



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

2025 DEMOCRACY SERVICE MEDAL

Honoring the Legacy of Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas



This Evening is Hosted by

THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY BOARD OF DIRECTORS

BOARD of DIRECTORS

Peter Roskam
Chairman

Stephen Beigun
Vice Chair

Eileen Donahoe
Vice Chair

Kenneth Wollack
Vice Chair

Jendayi Frazer
Secretary

Juan Zarate
Treasurer

Jessica Adelman
*Chair, Budget, Audit, and
Administration Committee*

Stuart Appelbaum

Liliana Ayalde

Alyssa Ayres

Roxanne Brown

Joaquin Castro

Victor Cha

Elizabeth Economy

Daniel Fried

Amaney Jamal

Tim Kaine (Honorary)

Rachel Kleinfeld

Mel Martínez

Victoria Nuland

Dayton Ogden

Minxin Pei

Marc Plattner

Scott Taylor

Todd Young (Honorary)

OSWALDO PAYÁ EMBODIED THE EXTRAORDINARY POWER OF ONE INDIVIDUAL'S MORAL COURAGE TO AWAKEN AN ENTIRE NATION. EVEN UNDER THE MOST REPRESSIVE CONDITIONS, HE SHOWED THAT THE HUMAN SPIRIT WILL ALWAYS YEARN FOR FREEDOM.

His life is a powerful testament to the inseparable bond between religious and democratic freedoms. Individuals who are free to follow their conscience become unstoppable forces for justice and human rights.

Anchored in his faith, Payá believed every person is endowed with dignity and the right to shape their own destiny. Guided by this conviction, he founded the Christian Liberation Movement and led the Varela Project, mobilizing over 25,000 Cubans to peacefully demand free elections, freedom of association, and the release of political prisoners—the most significant nonviolent challenge to the Cuban regime in decades.

Though his courage earned global recognition, it invited fierce repression. During Cuba's 2003 "Black Spring," dozens of Varela Project leaders were imprisoned, and Payá endured constant surveillance and threats. He paid the ultimate price in 2012, when he and fellow activist Harold Cepero died in a suspicious car crash—a tragedy attributed to the Cuban regime by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. On the one year anniversary of this terrible crime, in 2013 NED honored Harold Cepero's sacrifice bestowing him posthumously the Democracy Award. Today, Harold's father, Sabas Cepero, joins us in this tribute to Payá.

By posthumously awarding Oswaldo Payá the Democracy Service Medal, we honor his extraordinary moral courage and reaffirm our commitment to frontline advocates everywhere. Past honorees, including the Dalai Lama, Lech Wałęsa, and President Tsai Ing-wen, share a common thread with Payá: the courage to confront tyranny with truth and to awaken the conscience of a nation.

Payá's enduring legacy lives on through his family. Ofelia Acevedo, Oswaldo José, Rosa María, and Reinaldo Isaías Payá, represent the resilience of a movement and the steadfast hope of a free Cuba. Rosa María's work through Cuba Decide builds on her father's dream, advancing the call for Cuba's transition from dictatorship to democracy.

We are deeply inspired by their example, which mirrors the spirit of NED's partners worldwide who—like the Payás—stand against repression and fight for human dignity, reminding us that democratic change often begins with one voice brave enough to speak the truth.



Peter Roskam, Chairman



Damon M. Wilson, President and CEO

2025 DEMOCRACY SERVICE MEDAL

Honoring the Legacy of Oswaldo José Payá Sardiñas

CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

Tuesday, July 22, 2025 • 5:30 p.m.–7:30 p.m.

Welcome

Damon Wilson, NED President and CEO

Remarks

Senator Ted Cruz

Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz

César González, Chief of Staff for Representative Mario Diaz-Balart

Kenneth Wollack, NED Vice Chair

Michael G. Kozak, Senior Bureau Official for Western Hemisphere Affairs,
U.S. Department of State

Mel Martinez, NED Board Member, U.S. Senator (Ret.)

Liliana Ayalde, NED Board Member

Peter Roskam, NED Board Chairman, U.S. Representative (Ret.)

