



'I Am the Man'

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Some colleagues are wondering, again, how I would respond to academic researchers and North Korea propagandists describing me as being a troublemaker because of my work with North Korean refugees.

I embrace the accusations and, when it makes sense, expand the work that makes my critics cry.

I don't take it personally when researchers in the "publish or perish" academic world talk about me. They need something to write about to justify their grants and academic appointments.

Propagandists who even see c-o-n-s-p-i-r-a-c-y spelled in their morning soup or cereal are, to borrow from Winston Churchill, fanatics: "They can't change their minds and won't change the subject." I brush them off Mother Teresa-style (attributed): "No matter who says what, you should accept it with a smile and do your own work."

My education about academics began in 2002 when I was working as an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. I had noticed that university professors were declining my invitation to speak at a conference I was organizing to mark the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

Finally, one professor told me directly: Most university professors look down on think tank scholars, activists, and public speakers. Academics with long careers wouldn't respect that I suddenly appeared and seemed to be on TV a few minutes later.

Almost two decades later, I still believe his words, and see them as an explanation about the treatment of North Korean refugee speakers and authors in academic circles.

There are many academic researchers with tremendous academic credentials who are toiling in (well-deserved) obscurity with long lists of meticulously researched papers that often go unread except by peers, friends and relatives. In contrast, they see North Korean speakers and authors lacking academic credentials and sharing unverifiable stories suddenly become public figures with large social media followings.

Whereas many of those researchers are constantly publishing papers and books that get ignored, and struggle for speaking opportunities outside of academic conferences, refugee authors get

invited to write books and give speeches. Supposedly about a million books are published every year and many authors and speakers get paid six or seven figures to talk about their cats, politics, losing weight or for making various personal confessions.

A handful of North Korean refugee authors have their motives questioned from a variety of angles, every single word in a personal memoir, speech or TV show gets analyzed like sworn testimony in a courtroom. A North Korean refugee getting paid even a modest speaking fee justifies investigations — and probably leads to multiple research grant applications analyzing how it happened.

So when I heard that some academics had recently named me in another research paper as being a troublemaker assisting North Korean refugee speakers, I didn't bother responding to them or correcting their out-of-date information being repeated in the academic echo chamber. If I ever wonder about my work having an impact, then I can check those academic journals and propaganda videos for affirmation.

In one recent paper, the longest footnote was about me. In another, even though refugee speakers had worked with well-funded international organizations and governments, I was singled out as being particularly troublesome. In a video posted on a North Korea propaganda channel, I look so powerful that I am surprised North Korea didn't collapse when I first set foot on the peninsula.

I have told others suggesting that I respond to critics: I would be delighted to compare my deeds with their rhetoric. How many researchers or propagandists have had North Korean refugees seek them out for assistance, or just to meet them to thank them for their work? How many have had North Korean refugees give glowing public testimonials about them?

I am reminded of another troublemaker, 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass. In recalling being punished for leading an escape attempt from slavery, Douglass wrote in 1855, "If anyone is to blame for disturbing the quiet of the slaves and slave-masters of the neighborhood of St. Michaels, I AM THE MAN. I claim to be the instigator of the high crime (as the slaveholders regarded it)."

Some propagandists and researchers accuse me of being a troublemaker and agitator for empowering North Korean refugees to tell their stories. I accept the accusations and thank them for the motivation boost.

Tomorrow I will be co-MC of my organization's 13th English speech contest for North Korean refugees. So far, two of the contest winners have published books and several others have given speeches around the world.

If propagandists and researchers are looking to blame someone for empowering North Korean refugees to speak out, they can quote me like Mr. Douglass in their next journal articles or videos: "I AM THE MAN."

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