

Political Booknotes

Unbalanced Czech Book

By Gregg Easterbrook

MOHANDAS GANDHI—WHAT A jerk! Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Thomas Merton, Thomas Jefferson, Albert Schweitzer: a rogue's gallery of egocentric charlatans. People have said as much about everyone on that list, and now comes John Keane, a professor of politics at Westminster University in England, to add Václav Havel to the hall of shame. You may foolishly view Havel as a playwright, spirited dissident, and democratic hero to a peace-loving nation. *Václav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* reveals the shocking underside. Havel drinks too much, smokes too much, had too much sex, is vain, and, as president of his country, he made mistakes! Take this man away and string 'im up.

Overstatement? *Václav Havel* begins by complaining that its subject is too well thought-of by the world though he is guilty of "knavery" and though "the harsh fact is that most of the citizens of President Havel's republic think less of him than they did a year ago." Keane cautions readers that "I have never believed in heroes" and then goes on to relate that when he first met Havel, in 1984, "he didn't look much like a hero to me." This Havel was "exhausted, overweight, depressed" and had trouble operating the stick shift of his car. He also seemed more interested in getting hold of a bottle of whisky than in talking to John Keane. Oh, and he'd just been released from five years in prison, did we mention that? And yet imagine that he would prefer whisky to being interviewed! What a jerk!

Keane declares, "Gone are the days when it could be assumed that biography was about recording the facts ... my account of Havel's life is unavoidably 'factional.'" Funny, I was not aware that the days of fact-based biography were

gone or that resorting to "factional" techniques (whatever they may be) was "unavoidabl[e]." But at least the author gives fair warning.

After its declaration of intent to destroy its subject, *Václav Havel* holds to form. The description of Havel's birth, for example, finds ominous portents in an old family movie ("inexpertly shot," the book jabs) in which parents and relatives fuss over the baby so much as to give the impression of "a child whose early months were not only coddled but crowned." Keane seems unaware that it is standard for parents to fuss over babies in lavish fashion.

The tale continues downhill from there. Along the way, *Václav Havel* offers considerable scholarly detail on the postwar history of Czech politics and culture, a subject which Keane has studied closely. But he always comes back to what a crummy guy Václav is. He smokes incessantly. (A common health failing in the old Eastern bloc.) He drinks to excess. (Many numbed themselves against communism with brandy, including many of the chief communists.) He once got so totally, falling-down plastered on a Prague winter's night that he tumbled into an icy canal and would have perished in drunken oblivion but for valiant bystanders. While earning crowns by publishing maudlin tributes to his wife and fellow dissident, Olga, he was openly fooling around and, just a year after her death, married a tomato young enough to be his daughter. (Havel stayed with Olga for 45 years, including through her lengthy illness.) He pretended to take the presidency of the country reluctantly, but actually desperately desired the job and maneuvered to keep it out of the hands of Alexander Dubcek, his rival for most-admired Czechoslovakian. Plus his plays are overrated and he liked to be photographed with air-head celebrities.

Keane's bill of attainder may be true so far as it goes, but it is rarely leavened with acknowledgment of Havel's accom-

plishments. Born in 1936, to live first under Nazi invaders and then Soviet totalitarians, Havel grew up believing in freedom as the highest ideal. Raised under social and political systems that despised free thought, he nevertheless became a genuine artist, and also helped cultivate art in others. Given the chance

to live well and let others bear the sacrifice of dissent, he instead defied authority, mostly through the Charter 77 movement, enduring many trips to prison. (Keane seems to see the prison years as a career move on Havel's part; it's easy to think that once the danger is over.)

In the theater, Havel produced at least decent work. In letters, his 1979 essay "The Power of the Powerless," predicting that communism would crumble simply because people hated it, is among the shining works of political thought—it certainly displayed a better understanding of human nature than anything the communist thinkers wrote. Presiding over the Velvet Revolution, though of course far from its only important player, Havel was a force for peaceful democracy. And regardless of whether history determines the separation from Slovakia to have been the right or wrong course, Havel helped it happen without any of the bloodshed, confiscation, or recriminations that have characterized nearly all the national divisions of history.

Keane is right to contend that the world's reserve of admiration for Havel has not been adjusted for the fact that the last couple years of his presidency have been undistinguished—though with the Czech economy continuing to improve, the country's basic trajectory seems positive. Whether Havel brought it on himself with dissolute living or was simply the victim of bad genes, his health has become so poor that he no longer belongs in public affairs. This April, he publicly implored Madeleine Albright, who was born in Czechoslovakia, to return and assume its presidency. This isn't half as crazy as it sounds, and not just because European nations are accustomed to importing rulers; it shows that even in decline, Havel has his country's best interests in mind. And as for Keane's repeatedly stated complaint that Havel cannot be a great fig-

VACLAV HAVEL:
A Political
Tragedy in Six
Acts
by John Keane
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ure because many countrymen dislike him, find me the great figure who didn't have detractors and sworn enemies among his fellows; start with Winston Churchill while you're at it.

Václav Havel concludes with a chapter in which the author envisions his subject's state funeral, predicting sweeping displays of ostentatious insincerity. "As he lay in state in the old Castle of the Bohemian kings above the city, a queue some miles long would spring up. Mourners would wait all day, and all night, to see his body for the last time... Around the graveside a forest of microphones, tripods, cameras, pads and pens would suddenly spring up... Harry Truman's remark that a statesman is a dead politician would be confirmed. Loud sounds of grinding axes would also be heard." This is weird stuff. Maybe Václav Havel is now an aging, sickly alcoholic who should take his garlands and go home to contemplate the garden and read old letters in the days that remain to him. But one person in a generation leads such a life, and whoever does deserves a sympathetic biographer.

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Dances with Legislators

By David Plotz

IN THE PAST THREE YEARS, California has experienced one of the most astonishing and unnoticed political movements in U.S. history. A few thousand Indians have spent more than \$100 million on lobbying, ballot initiatives, and campaign contributions to turn their quasilegal gambling industry into a fully legal one. In the process, they outfoxed a hostile governor and helped elect a sympathetic one, passed two ballot initiatives, sidestepped an unfavorable California Supreme Court decision, smashed a challenge by the Nevada gambling industry, and spent more money than any interest group has ever spent in the history of American politics.

But the tribes' triumph has been greeted with a shrug, even by most Californians. Americans have come to take for granted the Indian casinos that

line the nation's highways and side roads. Gambling, supporters of this practice like to say, is the new buffalo. At the beginning of the '90s, only 14 tribes operated full-scale casinos. In 1998, 148 did. Tribal gambling has suddenly become a gigantic industry in numerous states and its profits have fueled political activism, cut tribal unemployment, improved Indians' health, and buttressed their education.

It was not a foregone conclusion that all this would happen, however, and it is not certain that it will endure. That is the message of W. Dale Mason's *Indian Gaming: Tribal Sovereignty and American Politics*. Indian gambling—I prefer not to use Mason's "gaming" euphemism—is the latest skirmish in a 200-year triangular war between the federal government, states, and tribes over Indian sovereignty. Tribes are (sometimes) winning this round, Mason argues, because they have mastered the tools of power politics: lobbying, lawyering, and money.

Written as a doctoral dissertation, *Indian Gaming* examines two case studies: New Mexico, where tribes succeeded in building significant gambling operations; and Oklahoma, where they have not. Mason begins with an excellent account of how gambling fits in the ancient dispute between disciples of Andrew Jackson and John Marshall over Indian sovereignty. The Jacksonian faction asserted that tribes are subject to state authority as well as federal. Marshall's Supreme Court declared that the Constitution grants tribes a sovereignty independent of states.

For most of U.S. history, the Marshall faction won the intellectual argument, but the Jacksonians determined the facts on the ground—up through the federal "termination" policy of the 1950s, to legislatively eliminate tribes.

But the Marshallites have been ascendant since the '60s, thanks to the Indian rights movement and a more sympathetic federal government. Tribes, Mason notes, have blocked state taxation, won control of mineral rights, and fought for legal jurisdiction in cases on tribal land. Gambling is the most high profile and important assertion of those rights.

Mason describes how the well-

organized tribes of New Mexico repeatedly played political hardball to advance their gambling interests. In the early '90s, Gov. Bruce King refused to negotiate compacts required to make gambling legal, asserting that Class III (i.e. casino) gambling was impossible because the state criminally banned it. King, a Democrat, was a longtime supporter of Indian causes, but in the 1994 gubernatorial campaign, they switched their allegiance to Republican candidate Gary Johnson, who promised to sign compacts. They supplied Johnson with nearly 20 percent of his campaign war chest. He hammered out compacts once he was elected.

When the state supreme court voided the compacts on the grounds that New Mexico outlawed Class III-type gambling, the tribes ran to federal court and persuaded the U.S. attorney to hold his fire until the legislature could act. In 1997, after heavyweight lobbying and deal-cutting, they persuaded the legislature to allow Class III gambling and permit the compacts.

If the New Mexico experience proves the value of old-fashioned politics in Indian gambling fights, Oklahoma's suggests that such methods are not always effective. Oklahoma's 39 tribes, unlike New Mexico's, are fragmented. Most of them were herded into Oklahoma during the Indian Wars, and don't share language, governance structure, or lifestyle.

These conditions stifled Oklahoma Indians' gambling efforts. Most tribes opened bingos in the '80s, but the state squashed every effort to add Class III games. A U.S. Attorney raided a tribal casino and seized its illegal Class III machines. The Sooner tribes lacked the cash and clout to persuade the governor and legislature to sign compacts.

Mason sides with the Indians, and that's not a bad choice. He is right to applaud the political mobilization of an excluded group and to admire the New Mexican tribes for mastering interest-group politics. But by focusing narrowly on political relations and two small states, Mason skips the more ominous sociocultural and political implications of the rise of Indian gambling. In their understandable push for more lucrative

INDIAN GAMING: Tribal Sovereignty and American Politics

by W. Dale Mason

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