



November, 1989. The Velvet Revolution. Vaclav Havel reads the names of the first non-Soviet Czech government in more than 40 years from above a crowd of 250,000 people in Prague's Wenceslas Square.

President Havel's story is honorable and inspiring.

Havel's guiding principle was his motto: "Truth and love must prevail over lies and hate."

Here is a brief summary of Havel's rise to the presidency.

## Václav Havel, Czech president:

### From absurd outsider to non-authoritarian insider

(Václav Havel was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia on October 5, 1936.)

"If humanity has any hope of a decent future, it lies in the awakening of a universal sense of responsibility, the kind of responsibility rooted far more deeply than in the world of transient and temporary earthly interests." (1)

Born in 1936, just as his native Czechoslovakia was about to slide defenselessly into the Nazi orbit, Václav Havel arrived at young manhood under a shabby Soviet-dominated Communist system that kept him from attending college as a way of punishing his prominent bourgeois family.

After completing his compulsory two years in the army, he stumbled upon his life's work when he took a job as a stagehand at Balustrade, a newly-opened small theater in Prague. A charismatic director, Jan Grossman, encouraged the young stagehand to write plays. By 1963 they had put on Havel's full-length first play, *The Garden Party*, and for the next

five years Havel and Grossman were at the center of the worldwide theater-of-the-absurd movement.

Anyone (and particularly a writer) could see that large tax-supported theaters, speaking the state's soul-crushing Newspeak, only added to public anomie. "By contrast, the spontaneity of the small theater allowed companies to win an audience's confidence with the self-deprecating charm of self-reference and irony." (2) Balustrade's unpolished productions allowed audiences to re-examine the connection between words and Truth in a world in which (as Havel ironically noted) "(p)ower is *a priori* innocent" because of the failure of "words like guilt and innocence (to) retain their meaning." (3)

In Havel's *The Memorandum* (1965), the ambitious deputy manager of a dreary bureaucracy introduces into his office a nonsensical "official" language supposed to improve communication. When the sympathetic but weak boss receives the title's unreadable memo, he discovers (shades of Catch-22!) that "the only way to learn what is in one's memo is to know it already."

In early 1968, during Czechoslovakia's reforming "Prague Spring," *The Memorandum* opened in New York, the last presentation (*Hair* had opened earlier that year) of Joseph Papp's great first season at the Public Theater. Briefly, everything seemed attainable. Within a few months, however, Russian troops had overturned the popular Czech government, and lovers of liberty became instant outlaws.

Unlike many, Havel stayed put. His troublemaking dramas were outlawed, yet he survived by working in a brewery and writing on the side. His plays about Vanek, an Everyman-figure, circulated in *samizdat* form, and his reputation grew. When the regime tightened the screws in 1977, Havel was among those who published the *Charter 77 Manifesto*. He spent the years 1979 to 1984 in prison for his defiance.

By 1989 he had become the best-known and most respected Czech dissident. When the Velvet Revolution ousted the Stalinists late that year, Havel was a consensus choice to lead the newly de-Russified Czechoslovakia. (The Czechs may have shaken off the Soviet yoke, but the tricky diplomacy of dislodging and sending home tens of thousands of resident Russian soldiers took up much of his first two years.)

As a politician, he was "the first completely non-authoritarian world leader in history," one writer claimed. (4) After three years as Czechoslovakia's president he resigned rather than preside over that country's bitter breakup, but within a few months he was elected president of the new Czech Republic, a position he held for ten years. Throughout his career,

he maintained a level of clarity that one writer dubbed "Politics Without Cliché." (5)

He has never considered the human adventure in either East or West as being easy. "I always return to the theme of human responsibility, which seems incapable of keeping pace with civilization and preventing it from turning against the human race," (6) he said in accepting an honorary doctorate from Harvard.

His guiding principle has been his motto: "Truth and love must prevail over lies and hate." (7)

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notes:

1 <https://www.bobcornwall.com/2009/11/velvet-prophet-vaclav-havel-and-his.html>

2 Chandler Rosenberger, "The Dissident Mind: Václav Havel as Revolutionary Intellectual." *The Journal of the Historical Society*, V.1:3; Sept 2006

3 quoted in Pankaj Mishra, "The Inner Voice." *The New Yorker*. May 2, 2011.

4 Janet Malcolm, "The Window-Washer." *The New Yorker*, November 19, 1990.

5 Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Politics Without Cliché." *Social Research*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Fall 1993)

6 <https://whatrocks.github.io/commencement-db/1995-vaclav-havel-harvard-university/>

7 <http://www.transformationalwriters.com/writers-choices/>