

Vaclav Havel Presentation

By Dave Olson

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Despite spending most of the year in prison, 1989 was a very big year for Czechoslovakian playwright Vaclav Havel. When the year ended, the Soviets had been overthrown in a bloodless revolution and Havel had moved from his jail cell to the Castle as the freely elected President of Czechoslovakia.

In the following years, he led the daunting task of reinventing the government, and in many ways Czech society, by introducing reforms aimed at taking a place at the table of contemporary Europe.

As Havel's political term comes to an end, his abilities and actions over the years have garnered deserved attention, not only a progressive and visionary leader as the President of his country, but as a leader in non-violent revolutionary tactics and an example of an ethical politician.

Indeed, at the recent NATO summit hosted by President Havel in the Czech capitol of Prague, French President, Jacques Chirac proffered,

"The light of the writer and the dramatist who, by the power of the pen, armed solely with courage and his faith in mankind and truth, has nurtured the hopes of the oppressed who were denied democracy."

"The friendly, humble, soft but vivid light of the iron man who, in the dark depths of the jail, in the abyss of totalitarianism, never weakened."

While the compliments are likely appreciated, more important was the realization of Havel's vision of a democratic eastern Europe as 7 former Soviet republics were offered NATO membership, a path Havel blazed when Czech joined in 1997. Further, acceptance to the European Union, with the benefits of eased trade and exchange, draws closer for many of these same republics.

Like all great achievements, Havel's was a long and perilous journey marked with frequent imprisonments, the roller coaster of freedom and oppression during the "Prague Spring" in 1968, a voluntary abdication during the "velvet divorce" where Czech and Slovakia went their separate ways, and his subsequent re-election to lead the new Czech Republic.

From a young age when he was denied access to higher education as well as cultural pursuits due to the Soviet policy of "normalization," Havel was leary of the oppressive tactics of the communists. You see, Havel's family was rather well-to-do, both his grandfather and father were prominent architects and educated intellectuals. Thus they were declared bourgeois "enemies of the state" and their property was confiscated when the Soviet took over in 1948 when Havel was 12 years old.

Denied education beyond compulsory learning, young Vaclav was motivated enough to attend night high school while laboring during the day.

Later, he was obliged to attend a vocational college and then army service rather than go his preferred route of a university degree. However, though he had begun writing and publishing plays a few years earlier, it was during his Army service that Havel began to express his dissident voice through an military theater company he organized.

I particularly enjoyed the account of his mock heroic socialist-realist play which won military accolades and was presented to the troops before political officials realized they had been duped as Havel's play was an existentialist "Punch and Judy" so to speak which mocked the communist bureaucracies and other absurdities of Soviet life in subtleties which only the disenfranchised understood.

After his military service, Havel pursued a career in theater - employed first as a stage-hand and later, an in-house playwright at a Prague theater where his plays were also performed. During this time, he also studied theater - taking a degree from a dramatic academy.

In this period of the 1960's, the spirit of reform spread throughout the country, due in large part to slowed economic growth under the communist system.

Havel reflects on the events leading up to this period of increased political and artistic freedom which became known as "the Prague Spring," saying "People were apathetic, tired, indifferent. Then people woke up and showed their will, their desire for freedom."

In early 1968, Havel visited the US, and was particularly influenced by the activist movements for equality, peace and human rights as well as the rock and roll music which sound-tracked the revolution.

Upon his return, he joined his fellow citizens as a prominent part of the Prague Spring movement which led to concessions in economic and electoral policy as

well as more moderate leadership from within the now-entrenched Communist party.

The excitement was short-lived however as later in 1968, Soviet tanks rolled in with more vigor and malice than ever before to quash the blissful movement.

The reforms were stripped, nonconformist artists, poets and writers were silenced, imprisoned, or sent into exile. Havel's plays are banned and his passport confiscated. He was offered several opportunities to leave the country but declined, at one point saying, "The solution of this human situation does not lie in leaving it." He moved from Prague to the country to concentrate on his writing, supporting himself by working as a laborer in a brewery.

After 47 dissident leaders were arrested to quell remnants of the revolutionary movement, Havel wrote an open letter to the communist president highlighting the social ills of the country.

The letter brought worldwide attention to Czechoslovakia and Havel himself. Enough attention and sympathy that in 1977, Havel felt confident enough to lead a group called Charter 77 which gathered signatures (at great personal risk to the signers by the way), to force the government to abide by the UN charter of human rights. This Charter 77 was published throughout the world, gaining yet more attention to his rather unique approach to removing the communist cloak.

