

# Closing Remarks at the 2009 Democracy Award Program

**Carl Gershman, President, National Endowment for Democracy**

I want to thank Howard Berman and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and all the other Members of the House and the Senate who joined us today for this very important tribute to people who urgently need our support. And of course I want to thank our Chairman Dick Gephardt for his leadership and for narrating that wonderful documentary film with his powerful and very distinctive voice.

I never thought when we first proposed honoring Cuban democrats with this year's Democracy Award that I would be so moved by the words that remarkably have been able to reach us from the island's prisons from two of the people we have honored; or so humbled by the courage and unbreakable spirit of all of the awardees; or so inspired by their simple idealism and faith that shines so brightly through the dense fog of 50 years of lies and demagoguery.

We all heard in that documentary Ivan Hernandez Carrillo speaking to us from a maximum security prison, from what he called "one of the darkest places in this hemisphere." He told us that it's his "duty to fight for democracy," just as it's the duty of all of us to do so because "democracy has a global dimension" and, as he said so touchingly, "This makes us glad." What we could not know is that he conveyed his message in the one phone call he's allowed for six months, and that he chose to use that call to speak to us -- and not to his family -- because he so desperately wants to be heard -- for his own sake, for the sake of his family, for the sake of all the other political prisoners, and for the

sake of Cuba.

A second awardee also used his one phone call from prison to reach us with his message. “We fight for democracy,” Jose Daniel Ferrer Garcia said over an audio link; “for love of democracy we are persecuted, incarcerated, and tortured. For love of democracy we are ready to sacrifice everything.”

How can we not be humbled by such words? How can we not pledge our solidarity to Jose Daniel, who dedicated his award to all Cuban political prisoners and oppositionists, and of course to his family as well?

Regarding the other three awardees, Antunez, who is a towering figure, as fearless and determined an opponent of tyranny as there is anywhere in the world today, was arrested yesterday along with his wife Iris who had organized a public meeting in one of the main square of Placetas. I am told that both were released after almost a hundred of people gathered at the prison in a show of solidarity. And on this same day the fifth recipient of the Democracy Award, Librado Linares, was put in a punishment cell in a sinister act of retribution. He has serious health problems, and this could affect his very life.

What all this tells us is that the Cuban government fears these fearless people, does not want them to be heard, and is determined to break their health, even if they cannot break their spirit. Surely they have tried to break their spirit, not just through prison and torture, but more insidiously, by portraying them in the regime’s propaganda as something less than human – as worms and insects, as mercenaries and agents of a foreign power.

In the documentary, Ivan Hernandez Carrillo thanks us for the award by saying that the recognition “reminds us that we are not simply

malcontents, but fighters for democracy.” In fact, he and others have been called malcontents and worse by the regime, and we know that there are some people among the political elites in this country, and in Latin America and Europe, who share that view, and who view these dissidents as an impediment to better relations with Cuba. But they are not an impediment. They are the key to a new relationship between Cuba and the United States, for such a relationship, which we all want, can only be built on the foundation of a new relationship between the Cuban government and the Cuban people, a relationship based on dialogue, trust, the rule of law, and democracy.

Ivan Hernandez said that this award will encourage him and other democrats in Cuba “to continue fighting and believing in hope, high principles, and democracy.” That, of course, is our hope, and it also imposes on us a special obligation to sustain this demonstration of solidarity and to remain faithful to our Cuban friends, so that one day soon, their dream of freedom , of Libertad, will become a reality.

Thank you all for coming.