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Captive Nations Past and Present

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Ever since President Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed the third week of July “Captive Nations Week” in 1959, Americans have acknowledged the citizens of oppressed nations. Although the Berlin Wall fell nearly 20 years ago, and although the number of communist countries has dwindled to five—China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, and Laos—many peoples around the world face the evils of oppression, communist and otherwise.

Captive nations are unfortunately not a thing of the past. Not only do communist countries such as China and North Korea pose potential roadblocks for U.S. foreign policy, but regimes ruling Iran, Burma, and Libya, among others, provide constant sources of grave concern. Citizens subject to tyranny do not control their own future. They are denied basic human rights and liberties. The United States is often forced to confront these nations on an international stage, and each presents a unique set of problems. It is a challenge that the United States, as the world’s freest and most powerful nation, must continue to meet.

China

China is one example of a country that presents multiple foreign policy challenges. With nearly 1.5 billion people, China is the most populous country in the world and one of the United States’ main trading partners.

Despite its progress on economics and trade, China’s human rights record remains deplorable. In August 2008, Beijing had the opportunity to showcase its

Talking Points

- Captive nations are not a thing of the past. In addition to communist countries such as China and North Korea, the regimes ruling Iran, Burma, and Libya, among others, are constant sources of concern for U.S. foreign policy.
- Citizens subject to tyranny do not control their own future. They are denied basic human rights and liberties.
- While communist and other totalitarian regimes violate individual rights and freedoms in almost every capacity, there are allegedly democratic governments like Venezuela that do so as well. Merely because a government claims to be a democracy does not necessarily mean that it is one in practice.
- Confronting these nations on the international stage is a challenge that the United States, as the world’s freest and most powerful nation, must continue to meet.

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greatest assets to the international community by hosting the Summer Olympics. Its athletes did their part for sure, but the Chinese government “failed to uphold pledges of an open media environment during the games, and expectations that the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] would enact broader reforms or make gestures toward improved human rights also proved unfounded.”¹

Furthermore, in order to accommodate the Olympics, tens of thousands of families were evicted from their homes, and their land was confiscated by the state.² Additionally, on a daily basis, the CCP ensures that political dissent is eliminated, the media tightly regulated, and religion suppressed through the use of government registration.

Despite China’s egregious human rights record, the United States maintains close diplomatic relations owing to global economics. During her first trip abroad, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton traveled to China and made it clear that human rights could not “interfere” with the progress of her visit.³ As Hillary Clinton’s focus centered on the economy, she ignored China’s human rights violations, suggesting that the liberty of the Chinese people was not a major priority of the Administration.

In this instance, America’s strong record of promoting human rights was sadly neglected. I bring this up not to contradict myself on America’s dedication to liberty, but to send a message that America must not waver in the promotion of her founding principles.

North Korea

China’s failures in human rights and civil liberties are shared by one its closest allies, the

Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). According to The Heritage Foundation’s *2009 Index of Economic Freedom*, North Korea “is one of the world’s most oppressed and closed societies.”⁴ Its government is founded on Marxism and has, since its establishment in 1948, evolved into one of combined extreme nationalism, xenophobia, and the use of state terror.⁵

While North Korea has attempted to flex its weak international muscle by repeatedly testing its nuclear weapons capabilities, “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il has failed to achieve much in the way of international influence. Rather, Kim Jong-il not only holds his citizens captive through government oppression, but is currently holding American citizens captive.⁶

American attempts at reason with North Korea have yielded negligible progress, and Kim Jong-il continues to threaten the world with North Korea’s growing nuclear capabilities as well as to devastate his own people. Similar to the situation in China, North Koreans are deprived of the basic human rights that are nonnegotiable in most of the Western world.

Cuba

The vast differences between American democracy and communism are on display a mere 90 miles off the shores of Miami. Historically, America’s antipathy toward communism has been experienced in its severely strained and until recently non-existent relations with Cuba. Relying on autocratic leaders like Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, the Cuban government depends on external assistance like subsidized oil and remittances from Cubans living abroad.⁷

1. Freedom House, “China,” at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/FIW09China.pdf> (July 14, 2009).
2. *Ibid.*
3. Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Working Toward Change in Perceptions of U.S. Engagement Around the World,” February 20, 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/119430.htm> (June 4, 2009).
4. Terry Miller and Kim R. Holmes, *2009 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation and Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 2009), p. 239.
5. Freedom House, “Freedom in the World—North Korea (2008),” at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2008> (August 5, 2009).
6. The two U.S. journalists, Euna Lee and Laura Ling, were released by the North Korean government and allowed to leave the country on August 5, 2009. See Evan Ramstad and Jay Solomon, “North Korea Frees Americans,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2009, at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124938154079404323.html> (August 6, 2009).