Senator Dick Durbin

2025 Democracy Service Medal Presentation

Accepted by Rosa María Payá and Ofelia Acevedo



ABOUT THE **DEMOCRACY SERVICE MEDAL**

Awarded by the National Endowment for Democracy's Board of Directors, the Democracy Service Medal honors individuals whose personal courage has advanced freedom, human rights, and democratic governance around the world.

First presented in April 1999—on the tenth anniversary of Poland's Roundtable Agreement—to former Polish President Lech Wałęsa and former AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, the medal has since recognized a diverse array of leaders who exemplify a principled commitment to democracy.

Notable laureates include His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, President Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan, and, in 2024, U.S. congressional leaders, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, and

Speaker Emerita Nancy Pelosi for their distinguished leadership and support of democracy advocates around the world.

The Democracy Service Medal is bestowed posthumously to Oswaldo Payá in recognition of his life's work and sacrifice. Accepting on his behalf are his wife, Ofelia Acevedo, and daughter, Rosa María Payá—embodying the resilience of a family and a movement that continues to confront authoritarianism in pursuit of justice.

This year's ceremony takes place on the 13th anniversary of Payá and Cepero's deaths and the 4th anniversary of Cuba's historic July 11 protests, when thousands demanded democratic change. Payá's posthumous recognition affirms the enduring spirit of those who lead from the front lines and reminds us that extraordinary courage can spark lasting movements for freedom and democracy.



HONOREE

OSWALDO PAYÁ

2025 Democracy Service Medal Honoree

(ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP/Gettyimages)

Oswaldo Payá Sardiñas (1952–2012) was one of Cuba's most courageous and visionary advocates of peaceful democratic change. An electrical engineer and devoted Catholic from Havana, his deep faith shaped his unwavering belief in human dignity and freedom.

In 1988, he founded the Christian Liberation Movement to promote democratic values through nonviolent means, inspiring Cubans to reclaim their voices and envision a freer future. His most iconic achievement, the Varela Project, gathered over 25,000 signatures demanding free elections and freedom of association—the most significant peaceful challenge to the regime in decades.

Payá earned global acclaim, including the 2002 Sakharov Prize for Freedom

of Thought, but faced fierce repression at home. During the 2003 Black Spring, dozens of project leaders were jailed, and Payá endured constant threats and surveillance.

He remained steadfast in his calls for reconciliation and peaceful change, believing true transformation must come from the Cuban people. In 2012, he died under suspicious circumstances later determined by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to be state-orchestrated violence.

Today, his legacy lives on through Cuba Decide, founded by his daughter Rosa María Payá, and through all Cubans who continue the fight for freedom. Payá remains a global symbol of moral courage and the power of conscience.

SPEAKERS

ROSA MARÍA PAYÁ

Rosa María Payá Acevedo, daughter of Oswaldo Payá and Ofelia Acevedo, is a leading Cuban democracy activist and human rights defender. As founder of Cuba Decide in 2015, she has united Cubans on the island and abroad to demand democratic reform and self-determination.

Her leadership has turned Cuba's struggle for freedom into a global cause, challenging the regime's narrative and exposing human rights abuses at the highest international levels. Her voice has become one of the most respected and influential calls for Cuban democracy worldwide.

Rosa María's impact has been recognized with honors including the Ileana Ros-Lehtinen International Leadership Award,

the Morris Abram Human Rights Award, the Casa Cuba Award, and the Keys to the City of Miami. The City of Miami has also established an annual day in her honor and, through her advocacy, declared July 22 as the Day of the Victims of Communism in America.

She holds a degree in Physics from the University of Havana, completed the Global Competitive Leadership program at Georgetown University, and earned a Master of Public Administration from Columbia University. She also serves as Honorary President of the Latin American Youth Network for Democracy. In June 2025, she was elected as a commissioner of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, becoming the first Cuban national to ever hold this position.

OFELIA ACEVEDO

Ofelia Acevedo Maura is a Cuban human rights advocate and the widow of Oswaldo Payá. A steadfast partner in his work, she has long championed the cause of freedom and human dignity in Cuba.

Alongside her husband, Ofelia played a crucial role in supporting the Christian Liberation Movement and the Varela Project, helping to organize and sustain networks of activists despite constant surveillance and threats. After Oswaldo's death in 2012 under state-orchestrated violence, she became a tireless voice for justice, working to expose the truth

behind his assassination and to keep his legacy alive.

Ofelia's unwavering commitment extends beyond seeking accountability; she has dedicated herself to advocating for the rights of all Cubans to live in freedom, speak without fear, and determine their own future.

Through her courage and moral clarity, Ofelia embodies the quiet strength of so many family members who stand alongside frontline democracy advocates, ensuring that their sacrifices continue to inspire new generations.

IN MEMORIAM

HAROLD CEPERO

Harold Cepero Escalante (1980–2012) was a dedicated Cuban democracy activist and a rising leader within the Christian Liberation Movement. Born in the rural province of Ciego de Ávila, Cepero was deeply influenced by his faith and a profound commitment to human dignity and nonviolent change.

As a student leader, he challenged university authorities and the regime's propaganda, eventually joining Oswaldo Payá to advocate for democratic reform through the Varela Project. Cepero played a crucial role in organizing grassroots support and encouraging

young Cubans to claim their rights peacefully.

Despite repeated arrests, surveillance, and threats, he remained steadfast in his vision of a free and democratic Cuba. On July 22, 2012, at just 32 years old, Cepero died alongside Oswaldo Payá in a suspicious car crash later determined by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to be state-orchestrated violence.

Cepero is remembered as a symbol of youthful courage, moral clarity, and the enduring hope for a Cuba where every citizen can live with freedom and dignity.



(Photo by JOHAN ORDONEZ/AFP via Getty Images)



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

ABOUT THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to advancing freedom and democracy worldwide. Established in 1983 as part of President Reagan's vision to foster an "infrastructure of democracy" and with bipartisan Congressional backing, NED supports grassroots leaders striving for the freedom to think, speak, worship, engage politically, and support their families without fear.

NED was founded on the belief that a private foundation grounded in America's civic traditions—political pluralism, entrepreneurial spirit, and a strong labor heritage—could serve as a powerful catalyst for democratic progress around the world. To translate this vision into action, NED mobilizes key pillars of American democracy—political parties, business, and labor—to support their counterparts abroad through support to the Core institutes that form the NED family: the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Center for International Private Enterprise, and the Solidarity Center.

Through more than 1,900 grants each year across 91 countries, NED empowers local activists, journalists, and civic leaders on their own terms—engaging with them as genuine partners and

helping them build resilient, community-driven movements. From rapid-response aid to long-term support, NED delivers flexible venture capital-style support for democracy efforts, helping bold local leaders scale, connect, and endure under repression.

By strengthening democratic institutions, NED also advances American interests: creating safer regions by countering authoritarian threats; building stronger communities that resist crises fueling migration, extremism, and transnational crime; and fostering more prosperous markets that uphold rule of law and fair competition. Free societies make stronger partners, better neighbors, and more reliable allies.

NED operates with a lean, agile, and principled nonpartisan approach, guided by a bipartisan board and rigorous oversight. Every dollar is tied to measurable democratic outcomes, supporting partners who know their funding comes transparently from the American people—fostering trust and accountability.

Today, as democracy faces unprecedented challenges, NED remains steadfast in its mission: to support all those who dare to imagine and work for a freer, more democratic future.



OP-ED

WHEN FREE SPEECH FALLS, SO DOES FREEDOM

An op-ed excerpt from Damon Wilson, NED President and CEO, and former senator Mel Martínez, NED Board Member, which originally appeared in the Miami Herald on April 28, 2025.

