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Light in the Shadow of Castro's Funeral, A Vigil to Honor His Victims

by [Alice B. Lloyd](#)



Gathering to mourn Castro's victims at the Victims of Communism Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Hours after Fidel Castro's state [funeral](#) ended a national mourning in Cuba, a small but intent crowd gathered at the Victims of Communism Memorial in downtown Washington, D.C. Dissidents like Sirley Ávila León and advocates from Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation led mourners on a Sunday evening in remembering the Cuban dictator's actual legacy—when it seemed few others would.

The spirit of the vigil offset a dominant [narrative](#), found in fawning [eulogies](#) from heads of state, that the murderous commandant was also a hero. Romantic tributes, in honoring Fidel Castro, dishonored his many victims.

Dr. Lee Edwards, who is also chairman of Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, remembered by name Cuban martyrs to democracy, sacrifices obscured from their countrymen.

"We're here to remember Oswaldo Paya, and others like him, who suffered and died at the hands of communism," Edwards said, lest we forget late activist who strove, unto his death, to defend his country against one-party rule.

"We're also here to tell Raúl Castro and his police and his spies and his corrupt party that the day is coming when there will be a free Cuba—and that day will come sooner than they realize." Dr. Edwards led us in a chant: Viva Cuba Libre!

But what will it take to free Cuba when the reality of her bondage is too often forgotten and ignored?

"A failure to learn from history," said Marion Smith, Victims of Communism executive director, is what we face when a dead dictator comes to look like a martyr. "It's perhaps never been more difficult to speak truth about what is happening in Cuba," Smith said.

"And without that clear understanding, there can be no hope for a brighter and more just future for the people of Cuba." In service to a fading hope for Cuba's democratic future—renewed by Fidel Castro's death but dampened by a global ruling class that lionized him—we remember those who continue to risk their lives for the island's freedom.

[Sirley Ávila León](#), an elected representative in her rural region who clashes with the corrupt and violent municipal authorities, exposes the criminal Castro regime against harrowing opposition. She testified before Congress in July, and in June was awarded the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation's Human Rights Prize. At the time, she was wheelchair bound thanks to a machete attack—the work of Castro's security officials, she reveals at her peril.

"The crimes of Fidel Castro are not just from the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s but they're still taking place today," León, living testament, told us through translator John Suarez who runs the blog [Notes from the Cuban Exile Quarter](#). Sunday, in a show of resilience deeper than mending muscle and tissue, she stood in the cold night air and spoke for her people:

"I speak for all those extrajudicially executed at the beginning of the regime. I also speak for all the millions who have died in exile without being able to see freedom for their country. And for the 11 million Cubans who remain in the island who have been indoctrinated and kept silent through the terror imposed on them by the regime. The thousands who have died on the high seas and in the jungles and the wilds trying to evade that dictatorship."

A letter was read aloud from the fiancée of graffiti artist Danilo Maldonado Machado, known as El Sexto, who was beaten and [imprisoned](#) after writing "Se fue"—he's gone—on a wall in Havana to mark Castro's death. At the time El Sexto [remarked](#), "The exterior dictator has died, but the interior dictator still remains inside many Cubans."

"Now more than ever it is imperative to support those greater than us to speak out and to honor those who have given their lives in the fight for freedom," El Sexto's letter read. His fiancée had delivered the missive to the good folks at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. "Fear," she quoted El Sexto, "affects creativity and liberty." And, "It is not creative to have fear."

Hope, fear's antithesis, must keep vigilant watch. Evil seems to have won on several fronts, Smith told me, recounting Fidel Castro's last great coup. "In the final years of his life, Fidel enjoyed a kind of vindication when President Obama announced diplomatic opening without any reform," and, thus, Castro could die victorious. "He understood that he had outlived the United States opposition to his corrupt and and bloody regime."

And yet Castro had not, and he could never, outlast the living consequence of his abuse, however meager his many victims' memorial seems compared to his own solemn show. Thousands reportedly gathered to mourn as he was interred in a massive crypt, at the end of a four-day procession across the island.

At the Victims of Communism Memorial, a Baptist pastor Rev. [Mario Leonart](#) who had brought his family from Cuba just three months ago, after a prison term that coincided with President Obama's diplomatic tour, said that he hopes now more than ever that his two daughters can return home someday. He gave a benediction, while his wife translated.

Afterward, a guitarist strummed while everyone took up their little white candle and passed the flame. For a few quiet moments a loose ring of wavering lights thronged the memorial statue, the Goddess of Democracy.

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