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Havelian Presidency: A Study in Theory & Practice

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty and Honors Program

Of the University of San Diego

By

Chelsea L. Johnson

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Abstract

Despite former dissident and Czech president Václav Havel's widespread influence, his presidency has not been seriously considered as a framework for how one should head a government. A reasoned and thorough examination of Havel's presidency is conspicuously absent in the existing literature. Havel is known for and evaluated most in terms of his sweeping moral principles and philosophical treatises, but I wish to know whether his 13-year presidency passes the test of ideal world leadership that he provides so clearly in his written works and speeches. Specifically, I develop a set of ideal traits for world leadership and then examine how this philosophical and political ideal translates to his political acts as president. I have selected one criminal justice, one defense, and one economic policy that Havel actively advocated for and instituted. These policies were either controversial or *prima facie* appear to contradict his political philosophy. Since Havel was both a playwright and philosopher, I then examine these policies through the lens of his prior-written plays and philosophical treatises – as well as my seven traits for ideal world leadership, extrapolated from his writings – to determine whether his political theory works in practice, whether his actions can be justified in the terms of his theory, and whether it constitutes a viable method of governing. The end result of my thesis will have either confirmed scholarly suspicions of Havel's presidential mediocrity, or proved the opposite and thereby serve as an externally applicable framework for morally and politically sound action. The latter reflects my determination that Havel was indeed a good president and an effective world leader.

“Much could be done by those whose function it is to advise the public what to praise, what to admire, what to hope and strive and seek for.”

--- Simone Weil, *Human Personality*

Introduction

Norms and expectations of the ideal holder of a political office must be examined critically. An individual who rose quickly from dissident to president should be expected to adapt to certain ideals and competencies. However, such an individual should not be expected to change on some personal, fundamental, or moral level. For instance, in the case of a recently married couple: if one party was unfaithful while they were dating, marriage should not impose a different or somehow stricter moral expectation than what the other spouse was aware of prior to marriage. Such an expectation that marriage would somehow change the offending party is unfounded and, in a way, foolish. At the same time, a spouse may expect some level of change in his or her partner's behavior following marriage and the newness of life together – for instance, that they put the cap back on the toothpaste, or that they mount the toilet paper in the right way. Small, practical behavioral changes are to be expected once one is aware of certain annoyances, but it is unreasonable to ask for a shift in personal mores and characteristics that have been there all along. Just as recently married people know, implicitly or otherwise, what they are getting themselves into, the people in a democratic nation arguably know what they are getting into when they elect a president.

I first approached this project expecting to agree with those who argue that Václav Havel's presidency was practically ineffective. However, I come out of it thinking nearly the opposite (but hopefully without falling into that trap of deification in which some scholars find themselves). Those who criticize Havel for somehow changing fundamentally on the journey from dissident to president lack consideration of alternative presidential ideals. Furthermore, those who criticize Havel for failing to alter his behavior misunderstand the role of drastic change as a precursor to doing well in

the presidential office; in addition, they lack recognition that Havel did indeed change in small ways insofar as they helped him learn and adapt to his new position. Neither of the two aforementioned views is entirely right, and Havel (the moderate politician that he was) succeeded in overcoming both criticisms of his presidency by conforming to neither. He continued to be the same Havel that he always was, while also learning to put the cap back on the toothpaste.

Examining how the ideas advocated by any political figure compare with their actual policies, as well as how a vision of ideal leadership might apply, is a worthwhile venture. My interest in such topics drives my investigation into how former dissident and Czech president Václav Havel's philosophical ideas translate to his political acts as president. Havel the Philosopher will be judging Havel the Political Figure, and in this way it will be a study in theory and practice. Metaphorically, one might say that my topic is a gavel and block – they are two parts to the same mechanism (two ways of looking at the same person), but at their meeting, judgment will be passed. Through this paper I wish to put forth an alternative assessment of Havelian politics, one that differs from what is present in the current literature. I wish to neither deify nor condemn Havel, but rather present a commentary that clearly answers the following questions: Does Havel's politics have more to offer the contemporary world than simply criticism of a bygone regime, i.e. the Soviet bloc? Was he a good dissident but a bad president, or was he good at both? Does his presidency meet the standards of ideal leadership that he puts forth in his theoretical writings? How might we be able to extract a vision of leadership from Havel's words and actions? These questions, among others, are what I will discuss in my thesis, and their answers will matter to anyone evaluating figures in power, along with political figures themselves.

In writing this paper, I examined both primary and secondary sources – journal articles and the like – to develop my ideas. Specifically, I have read through many essays and journal articles that discuss Havel's political philosophy, a biography of Havel written by a close contemporary, and many of Havel's own philosophical works such as *Letters to Olga*. I have also explored

background information on the more controversial policies advocated by Havel during his presidency. After compiling my notes on these works, I constructed an organized argument that (I hope) clearly answers my research questions.

This particular research project is not intended to be a comprehensive history of Havel's life, nor of his time in office. My lens is rather narrow as I will be looking at three specific presidential acts of Havel's and how they relate to his worldview. Even in consideration of those specific acts, I do not seek to uncover every detail of their implementation. I seek merely to evaluate them in terms of political philosophy, and moreover attempt to extrapolate my findings (at least in part) to politics in the modern age. To tackle Havel's entire presidency, or even the larger share of his writings, is outside the scope of my research. I am further limited by a narrow period of time, roughly from Havel's later years as a dissident to his departure from political office in 2003. I will not take into account what comes before, nor will I, for the most part, give regard for what comes after. I will focus chiefly on Havel's own political philosophy and will not attempt to subsume the ideas of external philosophers or thinkers – unless, of course, they write in consideration of Havel. This is all to present a new and persuasive conceptualization of Havelian political thought so that I might be better able to apply it directly to real-world issues in Havel's presidency, the vast majority of which occur many years after he writes his more notable works.

Literature Review

In this section, unlike subsequent sections, I will focus solely on exogenous scholarly works rather than Havel's own writings. In the realm of academia he is at times criticized harshly, at times deified; and when he is praised, it seems to be far more for his philosophy and dissident actions than for his presidency. Additionally, scholars tend to make very few claims about how Havel did as president and withhold their judgment in the realm of theory and practice. An example of this is Timothy Barney, who notes that "As Havel's presidency wore on... public opinion continued to appreciate his role as moral spokesperson but resented his inability to change the material lives of Czechs" (587). Here, there is a clear discrepancy between theory and practice from the point of view of Havel's constituents. Barney continues on to point out that "such tensions" (587) appear to, in a sense, define Havel's entire presidency; the roles of world leader and "moral arbiter" (590) contain specific and sometimes conflicting duties, and it might seem impossible to fulfill them both simultaneously. Barney gives the examples of "the serious growing pains of democratization with economic stagnation, privatization's corruption, and deep discord over the status of former communists" through which "Havel could be seen as aloof through his abstract lectures about 'responsibility' and 'being'" (602). Further, his fascination with the world of rock music and musicians deemed him as a sort of "cultural concierge" (597) to visiting artists. On this subject, Barney comments that "Havel's embrace of that role tended to madden his critics and was seen by some as evidence of a starstruck leader using the prestige of the office to hobnob with Western cultural idols at the expense of 'real' political issues in the country" (597). Barney mostly cites criticisms from the Czech people themselves of Havel's presidency, and acknowledges the "difficult balance" that Havel had to strike between "the celebrity president and the countercultural intellectual" (597). Barney sheds light on the uniquely Havelian double standard to which the Czech president had to aspire, for "Not only is Havel held responsible for strict fidelity to his dissident era 'life in truth' philosophy, but he is also held responsible for setting a standard (or cautionary tale)

for the future institution of the presidency” (605).

Matt Welch in his work titled “Velvet President” provides a slightly more sympathetic view of Havel’s presidency, steering clear of any specific critiques. Welch draws attention to Havel’s “fairy tale ascent from gulag to castle,” noting that it did indeed have the mysterious and surprising quality of a fairy tale, but also that Havel “was the only real choice considered when the new Czech Republic needed a president in January 1993” (1). Serving as the leading face of the dissident movement for so long, it was only natural that Havel be lifted up from the depths of Soviet imprisonment to the highest position of the newly freed nation within a few short months. Like Barney, Welch acknowledges the tensions between dissidency and theatricality versus officiality and presidency: “the former playwright has suffered personally under the constraints imposed by official decorum” (1). Despite Welch’s tendency to paint Havel as a victim, he clearly admires the former president’s practice of “forever injecting informality into the serious work of public life” and “[practicing] democracy with a human face” (1).

Paul Wilson, as a friend and prolific translator of Václav Havel’s, was well-acquainted with Havel’s ideas as well as his politics. And, in being so familiar with these aspects, Wilson possesses a uniquely acquainted view of Havelian politics. Although Wilson is moderate and does not critique all aspects of Havel’s theory and practice, he is certainly unafraid of espousing some criticisms. Wilson states that Havel’s refusal to create a political party “left him without the practical tools to affect specific changes in domestic politics that could bring Czech society, in practical ways, closer to his vision of what it should be” (28). Wilson views political parties as “the most effective means of organizing and mobilizing public opinion” (28), thus drawing attention to Havel’s political inefficiency in this sense. Additionally, Wilson asserts that Havel’s frequent “appeal for tolerance [of former Communist Party members] was admirable and consistent, but it did not offer much of a guide to action, nor did it match the popular mood” (25). Havel’s theories of human nature, and strict personal adherence to them in the political and public realm, thus prevent him from establishing his

ideals more concretely into the next administration, according to Wilson. At times Wilson critiques the disparity between theory and practice in Havel's life (and quite blatantly so), but he is not blind to the fact that Havel's supporters are many. He recognizes that, during Havel's campaign and ascension to power, "He seemed the platonic ideal of a philosopher-king made flesh" (22). Additionally, Wilson points out that, in November of 1989, Havel was "the natural and popular choice for president" because he was widely "perceived... as the real leader of the Velvet Revolution" (23). Nevertheless, Havel was "bewilder[ed]... at his sudden rise to the realm of 'high politics', as he likes to call it" (22). Havel's vision of himself was largely in tension with that held by the mass of Czech civilians. It is clear that Wilson admires Havel, especially his unyielding belief and hope in a "revolt of conscience" (25) as well as his emphasis on individual responsibility. Wilson cites Havel's first New Year's address as president: "We are all – though naturally to differing extents – responsible for the operation of the totalitarian machinery; none of us is just its victim: we are also its co-creators" (25). Although Wilson concedes that Havel is known more for his words than political acts, he states that "it would be hard, now, to imagine what that tumultuous process of emerging from the darkness of tyranny would have been like without the bright, uncompromising mirror he held up to it" (29). And although Wilson contends that Havelian political theory may not always hold in practice, the theory nonetheless shone like a beacon to Czech citizens and the world alike, instilling in many of his readers and constituents a hope of what could be, a tentative belief in goodness in the human soul, even after a horrifying forty-year display of abject evil. However, I will argue that Havel's political practice is something worth examining under greater scrutiny than merely to dismiss it based on his supposed practical ineptitude. Overall, Wilson's essay provides a sturdy analysis of Havel through the lens of political thought, and somewhat aligns with what I wish to do with this thesis: present a realistic view of Havel, but unlike Wilson, one in which Havel the political theorist scrutinizes Havel the practitioner's performance of theory.

