

Vaclav Havel - Playwright, President, Activist, Leader

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Vaclav Havel's career spans disparate jobs from brewery worker to playwright to President. His life is highlighted by his unusual rise to power, writing of existentialist plays and political potent essays and his remarkable journey from a dissident in prison to the leading a fledgling country from the presidential castle in a matter of weeks. Most importantly, his vision of bringing former-Soviet eastern European republics into the European community in a non-violent, efficient and sustainable manner is his greatest legacy.

Havel didn't plan on a career in politics and came to his leadership positions in strange turns of events, perhaps he inadvertently refers to himself in his discourse, "Summer Meditations," "...if your heart is in the right place and you have good taste, not only will you pass muster in politics, you are destined for it. If you are modest and do not lust after power, not only are you suited to politics, you absolutely belong there."ⁱ

Born to a higher-class family in Prague in 1951, he was denied the opportunity of completing high school due to the Soviet policy of normalization. In 1948 when the Soviet entered the country, the family's assets were seized and the family members denied access to many cultural and academic pursuits because deemed a "class enemy" by the State. Nonetheless, encouraged by a homelife of intellectual study, young Vaclav

persevered attending high school classes at night while working during the as a lab assistant during the days.ⁱⁱ

Academically denied again by “normalization,” Havel was compelled to study economics for 2 years at a technical college rather than studying the arts and humanities at a university. After this stint of higher education, and two years of required military service, during which he started a regimental theater company, Havel gained employment as a stagehand with a theater company in Prague in 1959. This employment provided opportunity to begin writing and producing plays in the mid to late 60’s while working with the Balustrade theater company.

Coinciding with Havel’s burgeoning writing career was his involvement with the liberalization movement of the mid 60’s during which it appeared that Czechoslovakia might throw off the mantle of Soviet oppression. In 1968, Havel visited America during the heart of the American counter-culture movement and became interested in protests and rock n’ roll music.ⁱⁱⁱ However, far from Flower Power, in Czechoslovakia in 1968, Soviet tanks rolled and squashed this period of relative artistic and political freedom known as the “Prague Spring.” This event became a defining point for Havel and many of his generation, for Havel in particular; the end meant a start into a career in human rights, activism and public service.

After 1968’s Soviet crackdown, Havel’s writings were banned, yet he continued publishing articles and essays in clandestine literary journals and theater performances

throughout the early and mid 70's. He was also afforded the chance to leave the country but remained in his homeland, working as a laborer in a brewery loading barrels while continuing to publish his essays including a well-publicized open letter to then-President Gustav Husak in which he described Czechoslovakia as "lacking a real life."^{iv}

Notably, his publication of "The Power of the Powerless" in 1978 brought him to the public forefront as a revolutionary and intellectual leader. His official Curriculum Vitae describes the essay, "(in which) he analyzed the essence of Communist totalitarian oppression and described the means and mechanisms used by the Communist regime in its effort to create a powerless, resigned society consisting of timid and morally corrupt individuals. Against the background of that analysis, he demonstrated the strength of moral resistance - of life in truth. The impact of the essay reached beyond the scope of the Czechoslovak dissent, influencing also the opposition movements in other then "socialist" countries."^v

In 1977, he and a group of other Czechoslovakian intellectuals and activists produced a document, inspired in a round-about way by the arrest of a rock band, aimed at ensuring human rights for all the country's people. Havel was arrested before Charter 77 was dispersed and sentenced to 4 1/2 years of hard labor in prison for his activities with the group, the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Persecuted.^{vi}

Released from prison in 1983, he was still considered a public enemy and kept under surveillance. Despite the risks, he kept criticizing the government in the underground press as well as leading public protests, which led to additional 9 months of prison time.

Shortly after his second release from prison came another critical moment in Havel's career as a leader. In 1989, he led a group called the Civil Forum and, along with other opposition leaders, successfully demanded the resignation of the Soviet-appointed President Gustav Husak.^{vii}

Throughout the next several weeks, Havel's Civil Forum orchestrated a series of devastating general strikes and brought the Communists to the bargaining table. First, the Civil Forum negotiated into effect a series of constitutional reforms and then a total succeeded in instigating a reorganization of the government by forming partnerships with sitting members of parliament. After the ouster, Havel was elected President, and promptly brought Frank Zappa to play a concert, then named him Minister of Culture.^{viii}

With the daunting task of reinventing government for Czechoslovakia, Havel and his colleagues started with establishing human rights and freedoms, then laws for private ownership and business law as well as organizing free elections starting with a 1990 referendum which basically asked, "Communism, yes or no?"

Vaclav was re-elected post-referendum, serving until 1992 when he resigned due to displeasure at the separation of Czech and Slovakia into two republics, explaining in his

abdication speech that he, “could no longer fulfill commitments necessitated by the oath of allegiance to the Czech and Slovak Republic in a way that would harmonize with his convictions, dispositions and consciousness.”^{xix}

His break from public service was short as he was elected President of the new Czech Republic in 1992 after the Parliament made some modifications to the office and overwhelming public opinion compelled him back into service.

