Donald Trump’s first State of the Union address featured the usual array of inspiring stories of sacrifice and courage. Most of them were American stories of true American heroes. But one was distinctively Asian: the story of Ji Seong-ho, the one-legged man who escaped North Korea on crutches and traveled more than a thousand miles to freedom.

Ji was a teenage boy during North Korea’s devastating famine of 1995–1998. One day in 1996, at the age of 14, he was scavenging for lumps of coal, stealing them off train cars to sell for food. Coal remains one of North Korea’s few exports, an economic lifeline to the communist regime.

Faint from lack of food, Ji collapsed while scrambling from one train car to another. Horrifically, he was only awakened by a train running over his left hand and foot. He endured more than four hours of operations without anesthetic to amputate his mangled limbs. His family shared their meager food rations to help him survive.

Trump made Ji the final personal tribute of his 2018 State of the Union address, calling Ji’s story “a testament to the yearning of every human soul to live in freedom.” In the most memorable image of the night, Ji triumphantly raised his old North Korean crutches over his head, to 42 seconds of rapturous applause.

Ji is a well-known human rights activist based in Seoul who advocates on behalf of those oppressed by the North Korean regime. He has raised his crutches in on previous occasions in less-ceremonial surroundings than the United States Capitol. As inspiring as Ji’s story is, the real news of January 30 isn’t the story itself. It’s how Trump used Ji’s story to tell America’s.
In his speech, Trump moved straight from prosing Ji’s yearning to live in freedom into saying that the “same yearning for freedom” had given birth to the United States, directly linking the world’s freedom narratives to America’s. Trump talked specifically about individual freedoms, not group rights or nationalisms. His theme wasn’t so much “America first” as “freedom first.”

Ji Seong-ho may not be an American (though his citizenship does not seem to be a matter of public record). But Ji’s story is an American story. Trump did not use Ji to lambast the evils of the North Korean regime. He used the story of Otto Warmbier for that, the American student who last year was mortally wounded in North Korean police custody.

Trump made Ji’s story an American story because it is a story of an individual pursuing freedom against overwhelming odds and over and above any particular political goal. Ji’s iconic crutch-raising was neither an act of defiance nor of provocation. In Trump’s telling, it wasn’t even directed at North Korea, though how Ji felt about it is only for himself to know.

Trump turned Ji’s crutches power into metaphor for the American ideal that free people can govern themselves, that they can “chart their own destiny.” It was the defining moment of Trump’s State of the Union address. Reaganesque in its grand simplicity, it could become the defining moment of Trump’s political comeback. If Trump really does want to “make American great again,” this rededication to the struggle for individual liberty is a great place to start.

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