Stephen Schiff's analysis of Havel, although it overstates both his virtues and his faults,

examines the potential reasons behind common criticisms of Havel's reign. The essay begins with a quote by Václav Bělohradský, which reads: "[A person] lives in truth only when he crosses the boundaries of his own version of the world, finds himself on an alternative map of reality, and is constantly forced to justify his own positions" (75). Based on Schiff's analysis, few things seem to describe Havel's initial experience as President of Czechoslovakia more. With "the aura of a certain kind of theater star" (78), Havel now had to navigate a world in which "every choice is fraught with ambiguity" (77), when before, "the world was so neatly divided between the devils in power and the saints who fought them" (77). Schiff argues that Havel was not aware that the world is much more complex outside of the artificial frame that was the falsifying, sinister reign of the Soviet bloc in what is now the Czech Republic, and in my view this is a misreading of Havel. Schiff describes Prague as "one of the gloomiest and most repressive of the Warsaw Pact regimes" (86). However, it is difficult not to admire Havel's certain brand of doing what is right even in the face of that; according to Schiff, "When he ran into one of his former jailers shortly after taking office, Havel shook his hand warmly and asked him how he'd been" (78). Schiff remarks that Havel was like a "European Gandhi" (78) in his steadfastness in moral ideals. Although Schiff tends to slip into deification of Havel, he recognizes that Havel was an endearing figure in many senses, including his choice of staff – he hired his Secretary immediately, Bára Štěpánová, who "used to be an actress in a theater troupe called the Society for a Merrier President, which found fame by posing as riot police during demonstrations and mock-threatening the protestors with salamis and cucumbers" (79). Schiff provides an interesting insight into why Havel might be so harshly judged by so many when it comes to practicing his political theory: "In meeting the demands of destiny, Havel has, in a way, left the realm of humanity. He no longer has any margin of error" (89). Havel was never going to fit the mold of traditional ways of thinking about what constitutes a good president. In addition, in becoming the first president of Czechoslovakia after the fall of the Soviet regime, and later of the Czech Republic, too much was expected of Havel, as it would have been any man.

Jean Bethke Elshtain, in her essay titled “A Performer of Political Thought: Václav Havel on Freedom and Responsibility,” asks the question that Havel presents: whether “to engage in theoretical or wistful overreach” (113), this being the premise of many critiques of Havel. She notes that “our practices are always struggling to keep up with our theories” (113), lending a sympathetic eye to Havel’s plight. Moreover, she asserts that Havel “simply refuses to be drawn into the theory/practice dilemma as it is usually posed” (113), and utilizes this assertion to establish Havel as “an exemplary performer of political thought” (116-117). She goes on to maintain the singularity of “the way in which [Havel] works the boundaries of various commitments and modes of thought and inquiry; the care he takes to locate himself, in a permanent *agon*, a never-ending contestation between tradition and transformation” (117). Although every example given by Elshtain to support this is purely from the theoretical and philosophical side, her assertions are fascinating. I wish to fill in the gaps in her work by providing examples of Havelian presidential policy by which to examine the success of his theories. In her ultimate analysis, Elshtain reminds the reader that “Hope is definitely not the same as optimism” (122). Havel, rather than being optimistic and perhaps naïve about human nature, is instead simply hopeful about it. Additionally, I found the following passage fascinating: “Havel’s response to those who claim his own thought is murky and unrealistic and will not survive a move into the realm of practical politics is complex, amounting to something akin to an invitation for them to help him take stock in order that his own words not become empty clichés” (123). In a sense, this is what I wish to do with my thesis – help Havel account for his own vision of ideal politics, and whether or not he as president measures up to it (whether his political practice aligns with his political theory, and if not, what picture of Havel emerges from that scene in the end); to, in essence, help him “take stock” of both his political actions and thus determine the possibility of whether his ideal vision can be used as a tool for evaluating the modern world.

Although significant in actuality, it seems that political legacy is at times meaningless to the media and the masses. Perhaps this is one reason why Havel’s presidency has not been seriously

explored by many scholars. The issue has become subtle, almost invisible due to the lack of attention paid to it. In a manner similar to Paul Wilson, Stephen Bates presents a more moderate picture of Havel, noting that in their extreme feeling Western journalists “didn’t just listen” when Havel opened his mouth,” but “genuflected.” Bates points to various instances of the media’s worship when he remarks that “The dissident-turned-Czech-president was ‘an international icon of integrity’ (The New York Times), a ‘genuine hero’ (Newsweek), a ‘secular saint’ (Toronto Globe and Mail), and ‘a moral giant in an era of pygmies’ (Der Spiegel).” Bates also quotes an American journalist who stated: “If I could talk like that, I would run for God.” However, despite this very literal deification, Bates notes that “the press’s relationship with Havel was more complicated than it seemed.” For example, “at the end of [Havel’s] term, he [expected] questions about his political legacy” from reporters; “Instead, they care only about sex and scandal,” undermining any political achievements that Havel might have claimed.

Without presuming direct judgment but while maintaining a critic’s affect, Aviezer Tucker analyzes the theory versus practice predicament. He judges the success of Havelian theory very few times, and once when referring to the “existential revolution” (170) of the Czech people for which “expectations” were set and “prepared” by Havel, a transformation which, in Tucker’s estimation, “never happened.” Tucker makes the very pointed and convincing argument that “Being-a-president is very different from Being-a-dissident-philosopher. Philosopher has to be tested against politics, theory against reality” (171). To enforce Havelian theory in the real world of politics would have been “to practice the consequentialist ethics of social responsibility” (173), but Tucker makes little effort to parse and deduce the particulars of Havel’s presidency in order to further inspect the “practice” facet of the theory and practice debate, besides a brief mention of his generally unfavorable opinion that while Havel’s dissident life was a success, his presidential “concentration on authenticity and moral perfectionism prevented him and his fellow dissidents from understanding the significance of constructing democratic institutions and working through them” (90).

Other scholars also find Havelian politics wanting, after some scrutiny. John Keane in his biography titled *Václav Havel: a Political Tragedy in Six Acts* unsurprisingly paints Havel's politics in an unfavorably tragic light. He critiques Havel's overarching philosophy of "living in Truth," claiming that Havel uses "truth cautiously, as a means of repairing and oiling the machinery of state power, and his seat within it" (436). Keane cites a friend of Havel's, Adam Michnik, who says that Havel's unlikely ascension to power reveals a "charismatic leader" who "becomes a caricature of himself" (491). However, one might counterargue this point and say that holding political office is always a tragedy for the holder; one must always give up something had by oneself in order to serve the collective; one must always lose a part of oneself; one must always fail. One *cannot* win, in the traditional sense of the word, in a position of political power – at least not truly and completely. John Keane disagrees, and cites Havel's personal traits – his "natural impatience" (422), for example – to argue that what is "appropriate on stage" was not necessarily so in the "early weeks of the "revolution, when time was needed to get the new balance right among various branches of the constitution" (422).

Taking the opposite view, Delia Popescu underscores some of the ways in which Havel is misinterpreted. She cites Keane's biography directly, saying that it, "together with a few other sharp critics of Havel's presidency, overstated both the actual power Havel had in office and the extent to which he failed to effectively use that power" (18). As will be evident later in my thesis, Havel actively sought to ascribe to the Czech presidential office less and less power. It is thus erroneous to declare that he unsuccessfully wielded power that he did not possess. Popescu narrows in on Havel's philosophical ideal of "Living in Truth" (99), one that is "sometimes branded as idealistic, lacking the backbone of a political creed or the sharp teeth of a Frondist call to arms." Alternatively, Popescu makes the argument that it is the most practical political creed one can employ given the context of Havel's life. If proven by nothing else, this is affirmed to some extent by the hope of the Czech people – Popescu states, "Perhaps he can be criticized for his relentless allegiance to his principles,

yet that obviously struck a chord with the post-revolutionary electorate, which elected him twice” (123). In addition, normal ways of thinking about politics are particularly unhelpful: “Using this conventional frame to judge Havel is... counter-intuitive, since Havel operates explicitly against it” (21).

In addition to Delia Popescu, Robert Pirro provides one of the more crucial and overarching analyses to my work. His reasoned examination of Havelian political theory is clearly ordered toward tackling the “suspended quality” (230) of Havel’s thought, as it seems caught precariously between two other things, two “poles” (230), and in this way, it fights explanation. Pirro summarizes Elshtain’s view that “Havel insists on confronting” a “spiritual crisis” with a supremely “paradoxical nature” (230). Pirro lists and describes the various (and at times flawed) ways in which Havel is interpreted and criticized, bringing to light the need for new analysis. He cites the reason for scholarly fascination with Havel as the former president’s unique “approach to politics” which “resists easy classification according to the standards of conventional modes of political thought” (228). What is produced from Havel’s political thought is an array of “widely varying characterizations” that “reveal how difficult it is to draw forth a consistent and unambiguous Havelian position on central questions of contemporary theoretical concern” (228). (This is in part what I wish to do, despite the exertion required.) Pirro then brings authors to the forefront who have misinterpreted or misconstrued Havelian political thought; for instance, he cites critic Edward Findlay’s view that Havel’s work “reflects... the adoption of a literary style of theorizing that lacks definitional rigor and consistency” (230). Essentially, there is not nearly enough structure or lucidity in Havel’s philosophy for it to be particularly useful or convincing. With regard to this opinion, Pirro remarks such opinions see “Havel’s political ineffectiveness as president” as “primarily due to a misapplication of philosophical concepts” (232) as well as “a lack of recognition that the ‘Heideggerian politics of authenticity appropriate for a persecuted dissident is insufficient when political power and responsibility are assumed.’” However, Pirro rightly points out error in “the claim that the sole measure of Havel’s

coherence as a theorist ought to be a philosophical one, namely, the standards of definitional clarity and consistency set by his philosophical mentor, Patočka” (231). Such standards cannot and should not be universally applied in political theory. Further, set next to them as a measure, “Havel’s work will inevitably fall short” (231). Pirro acknowledges how very easy it is to succumb to an interpretation of Havel’s works and writings based on an initial glance. Without significant rumination, they certainly seem “inconsistent” (233) and Havel’s idea of “political action... appears compromised by a metaphysical focus on the dynamics of the inner life of individuals and a corresponding neglect of external relationships” (233). This is, nonetheless, not the case of Havelian political thought. Pirro surmises that due to Havel’s “experience both inside and outside the halls of power, he has been in a position to demonstrate how the philosophical lessons of Patočka (or Heidegger) can be applied (or misapplied) in politics” (232). My task is to more acutely examine said application or misapplication.