In 1996, Havel’s health problems from chain-smoking required him to undergo surgery to remove half a lung and a tumor, complications after which almost cost him his life. ^x

While the Prime Minister wields the bulk of political power in modern Czech Republic, Havel as president serves as the country’s non-partisan conscience and ethical navigator. Havel’s moral highground and emotional intelligence are evident in an honorary degree acceptance address in which he discussed the conflict felt by politicians torn between popularity and responsibility,

“This responsibility often finds itself in a desperate conflict with a politician's regard for the majority sentiment and with his or her desire to be recognized, respected, and elected. My personal opinion is that if this dilemma cannot be resolved in any other way, the only acceptable course is to forego popularity and follow the path of responsibility.” ^{xi}

The Financial Times in an article leading up to Prague’s 2002 NATO summit, said, “Mr. Havel – the only dissident leader from the 1989 revolutions against communism still in power – has consistently used his moral and intellectual authority to press the west to reunite Europe, to bring down the old Iron Curtain once and for all.”^{xii}

Aside from being the country's moral compass of sorts, he also is the catalyst in planning the country's external affairs vision. In his 1994 Independence Hall speech "The Need for Transcendence in the Postmodern World," Havel revealed his sense of globalism and hinted at the broad awareness of the direction he wanted to lead as President.

"Today, this state of mind or of the human world is called postmodernism. For me, a symbol of that state is a Bedouin mounted on a camel and clad in traditional robes under which he is wearing jeans, with a transistor radio in his hands and an ad for Coca-Cola on the camel's back. I am not ridiculing this, nor am I shedding an intellectual tear over the commercial expansion of the West that destroys alien cultures. I see it rather as a typical expression of this multicultural era, a signal that an amalgamation of cultures is taking place. I see it as proof that something is happening, something is being born, that we are in a phase when one age is succeeding another, when everything is possible. Yes, everything is possible, because our civilization does not have its own unified style, its own spirit, its own aesthetic."^{xiii}

Since his election as president and subsequent referendums, Havel and his colleagues charted a course to enter the European community, bringing his progressive Eastern European neighbors along. Indeed a lengthy process of goal setting and sticking to the course. As he and the presidents of other NATO entries, stated in a joint resolution reflecting upon the 1997 Nice Treaty,

"The prospect of joining the European Union has, from the very beginning, been the engine of democratization and transformation which has taken place in our countries. A "Return to Europe" was what our citizens voted for in the first free elections."^{xiv}

While Havel's term is nearing an end, his service is ending as dramatically as he entered as Prague recently hosted a groundbreaking NATO summit in which seven former Soviet-controlled republics were offered membership.

Along with all the photo-ops and hand-shaking was fulfillment of Havel's vision for democracy and freedom in Eastern Europe, a path he forged when the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1997 after liberalizing their financial markets, ensuring democracy and creating reliable courts of business law.

His vision for Europe was explained also in a joint reflection on the 1997 Nice Treaty, which brought about the first wave of NATO expansion.

“The idea of a Europe based on equality and cooperation is an historical opportunity to create a community of peace, stability and prosperity - not only for us, the Europeans, but also hope for the surrounding world - if we manage to bridge the sometimes bitter historical experiences and traumas of the past which so often in Europe have led to dividing lines, disputes and wars.”^{xv}

In his 2002 speech welcoming the new countries, he shared his enthusiasm and stressed the mutual responsibility in this NATO expansion relationship in his official address welcoming the new nations:

“By your dedicated endeavors and by the positions you have taken, you have repeatedly proved that you see your membership in NATO not only as a guarantee of your own security, but also as a commitment: just as the Alliance will safeguard your security, you will safeguard the security of others and assume the co- responsibility for peace in the world.”^{xvi}

As one might expect, an experienced playwright and essayist writes his own political speeches. Furthermore, his essays and speeches are archived on-line on the Presidential

website. His skills as a communicator are additionally evident when visitors to his website are welcomed with a hand-written note including his wish, “I hope that these pages will be found by perceptive readers.” Signed “Yours, Vaclav Havel” with a sketched red heart as a personal touch.^{xvii}

He made the following remarks concerning the importance of verbal communication, among other skills, in diplomatic life in his discourse “Summer Meditations,”

“I have discovered that good taste is more useful here than post-graduate degree in political science. It is largely a matter of form: knowing how long to speak, when to begin and when to finish; how to say something politely that your opposite number may not want to hear; how to say, always, what is most significant at a given moment, and not to speak of what is not important or relevant; how to insist on your own position without offending; how to create the kind of friendly atmosphere that makes complex negotiations easier; how to keep a conversation going without prying or being aloof; how to balance serious political themes with lighter, more relaxing topics; how to plan your official journeys judiciously and to now when it is more appropriate not to go somewhere, when to be open and when reticent and to what degree.”^{xviii}

