

Havel issues moral challenge to U.S.

by William Jones

The bureaucrats and the politicians of Washington had undoubtedly never experienced the likes of the compelling address delivered to a joint session of Congress on Feb. 21 by the President of Czechoslovakia, playwright Vaclav Havel. It was the first state visit from any of the recently liberated countries of Eastern Europe. One congressman expressed great surprise that he and his colleagues—who, he indicated, had an attention span that barely exceeds a minute or two—sat “spellbound” during Havel’s hour-long speech. The mild-mannered Czech President appeared with a quiet dignity among the polished soap-commercial dandies that the U.S. political process tends to put into office (and keep there).

The Czech President, small in stature, proved himself the moral giant, as the former political prisoner issued a challenge to the wheelers and dealers in the U.S. Capitol. It remains to be seen, how they will try to measure up.

Vaclav Havel explained the higher moral basis from which he, a former “dissident” and political prisoner who had refused to emigrate from his own country as a price for being let out of prison, could issue that challenge. “The communist type of totalitarian system has left both our nations, Czechs and Slovaks, as it has all the nations of the Soviet Union and the other countries the Soviet Union subjugated in its time, a legacy of countless dead, an infinite spectrum of human suffering, profound economic decline, and above all, enormous human humiliation,” Havel said. “It has brought us horrors that fortunately you have not known. It has given us something positive, a special capacity to look from time to time somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience. . . . We, too, can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it.

“The specific experience I’m talking about has given me one great certainty: Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around, as the Marxists claim,” Havel said. “For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness, and in human responsibility. Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed . . . will be unavoidable.”

Havel pointed out that the task facing the world today was to “enter an era in which all of us, large and small, former slaves and former masters, will be able to create what your great President Lincoln called the ‘family of man.’ ” Havel expressed fear, however, that the world seems to be “receding from the ideal rather than growing closer to it.

“Interests of all kinds—personal, selfish, state, nation, group, and, if you like, company interests—still considerably outweigh genuinely common and global interests,” he said. “There are still many who say they are concerned not for themselves but for the cause, while they are demonstrably out for themselves and not for the cause at all. We are still destroying the planet that was entrusted to us and its environment. We still close our eyes to the growing social, ethnic, and cultural conflicts in the world. From time to time, we say that the anonymous mega-machinery we have created for ourselves no longer serves us but rather has enslaved us, yet we still fail to do anything about it.”

Responsibility to a higher order

Havel then touched on the bedrock issue which has not been evident in the U.S. Congress’s behavior of late—responsibility to universal law. From the passage of the criminally stupid Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Amendment, which turns decision-making on federal spending over to a computer, to the very recent failure to override President Bush’s reprehensible veto of a bill that would have extended the visas of Chinese students fleeing the monstrous Beijing regime, the U.S. federal legislators have flouted this moral imperative, all on behalf of their cozy affair with nation’s real powers—the financial oligarchy and the liberal establishment.

The Czech President said, “We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than my family, my country, my success—responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged. The interpreter or mediator between us and this higher authority is what is traditionally referred to as human conscience.

“If I subordinated my political behavior to this imperative,” Havel continued, “mediated to me by my conscience, I can’t go far wrong.”

During the course of his speech, Havel made himself the spokesman for the ideals of the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution, which he referred to as the real inspiration for the revolutionary developments in Czechoslovakia. Quoting Thomas Jefferson that “governments are instituted among men deriving their just power from the consent of the governed,” Havel pointed to this as “a simple and important act of the human spirit. What gave meaning to that act, however, was the fact that the author backed it up with his life. It was not just his words; it was his deeds as well.”