“The world doesn’t give a damn about us and nobody’s coming to our rescue – we’re in a nasty predicament, and it will get worse and worse – and you are not going to change any of it! So why beat your head against the wall and charge the bayonets?”

--- Michael in *Unveiling*, p. 46

“My... wish is that you not lose your hope, faith, and ability to delight in the world – even if the world is the way it is.”

--- *Letters to Olga*, p. 142

Part I: Havel’s View of Human Nature | What does Havel believe about humanity, and by proxy, himself?

It would be an incomplete examination of Václav Havel’s conception of ideal politics without first determining his view of human nature at large and ideal human interaction. This is because one’s understanding of politics is deeply linked to one’s particular understanding of the human species at large. In this section I place heavy emphasis on such philosophical texts as *Letters to Olga*, which is a compilation of letters written during Havel’s four-year imprisonment. Throughout them, Havel emphasizes individual agency, moral responsibility, and thoughtful action and characterizes human personality as a vast “set of possibilities” and “potentials” (*Letters to Olga* 138). In addition, Havel espouses belief in a higher order of “Being” as well as a concept which he calls “horizons.” Through it all, Havel develops a particular picture of what it means to be human, ultimately declaring that we are all infinitely responsible to Being, ourselves, and others.

Letters to Olga is perhaps the pinnacle of works by Václav Havel which exemplify his prowess as a deeply contemplative, “philosopher-king” type (as Paul Wilson and others maintain). It is the work which best describes Havel’s view of human nature and the world at large, making paradoxically abstract yet nuanced points throughout. Its prominent themes are the concepts of human identity and responsibility, which he gradually develops as the letters progress, and after this a

rather strange concept called “horizons.” Another major theme, and a rather abstract one, is the concept of “thrownness of Being.” The ultimate point of the letters is that in writing them Havel went on a “quest to discover the meaning of his life and snatch it from the jaws of nothingness” (17). In this highly personal, philosophical journey, he defines his principal questions as the following:

What, in fact, is man responsible to? What does he relate to? What is the final horizon of his actions, the absolute vanishing point of everything he does, the undeceivable ‘memory of Being,’ the conscience of the world and the final ‘court of appeal’? What is the decisive standard of measurement, the background or the field of each of his existential experiences? (101).

Perhaps the most notable aspect of *Letters to Olga* is how Havel develops his conceptualization of responsibility. In letter 53 he pursues this by outlining three different “horizons,” or things beyond oneself to which one relates. These horizons range from the physical and changeable surroundings to the concealed, abstract, and permanent internal surroundings. Together, they make up one’s experiential home. Later, in his first presidential book titled *Summer Meditations*, Havel explains that “For everyone, home is a basic existential experience. What a person perceives as home (in the philosophical sense of the word) can be compared to a set of concentric circles, with one’s ‘I’ at the center” (30). In *Letters to Olga*, he continues to dive into existential thought by asserting that human personality exists not on the basis of actual experience, but on “the possibility of experience” (139). As is evident, the presence of abstract thought and metaphysical philosophy in Havel’s writing overwhelms what would be a mundane collection of prison letters to his wife, and they thus become something else entirely: a philosophical treatise.

One of the more noteworthy letters in this section is letter 91. Here Havel points to a formative experience that he had during the prior summer at a prison in Heřmanice. He reminisces on this summer day: he had a break from his shift at work and was staring out beyond the fence at a field and a single tree there, feeling the summer heat and breeze, and he recalls this experience in detail:

Suddenly, it seemed to me that all the beautiful summer days I had ever experienced and would yet experience were present in that moment; I had direct, physical memories of the summers I spent in Ždárec as a child; I could smell the hay, the pond and I don’t know

what else.... I seemed to be experiencing, in my mind, a moment of supreme bliss, or infinite joy... and though I felt physically intoxicated by it, there was far more to it than that: it was a moment of supreme self-awareness, a supremely elevating state of the soul, a total and totally harmonic merging of existence with itself and with the entire world (221).

Havel is aware that something profound and nearly inexplicable occurred here, and it would inform many of his more in-depth ideas later in the volume.

In the final section of letters, Havel first presents and defines the strange term of “thrownness of Being.” In order to do so, he describes the fundamental experience of being human as a state of separation, a severing; similar to how a child is separated from its mother at birth. When in the world, a human does not belong anywhere specifically, and as Havel puts it, “He is an alien in the world because he is still somehow bound up in Being, and he is alienated from Being because he has been thrown into the world” (321). This is the state of “thrownness,” where the feeling of responsibility for others originates – we are all connected by our mutual state of isolation and “thrownness.” Havel was prompted to these reflections on responsibility after watching a weather report in which there were technical difficulties and the meteorologist could only stare into the camera in utter paralysis. Upon witnessing this debacle Havel felt an inexplicable empathy toward her, and this experience initiated his more complex theory on responsibility for others. In addition, he speaks extensively on the idea of human transcendence and the desire to step beyond all horizons into the impossible, and how this desire should govern one’s life. The concept of “I” is defined as “the experience of man alone with himself” (343), and the “I” that has come into realization of itself in its state of “thrownness” feels the truest sense of responsibility toward itself, others, and the world – when this self-awareness does not break through in one’s soul, great atrocities can occur.

Although a vague concept, Havel defines “Being” as the experience of something that “is” (358), of the “pre-origin” (341) to our existence and consciousness, which manifests as harmony, infinitude, totality, and mystery. It is the essence of meaning that inspires wonder, humility, and hope. Havel also describes it as something or someone eternal, with an “infinite memory, an

omnipresent mind, and an infinitely large heart” (346). However, it is crucial to note that Havel is hesitant to call it “God,” although it admittedly can be conceptualized in that way. Further, Being is the source of human feelings of responsibility and is the “absolute horizon of one’s relating” (346), where one can step beyond one’s concrete horizons and into the unseen ones.

Havel once again turns back to his experience of the summer day in Heřmanice to speak on the human longing for re-emergence into the integrity of Being, and how this longing can be satisfied in certain moments. He describes this as “Being spellbound within me and Being spellbound within the world [joining] hands” (333), which serve as points at which one can experience true meaning. However, if one turns away from Being and throws oneself fully into the surrounding world without regard for meaning or truth, one is giving into conformity and selfishness, and morality becomes arbitrary and self-referential. This can translate to a mass rejection of Being, and may result in fanaticism and the various atrocities associated with it. Human nature, in essence, is at its best when transfixed and poised between two extremes – full reemergence into Being which diminishes one’s responsibility to the world and capacity to live in the present moment, and a complete turning away from Being as described above. According to this principle, we are constantly making our way along a tightrope, and to fall on either side is a travesty in the human soul.

It thus becomes clear that for Havel, morality is about consistency; he values, above many other things, “identity and continuity” (75). He goes on to assert that concern for the world stemming from internal structures is right conscience, and not concern for oneself stemming from external structures. The former is what gives us reason to do anything. Under his mode of thinking, it becomes evident that those living in immorality and lies have the potential to choose otherwise. When it comes to conscience, there is always freedom of choice in Havel’s mind. When he outlines his three paradoxes of “thrownness,” the second one may be interpreted as an additional definition of conscience: “The tension between [thrownness’] Being and its self-perception” (325). It perhaps highlights the paradoxical ideal of self-awareness as a key factor in the facilitation of right

conscience in any human being; one must be internally aware of oneself and one's intermediate, uncomfortably fragmentary state of existence between Being and the surrounding world.

Havel writes an entire essay on conscience called, of course, "Politics and Conscience," that is especially illuminating after an in-depth investigation of *Letters to Olga*. In this 1984 essay he identifies the enemy of conscience as the impersonal and mechanic, and one can clearly see the influence of Kant in Havel's delineating of ethics: "At the basis of this world are values which are simply there, perennially, before we ever speak of them, before we reflect upon them and inquire about them" (2), as well as in his conjecture that conscience comes from "something beyond or above [the world] that might escape our understanding and our grasp... and is the hidden source of all the rules, customs, commandments, prohibitions, and norms that hold within it" (2). In other words, a universal expositor of conscience is what creates all social values; Havel would perhaps deem the source as Being. In a similar vein, he speaks to how an individual may self-deceive and rebel against the universal truth of conscience, and advocates that one must "not invent responsibilities other than the one to which the voice calls" (11). Havel then brings the idea of conscience out of the abstract and into the concrete, saying that it is the primary source from which "real political force" (13) can be derived – only through right conscience can visible, external, and lasting change be truly enacted.

Conscience is, then, an essential component of Havelian human nature. It informs ideas of responsibility and human capacity for action and choice. Hence, in contemplating Václav Havel's works *Letters to Olga* and *Protest* together, it can be gleaned that conscience, according to Havel, comes from something outside of ourselves, something akin to his idea of Being. Conscience, then, expressly does *not* originate from an inner voice of one's own as is the popular conception of it. Upon close inspection of both works, Havel's "bad" conscience seems to encompass the following: rashness and reactivity, pessimism, living in lies, turning away from Being, a concern for oneself, rejecting existence and thus identity, inconsistency, and comes from following one's own voice. By

contrast, Havel's "good" conscience includes the following: thoughtfulness and contemplation, optimism, living in truth, turning toward Being, a concern for absolute truth and for the surrounding world, embracing existence totally, consistency, and comes from following an external voice grounded in the very source of existence and identity. In his overall conception of human nature, there is absolutely room for an individual to choose this. Furthermore, this ideal for human conscience translates directly into Havel's ideal for political conscience, as will be seen in Part II.

In another essay titled "A Word About Words," Havel points out, in a myriad of ways, that "alongside words that electrify society with their freedom and truthfulness, we have words that mesmerize, deceive, inflame, madden, beguile, words that are harmful - lethal, even. The word as arrow" (4). But despite humanity's frequent attempts to characterize words and phrases as either good or bad, positive or negative, words escape these categorizations – "at times they can be one or the other. They can even be both at once!" (4). Havel's ultimate advice regarding words is the following: "it always pays to be suspicious of words and to be wary of them, and that we can never be too careful in this respect" (7). It is therefore necessary to the larger work of this thesis to understand that Havel recognizes the deceptive power of speech, and that he would have us be just as discerning of his own words as those of other politicians. Havel's view of human nature is illuminated for a moment when he speaks of "the human world as it really is: a complex community of thousands and millions of unique, individual human beings in whom hundreds of wonderful qualities are matched by hundreds of faults and negative tendencies" (8). Thus, Havel does not ignore the ugly in humanity, as optimistic as he seems. He continues on to speak of humankind's arrogance – in its appropriation and use of the natural world, in its tendency toward political tyranny and destruction (he gives the example of atomic bombs), and he asserts, "That is bad. But in each case [humanity] is already beginning to realize his mistake. And that is good" (9). Havel ends his speech by effectually asserting the existence of a universal responsibility, had by each of us, to recognize and right our errors with as much expediency and authenticity as possible.

