



A hero in Castro's gulag

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Jeff Jacoby

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At a White House ceremony tomorrow President Bush will honor [eight distinguished men and women](#) with the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#), the nation's highest civil award. Among the recipients will be the longtime civil rights activist Benjamin Hooks; Harper Lee, author of the much-loved novel, "To Kill a Mockingbird"; Liberia's Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first woman elected president of an African nation; and C-SPAN's founder and president, Brian Lamb.

One of the honorees, however, will not be there. Instead of joining the president amid the pomp and finery of the White House, [Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet](#) will spend the day locked in a fetid cell in the Combinado del Este prison in Havana, where he is serving a 25-year prison sentence for

speaking out against Fidel Castro's dictatorship.

Peter Kirsanow, a member of the US Commission on Civil Rights, has written that the conditions of Biscet's incarceration are like [something out of Victor Hugo](#): "windowless and suffocating, with wretched sanitary conditions. The stench seeping from the pit in the ground that serves as a toilet is intensified by being compressed into an unventilated cell only as wide as a broom closet. . . . Biscet reportedly suffers from osteoarthritis, ulcers, and hypertension. His teeth, those that haven't fallen out, are rotted and infected."

A pro-life Christian physician, Biscet first ran afoul of the Castro regime in the 1990s, when he [investigated Cuban abortion tech-](#)

[niques](#) -- Cuba has by far the highest abortion rates in the Western Hemisphere -- and revealed that numerous infants had been killed after being delivered alive. In 1997, he began the [Lawton Foundation for Human Rights](#), which seeks "to establish in Cuba a state based on the rule of law" and "sustained upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Between June 1998 and November 1999 he was arrested 26 times; in 1999, he was sentenced to three years in prison for "disrespecting patriotic symbols." To protest the regime's repression, he had hung a Cuban flag upside down.

For decades, various American journalists and celebrities have [rhapsodized](#) about Castro's supposed island paradise, resolutely ignoring the mountains of evidence that it is in reality a tropical dungeon. Intent on seeing Castro as a revolutionary hero and Cuba as Shangri-la, they avert their gaze from the island's genuine heroes -- the [prisoners of conscience](#) like Biscet, who pay a fearful price for their insistence on telling the truth.

The US detention center in Guantanamo Bay is sometimes spoken of as if it were a Caribbean concentration camp, but the only facilities that deserve such a label are hellholes like Combinado del Este, in which Biscet and so many other Cuban dissidents have been brutally abused -- or worse. Over the years, life in Castro's gulag has been well-chronicled. The classic narrative is Armando Valladares's [Against All Hope](#), a stark and searing memoir, first published in 1985, of the au-

thor's 22 years in Cuba's horrific prisons.

The newest account of life as a Cuban political prisoner is [Fighting Castro: A Love Story](#), Kay Abella's affecting and inspiring saga of one Cuban couple's love for each other and for their homeland, and the cruelties, large and petty, inflicted on those who challenge the regime.

For Lino Fernandez, a young physician who pays for his democratic resistance with 17 years behind bars, those cruelties are sadistic and often bloody. Abella describes, for example, what it was like to experience a *requisa* -- a search by armed prison guards -- in the notorious round fortress on Isla de Pinos:

"The roar of the invading horde . . . viciously beating men unarmed and weak from malnutrition and confinement. A screaming mass of soldiers swarming over the circular, stabbing with bayonets, crushing limbs with truncheons and rubber-wrapped chains. The panic of no place to hide, knowing you'll be beaten harder for trying to protect yourself, stomped on for clinging to a pillar or rail, thrown down the stairs for daring to hesitate. . . . The indignity of men whining, begging, whimpering before a skull is cracked, a shoulder yanked from its socket, genitals smashed with the gun butt."

For the families of political prisoners, the cruelties come in other forms, such as the humiliating strip-searches on the rare occasions when a prison visit is permitted, or the

pressure put on children to demonstrate loyalty to the Communist Party that has imprisoned their father. And there is economic privation: Oscar Biscet's wife, Elsa Morejon, is a trained nurse, but she has been [barred from holding a professional job](#) in Cuba since 1998.

The conscience and courage of these dissidents are nothing short of extraordinary. "During these years

here in prison," Biscet wrote to Elsa in a [letter](#) smuggled out of prison earlier this year, "I have seen shameful things that I am unable to describe to you in words because of their perversity and their attack on . . . civilized society. Despite this difficult situation I am not intimidated nor do I take any step backwards in my mind. . . . I will carry out this unjust sentence until the most high God puts an end to it."