



Assumption  
University

## Digital Commons @ Assumption University

---

Political Science Department Faculty Works

Political Science Department

---

2007

### Living in Truth: A Wise, Quirky Memoir from Václav Havel

Daniel J. Mahoney

Assumption College, dmahoney@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/political-science-faculty>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Daniel J. "Living in Truth: A Wise, Quirky Memoir from Václav Havel." *City Journal* (July 6, 2007). <https://www.city-journal.org/html/living-truth-9438.html>.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Political Science Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@assumption.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@assumption.edu).

BOOKS AND CULTURE

## Living in Truth

A wise, quirky memoir from Václav Havel

Daniel J. Mahoney

July 6, 2007

***To the Castle and Back*, by Václav Havel, translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson (Alfred Knopf, 383 pp., \$27.95)**

In February 2003, Václav Havel stepped down as president of the Czech Republic, having served two terms in office and an earlier, incomplete one as leader of the now dissolved Czechoslovakian state. It was an event of real significance. The dramatist-turned-dissident-turned-statesman remained the only figure of note in the region whose political position and moral authority spanned both the momentous anti-totalitarian revolutions of 1989 and the everyday challenges of post-Communist politics. In this compelling (if somewhat eccentric) work, Havel recounts his role as a sometime “fairy prince” in the peaceful events that brought down Communism. He also provides a fascinating account of his efforts as a democratic statesman, presiding over the decommunization of his country and its entry into the community of free nations.

With the fall of Communism, Havel entered a new phase in his life, setting the tone for morally serious civic engagement in a newly democratic society. This proved no easy task. Czechoslovakians had been deeply corrupted both by totalitarian mendacity and by the compromises that they had felt compelled to make with the Communist state during the harsh “period of normalization” that followed the crushing of the Prague Spring of 1968.

As Havel made clear in earlier works, such as 1992’s *Summer Meditations*, he saw his new political role as fully consistent with his dissident opposition to totalitarianism. In

his post-1989 books and speeches, Havel continued to defend a moral vision of politics that he called “nonpolitical politics” or “politics as morality in practice.” He identified this vision with the demanding but liberating task of “living in truth.” Havel refused to identify politics with a dehumanizing “technology of power,” the notion that power was an end in itself. Instead he defended a moral order that stands above law, politics, and economics—a moral order that “has a metaphysical anchoring in the infinite and eternal.” His speeches as president, many collected in English in *The Art of the Impossible* (1997), were artful exercises in moral and political philosophizing, enthralling Western audiences.

But Czechs began to tire of their “fairy prince.” Havel’s opponents in the press and the political class (“the snide brigade,” he calls them) increasingly dismissed him as a naive “dreamer,” a mere moralist with zero relevance to the challenges of a post-Communist era. Abroad, Havel continued to be widely admired as a hero and moral witness; at home, those enamored of a more pragmatic or technocratic view of politics dismissed him—and all the dissidents of old—as “left-wing” curiosities, who somehow had very little to do with the collapse of Communism. This dismissal of the historic importance of the dissident resistance to Communism no doubt assuaged the consciences of those who did nothing to fight totalitarianism before 1989.

*To the Castle and Back* defends “nonpolitical politics” as a realistic response to the dilemmas of post-Communist politics—and modern politics more broadly. For the cursory reader, the unsystematic character of the work might be confused with something thrown together, a substitute for a carefully crafted memoir. In fact, Havel has structured the book carefully. He combines an extensive interview, conducted with the Czech journalist and broadcaster Karel Hvizd’ala, detailed notes to his staff between 1993 and 2003, and a “postpresidential” diary, written in three different locations.

Underscoring his artful weaving together of these literary forms, Havel tells us that he significantly modified Hvizd’ala’s questions, to the point of treating him “a little like a dramatic character in one of my plays.” The interview—always interesting, sometimes confrontational, ranging from the gossipy to the philosophical, as much self-interrogation as interview—is the book’s core, providing its thematic and narrative unity. “It is no accident,” as the Marxists used to say, that Havel’s apologia centers around a defense of the soundness and efficacy of his core moral idea of nonpolitical politics.