Havel conceptualizes collective action as ultimately dependent upon individual transformation and renewed deference to that which is outside of the individual. In his presidential work *View From Prague*, Havel's frustration with the public becomes clear but not to the detriment of his sense of hope about human nature. An excellent case study therein is environmental degradation. Havel possesses no illusions as to the sheer immensity of the task of getting people to actually act on feelings of responsibility to the environment, albeit through recycling or some other contribution. He asserts that humanity's "essential inconsistency" lies in the following: "while our cognitive capacity allows us to clearly see the dangers facing the human race, our ability or our readiness to combat these dangers in a truly resolute fashion and on a global scale is very limited" (8). The problem essentially exists in the "barriers in the realm of human awareness or mentality" which cause us to generally look after only "immediate interests" (9), and he attributes these barriers to "a loss of metaphysical certitude, of vanishing points and horizons" (19). The human race has no concrete way in which to align itself with the surrounding world, and thus we are lost and confused – and worse, coping with it via a single-minded focus on the wrong things. Havel isolates the central problem with modern humanity as the following:

Could not the whole nature of the current civilization – with its short-sightedness, with its proud emphasis on the human individual as the crown of all creation and its master, and with its boundless trust in humanity's ability to embrace the universe by rational cognition, could it not all be but the natural manifestation of a phenomenon which, in simple terms, amounts to the loss of God? Or, more specifically, the loss of respect toward the order of existence of which we are not the creators but mere components, to the mysterious inherent meaning or spirit of this order, to its memory capable of not only recording that part of our deeds concealed from others but of recording it for eternity, that is of evaluating our deeds from the point of view of eternity? (19).

This critical "loss of respect" is a cause of fundamental human misunderstandings about the world and the ways in which we act in it. A solution, then, is the regaining of this respect: a recognition of our finitude in the scope of "eternity," and an internal genuflection before the "mysterious," the other-worldly, whether or not one wishes to term it "God." What Havel is advocating is just as radical as it seems – a "profound change, or even a revolution in the realm of the human mind" (9).

This is, indeed, the crux of personal responsibility, and also the crux of Havel's ideal humanity – a responsibility had by all of us to rightly develop and order our minds and our souls. This is not a simple task, and no part of Havel's philosophy is void of nuance and complexity. In this way, his view of human nature and moral life is essential to his practice of politics.

Part II: Havel's View of the Ideal President | What does Havel give us for judging political action?

I now move into the most substantial section of my thesis. Havel's ideal picture of world leadership is firmly rooted in the cohesive picture of human nature above. Now that I have examined the latter, I will now explore its connection to politics through a thorough examination of *Summer Meditations*, alongside other works. Dubbed by Robert Pirro as Havel's "most politically programmatic book published in English" ("Václav Havel and the Political Uses of Tragedy" 232), Havel wrote *Summer Meditations* in the middle of his first (and last) term as president of Czechoslovakia, when he was just beginning to struggle with the dichotomy between the passion of the Velvet Revolution and the realities of the Czechoslovak situation. Although a politically oriented volume, Havel sees its chief aim as to highlight "the moral origin of all genuine politics, to stress the significance of moral values and standards in all spheres of social life" (*Summer Meditations* 1). With this in mind, the role of the politician as he conceptualizes it is to rightly shape the nature of society, which is dependent upon the nature of the ruler. He says, "It is largely up to the politicians which social forces they choose to liberate and which they choose to suppress, whether they rely on the good in each citizen or on the bad" (4). In other words, it is the express "responsibility" of the politician "to seek out the best in that society" (4) and to illicit from the people that which is already there, for "Goodwill longs to be recognized and cultivated" (9). He believes in the ability of the state to "help us become more human" (19) and emphasizes its role in the human soul. He uses himself as an example of how the state shapes individuality: "The Czech language, the Czech way of perceiving the world, the Czech historical experience, the Czech modes of courage and cowardice, Czech humor

– all of these are inseparable from that circle of my home” (31). However, Havel does not believe that advancing the moral interests of a state is a simple or automatic task. He clearly presents his perspective on this when he says, “My experience and observations confirm that politics as the practice of morality is possible. I do not deny, however, that it is not always easy to go that route, nor have I ever claimed that it was” (12). In light of all this, it is important to recognize a common criticism of Havel: that his ideals weaken in the face of the political realities of his presidency. However, Havel states in the Foreword to *Summer Meditations* that “in fundamental things – in my concept of politics, in how I see its inner spirit – absolutely nothing has changed” (xiii), even despite “the increasing complications of [the Czech] public life” (xiii). This consistency is evidenced in various ways in the remainder of my thesis. Moreover, among other works I will use *Summer Meditations*, written at the beginning of his Czechoslovak presidency, together with his later memoir, *To the Castle and Back*, written after his presidency of the Czech Republic, to further demonstrate throughout this section the unchanging quality of Havelian thought and values.

I must acknowledge the potential methodological issue of Havel’s own bias. When writing of his vision of a world leader, he is simultaneously in a position of political power and may, to the critic’s eye, be justifying his own political actions and behaviors. In response to this, I must also acknowledge the approach of scholars who judge Havel’s dissident writings: those who marvel in his humility and steadfast adherence to a complex moral structure during this time, and those who judge Havel’s success as a dissident in terms of his writings about what it means to be a dissident. This appears to be a methodological issue, but in scholarly work and for the purposes of my thesis, it is not so. Essentially, I am reading Havel’s presidential writings in the same spirit as scholars who read his philosophical and dissident writings. Havel is, and always was, writing, acting through, thinking, and reflecting on his ideas as they were being simultaneously enacted. My ultimate aim is thus to frame Havelian politics as giving us something to which to aspire, and something by which to judge. The fact that he discusses the ideals of presidency while analyzing facets of his own presidency is of

no greater significance than the fact that he discusses the ideals of dissident philosophy while analyzing the facets of his own dissidency. This is even less a methodological problem because Havel's dissident ideals align quite well with those of his presidency; in other words, in no way does his philosophy contradict his presidential comportment. I argue that these two phases of Havel's life are mere parts of a cohesive whole.

Given Havel's obviously strong feelings on what an effective president (or other office of world leadership) should be, I took the liberty of extrapolating from his various writings seven traits that make up the ideal. They are as follows:

- 1. Averse to power; nonpartisan; apolitical.**
- 2. Compassionate; a moral symbol and catalyst for deep thought.**
- 3. Theatrical, with an attention to drama, aesthetics, and thematics.**
- 4. Cautious; consistent; possessing common sense.**
- 5. Moderate and cooperative with legislative bodies.**
- 6. Decent and principled, with good taste.**
- 7. Humble; always unsatisfied with oneself.**

The order of these traits is intentional; they appear in pairs of contradiction. How does one possess an aversion to power while also asserting oneself as a moral symbol? How does one be theatrical while also demonstrating caution? How does one cooperate with others while also sticking to one's own principles? These apparent paradoxes are evidence that Havel's pictures of human nature and ideal politics are not simple ones, and that his ideal interacts with itself in interesting ways worth our closest attention. One of Havel's more salient critiques of communism is its mechanic quality and obsession with things working smoothly, so the obvious tensions among these traits that I have extrapolated are not surprising. The final trait has no contradictory partner, and in fact it overarchingly applies to the other six – one needs humility in order to successfully approach and embody the situational nuances of the other traits. I explain each of them more thoroughly below,

along with minor examples of how Havel exhibited each.

1. Averse to Power; Nonpartisan; Apolitical

Havel claims the importance of aversion to power in any office which wields great power. Although he does not ridicule the “struggle for power” alone, he declares that “What’s important is that power be not an end in itself but rather the true expression of a desire to serve a good cause” (*To the Castle and Back* 85). Politics badly practiced is “no more than the interplay of particular interests or pragmatic schemes that ultimately conceal a single aim: to remain in power at all costs” (13), and such an approach should be unqualifiedly avoided. Havel claims to be fundamentally “freer than those who cling to their power or position” due to the absence within him of “a longing or a love for power” (*Summer Meditations* 8). Although he might be criticized for pursuing political power as his aim anyway, what influenced his decision to run for president was his “sense of responsibility” that prompted his argument that “you can’t spend your whole life criticizing something and then, when you have the chance to do it better, refuse to go near it” (5). In the specific political context of a post-Soviet satellite state, which had just escaped from an overbearing regime, “Havel’s approach was to allow self-government to happen” (Popescu 18), and thus an aversion to power is even more necessary. Havel’s whole enterprise of playwright-dissident-president was “spent reflecting on and critiquing political power” (Barney 587), most clearly evidenced by the precepts of the 1993 Czech constitution, much of which Havel drafted independently, according to Stephen Schiff. The constitution grants so few powers to the Czech presidency that the Czech Republic has “one of the least powerful presidencies, at least constitutionally, of post-communist nations” (Barney 589), specifically in reference to Articles 62, 63, and 64 (Barney). This particular trait is remarkable given the temptations that power presents, as well as its near-inescapable lures that convert those in its grasp to the proverbial dark side. Power is especially conducive to moral compromise, and Havel recognizes this early enough in his career as a dissident to be prepared to avoid it in politics. An aversion to power is a rare and desirable trait in any political figure, as those who desire power the

least are especially qualified to wield it.

Nonpartisanship is a clear factor in Havel's conception of an ideal world leader. Throughout his career Havel refused to classify himself politically in any way. As he puts it, "I have never espoused any ideology, dogma, or doctrine – left-wing, right-wing, or any other closed, ready-made system of presuppositions about the world" (*Summer Meditations* 60). This incensed other politicians "from both the right and the left" such as "Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman," who "were both highly partisan" (Barney 605-606). Havel thus can be thought of as always suspended between any two extremes, and to choose one or the other "would a priori limit my freedom, bind me to something or someone, without revealing anything essential about my opinions" (*Summer Meditations* 61). As Delia Popescu notes, "The question of political parties is almost an afterthought for Havel, because his apolitical politics focuses on individuals rather than groups" (125) – the individual human person will always hold significantly more value than any collective. In his refusal to dub parties as central to politics, Havel's goal was "to overcome the possibility of utilitarian behavior meant to fulfill party goals" (125). To put all of political life into a neat box of perceived truth would be to deny that "Life... is simply more plural, nuanced, contingent, and open-ended than can possibly be grasped by an ideological system" (Hammer 146), a principle which Havel believed to his core. It is thus important to Havel that an effective world leader "not aspire to rule," but "to represent the conscience of a nation," and "not... mold," but "motivate" (Popescu 18). Michael Žantovský in his biography of Havel gives the example of Havel's "mild prodding of the parliament" throughout his presidency "to adopt an electoral law that would emphasize the role of decent and capable individuals and de-emphasize that of political parties" (*A Life* 228). This is just one way in which Havel's political ideals manifested in his political actions. However, it is prudent to address the fact that Havel's opinion of political parties did not remain stagnant. He reflects after his presidency ended, "Over the years, and particularly during my presidency, I have refined and moderated my opinions a little. I think that political parties are an important instrument of democratic politics, but they are not its most

highly evolved form, nor its ultimate meaning” (*To the Castle and Back* 119). He changed his ideals only moderately in order to adapt to the complexities of running a country, just as any effective political figure would. Although partisanship has been made important to the electoral and operative political processes in the United States, for example, this is anything but the ideal. If more American presidents were nonpartisan, one might expect to see a greater level of regard for other opinions and a worldview that is not limited to a constricted set of extreme ideological views. Indeed, a president’s views and motives would be deeply grounded in a complex and dynamic moral foundation rather than in the ideological claustrophobia of partisanship.