Though he has been lauded with numerous international awards both as a playwright and president, he remains well aware of his limits. In a 2002 speech honoring him at NYC’s City University he expressing his personal misgivings about his abilities, showing modestly and deliberate self-awareness by a man of such renown,

“... and I’ve discovered an astonishing thing: that although it might be expected that the accumulated wealth of experience would give me more and more self-assurance, confidence and polish, the exact opposite is true. In that time, I have become a good deal less sure of myself, a good deal more humble. You may not believe this, but every day I suffer more and more from stage-fright; every day, I am more afraid that I won’t be up to the job, or that I’ll make a hash of it. It’s harder and harder for me to write my speeches, and when I do write them, I am more fearful than ever that I will be hopelessly repeating myself, over and over again. More and more often, I am afraid that I will fall woefully short of expectations, that I will somehow reveal my own lack of qualifications for the

job, that despite my good faith I will make ever greater mistakes, that I will cease to be trustworthy and lose the right to do what I do.”^{xix}

In the same speech, he shared three key lessons from his years as president, reflecting his vision for a responsible and sustainable global society.

“1) If humanity is to survive and avoid new catastrophes, then the global political order has to be accompanied by a sincere and mutual respect among the various spheres of civilization, culture, nations or continents, and by their honest effort to seek and find those values or basic moral imperatives that they have in common, and to build them into the foundations of their co-existence in this globally connected world.

2) Evil must be confronted in its womb and, if it can't be done otherwise, then it has to be dealt with by the use of force. If the immensely smart and expensive modern weaponry must be used, let it be used in such a way that does not harm civilian populations. If this is not possible, then the billions spent on those weapons will be wasted.

3) If we examine all the problems facing the world today, be they economic, social, ecological, or general problems of civilization, we will always - whether we want to or not - come up against the problem of whether a course of action is decent or not, or whether, from the long-term planetary point of view, it is responsible. The moral order and its sources, human rights and the sources of people's right to human rights, human responsibility and its origins, human conscience and the penetrating view of that from which nothing can be hidden with a curtain of noble words - these are, in my deepest convictions and in all my experience, the most important political themes of our time.”^{xx}

He also serves as an inspiration to other human rights activists and policy makers around the world, demonstrating how one man can contribute to history through non-violent solutions as pointed out by Madeline Albright upon presenting Havel with the Fulbright Prize for International Understanding.

“We are giving Vaclav Havel a prize because we are the beneficiary of his wonderful crimes. Because his nation and his neighbors are free, we too are free; free now from the icy grip of the Cold War, free now to bring the world together around basic principles of democracy, open markets, law and peace.”^{xxi}

The ability to inspire with a distinct vision is a key ingredient to leadership. In his essay, “Interpreting Vaclav Havel,” former US Representative Walter H. Capp discussed the reasons why Havel’s work was so attractive to Americans,

“Does the fact that more Americans than one might expect attend to his views and support his vision stand as evidence that citizens of this country are searching for alternatives to our prevailing fare of divisive, uninspiring politics? Is it confirmation that people would welcome an intellectually substantive, culturally satisfying, and spiritually nurturing politics?”^{xxii}

In a Financial Times article Havel wrote concerning the recent catastrophic floods in his homeland, rather than dwelling on the tragedy, he looked forward to preventing future disasters by learning from the past.

“We must all do more to learn about the impact of our activities on the environment and to draw the right lessons from what we learn. If we fail to do so, we will suffer more disasters, as will our children and grandchildren. Of course, not even the most sensitive and enlightened handling of the landscape can prevent such catastrophes altogether. But I believe it can soften their blow.”^{xxiii}

Perhaps this finding of a positive lesson in a difficult situation is an appropriate summation of this rare balance of pragmatic and emotional points of view, which distinguish Vaclav Havel’s career as a leader. As his term as president draws to a close he *does* point out (with a smile), “I am looking forward to the time I will no longer have to use diplomatic language.”^{xxiv}

Endnotes

- ⁱ HAVEL, Vaclav, “Summer Meditations” via <http://www.rahul.net/xavier/vaclav.html>
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- ⁱⁱⁱ ABC Newsmakers, “Vaclav Havel, President of the Czech Republic”
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- ^v HAVEL, Vaclav, “President of the Czech Republic, Curriculum vitae”
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- ^{viii} *ibid* two
- ^{ix} *ibid* five
- ^x *ibid* two
- ^{xi} HAVEL, Vaclav, “Acceptance Remarks upon Conferment of an Honorary Doctorate of Law.” Valletta, University of Malta, 9 April 2002
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^{xx} ibid

^{xxi} ALBRIGHT, Madeleine, U.S. Secretary of State, presenting Havel with the 1997 J.
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^{xxiv} ibid twelve