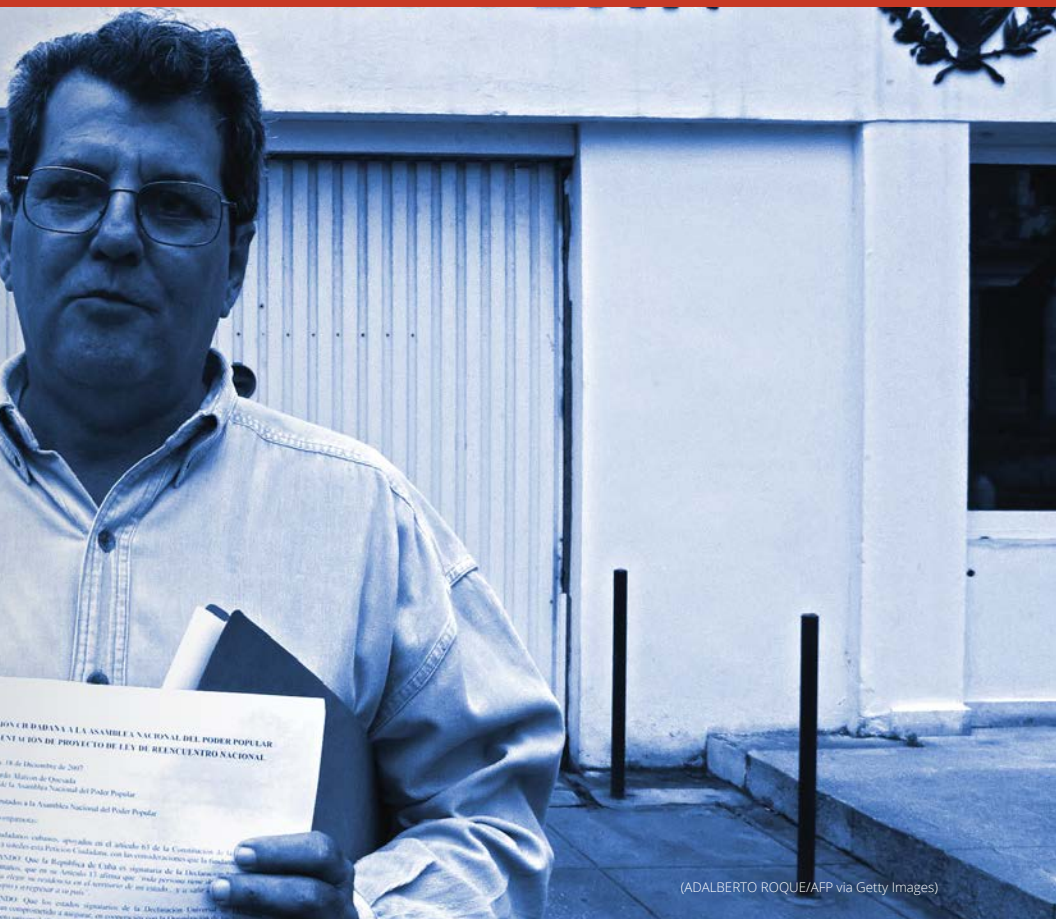
NED partners like Diario de Cuba are holding the regime accountable at home and abroad. Their exposé of a former Cuban judge — who sentenced peaceful protesters and then sought asylum in the U.S. — exposed corruption within Cuba's judiciary and pushed for justice across the Florida Straits.

Another partner, Cuba Siglo 21, uncovered how GAESA, a military-run conglomerate

of former generals, serves as the regime's economic backbone — an investigation published in the Miami Herald.

Without Cuba Siglo 21's work, much of this information would remain buried. These investigations don't just expose corruption — they create a ripple effect, enabling other journalists to follow the money.

Meanwhile, Cuba remains a destabilizing force across the region, exporting antidemocratic narratives through state-run institutions; and, as NED partner Directorio Democrático revealed, allowing its citizens to be recruited by Russia to fight in Ukraine.



(ADALBERTO ROQUE/AFP via Getty Images)

These revelations matter. They undermine the regime's legitimacy, galvanize international accountability and arm Cubans — and U.S. policymakers — with the truth.

This is not just a Cuban crisis. It's a U.S. national security concern. A bankrupt dictatorship near our shores threatens regional stability, fuels mass migration, and enables authoritarian influence from Moscow to Caracas.

But this is also a moment of opportunity. The regime is morally and fiscally bankrupt and out of answers. The Cuban people are not. They are

demanding change, and independent journalists and freedom fighters are helping them imagine — and build — a different future.

The U.S. must not blink now. We call on Congress, the administration and international partners to ensure continued investment in Cuba's democracy movement.

These frontline actors need immediate, sustained resources to continue their work.

Every day without them, the regime's stranglehold of censorship tightens.



Contact Us

National Endowment for Democracy
1201 Pennsylvania Ave, NW, Suite 1100
Washington, D.C. 20004
Phone: (202) 378-9700

Email: info@ned.org
www.ned.org