Havel’s support of what he calls “apolitical politics” also constitutes a signal as to what he perceives as effective in a president. Contrary to what other politicians might say at the dawn of a new year, Havel mentions more of what is wrong with Czechoslovakia in his 1990 “New Year’s Address to the Nation” than what is going well. This is notable as he was only first elected as president three days prior; his radical honesty in such situations is laudable. But despite Czechoslovakia’s clear need for improvement, Havel exhorts his people near the end of the address: “Let us teach both ourselves and others that politics does not have to be the art of the possible, especially if this means the art of speculating, intrigues, secret agreements and pragmatic maneuverings. But that it can also be the art of the impossible, that is the art of making both ourselves and the world better” (4). Havel’s clear aversion to any political “game” (*To the Castle and Back* 109) originates in his dissidency wherein he “refused to engage politically a state that dictated the terms of the discussion” (Popescu 109-110). Later, during his presidency, he describes himself with the term “political activist” but outrightly rejects being dubbed “a politician” (*To the Castle and Back* 334). Paradoxically, Havel seems to advocate a suspicion of politics most vehemently in those involved directly in politics (*A Life*). Although many instructed him “to be more ‘tactical’” (*Summer Meditations* 7), Popescu points out that Havel “appears to be a pragmatic, skilled political player” (14) even without the aid of the “speculating, intrigues, secret agreements and pragmatic

maneuverings” that he mentions above. In contrast to the standard view of politicians, Havel is never afraid “to go somewhat against the prevailing political opinion” (*To the Castle and Back* 43) in situations large and small, from the emphasis on making immediate reparations with the exiled Sudeten Germans to the choice of who to invite to a simple award ceremony. On March 6, 1995, Havel writes in consideration of the latter that “There will be problems, mainly with those who were at one time communists” (43), but proceeds unphased with his original guest list for the unnamed ceremony. To be apolitical is not to say that one is never involved in politics; rather, it denotes a specific mode of interaction with politics wherein the traditional, selfishly strategic approaches that are common in politics are outrightly ignored and avoided.

2. Compassionate; a Moral Symbol and Catalyst for Deep Thought

Havel always upheld the importance of a head of state serving as a symbol to which the people could look for hope. Especially in the case of a post-communist nation, it was imperative that Havel “attempt to define, in large part, the Czech community” (Barney 586-587), which was previously left open-ended, through moral significance and symbolism. Essentially, Havel was a meaningful representation, parser, humble proponent, and symbol of the good. However, Timothy Barney notes that there do appear to be “tensions” between Havel’s “position as both transcendent moral conscience and professional politician” (588), but Barney also argues that Havel’s presidency “remains compelling because of... his status as an international symbol for post-communist political culture as a whole” (588). An excellent example of this symbolism made more tangible is Havel’s 1990 “New Year’s Address to the Nation,” which became a yearly tradition for him. For Havel, “to best model democratic behavior and civility in the new era” (Barney 599) meant living out “a constitutional duty” (590). Although he was sometimes disparaged for “a moral, almost preacher-like mode of discourse” (602), Havel’s focus was on constructing a nation “that is – regardless of how unscientific this may sound to the ears of a political scientist – humane, moral, intellectual and spiritual, and cultural” (*Summer Meditations* 18). In his memoir *To the Castle and Back*, as Havel

refers back to his old notes, the reader notices that he is nearly constantly writing speeches and utilizing words and other symbolic instruments in attempts to affect change. As justification, he at one point cites public opinion, commenting that “it would even seem that people expect their head of state to declare the importance of certain moral norms” (*To the Castle and Back* 171). In this way, Havel demonstrates a keen understanding of a fundamental concept: how best to reach people. He views not only his words but also his actions as meaningful in the public sphere: “It’s not about the act itself but about its significance, which would initiate an informed public debate...” (342), as he writes near the end of his presidency. Moral norms had to be established and built for a society in which values had been suppressed for generations. Even before Havel’s presidency, in the Vaněk plays, the protagonist demonstrates an acute attention to moral action in *Protest* after assuming that Stanek would sign his petition:

Vaněk: “I don’t know – I feel very embarrassed – Well, it seems to me perhaps I wasn’t being quite fair –”

Stanek: “In what way?”

Vaněk: “Well, what I did – was a bit of a con trick – in a way –”

Stanek: “What are you talking about?”

Vaněk: “I mean, first I let you talk, and only then I ask for your signature – I mean, after you’re already sort of committed by what you’ve said before, you see –” (68)

Such careful consideration and intense self-awareness on Vaněk’s part only makes Stanek more defensive about his decision to remain neutral. But by acting as a sort of advertisement for morality, it is clear that Havel does not wish to assert moral superiority by any means – in fact, very much the opposite. The truly moral thing to do as an example of morality is to reject any assertion of the self above others. Although a Machiavellian might disagree, to have a compassionate moral leader at the helm is always preferable to the alternative. Moreover, to have a political figure that serves a symbol of hope and transmitter of reassurance adds to the general morale of a society, especially when under strain.

3. Theatrical, With an Attention to Drama, Aesthetics, and Thematics

In terms of the Havelian presidential ideal, theater and drama are undeniably important for

effective communication to one's constituents and to the world at large. Like with compassion and serving as a moral symbol, Havel lifts up a thorough understanding of rhetoric and how to reach people, this time in a deeply artistic way. Although an ideal president need not be a former playwright, he or she must "have an elementary dramatic instinct" or "a sense of how to make distinctions between various acts or events, how to order them, stack them up, give them a meaningful sequence, gradation, or structure" (*To the Castle and Back* 277-278). Havel explains further:

It seldom happens that politics is fixed on a clearly defined goal. Drama is an attempt to deal with this fundamental amorphousness of life.... to visibly define the beginnings, the interruptions, the pauses, and ultimately the end, or the point of it all – in other words, all the things that are so hard to see outside of drama (*To the Castle and Back* 277).

Upon examination of the film *Citizen Havel*, which provides an honest depiction of Havel's first few years in office, Timothy Barney notes that "He appears lost without the theatrical flourishes, more at ease 'directing' the next presidential event" (595). In this way, "the Czech presidency" is characterized "as a meticulously staged piece of theatre" (598) – not, however, "staged" in the inauthentic sense. Rather, Havel's liberal application of art to politics is underscored, as well as art's overall importance in allowing him to adequately fulfill his role. For instance, one might take Havel's 1990 "New Year's Speech to the Nation," about which he outlines his primary goal: that it not "come like a bolt out of the blue, but rather like a program for the 'state' articulated at just the right moment and articulated as far as possible independently of momentary party bickering" (*To the Castle and Back* 11). Thus, the wording and communication of this "program" is of utmost importance and is best aided by the incorporation of drama. Even in his experience and understanding of abstract concepts such as freedom, Havel relies "on his experiences in the theater to evoke" its "nature and promise" (Pirro 233). In addition, Theater can serve as a way in which to bridge the gap between theory in practice. Žantovský asserts in several ways throughout his biography that Havel considered both theory and practice in his artistic choices. With his 1970s play, *The Conspirators*, "Havel was

equally perceptive about what he wanted to achieve in the play and how he was failing to achieve it” (*A Life* 85), and “He struggled for months to reconcile the two” (85). I argue that this same attention to theory and practice exists in his political life. Popescu relates how this tension is apparent within Havel’s plays themselves, as they are largely “dramatizations of an inner struggle to retain an autonomous self” and “Havel’s characters are engaged in an effort to enact an alternate self that lives up to a set of expectations formulated by outside circumstances and agents” (60). Especially in the three Vaněk plays in which Havel himself participates through his alter-ego, Vaněk, this contrast between inner theory and outside reality is strikingly similar to struggles that we all undergo offstage, in which we reconcile parts of ourselves with the wider world. This can effectively occur through the use of art and drama. A sense of theatricality as Havel means it does not entertain the cynic’s worldview, and it is not what it might at first seem to be; it is not about political melodrama nor false rhetoric, but rather the practice of an ethical rhetoric that attempts to delineate and clarify the complexities of the surrounding world. (To provide a metaphor: the ideal is a display of inspiring avant garde theater rather than a cliché and problematic romantic comedy.) This is, I argue, essential in an ideal world leader.

Havel also emphasizes an affinity for aesthetics in heads of state, given that they are often some of the most visible figures in government. This affinity is most obvious in *To the Castle and Back*; on December 17, 1995, he writes an entry in which he laments the horrid exterior lighting of the Prague Castle: “I hope that it’s not final! There were two serious problems with it: (1) the illumination was still (especially in comparison with St. Nicholas) not warm enough even though it was somewhat better than the ‘neon’ that we’ve had so far” (50). Although the reason he later gives for this immense focus on what might seem trivial is that “we had to invent everything for ourselves” (thus the necessity for creativity), this “aesthetic side of politics” (278) is an important aspect of Havel’s presidency that extends beyond his own reign. Havel sees a subtle connection between the surrounding aesthetic affect and the inner life of individuals. For instance, he criticizes American

architecture (most especially government buildings) for being “uninventive replicas of antique architecture appropriately inflated... and appropriately soulless” (27). Art has a subtle but immensely important connection to the inner life of individuals, and in my view, individuals who allow their souls to be swayed by aesthetics are more likely to possess a well-ordered and vibrant inner life, and thus are better suited to a life of power that recognizes the endless nuances and moral quandaries of political life.

Thematics are another important facet of this collection of traits that should be had by an effective world leader. By thematics I mean something slightly more nuanced than policy agendas, although they may be defined as such from Havel’s usage of the term. His first mention of it occurs on March 15, 1994: “I concluded that out of the amorphous mass of my activities certain priorities should regularly, and in various forms, emerge – something like my ‘presidential’ themes.’ That is, it seems to me as though my presidency has been – if I may put it that way – not ‘thematic’ enough. I have been too much the object of events...” (*To the Castle and Back* 28). Thematics, then, have something to do with control, or at least effective agency that surpasses any limitations on one’s office (even limitations that Havel himself imposed on the Czech presidency). An example that he later gives of a “theme” from the area of domestic policy is energy. In this way, Havel’s themes are something like policy agendas in that they are goals for one’s time in office that should “come back dramatically, alternate and intertwine” (34) in ways subtle and overt. In other words, the ideal world leader should avoid promulgating strong opinions on all political issues (especially those outside of one’s careful and considered expertise), but rather focus in on a set of truly crucial matters facing the state at that time, and recognize that a single policy will likely not solve the issue. Such presidential themes often will recur time and again while one holds office, and one must exhibit focus and be prepared to address them.

