

Vaclav Havel's Message Resonates Still

by [Barbara J. Falk](#) *Associate Professor, Canadian Forces College.*

Writings by the late Czech political icon continue to pinpoint the challenges faced by revolutionaries from Russia to China to Syria.

At the conclusion of his 2000 [biography of Václav Havel](#), John Keane imagines the future funeral of the now-former dissident playwright who became president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, predicting a “global media event.” Keane predicted that, following Havel’s death, Prague would double in size as thousands of Havel’s compatriots would finally – and perhaps begrudgingly – stand in queues all day to demonstrate their long-withheld appreciation for the man who came closer than any other European in the 20th century to wearing the mantle of philosopher-king.

In the wake of Havel’s recent death, much has been, and will be, said in lavish tributes and obituaries, referring to Havel’s privileged bourgeois origins, the impressive oeuvre of plays, essays, and presidential speeches he insisted on writing himself, his activism and role in [Charter 77](#), his stubborn unwillingness to be cowed by an authoritarian communist regime that stupidly enhanced his image by railing against him in the turgid prose of the party press, his tenure in prison, and the magical quality of the [Velvet Revolution](#) that propelled him into office in late 1989. More ink and keyboard strokes will attend to his legacies: the transition to democracy and market economy that he presided over, his role in the remarkable peaceful dissolution of first the [Warsaw Pact](#) and then Czechoslovakia into two states, and his role in propelling his country into both NATO and the EU.



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Those in the know will comment upon his fractured relationship with his successor, Václav Klaus, and his controversial support for the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. What is most deserving of tribute, however, are his ideas, and how he wove them with gentle irony and humour into his texts, regardless of their seriousness or the genre in which he was writing. He was a man committed to public action. He believed that ideas could make a difference, and that there was no simple separation between art and politics, or the personal and the political. As a playwright, he saw himself as playing a particular role in politics, and he carefully scripted the absurdities of minor detail and major gaffe.

His most memorable play, [The Memorandum](#), illustrates the dysfunctional relationship between language and meaning, especially in large, bureaucratic organizations. It is an absurdist classic: All can relate to the themes of alienation, hypocrisy, and marginalization that permeate our experiences of technocratic “efficiency” and our impersonal encounters with systems of rules. At the time that he wrote it, Havel was very much outside the system – he had no idea how prescient and timeless his observations would be, and how especially relevant they would be to his own unusual trajectory.

In his most famous and influential essay, “[The Power of the Powerless](#),” Havel demonstrates his appreciation of the absurdities of life for the everyman by depicting a modest greengrocer who is obligated to display a sign in his shop window stating that most rote of communist slogans, “Workers of the World, Unite!” The ideological content of the slogan helps disguise the base foundations of his action. After all, as Havel points out, he is not required to display a sign stating, “I am afraid and therefore unquestioningly obedient.” Havel carefully analyzes how the greengrocers of each political system prop up the systems they inhabit as willing accomplices by “living the lie.” Through this essay, he powerfully exposes the nakedness of the lie, and how political passivity supports authoritarianism. The antidote is obvious, but not easy: For the powerless to become powerful, they must first take responsibility, disrupt the reigning ideology, shatter the world of appearances, and live within truth. This is effectively what Havel and many others attempted to do through two decades of active dissent, from the crushing of the [Prague Spring](#) through to the [annus mirabilis of 1989](#).

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Nonetheless, Havel’s actions, and his constant reminders to his fellow citizens to act civilly and take responsibility, often resulted in a kind of collective moral embarrassment. Havel was lauded more in foreign capitals than at home. Especially after 1989, people did not like to have their faces smeared with the fact of their previous subservience, and Havel’s critics often perceived him as preachy and judgmental. After all, Havelian responsibility is not for the faint-hearted – just ask those who took to the streets after Iran’s stolen elections in 2009, or those who are currently being assaulted by Egypt’s security forces in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.

In his memoir, [To The Castle and Back](#), Havel orchestrates, in accordance with his dramaturgical training, a chronologically confusing, yet deeply meaningful, series of meditations on life in power – and then suddenly outside it – wherein he complains as much about the bat inhabiting the closet as he does about the serious decisions of state. It turns out that the powerful lack power in unexpected ways, just as the powerless have more power than they realize. Through this memoir, Havel exposed his own mental backtrack, filled with worries and mistakes – not the usual stuff of post-presidential memoirs whose authors typically jockey for their place in history.

Above all, Havel would have appreciated the many ironies attendant upon his passing. The man who drove a scooter through the halls of Prague's Kafkaesque castle; who, in the early years, longed to slip out for a drink at his favoured Café Slavia; and who welcomed heads of state and the Rolling Stones with an equal measure of bemusement and enthusiasm, will now be appreciated, as Keane predicted, by a nation once again surprised by the world's attention. The fact that he died on the same weekend as North Korean despot Kim Jong-il would have delighted him. The tragedy that many brave enough to take political responsibility seriously paid for this commitment with their lives just as he took his dying breath would have deeply distressed him. But his oeuvre and his example will live on. His life and his trajectory from dissident to philosopher-king could have been written by a playwright. Indeed, it was.

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