problem is that its argument often seems to contradict itself.

Montz wants us to believe that the U.S. public has been misled about conditions in North Korea, but aside from a few scenes filmed on a tour of the country last year, the film relies heavily on interviews with the academics and writers who have become the U.S. media's go-to experts on North Korean politics and society, including FP contributors like Victor Cha and B.R. Myers.

He argues that we ignore *Juche* -- the Kim regime's governing ideology -- at our own peril, but also readily acknowledges that much of it is simply crude gibberish meant to justify a system of ethnic nationalism.

Perhaps most problematically, the film asks us -- reasonably -- to acknowledge that ordinary North Koreans are more than just mindless automatons, but the film never shows us any of them doing anything except for venerating the regime.

Montz is a self-described libertarian non-interventionist, who wants to see the United States scale back its military presence on the Korean peninsula, but I'm not sure the film really makes that case. *Juche Strong* argues that a significant number of North Koreans *believe* in their system, that the legitimacy of the Kim regime is built on more than just brute force and terror, and that many North Koreans choose to remain in the country, rather than simply being afraid to leave.

But if North Koreans really believe their propaganda, shouldn't that make us *more* worried about the security threat the country poses? I generally think the threat from Pyongyang is a bit overhyped and that if war does break out, it will likely be do to accident rather than intention. But if you wanted to convince me that the United States needs to maintain its current military commitment to the region, a good place to start would be by making the case that it's a nation of true believers willing to die for their government rather than one of cowed and terrified people who will abandon their leaders at the first sign of weakness.

It's hard to argue Juche Strong and Juche Harmless at the same time.