

Havelian Presidency: A Study in Theory & Practice

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Central Problem

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. He is known for and evaluated most in terms of his sweeping moral principles and philosophical treatises, but I wish to know whether his presidency passes the test of ideal world leadership that he provides so clearly in his written works and speeches.

Research Questions

Do Václav Havel's politics have more to offer the modern world than simply criticism of a bygone regime, i.e. the Soviet Bloc? Was he an effective dissident but an ineffective president, or was he good at both? Does his presidency meet the standards of ideal leadership that he puts forth in his theoretical writings?

{ The end result of my thesis will either confirm scholarly suspicions of Havel's presidential mediocrity, or prove the opposite and thereby serve as an externally applicable framework for morally and politically sound action. }

Havel's Philosophy

- Emphases on individual agency, moral responsibility, and thoughtful action.
- Human personality as a vast "set of possibilities" and "potentials" (*Letters to Olga*).
- Belief in a higher order of "Being" – the experience of something that "is," of the "pre-origin" to our existence and consciousness; it manifests as harmony, infinitude, totality, and mystery; "Being" as the essence of meaning that inspires wonder, humility, and hope.
- **We are all infinitely responsible to Being, ourselves, and others.**



"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."

--- Havel, *Summer Meditations* (p. 12)

Policies Under Review

1. **Criminal Justice** – Mass amnesty of prisoners in 1990. Criticized for increasing crime rates and for going too far in the pursuit of ridding the country of the remnants of Communism.
2. **Defense** – Support of the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Criticized for compromising his pacifist principles.
3. **Economics** – Restitution of private property in early years of presidency. Criticized for the logistics of implementation and for granting property rights back to the bourgeois.

Findings

Seven traits that make a good president, according to Havel (extrapolated from his writings):

- 1) Averse to power, non-partisan, "apolitical"
- 2) Theatrical, with an attention to aesthetics, drama, and thematics
- 3) Cautious, consistent, possessing common sense
- 4) Decent and principled, with "good taste"
- 5) Moderate and cooperative with legislative bodies
- 6) Humble, always unsatisfied with oneself
- 7) A moral symbol and catalyst to deep thought

Was Havel a "Good" President?

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. The three policies under review were sound ones, and were remarkably consistent with the moral values set forth in his pre- and post-presidency writings. In short, Havel did not compromise himself for the office and still managed to be an effective leader.