4. Cautious; Consistent; Possessing Common Sense

Perhaps one of the more important traits that Havel lifts up as crucial in an effective world leader is caution. As much as Havel believed in the people in the realm of legislative choice, he also recognized that people can be persuaded merely by emotion at times, and at the expense of the well-being of the state as a whole. Essentially, Havel is always cautious of mass tendencies, and is simultaneously an optimist (about individuals) and a pessimist (about collectives) in regards to human nature. Within his caution is, once again, an internal sort of moderation that avoids all extremes. In a speech he delivered when first elected as president of the newly formed Czech Republic in 1993, he proposes that the office of president be unimpeachable for the whole five-year term, and gives the following reason: “if [the president’s] position depended on the changing political situation or mood, he could not fulfill this goal” (“The Role of the Czech President” 2). This caution and moderation is also evident in Havel’s opinion of referenda and the usage thereof: “It should merely be a kind of insurance policy that we know is available to us in extreme circumstances but which is not in any way overused” (*To the Castle and Back* 195). Essentially, good things can be, and are, ruined by human error. Havel is also very careful of centralized power; among his initial wishes for the democratic state of Czechoslovakia was a “highly decentralized state with confident local governments” (103). Ideology also is a subject of his general wariness because of its inclination to generate “obsession” (326) and to make people believe that “everything that goes against theoretical precepts, that cannot be made to conform to them, or that goes beyond them, is, by definition, worthy only to be rejected” (*Summer Meditations* 66). Overall, Havel advocates a strong caution against all extremes, and even a caution of oneself in which “doubts grow out of actions, actions out of doubts” (*To the Castle and Back* 339) and one is always second-guessing and reevaluating one’s own precepts and behaviors. Because a world leader holds significant power over the well-being of his or her constituents – even, in fact, whether they live or die – it is absolutely crucial that he or she be cautious in all matters, never acting rashly or without due consideration. In this analysis, caution does not at all denote an unwillingness to act, a detrimental indecision, or a dragging of one’s feet; rather,

it imposes an ideal of thoughtfulness in matters of policy, something that I believe should be upheld.

It is also essential to evaluate consistency as a characteristic of an ideal president. One must hold a thoughtful idea of the right and the good as unswervingly as possible through one's life, barring occasional examination of Being (refer to Part I) in order to determine the viability of one's philosophy and perhaps making occasional alterations as a result. Havel himself kept a remarkably consistent attitude toward life through both his dissidency and presidency. He recalls in his memoir, "I realize – and this is encouraging – that in fact I have always thought more or less the same way and worked – how successfully is another matter – to achieve the same things" (*To the Castle and Back* 35). He comments on his presidency over Czechoslovakia versus that of the Czech Republic that, "I believed, and still believe, in certain values that I tried to honor in both countries" (170). And in examining the mountain of writings that Havel produced over the years, one comes to the conclusion that his estimation is correct. Even without realizing his own tendencies, any show of inconsistency distresses Havel; for example, his assessment of American television:

But America is a rather odd country. It's very religious, and at the same time it allows a broadcast of the pope's funeral to be interrupted by advertisements, many of which were the direct embodiment of what he had criticized for his entire life. I found it truly hard to understand, and it made me more and more uncomfortable, until I finally switched the television off (20).

Essentially, what Havel promotes is a consistent and reliable "framework of ideas" (160) within which to render decisions. In his case this entails his previous philosophical writings, but may look differently among other world leaders. Furthermore, one must not mistake consistency for failing to adjust to different situations; it should be conceptualized instead as a firm but reasonably adaptable vision of political decision-making. Consistency is an overlooked but vital trait in right politics.

Of lesser visibility in Havel's writings but of equal importance is the role of common sense in the ideal world leader. On this subject Havel remarks that "Clearly, nothing can get along without the participation of powers as unscientific as healthy common sense and the human conscience" (*Summer Meditations* 67). On the subject of whether conscience and goodness will triumph in

politics, Havel states that “directness can never be established by indirection, or truth through lies, or the democratic spirit through authoritarian directives. Of course, I don’t know whether directness, truth, and the democratic spirit will succeed. But I do know how not to succeed, which is by choosing means that contradict the ends” (*Summer Meditations* 7-8). Here, we see a very reasoned direction for how to approach morality in politics that is rooted in common sense. Further, Havel maintains that “there is only one way to strive for decency, reason, responsibility, sincerity, civility, and tolerance, and that is decently, reasonably, responsibly, sincerely, civilly, and tolerantly” (8). This very closely aligns with consistency, but also imbues a certain reasonableness and rationality in one’s approach to decision making. An ideal world leader must have some idea of what works and what does not in the realm of practical politics, and this means possessing a great deal of common sense.

5. Moderate and Cooperative With Legislative Bodies

Although he pushed for a very particular picture of parliament which employs “an electoral system incorporating both majority and proportional principles” (Pirro 232), Havel was remarkably moderate and cooperative in his dealings with other branches of government. On this subject, Robert Pirro quotes Dean Hammer’s argument that, in fact, Havel’s view of the ideal parliamentary structure “[reflects] a larger concern to foster ‘a new conceptual environment of responsible participation’” (232). Havel argues that the combining of majority and proportional election mechanisms “would bring us the advantages of both systems and limit their disadvantages” (*To the Castle and Back* 182), reflecting a moderate view of how parliament should operate based on the thematic element of constantly being suspended between two extremes. Overall, Havel’s philosophy on interacting with Parliament throughout his presidency is clear in what he writes on December 25, 1994:

If parliament passes [laws] in their original form, it will be necessary to say that I don’t take this as a personal defeat because I don’t see my right to return the laws for reconsideration as in a tennis match. I’m behaving in harmony with my conscience and with my sense of justice, and the point for me is to express, through my actions, my opinion as head of state. If this opinion is overruled, I bow to the collective wisdom of parliament, which reflects the collective wisdom of the public. Should it appear necessary to me, my responsibility, however, is to go against even this collective wisdom, with the

proviso that if the collective wisdom prevails, I will, as a democrat, fully respect that decision (34).

As president Havel must, above all others, have faith in the people and in their choice of representatives, but at the same time without investing too much faith. In addition, his more submissive comportment toward the country's legislative body reflects his conviction that only through "never-ending work involving education and self-education" can "a moral and intellectual state... be established"; not "through law, or through directives" (*Summer Meditations* 20). Expending undue effort in the legal realm is not the method by which Havel will achieve his ultimate goals for the nation – nor actualize his presidential themes, if you will. Neither through fighting mercilessly with parliament will his aims be realized; Havel did not even allow the presidential office "the right to initiate legislation," and "while the president could now invoke the veto and return laws for parliament's reconsideration, a majority of the Chamber of Deputies was all that was required to override the veto" (Barney 589). As with nearly all things, Havel's reasoning for structuring the Czech presidential veto in this way draws explicitly on his philosophy of responsibility: "it is borne by a single individual, who makes his decision based on his own good sense, and his conscience, and who then bears a clear, personal responsibility for that decision" (*To the Castle and Back* 193). One should, however, use this power sparingly; Havel exercised it only 27 times during the 10 years he was president of the Czech Republic. This type of moderation and cooperation are not to be mistaken for weak passivity, but rather a knowledge of what will truly lead to the realization of one's ultimate goals. The ideal world leader will recognize that one will not change the minds of others through argumentation, but rather through heart and perseverance.

6. Decent and Principled, with Good Taste

The next set of traits involve what might be viewed as trivial formalities, but are just as crucial to an effective head of state as the others. Michael Žantovský describes Havel as usually very "courteous and mild-mannered" (*A Life* 76), indicating as before a person who is adverse to

immoderations. What it means to have “good taste” in Havel’s own words is the following: “Qualities like fellow-feeling, the ability to talk to others, insight, the capacity to grasp quickly not only problems but also human character, the ability to make contact, a sense of moderation: all these are immensely more important in politics” (*Summer Meditations* 11). In everyday conversation, good taste is what “determines how long one should speak, how much one should reveal, how deeply one should probe.... None of that is easy” (*To the Castle and Back* 323). In some of the journal entries that he includes in his memoir, Havel has a clear concern for decorum and appropriateness. He writes on February 17, 1994: “At a reception hosted by the Thai prime minister.... I noticed that Czechs were standing around talking mainly to Czechs. This is highly inappropriate and in fact almost boorish” (17). In addition, he appears to have a distinct fear of provoking or offending. He recounts a “horrific, feverish” nightmare he had in which “S. called on me immediately to resign the presidency because I had insulted six neighboring countries” (27). Good taste is thus indispensable in a political figure, if not only for the fact that friendly conversation and good relations among rulers is part of what determines peaceable relations among nations, more broadly. As an extreme example, two rulers who do not like each other personally are more likely to go to war or to impose sanctions, and therefore sacrifice the lives and livelihood of their citizens over petty grievances. It is thus eminently important that an ideal head of state know how to appropriately converse and navigate interactions with others in power.

As with anything to do with Havel, a concern for decorum has a deeper level than merely that of conversational propriety and maintaining good relations. It also has to do with a fundamental respect for each human being and a striving to cultivate that within himself. In his words, “As in everything else, I must start with myself. That is: in all circumstances try to be decent, just, tolerant, and understanding, and at the same time try to resist corruption and deception. In other words, I must do my utmost to act in harmony with my conscience and my better self” (*Summer Meditations* 7). He cites the importance of “educated,” “cultivated,” and “decent people” in solving “the big problems in

this country” (121). Further, “decency” is expressly not “something on a list of goals that we had already achieved, making it no longer necessary to strive for,” a view which Havel calls “utterly absurd” (*To the Castle and Back* 177). This ideal attribute is also evident in Havel’s Vaněk plays, written in the 1970s, long before his presidency. Take the play *Audience*, for example, in which Vaněk’s dissident activities make the Brewmaster feel morally inferior; the latter says, “All I’m good for is to be the manure that your damn principles gonna grow out of, and to scare up heated rooms so you can play heroes!... you gonna be a hero – but what about me?” (25). Havel clearly recognizes how his principled and decent approach to politics and to life in general might make others feel lesser, and he demonstrates an empathy toward and a gentle redirection of such thoughts and feelings by giving the Brewmaster in *Audience* as well as Stanek in *Protest* the lion’s share of the dialogue. Furthermore, in *Unveiling*, the brainwashed couple Vera and Michael exude a regime-instilled hypersensitivity toward the end of the play. Vera’s outburst is filled with emotion: “(Crying) You’re selfish! A disgusting, unfeeling, inhuman egotist! An ungrateful, ignorant traitor! I hate you – I hate you so much – go away! Go away!” (48). But despite Vaněk’s clear discomfort, he does not go away. He stays and listens with them to “the same tune over and over again, until the last spectator has left the theatre” (*Unveiling* 48). Through his alter-ego, Havel sympathizes with those who do not approach decision-making and human interaction in the same way that he does; he recognizes the supreme difficulty in doing so. However, in the context of politics, this difficulty must be summited in order to comprise the ideal. To be decent and principled is not to be an unrelenting and overly traditional judge of appropriateness, but rather an attempt to treat each and every human being with the respect and consideration that he or she deserves. This trait, as one might imagine, is not had by everyone.

