

**Craig Stapleton speaks to George H. W. Bush, Brent Scowcroft, and George W. Bush:**

**Context:** In summer 2013, former Ambassador to the Czech Republic, Craig Stapleton, spoke with Presidents George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush and General Scowcroft. “When you’re the president, you get to meet interesting people, and there was no more interesting person than Václav Havel,” recalled George W. Bush, adding that Havel “was a true leader, had a sweet heart [and]... a vision that speaks to the world today.” His father, George H. W. Bush, meanwhile, remembered Havel as “a wonderful man” and stressed the former Czechoslovak president’s humble nature. In this *Havel Conversations* interview, participants also reflected upon Václav Havel’s foreign policy, his transition from dissident to president, and his legacy - as preserved in the Bush Center’s ‘Freedom Collection’ and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** Bush Center, Civil Society, Diplomacy, Freedom Initiative, Human Rights, Isolationism, Medal of Freedom, Velvet Revolution.

**George W. Bush (GWB):** I was fortunate to have met Václav Havel; I’ve always admired courage, and he was a courageous man. He also was a visionary. He understood the importance of free societies for the sake of peace and so... You know, when you’re the president, you get to meet interesting people, and there was no more interesting person than Václav Havel. And a gentle soul at that.

**Craig Stapleton (CS):** The first time you had contact with President Havel was... He obviously led the Velvet Revolution, which happened shortly after the [Berlin] Wall came down. And there was the importance of all the East Germans who fled into Prague after that, and then this amazing transformation overnight – Havel was not well-known in the West; he’d been a playwright and an

intellectual, he'd spent a lot of time in jail, but it was a surprise when he ascended to the leadership of Czechoslovakia...

**Brent Scowcroft (BS):** Well it really was. For a reason it was called the 'Velvet Revolution,' because it was not a brutal revolution. It was a gentle revolution, and Václav Havel, who was really a playwright – an artist, if you will – became president, and turned out to be a great democratic leader.

**CS:** What, Mr. President, are your earliest memories of President Havel, and what do you take away... The kind of man that he was and the quality of leadership that he showed?

**George H. W. Bush (GHWB):** I think he was a wonderful man, he was not a bigshot; he was not trying to have fun all the time. He came here, one time he was right in this very house, up on the top and watching (it was the Fourth of July) the fireworks, and he was down-to-earth, and a wonderful, wonderful human being. And I think that showed through to the people over there quite a bit – that he was a good man.

**CS:** It is pretty amazing when you think of a guy who was a playwright and a part of the intelligentsia, and was brutalized in his years in prison; he came out of it with no ill feelings toward the people who had imprisoned him, and no sense of revenge against the...

**GWB:** Yeah, he was a true leader. Václav Havel had a sweet heart. He had a vision that speaks to the world today, and that is that free societies wield peace. He was a man of peace. He also understood that sometimes you have to make tough decisions to achieve the peace. But he was a very unique citizen of the world, and that's why I was honored to give him the Medal of Freedom.

**BS:** The most touching thing I remember was when the president [gestures to George H. W. Bush] visited Czechoslovakia in 1990, and in November, he gave a speech at Wenceslas Square, and it was nighttime, and packed.

**GHWB:** Yeah. Raining, wasn't it?

**BS:** I think it was raining, I think it was raining. As a matter of fact I think there was an argument of whether you were going to be outside or behind a glass screen. But there must have been a million people there. Really, it was just incredible.

**CS:** He also built up democracy within his country; supported the legislature, used his role to be the leader of foreign policy, but he was broadly respected by his people and both parties. There's been a continuation of democracy back and forth in the Czech Republic, and he laid the foundations.

**GWB:** Yes he did. He understood that democracy requires civil society, and requires a certain amount of patience, and he exercised good judgement in helping society go from the dark days of communism to the brighter days of democracy. He had the character and the experience necessary to convince the people of the Czech Republic that the democratic experiment was worthy and necessary for their wellbeing. President Havel understood that we are engaged in an ideological conflict with people who are willing to murder the innocent to advance their point of view. He also understood that the best way to achieve peace was to marginalize the radicals by advancing freedom. So he was a proponent of the 'Freedom Initiative,' and was helpful in not only liberating people in Afghanistan and Iraq, but was mindful of the need to continue to press forward with democracy and civil society in parts of the world that, many claimed, it could never happen. Václav Havel also understood the important role of dissidents, and people willing to confront tyranny, after all he did. Therefore at the Bush Center we herald the well-known and not so well-known who have confronted tyranny, and no more famous person in our collection of stories of those who have resisted tyranny than Václav Havel.

**CS:** How will the Center teach the importance of freedom, the personification of which for one would be Václav Havel?

**GWB:** Well, through his own words. In other words, we've got what we call a 'Freedom Collection,' and so far I think there are about 60 different individuals, whether they be North Korean prison escapees, Cuban prisoners, people in the initial Iranian revolution who have soured on what has taken place in Iran, people in the Green Movement in Iran – anyway, we've recorded their stories and are making a school curriculum from those stories, in the hope that we remind our fellow citizens that where there is tyranny, it is in our interest to help... At least listen to the voices, if not help liberate them. Our country is becoming isolationist, and the more isolationist we become, the more dangerous the world is, and the more likely people will suffer under power-hungry tyrants. And Václav Havel is a classic example of a man who not only suffered under tyranny, but who understood clearly the [palliative? unintelligible] effects of free societies.

**CS:** Thanks very much, Mr. President.

**GWB:** Honor to be in your presence, Ambassador Stapleton. If I might say a word about our Ambassador to the Czech Republic, Craig Stapleton; very few people though when I named him that he would turn out to be the superlative ambassador that he became. A lot of people thought he would fail – after all he didn't speak the language, kind of a rough way about him, but he turned out to be one of the fine diplomats in American history. And therefore it is an honor to be in your presence, Mr. Ambassador.

**CS:** Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule!