Remembering the many Václav Havel’s

Given his multiple personalities and achievements, what is the best way to remember the late Czech poet, dissident, and president?

By John Keane, guest contributor

FORTUNE -- How should Václav Havel be remembered?

During my first encounter with him, in Prague in 1984, when everything seemed hopeless, I was struck by the man's hedgehog resilience. Here was a rarity: an unusual figure, intense but witty, a clear-headed thinker and a wonderful writer, a courageous individual blessed with a razor-sharp sense of irony; a chain-smoking man of letters whose fate was politics and (most people still overlook this) an individual who had a genuine taste for it, and yet someone who taught the world, by example, about the grave dangers of unaccountable power.

Two-thirds of Havel's life was lived under conditions of dictatorship or totalitarian power. Against terrible odds, he managed to survive, until the so-called Velvet Revolution of 1989. That changed everything in his life. The upheavals of that year greatly complicated his choices. He became three figures: Havel the playwright dissident; Havel the politician; and Havel the global statesman.

Let's work backwards. After finally leaving political office in 2003, Havel carved out the role of global statesman. In many obituaries during the past few days, he's been described as a giant and compared with figures like Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi. The praise is understandable. He was indeed a global champion of democratic virtues. He stood for pluralism, openness, and integrity, and he wrote and delivered memorable speeches on subjects like the environment, globalization, and violence.

There were some practical successes -- for instance, he directed the Human Rights Foundation in New York -- but in his role as global statesman, there were also setbacks. His support for the American and British invasion and occupation of Iraq attracted criticism, at home and abroad. There were some fruitless episodes, the chief example being his attempt to broker a peace deal between the Palestinians and the state of Israel. It came to nothing.
Havel, the politician

There was a middle period -- Havel as politician. The standard story is that he was a "reluctant" politician; the Guardian newspaper in London echoes that line in its recent obituary, which is fundamentally mistaken. Havel's first wife Olga had his measure. "He adores it!' she said over coffee to Czech poet Josef Topol, a year into Havel's first presidency. "He'll never give it up!" She was right.

He viewed being removed from office as synonymous with the collapse of his personal world. "You know how hard it is. I've given my whole life to politics," says the key character in Leaving (2008), an autobiographical work by Havel that's peppered with references to Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard and Shakespeare's King Lear, two plays that address the painful personal costs triggered by the loss of power. Havel wanted very much to be the helmsman of the new Czechoslovak state. He clung to power and there were moments when political office was his aphrodisiac. Four presidencies in two countries over 13 years is proof of that. He arguably stayed too long; it eventually caused an abdication crisis in Czech politics.

Havel was the first and firmest champion of honest and fair-minded reconciliation with Germany over the Sudeten question. His longstanding wish that Czechoslovakia enter the European Union was granted. As president, he stood for open-mindedness, for toleration, and for civility, especially for underserved groups like the Romany. He had no truck with xenophobia and what he dubbed small-minded and petty-nationalist "Czech-centrism." He tried to turn politics into fun, even adding a postmodern touch to it as president.

Within several months of becoming president, the Prague castle was adorned with red, white, and blue BMWs; a "Festival of Democracy" was staged; blue jeans and t-shirts became cool; and personal invitations were extended to Lou Reed and the Rolling Stones. Like a chameleon, Havel morphed into what Germans call an Ichspieler; he played himself on a political stage for a domestic and international audience. He loved all of that, though it came at a high price. He learned a tough lesson: under democratic conditions, political careers very often end in failure.

There was a moment of great honesty when he confessed that holding a political office resembled a prison sentence. He found himself caught up in the rough and tumble of a democratic transition. He was forced to face politicians like Czech President Václav Klaus, who out-performed and out-survived him. When Havel finally left office, he was unpopular among sections of the Czech and Slovak public.

Future historians will tell us that his achievements as a politician were mixed. He made more than a few errors of political judgement, most of which remain unknown outside his country. He had difficulty adjusting to the spirit and mechanisms of representative democracy.