7. Humble; Always Unsatisfied with Oneself

Humility is another imperative attribute in Havel’s conception of the ideal political figure. Havel’s strong distaste for pride stems from his experience of communism, about which he concludes

that:

It is an extreme expression of the hubris of modern man, who thinks that he understands the world completely – that he is at the apex of creation... and has not noticed that there is a structure infinitely more complex, of which he himself is merely a tiny part: that is, nature, the universe, the order of Being (*Summer Meditations* 62).

However, Havel would be the last to say that his dissident life or presidency adequately combatted this view, or that he was a good leader of society at all. I argue that this alone qualifies it as (at least partially) a good one. A significant driver for Havel in his comportment as president was a “fear of my own conscience that delights in tormenting me for real and imagined failures” (*To the Castle and Back* 339). Further, Havel laments about his time in office, “I felt as if I were out on a limb, a man betrayed by history, which has burdened him with endless tasks and now mocks him for his inability to master them” (43). He readily admits that he has made numerous mistakes, “probably all [deriving] from my awkwardness, my indecisiveness, politeness that slips easily into compromise...” (275). However, the film *Citizen Havel* stands testament to the positives of Havel’s “disarming quality of open access” and “willingness to open his mistakes and anxieties to the public record” (Barney 593). Further, throughout Havel’s presidency he frequently mentions a desire to return back to the life of a writer rather than remain in a life of politics, a characteristic which exudes a sort of philosopher-king type image. This lends credence to the idea that the person best suited to a position of power is the person who wants it least, a concept perhaps reminiscent of political figures like George Washington. In response to questions regarding how he felt about running again for the Czech presidency in 1998, Havel says, “I don’t know if I did the right thing. To the extent that I helped our country – something I cannot judge for myself – I did the right thing; if I didn’t, then I should have turned my attention to other things. There was certainly no personal benefit to be had from running again” (*To the Castle and Back* 225). Havel again demonstrates this presidential ideal in a quote taken from his last speech as president: “To all of you whom I have disappointed in any way, who have not agreed with my actions or who have simply found me hateful, I sincerely

apologize and trust that you will forgive me” (Green). In order to act adequately in the political realm, one must never be satisfied with oneself and always strive to acknowledge and mitigate any negative impacts of one’s policies, in word and in deed. Humility is therefore necessary in a truly good ruler, because those who do the worst sorts of deeds in politics are often also those who have let power and prestige get the better of them. One might argue that if one is always wallowing in one’s own mistakes then one cannot successfully focus on doing better, but I argue that it is possible to be simultaneously humble and effective.

With the above in mind, I assert that Havel’s ideas about morality and the political ideal are consistent ideas, and remained consistent through both his dissidency and presidency, two periods in which Havel demonstrated an engagement with theory and practice. In addition, I assert that they are politically relevant and practical insofar as they provide a framework by which to judge action. As Havel himself relates, “Of course it’s one thing to philosophize independently, just for the sake of it, and something else altogether to achieve real things in politics. That I admit. But that doesn’t mean that politics must surrender all its ideas, deny its ‘heart,’ and become a mere self-propelled, technocratic process” (*To the Castle and Back* 13). Thus far, I have established how Havel’s philosophy is the solid ground in which his political ideals are rooted, as well as outlined his political ideal in greater detail than the existing literature provides. Additionally, I have demonstrated that the above seven traits for ideal political leadership are good and sound, and that we should take them seriously. The question, now, is whether Havel achieves them in his own presidency.

Part III: Controversial Political Acts of Havel’s Presidency | *Does Havel pass his own test?*

With the standards of ideal presidential action and comportment established, I thus move to examining three controversial policies either advocated or instituted by Václav Havel in the realms of criminal justice, defense, and economics. Each policy is accused of being either bad on its face, or contradictory to Havelian thought. Although it appears thus far that in less controversial examples

Havel achieves his goal, scrutinizing more morally dubious actions will resolve the question of whether Havel's practice squares with his theory. Below are those policies:

1. Criminal Justice Policy | The mass amnesty of prisoners declared in 1990.

2. Defense Policy | The NATO bombing of former Yugoslavia in 1999.

3. Economic Policy | The restitution of private property in the early 1990s.

In the paragraphs that follow I explain each policy and determine whether Havel's actions conform to any of the seven traits for an ideal president.

1. Criminal Justice Policy | The Mass Amnesty of Prisoners Declared in 1990

This first example occurred at the very beginning of Havel's presidency of Czechoslovakia. Prior to this point, the Soviet regime had arbitrarily and often unjustifiably incarcerated mass numbers of people. In the spirit of a new start, President Havel almost immediately "granted amnesty to 30,000 prisoners," which amounted to around 75% of "Czechoslovakia's jail population" (Newman). Although the majority were released altogether, for more violent crimes sentences were only "[reduced]... by one year" (*To the Castle and Back* 94). This policy was especially controversial in the domestic sphere; critics accused Havel of needlessly increasing crime rates as well as for going too far in the pursuit of ridding the country of the remnants of Communism. However, Havel laments in his memoir,

The amnesty of January 1990 has been held against me for fifteen years without anyone explaining to me why it was bad. Was it supposed to have increased the crime rate? The crime rate did go up, but for entirely different reasons;... the release of prisoners in 1990 accounted for only a 9 percent increase in the general crime rate in the Czech Republic and 7 percent in Slovakia; in other words a slightly larger percentage than freed prisoners contribute to it every year (*To the Castle and Back* 94).

Although the policy did indeed marginally increase the overall crime rate, that is not important to Havel's reasoning for instituting it in the first place. Below are the ways in which Havel's actions adhere to some of the traits of the ideal world leader.

#4 Cautious; consistent; possessing common sense.

Havel demonstrated an undeniable common sense with this policy. The sheer number of prisoners incarcerated unjustly by the previous regime meant that “you couldn’t just separate the good from the bad by waving a wand. It would be a long and difficult process, particularly since we wanted to be both just and pragmatic” (*To the Castle and Back* 71). There seems to be an unsolvable contention between justice and pragmatism, but Havel consistently strove to enact both. In the interests of time and of justice Havel acted swiftly and practically, and simultaneously recognized the complexities and contentions of the situation without any attempts to dismiss them and simplify the context. He did this also with the traits that follow – to be simultaneously principled and compassionate and theatrical is a difficult balance to strike, but Havel’s complex understanding of the way the world (and politics) works contributed to his success with this policy.

#6 Decent and principled, with good taste.

Sometimes things “must be done on principle, because it is the right thing to do” (*Summer Meditations* 16). Havel acted according to the deeper definition of “good taste” here by valuing the interests of the individual human being over the arbitrary preferences of a bygone regime. In addition, Havel recognized that “it would have been easiest to grant pardons to no one” and that as a result he “would have been immensely more popular. But I wasn’t the president in order to be popular” (*To the Castle and Back* 95); he was, it seems, the president in order to do the decent (and difficult) things.

#2 Compassionate; a moral symbol and catalyst for deep thought.

As a former prisoner himself, Havel “wanted to part company with everything that was degrading about the communist justice system” and “make it absolutely clear that conditions were changing fundamentally” (*To the Castle and Back* 95). That meant extending compassion to those wronged by the former system, and to go as far as safely possible in doing so. For this reason, a marginal increase in crime rate was of little import to Havel’s thought process. Compassion overrides a record of wrongs, and to the negligible detriment of Czech society at large.

#3 Theatrical, with an attention to drama, aesthetics, and thematics.

In giving amnesty to prisoners at the beginning of his presidency, and in a mass sweep no less, Havel was demonstrating some of the dramatic flair that is necessary to a good presidency. Granting amnesty in the way that he did was a significantly bold move. There was a rhetoric to it and, as already demonstrated, a purpose of making something clear. Additionally, this broad policy did not die in bureaucratic stagnancy but was enacted quickly and with force. A sense of theatricality is obvious here, as Havel orchestrated the timing and the extent of this policy in order to achieve a specific effect.

2. Defense Policy | The NATO Bombing of Former Yugoslavia in 1999

The second example occurred during Havel's second term as president of the Czech Republic. After years of ongoing violence and genocide, failed peace talks, and "a new wave of ethnic cleansing launched by Serbian forces against the Kosovar Albanians" ("NATO Bombs Yugoslavia"), NATO finally began to intervene militarily on March 24, 1999. Havel had been pushing for this sort of action for years, despite the Czech Republic's fairly new status as an official NATO member. The NATO attacks targeted "Serbian military positions in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo" after "Serbian troops drove thousands of ethnic Albanians from their homes and were accused of massacring Kosovo civilians" ("NATO Bombs Yugoslavia"). The conflict ended on June 10, 1999 when Serbia finally "agreed to a peace agreement" ("NATO Bombs Yugoslavia"). There were, of course, some unintended consequences of the NATO intervention, namely "miscalculated bombings that led to the deaths of Kosovar Albanian refugees... and Serbian civilians" ("NATO Bombs Yugoslavia"). Because of Havel's enthusiastic support of the NATO intervention, he was the target of the sharp criticism that he had compromised his pacifist principles; for instance, "Slavoj Zizek deplores Havel's resort of a divinely created humanity by which the Czech president justified" (Pirro 229) the attacks. However, these criticisms are again beside the point, because "Havel would always give precedence to a peaceful and amicable way of conflict resolution, but he believed too

strongly in the inadmissibility of appeasement when facing an evil to be a pacifist” (*In Search of Allies*). Although in *To the Castle and Back*, for instance, Havel may write about the NATO bombing in a way that justifies his own decision, that decision does indeed conform to his previous philosophical writings as well. As argued before, Havel’s ideals did not change in any fundamental way through his presidential encounters with the world of practical politics. Havel is of course not an advocate of violence, but as Zantovsky argues in *In Search of Allies*, he had never been a pacifist, either. Any claims of his pacifism are exogenous to his own writings, and good example of this is Stephen Schiff’s comparison of Havel to Gandhi. Thus, Havel’s support of the NATO intervention was not a self-contradictory move and was the right choice for Havel given the context. Since he did not compromise his principles, below are further ways in which Havel’s support of this policy reflects some of the ideal traits.

#1 Averse to power; nonpartisan; apolitical.

In his aversion to power, Havel upholds the individual over state sovereignty and recognized that the best way forward in the international sphere was if the Czech Republic “engaged with the acute problems of international politics and security in the name of values larger than narrow national interest” (*In Search of Allies*). Because Havel places such strong emphasis on the individual person over collectives, one must recognize that it is indeed possible to act as a collective nation-state on behalf of the well-being of individuals. In addition, Havel demonstrated an apolitical quality here because did not ever listen to just anyone on this issue; he often perceived himself to be hearing from politicians “various lies and clichés” (*To the Castle and Back* 298) of which he was wary.

#2 Compassionate; a moral symbol and catalyst for deep thought.

In his behavior regarding the NATO intervention, Havel upheld his role as a moral symbol, but without asserting his own power. These traits can sometimes be in contention, which further demonstrates their applicability to the complexities of politics in action as well as the difficulty of living one’s political life like a balancing act, as Havel would advocate. In his view, “the war in

Yugoslavia is a landmark in international relations: the first time that the human rights of a people – the Kosovo Albanians – have unequivocally come first” (*Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State*). He makes a compelling argument for intervention, namely that allowing evil to persist “has, so far, never forced evil to retreat, or to become more humane,” and “In the end, when confrontation came, the price that everyone had to pay was infinitely higher than the cost of a firm stance” (*To the Castle and Back* 310). Such evil, according to Havel, will exist “as long as people are merely people” (315) – he possesses no illusions about ever defeating it entirely, but always advocates a perseverance in fighting it. However, other world leaders must be careful about how they define evil – the flaw in Havel’s argument “lies in the question of who determines what is evil. Not everybody could be trusted with the definition as well as Havel, who had been well aware of the dangers” (*In Search of Allies*). Thus, Havel cautiously demonstrated his moral ideals, absent of any motives to obtain more power.

#3 Theatrical, with an attention to drama, aesthetics, and thematics.

Havel’s dramatic instinct is visible once more with the NATO convention in Prague shortly after the intervention in Yugoslavia. He writes, “I... wanted this summit... to stand out from all the others in the memories of the politicians who took part, one that, thanks to its dramatic structure and atmosphere, they would remember as a truly historic meeting” (*To the Castle and Back* 303). The manifestation of this performative predilection was a special orchestral piece, commissioned by Havel, to be played during the convention. It was quite an eclectic musical work, “played by symphony orchestra musicians, rock musicians, and sung by both opera and rock singers” (303). This serves to highlight further the ways in which art was central to Havel’s presidency, even the realm of foreign affairs. However, Havel was thoughtful here about the way in which art would come across and did not tout theatricality simply for its own sake or for the sake of gregariousness.

#6 Decent and principled, with good taste.

The concept of decency plays heavily into Havel’s approach to the NATO intervention. He

cites globalization as the reason that today, “a threat to some has an immediate impact on everyone, in which for many reasons... our individual destinies are merging into a single destiny, in which all of us – whether we like it or not – must begin to bear responsibility for everything that occurs” (*Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State*). He goes on to assert that “In such a world, the idol of state sovereignty must inevitably dissolve” (*Kosovo and the End of the Nation-State*). However, Havel does not support an unqualified acceptance of “the intervention of one state against another state that is justified by a defense of humanity” (*To the Castle and Back* 167). Such things must be “constantly and carefully [scrutinized]... to determine that it is not just a pretty façade concealing far less respectable interests, be they strategic, economic, or other” (167). The interests and safety of an individual human being are far superior to any “selfish, inconsiderate, mindlessly pragmatic foreign policy” (*Summer Meditations* 99) objectives. By supporting intervention in a situation laden with unacceptable violence and atrocities, Havel’s theory makes sense in consideration of his practice, as above all he seeks to enact “a humane, educated, sensitive, and decent [foreign] policy” (99). Thus, his support of the NATO bombing is a good example of Havelian leadership.

3. Economic Policy | The Restitution of Private Property in the Early 1990s

Lastly, the returning of private property to citizens characterized much of the economic position of Havel’s early years presiding over both Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. It began with “small-scale privatization” which was “more or less complete” by 1991, followed by “large-scale privatization of the big state enterprises” which took “several years” (*Summer Meditations* 64). Havel was satisfied with neither the pace of the economic reforms nor their extent, and in his view “reforms had resulted in the appearance of a market rather than the real thing” (Welch 1). Havel’s institution of this project earned him criticism for the logistics of its implementation, as well as for granting property rights back to the bourgeois. Unfortunately, some took advantage of the chaotic process by claiming ownership of properties over which they were merely temporary administrators. Havel laments in retrospect that “I should have relied far more on my own common sense and trusted

less that the experts knew what they were doing” (*To the Castle and Back* 158). However, Havel was not at all submissive about the necessity of market reform in the first place – in a “December 9, 1997 speech to the Czech Parliament,” Havel “took [Václav] Klaus to the woodshed for dragging his feet on reforms and advocated specific measures far toothier than the shock therapy slogans Klaus had been mouthing since 1990” (Welch 1). He was adamant that “The only economic system that works is a market economy, in which everything belongs to someone – which means that someone is responsible for everything” (*Summer Meditations* 62). For Havel, the type of economy in place ultimately informs an individual’s experience of what it means to be human, as well as one’s sense of responsibility. In other words, ownership and economic systems of reward are essential to the human psychological experience, and thus are of great import in Havel’s view. Below are some of the ways in which Havel embodied his ideal in the economic sphere.

#1 Averse to power; nonpartisan; apolitical.

Granting property back to the bourgeois was not an example of Havel upholding norms of power and influence; rather, power was the furthest from his considerations on the matter. His totalizing view of justice and rejection of political motives is evident in the following passage: “To this day some people shake their heads because a chateau that used to house a nursing school was returned to a count who had come back from God knows where. But even that was the right thing to do. If it’s justice you want, then it has to be for everyone” (*To the Castle and Back* 269).

Considerations of power are never central to Havelian political action, nor is Havel interested in taking sides; he adheres only to nonpartisanship; he fights only for the individual person, not for the poor or the rich.

#5 Moderate and cooperative with legislative bodies.

Havel did not merely rage on about his preferences for economic reform, but rather ceded to the power and judgment of parliament, who happened to agree with him on the decency of aiding “the trauma” experienced by “tradesmen and small businessmen” in the wake of communism which

was “clearly passed on from generation to generation, and if our parliament, or rather our parliaments, passed the relatively generous restitution laws so quickly, they were not acting on a whim but rather were responding to the general will to right those earlier economic wrongs” (*To the Castle and Back* 269). Although he pushed hard for economic reform, Havel ultimately deferred to the will of parliament as he always said he would. The fact that moderation might seem contradictory to a quick and radical economic transformation further highlights that nothing in Havel’s picture of human nature or ideal politics says that there will not be tensions within the ideal. It is not a simple system, and the ideal world leader has a knack for navigating its intrinsic complexities.

#4 Cautious; consistent; possessing common sense.

Despite his fervor for economic change, Havel was immensely wary of how “aspects of the reforms have become an ideology,” calling it “dangerous” (*Summer Meditations* 65). Just as he was averse to the extremes of communism, he was passionately “against an unchecked capitalism bereft of a guiding moral vision” (Barney 601). In the modern age this has resulted in a “pressure toward soulless uniformity” (*To the Castle and Back* 308) and “growth for the sake of growth” (307). Just as in the Soviet bloc, “concern for oneself and one’s material possessions” (175) could easily overwhelm a capitalist culture that goes too far in its pursuit of success. It was evident in Michael and Vera’s fixation on their home décor in *Unveiling* just as it was in citizens throughout the communist regime, and could easily manifest in a capitalist society focused on economic profit.

The seventh trait of humility and dissatisfaction with oneself does not appear as explicitly as the others within the above three policies. However, it applies universally to all of them; one needs a fundamental and deeply rooted humility in order to embody the other six traits well. Humility is important not only for world leaders, but also for their observers and evaluators: we must judge our own views and ideals with some measure of self-doubt. There are obvious tensions within the traits and how they are enacted in the world, and to fail to recognize that is to grossly oversimplify. In both his dissidency and presidency Havel navigates those paradoxes without contradicting himself, even

in the toughest situations. I argue that this is due to humility: a constant reexamining and doubting of oneself, a constant recognition of one's own inability to solve everything in the face of a world of complexities and yet still trying. Havelian political thought is neither simple nor straightforward, and for that reason it is able to adequately address a world that is also neither of those things.

“All my life I have simply believed that what is once done can never be undone and that, in fact, everything remains forever. In short, Being has a memory. And thus even my insignificance – as a bourgeois child, a laboratory assistant, a soldier, a stagehand, a playwright, a dissident, a prisoner, a president, a pensioner, a public phenomenon, and a hermit, an alleged hero but secretly a bundle of nerves – will remain here forever, or rather not here, but somewhere.

But not, however, elsewhere. Somewhere here.”

--- To the Castle and Back, p. 330

Analysis & Conclusion

It seems that Havel achieved his theory of the presidential ideal in practice in a post-communist era; beyond that era, he still has much to offer the modern world. His consistency and moderate adaption to the office were particularly impressive aspects of his presidency. In my thesis, Philosopher Havel judges President Havel and the latter is not found wanting. Although I am in the minority with my conclusions, I am not the only one to generally conceptualize Havel’s presidency in this way. Peter Newman quotes Havel: “Man... is in fact nailed down - like Christ on the cross - to a grid of paradoxes. He balances between the torment of now knowing his mission and the joy of carrying it out” (1). Knowing one’s mission is a torment, perhaps because one knows how impossible the human ideal is. However, “the joy of carrying it out” implies a certain elation in at least trying, at least actively striving toward it. But when Newman states directly afterwards that “Václav Havel did both, and we're all the better for it” (1), he is saying that Havel both knew his purpose as a human being and was successful in realizing it. In *The Power of the Powerless* Havel maintains that “Reality does not shape theory, but rather the reverse” (5). It can thus be accurately described that Havel provides an example of not just pretty philosophy, but what Popescu calls “applied political theory” (22). Therefore, although criticized by some for doing too much of the wrong things, and by others

for doing too little by refusing to engage in normal politics, Václav Havel did not concede his preexisting values and changed them only to the extent that they were made more moderate. He was certainly not a perfect president, but the three controversial policies under review were in fact sound ones and were remarkably consistent with the moral values set forth in his pre- and post-presidency writings, namely his philosophy and dissident works in alignment with his presidential writings and memoir. In short, Havel did not compromise himself for the office and still managed to be an effective leader. His presidential legacy is one which is suspended between Being and the world, existing uncomfortably in the “tense relationship between continuity and change” (Barney 591) out of which he “[constructed] his office” (591), always balanced between any two extremes – always apolitical, theatrical, moderate, cautious, decent, humble, and compassionate. Thus, despite scholarly work to the contrary, Václav Havel was what might be termed a good president, and his time in office can be regarded as an externally applicable framework by which to judge morally and politically sound action, specifically through the seven traits. We thus come away with a more thoughtful and favorable view of Havelian presidency itself, along with a complex set of standards for future world leaders to embody. In further research, I would like to see the seven ideal traits applied to other world leaders to garner a better idea of the usefulness of this framework in other contexts.

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