In 1978, Havel continued to build his reputation as a leader by publishing the essay 'The Power of the Powerless' in which he analysed totalitarian oppression and describes the methods used by the communist regime to control society.

The next year, Havel helped form the "Committee for the Defence of the Unjustly Prosecuted" to document individual cases of government persecution and human rights violations.

Over 400 cases are documented between the formation of the committee and 1984. During the 1970s and 1980s Havel is repeatedly arrested (1977, 1978-79, 1979-83, 1989) and serves almost five years in prison for his involvement with the committee.

His arrests are so frequent in fact the Havel began carrying a toothbrush at all times as he never knew when he would be back in prison. An interesting irony considering by this time, he was personally acquainted with foreign heads of state yet subject to constant police harrassment in his home country.

His deftness for subtle writing was evidenced again in his weekly letters from prison to his wife Olga which were later published as a book.

As it was, inmate correspondence was screened by political officers to ensure they included nothing about life in prison, political thought, treatment by guards, any jokes or humor or even underlined words.

Over the course of time, Havel learned that simple, intelligible letters were almost always intercepted: only convoluted, almost incomprehensible letters had a chance of slipping through the net. Thusly Havel deliberately adopted a convoluted and impenetrable style. In spite of this, the letters were read avidly by Havel's friends and supporters.

In early 1989 came another arrest and nine month imprisonment - this time for laying flowers at the grave of a noted dissident. The ensuing backlash both in-country and internationally for Havel's arrest was so great that he was released 9 months later never to return.

Shortly after his release from prison, the aggressive police actions against a peaceful student protest acted as catalyst for massive anti-government protests.

Oddly enough around this time, Frank Zappa entered into contemporary Czech culture when the jazz division of the musician's union was disbanded for revolutionary activities including playing Zappa's music.

Anyhow, riding the this wave through November 89, Havel and others organized a coalition of opposition groups called "the Civic Forum" with Havel as the leader and spokesperson. The group immediately circulated a petition calling for liberal reforms which was signed by hundreds of thousands of citizens.

The very next day, Havel addressed a crowd of half a million from a balcony overlooking a Prague square, encouraging the citizens in their revolutionary efforts, saying, "The truth and love will always beat the lie and hatred."

The Civic Forum's actions were so swift and successful, that the Communists were almost immediately forced to form a coalition government and hold elections in what became known as the Velvet Revolution.

Less than 2 months after his release from prison, Havel was elected interim president of Czechoslovakia and hundreds of thousands came to the Prague castle for his inauguration. In one of his first official duties, he invited Frank Zappa to perform a concert and then appointed him Minister of Culture.

The following June, Havel was elected President in a landslide which featured 95% voter turnout. He quickly moved for social reforms, revamped business and commerce laws and abolished the death penalty though he surprised some when he did not completely abolish the Communist party.

Despite an 80% approval rating, he resigned in protest of the "Velvet divorce" in which Slovakia decided to be independent from Czech. Though Havel thought it was a poor decision, the deal happened peacefully, inspired no doubt by Havel's precedents.

After some modifications to the constitution to more clearly define division of power between the Parliament and the President, he was elected to lead the new Czech Republic in early 1993.

Over the next few years, Havel suffered numerous personal set-backs including the death of his wife Olga from cancer in 1996 and his own cancer battle and ensuing complications from the surgery which nearly killed him. The health problems continue, due to both his years as a chain smoker and pneumonia untreated in prison. However, on a positive note, he did gain a new wife during his recovery, the actress Dagmar Ves Kernova.

In 1998, he was re-elected and continued to work towards freedom and equality (particularly for the Czech gypsy population), as well as encouraging progressive democracies in eastern Europe and morality and honesty in politics.

In 2002, as he prepares to end his term as President and re-enter life of the theater as a private citizen, he has encouraged Czechs to not rely on a single leader or party but to judge each politician on their own merits and ethics, accountable for their actions - a rather anti-political view for a politician.

He emphasizes that it is up to ordinary citizens to ensure freedom and shape the future. He encourages people to ask disturbing questions rather than accept ready-made answers meant to placate the masses and has long led by example by countering society's ills and oppressions with civility and bearing witness to events as an involved on-looker.

Not only does he not want to be a politician, he also seems ill at ease as an "icon" of the velvet revolution – though it is a reputation justly earned by consistently disregarding the odds against him and speaking the truth publicly and eloquently. Both Czechs and others realize that despite the personal

hardships endured as a result of his dissent, he refused to temper his criticism of the communist regime until freedom was finally won.

In closing, it seems to me that both a country with the courage to elect a playwright as President *and* a playwright who has the moral fortitude to write what he feels regardless of the consequences, are both worthy of our highest regard.