In the course of the extended dialogue with Hvizd'ala, the reader comes to appreciate how ludicrous it is to reduce Havel to the label "left-winger." Havel may have had an instinctive liking for the Lou Reeds and Frank Zappas of the world—he identifies with the anti-totalitarian "spontaneity" of rock and roll music—and he still finds a home in the pages of *The New York Review of Books*. But Havel also reveals himself as an eloquent defender of the market economy, a critic of the indifference of prosperous peoples to those suffering tyranny or genocide under totalitarian regimes, an enemy of appeasement and pacifism, and a friend of dissidents in Cuba, Belarus, and China. He is a conservative-minded ecologist, a qualified multiculturalist who rejects moral relativism, and a defender of taste and civility in a mass society. In fact, the unreconstructed Left denounces him as a man of the Right.

Responding to his critics on the Right—represented above all by the Civic Democratic Party of Václav Klaus, Havel's principal rival and detractor in the 1990s and his successor as president of the Czech Republic—the old dissident points out the subterranean bonds connecting "market fundamentalists" who ignore the moral foundations of the free society with their Communist enemies. In their facile dismissal of moral imperatives and their reduction of politics to an essentially economic problem, they perpetuate some of the core pathologies of the totalitarian Left, Havel believes. They confuse his anti-totalitarianism with an indulgence for the Left, when in fact it reflects a deeper philosophical perspective on modernity, one that can be called "postmodern" in the limited sense of seeking to go beyond the philosophical premises underlying modernity. It transcends the dichotomy between Left and Right.

Consider Havel's evocative comparison of politics and drama. Dramatic or literary art, Havel writes, attempts "to deal with [the] fundamental amorphousness of life, to uncover something like the structure of Being, to display in vivid terms its internal weave, its hidden structure, and its real articulation." Too often politics appears as a "strange, never-ending process with no clear turning points and no unambiguous and immediately recognizable outcomes." In the modern world, politics can "appear to be hopelessly boring, a gray, dull administrative grind, enlivened occasionally by a scandal or pseudo-scandal that is forgotten as soon as it is over." Without succumbing to irrationalism, Havel attempts to awaken his readers to the "structure of Being" that underlies even prosaic political life. His memos and diary entries jump from period to period in an effort to reveal the underlying connections and "real meaning" of political life that a one-sided emphasis on "mechanical chronology" covers over. Whether laboring over a speech, describing his efforts to restore and beautify the centuries-old "Hradcany" or Castle—the historic seat of government in Prague—or preparing for

trips abroad, Havel alerts his readers to the nontechnocratic aspects of politics: the importance of taste and civility; the inescapable role of personal considerations, including friendships among statesmen (Havel counted a pope, the Dalai Lama, and former American secretary of state Madeleine Albright as friends); and beauty as an elevating corrective to the reductively mechanical expressions of modern civilization.

A quiet sadness informs this book. True, Havel never loses sight of life as a precious gift, and of his time in office as an opportunity to face new challenges and to defend his principles. We see him subjected, however, to endless calumnies, struck by illness, facing the death of his beloved first wife Olga and the widespread castigation of his second wife Dagmar (“Dasa”) Veskrnová for no other reason than she was an assertive woman who wasn’t Olga (an equally assertive woman). Instead of writing new plays and books, Havel struggles to write speeches and feels haunted by the sense that he is endlessly repeating himself. The reader experiences precious time lost, the approach of death, the self-doubts of this “man of paradoxes,” all too human in his weaknesses and contradictions.

By the book’s conclusion, we leave behind the “fairy prince” and discover—or rediscover—the artist, philosopher, and statesman. If Havel delights too much in the company of vapid celebrities such as Robert Redford and Sharon Stone—has anyone told him that they actually admire Fidel Castro?—and if he too readily resorts to New Age symbolism, he still exemplifies those intellectual and spiritual qualities integral to human freedom and dignity. In *To the Castle and Back*, one of the great men of the age shows that he has much to teach us all—whether citizens of firmly established democracies or of newly emerging ones—about the limits of reducing politics to an impersonal “technology of power.”

---

*Daniel J. Mahoney is the chairman of the political science department at Assumption College and the author of books on Raymond Aron, Charles de Gaulle, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Most recently, he has edited (with Edward E. Ericson, Jr.) The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings, 1947–2005 (ISI Books, 2006).*