In the early days of his first presidency, for instance, he tried to change the constitution by a show of hands in parliament. That was roundly rejected, for good reasons. He later identified with the Czech Green Party, but he initially had no affection for political parties. He even thought that, in the transition to parliamentary democracy, Czechoslovakia could do without a multi-party system. During his first meeting with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, he proposed
the abolition of parties, and the formation of one big party -- Europe. His attitude reflected both the unhappy history of political parties in central Europe and his earlier preference for "anti-politics." But, in context, it was pie in the sky.

Havel, the poet

The earliest and toughest phase of his life, Václav Havel as poet, playwright and dissident political writer, paradoxically turned out to be his happiest and most effective years. He lived through no fewer than eight regime changes during the course of the 20th century. In the face of military occupation, terror, and bullying, he displayed great personal courage, radical honesty, and unflagging dedication to the values of a civil society. This is what he meant by "living in the truth." It was a powerful idea and inspiring political slogan, which helped to prepare the grounds for the human rights declaration Charter 77, in its resistance to Soviet domination. With grace, the charter provided the poetry for the revolution of 1989.

Much can be learned from the writing Havel produced in the early period of his life. For me, two stand out. One is a play called The Memorandum (1965). Written in the tradition of the Theatre of the Absurd, it's a toothy satire on the follies and dangers of concentrated, total power. In this play, the ruling authorities decreed that they want more transparent and efficient communication with their subjects, to maintain control over them. So they introduce a new language called "ptydepe." Nobody can understand it; even the official instructors are baffled by its syntax, despite some simple rules, which specify, for instance, that the more frequently a word is used, the shorter it is. The word "wombat" is 80-odd letters long. When I first saw the play performed in Prague after the revolution, I was struck by the audience's spirited reaction. They found it riotously funny. It was. That's why the communist authorities had banned it.

Havel, the dissident

Havel also published a political essay called The Power of the Powerless (1978) (Full disclosure: I edited its first English edition). The piece is still widely considered to be the greatest political essay written in central and Eastern Europe before the events of 1989. Beautifully written and theoretically sophisticated, the tract contains a single but radical insight: the powerful, even if equipped with the most advanced weaponry and means of control, are actually no match for the powerless if and when they decide to withdraw their consent and non-violently refuse to play the game of the powerful.

Havel often said that the power of the powerless in any context is their ability to reject current political arrangements, to behave differently, for instance, by refusing corruption, lying, bullshit, bribes, and the other trimmings of power. For that thought, Havel was awarded a three-and-a-half year prison sentence.

When I first met him, he had just been released. He was mentally and physically exhausted, constantly on edge, anxious that he would be arrested again. His pet dog, shot dead by the secret police just a few weeks later, barked constantly at the entrance of his upstairs Vltava apartment.
We sipped whiskey I'd brought as a gift from Scotland. He calmly told me he would carry on taking risks, no matter what happened. He did, and did so with fearless dignity. He practised what he had written on his dissident's typewriter. That earned his essay regional and global fame, and rightly so. It was a trumpet blast in favor of the principle that non-violent resistance could triumph anywhere against any and all forms of power.

So, given his multiple personalities and abundant achievements, what is the best way to remember Václav Havel? We should mourn his passing, certainly. But democracies shouldn't immortalize their leaders, past or present. They mustn't allow anybody to sit on thrones. Yes, they need to preserve memories of figures like Havel, particularly in our darkening times, when more than a few democracies find themselves in trouble. Yet democrats should try to live without political heroes and myths of great leaders.

I doubt Václav Havel would want to be put on a pedestal. That's why I think he's best remembered as a man who had the misfortune of being born into the 20th century, a brave citizen who resisted its excesses, a public intellectual whose life and writings teach us much about the evils of concentrated power -- and the magical ability of humble people to throw off its chains.

That's quite a lot to remember.

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