The United States, under the leadership of President Barack Obama, has recently stated that it “seeks a new beginning with Cuba,”⁸ despite the Cuban government’s routine denial of individual rights to citizens. Cubans are frequently deprived of political participation and the ability to vote in competitive elections, protection against arbitrary arrest, due process of the law, humane treatment while in custody, free expression and thought, peaceful assembly, free association, and the right to receive and impart information.⁹

While President Obama has announced that Cuban-Americans would be able to travel freely to Cuba as well as send increased remittances, Ricardo Alarcón, president of Cuba’s parliament, has expressed little reciprocity: “We have to do absolutely nothing except take note of and recognize the corrective steps when they [the U.S.] take them.”¹⁰ It is difficult to understand how U.S. relations with Cuba can improve with this mentality. Still, as the Obama Administration has recently made obvious with China, it will allow individual rights to fall by the wayside in pursuit of amicable foreign relations.

Vietnam

Not only does communism have a devastating impact on the liberties of those subject to its rule, but economic freedom is devastated because of it. In 1995, the United States restored diplomatic relations with Vietnam through their first trade agreement. Many believed that this opportunity would liberalize Hanoi’s state-controlled economy and that

Vietnam would be the next “Asian tiger.”¹¹

However, economic progress has been severely stunted owing to the centrally planned economy and the state-owned enterprises consuming subsidized loans from government-owned banks. The economy rapidly plummeted, and hopes for a new economic power in Asia quickly dwindled.¹² While the U.S. continues to develop trade relations, Vietnam’s suppression of political dissent continues to be the main issue of contention in relations.

In 2007, Vietnam drew considerable ire from the Bush Administration and Congress when the regime “launched a crackdown on political dissidents, and in November the same year arrested a group of pro-democracy activists, including two Americans.”¹³ Then, “in 2008, the Vietnamese government tightened controls over the press and freedom of speech and convicted two journalists for their reporting on high-level corruption.”¹⁴ Despite these unfortunate setbacks, the United States continues to promote reform and investment in the regime, which has been growing in recent years.

Laos

Vietnam’s close neighbor, Laos, is also “governed by one of the world’s few remaining Communist regimes.”¹⁵ Additionally, it is one of Asia’s poorest nations.¹⁶ In 1991, the government made an attempt to liberalize the economy, but on the whole, it failed miserably. As poverty leaves a devas-

7. Miller and Holmes, *2009 Index of Economic Freedom*, p. 149.

8. Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony,” Hyatt Regency, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, April 17, 2009, at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Press-Conference-By-The-President-In-Trinidad-And-Tobago-4/19/2009/ (July 14, 2009).

9. Ray Walser, “Cuba Solidarity Day 2009: Supporting Cuba’s Democratic Movement,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2453, May 19, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2453.cfm>.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Dana Robert Dillon, “A Trade Pact with Vietnam: The First Step in Building Substantive Relations,” Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 690, July 26, 2000, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/tradeandeconomicfreedom/EM690.cfm>.

12. *Ibid.*

13. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, “Background Note: Vietnam,” March 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/4130.htm> (July 20, 2009).

14. *Ibid.*

15. Miller and Holmes, *2009 Index of Economic Freedom*, p. 247.

16. *Ibid.*

tating impact on Laos's people, many are forced to become economic migrants and seek work in neighboring Thailand.¹⁷

Though China invests heavily in Laos, taking advantage of the land's natural resources, many Laotians are displaced owing to the increasing influx of Chinese businesses and workers. In one attempted protest against perceived Chinese intrusion, the organizer was abducted and the protestors suppressed by the government. Such assemblies are severely restricted by the regime because they allegedly "cause turmoil or social instability."¹⁸

Laos's poverty has also made its people vulnerable to human trafficking. Women are at the greatest risk for exploitation and are frequently sold into prostitution and other odious enterprises.¹⁹ Although women are supposedly guaranteed the same rights as men under the law, the government does nothing to curb the threat against them.

Iran

While communist countries are flagrantly guilty of depriving their citizens of liberty, there are other oppressive regimes that also deny their people the rights they would normally be granted in a free state. Iran is one example. A theocracy, Iran is ruled by the Shiite clerical elite, otherwise known as the Council of Guardians.

The most powerful political figure in Iran is the supreme leader. As the individual holding the most influence, the supreme leader is head of the armed forces. He also appoints the leaders of the judiciary and the chiefs of the state broadcast media and half of the Council of Guardians.²⁰

The president and legislative branch of Iran are mere servants of the clergy and hold little sway in the implementation of law. As Iranian policy is based on Sharia law, citizens are subject to the clergy, who then guide the president in its enforcement. Iranian citizens are therefore subject to an undemocratically elected body that interprets the law in the manner it sees fit.

Burma (Myanmar)

Military dictatorships are equally guilty of suppressing the rights of their citizens in countries such as Burma and Libya.

Since 1962, Burma (whose leaders prefer to call the country Myanmar) has been ruled by its military and continues to be one of the world's most oppressive regimes.²¹ According to Freedom House, the ironically named State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) controls all executive, legislative, and judicial powers, suppresses all basic rights, and commits human rights abuses with impunity.²²

Libya

Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qadhafi was a young military captain when he and his army overthrew the Libyan king while he was traveling abroad.²³ While Qadhafi holds no official title, he continues to lead the country in a strict totalitarian fashion. Heritage's *2009 Index of Economic Freedom* rates Libya the region's least free nation and reports that, "despite having one of Africa's highest per capita incomes, Libya has suffered from more than 30 years of socialist economic policies and international sanctions."²⁴

17. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—Laos (2009)," at <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2009&country=7642> (July 20, 2009).

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—Iran (2008)," at http://freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2008&country=7413&pf (July 15, 2009).

21. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—Burma (Myanmar) (2008)," at http://freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2008&country=7363&pf (July 16, 2009).

22. *Ibid.*

23. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—Libya (2008)," at http://freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2008&country=7433&pf (July 10, 2009).

24. Miller and Holmes, *2009 Index of Economic Freedom*, p. 257.

Although the United States resumed relations with Libya in 2004 after Qadhafi abandoned plans for the development of nuclear weapons, Libya's people are devastated by government control. As most of the land is owned by the government, citizens have no property rights. Furthermore, foreign companies are at great risk for government expropriation.²⁵

According to Freedom House, although relations with the United States have thawed, Libya's poor performance in human rights has showed no signs of improvement. Political freedom in Libya is nonexistent. Political parties have been outlawed for 35 years, and many Libyan opposition movements have been forced to operate outside the country.²⁶ All political activity is strictly monitored, and the only form of public assembly that is permitted includes rallies demonstrating support of the regime.

When President Obama traveled to Italy for the G-8 Summit in early July, he stated that there are signs "that relations have improved considerably between the U.S. and the North African nation."²⁷ Despite Qadhafi's blatant human rights violations and harsh criticism of the U.S., President Obama continued his attempts to enhance America's image by reaching out to the controversial leader.

Venezuela

While communist and other forms of totalitarian regimes violate individual rights and freedoms in almost every capacity, there are allegedly democratic governments that do so as well. It is important to mention that merely because a government claims to be a democracy does not necessarily mean that it is one in practice.

For example, Venezuela is an electoral democracy in name. However, in 1999, Venezuela's Con-

stituent Assembly, dominated by President Hugo Chávez, drafted a new constitution that strengthened the presidency, introducing a unicameral National Assembly.

Since enhancing the power of his office, Chávez has continued to lead Venezuela despite much outrage and frequent deadly protests. While elections are held, opposition candidates are often "forced to operate under difficult positions,"²⁸ further weakening their influence and dramatically reducing their chances for election.

Conclusion

Though many of the peoples formerly living under oppression are now free, there are millions across the globe that are not afforded the basic human dignities that are considered sacrosanct to America's foundation.

As President George W. Bush stated, the United States is "a Nation forged from the ideals of freedom, justice, and human dignity, [and] we will continue speaking out on behalf of oppressed people."²⁹ America must strive to promote the principles of democracy and awareness of human rights so that all peoples are treated with equal fairness and the dignity that is their God-given right.

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25. *Ibid.*

26. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—Libya (2009)," at <http://freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2009&country=7647> (July 10, 2009).

27. Fox News, "Obama Shakes Hands with Libya's Qaddafi," July 9, 2009, at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/07/09/obama-shakes-hands-libyas-qaddafi/> (July 20, 2009).

28. Freedom House, "Freedom in the World—Venezuela (2008)," at http://freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fiw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2008&country=7519&pf (July 10, 2009).

29. George W. Bush, "Captive Nations Week, 2005," Proclamation 7913, July 15, 2005, at http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2006/janqtr/3CFR7913.htm (July 16, 2009).