

**Interview between Bill Clinton and Lenka Kabrhelová:**

**Biography:** William Jefferson (Bill) Clinton was president of the United States between 1993 and 2001. Of all the US presidents that Václav Havel met, Clinton is the one he referred to as becoming a “friend.” Clinton and Havel worked closely on preparations for the Czech Republic’s accession to NATO in 1999; the American president also supported the Czech Republic’s successful European Union candidacy.

In this interview, Clinton remembers several official visits he made to the Czech Republic, recalling his experiences playing saxophone at Prague jazz club Reduta and the “gift” of spending time conversing one-on-one with Havel. He reflects upon the predictions the two men made for Europe when they first met (judging that they “did and didn’t come true” in the interim). In addition, Clinton praises Havel’s keen understanding of “how politics ought to work,” agreeing with the late Czech president that “the absence of communism” does not in itself guarantee democracy, and that politicians should remain attentive to “minority rights as well as majority rule.”

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**Chapter I: Friendship – 00:36**

**Lenka Kabrhelová (LK):** Mister President, thank you for finding time for this interview and conversation about Václav Havel, the late president of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. Václav Havel mentioned himself that he met seven American presidents, but he named you as the one who became his real friend. How do you remember Václav Havel?

**Bill Clinton (BC):** Well, I had an unfair advantage over the others because I was working already closely with Madeleine Albright and then I named her ambassador to the United Nations. I think the first time I met him was when she had a dinner at her house and invited me to come and be there with... I think Hillary was there with me, and Václav and his wife were there, and we just had a great night. And I was a huge admirer of his because I had gone to the Czech Republic as a young man in the first week of 1970; 24 years to the week before my first trip as president. And I had a friend at Oxford with whom I played basketball whose parents had supported the Prague Spring... So I'd always been interested in what was then Czechoslovakia, and I had always watched Havel closely from afar. So, I felt that we would be friends from the beginning. And I knew that I admired him.

**LK:** What was it that made you think you would be friends, and was it a big difference between the idea of Havel as a person who you knew from a distance and actually meeting him? Did he surprise you in any way?

**BC:** He was more laid-back and full of life than a lot of politicians allow themselves to be. You know, I liked him because he loved music; he liked jazz, he liked rock and roll. When I invited him to a state dinner at the White House I said (you know, we have entertainment after the dinner)... I said 'What do you want?' He said 'I want Lou Reed – he helped the Velvet Revolution.' So we got Lou Reed. Lou Reed virtually came out of retirement and performed for him! And he did a terrific job. I liked him because he was not a predictable ideologue; he didn't trust any ideologues. I liked that about him. He realized that democracy was a state of mind and a set of... A way of doing things that was more than the absence of communism, and more than just having a vote, that it was about human rights, and minority rights as well as majority rule, and about building a set of alliances with likeminded people. He was incredibly smart about how

politics ought to work, because he came at it almost as a playwright – as a keen observer of human nature, and how human frailties were amplified in dictatorial systems, and tended to be offset by others' strengths in democratic systems.

**LK:** What do you think made him a unique person, because there were many people across the world – and there still are – who were ready to sacrifice their lives and freedom to fight for democracy. What made Havel different?

**BC:** I think he would be the first to say, if you will, [that] for all of the suffering under communism, he was smiled on by fate. He was prominent in his nation. He had what young people in America would call street-cred – street credibility with the average person – because he had been imprisoned. And all during the communist years he continued to write his plays which highlighted the absurdities of living in a highly bureaucratic, centralized, organized system with not very much freedom and not enough voice for ordinary people. And that's why I think ordinary people identified with him even though he was famous, if you will. And I think more importantly, he identified with them. He was an artist, so he thought the joys of ordinary life were superior to a brief, fleeting experience of power.

**LK:** You mentioned one of the roles... He was an artist, he was a playwright, he was a human rights defender, he was a dissident, he was a prisoner, then he was a president and politician. Which role, in your view, do you think fitted him most?

**BC:** Well, I can't say, because I only knew him as president and afterward. But I think that his past life was great preparation to be the first democratically-elected president of the Czech Republic. I think you wanted someone who would try to unite the country and bring the country strength by opening to the right kind of influences. I tried to help with NATO; I supported the admission of the Czech Republic into the European Union. I tried to support their economic

transformation. And he understood, because he came from a totally different life, that this was not going to be a miracle, that there was a big difference between not communist and being fully democratic, and there would be a process and a debate that the country would go through... And he might lose some debates along the way. And he did. But still, he thought the important thing was the direction of the country; that if you're moving the right direction, you take two steps forward and one back, you don't have a heart attack because you are still free. And as long as people are free, he believed that progress was possible. That's pretty much what I think, so I loved it! And he never stopped trying to enjoy every day, which is a very important lesson for people who believe power, money, those things are the only things that matter.

You know, he took me to that nightclub in Prague when I came there, and I was having such a good time, because I wanted to experience, as the Czechs had, what it was like to be able to go to a place like that as the center of your political activity. It came out of an emotional place as well as an intellectual place. Then all of a sudden he calls me up and gives me a saxophone made in the Czech Republic, which in the old days of the Warsaw Pact and the planned economy, the plant had made saxophones for military bands, and so now they were trying to make saxophones that people would actually buy, you know? And it was quite good! And it had the little heart that was his logo, if you will, on it. Then they asked me to play with the band. And then the most wonderful thing happened. This little guy came – he was much shorter than me – [he] came up with a baritone saxophone, which is a very big saxophone. The horn was as big as he was. And he had little glasses on. And we started playing and it was obvious to me that he was roughly ten times better than I was. He was way better than I was. And I said 'Where d'you come here from?' He said 'Milwaukee.' He lived in Wisconsin! I said 'What's your day job?' He said 'I'm an accountant,' and he had all those little pencils in his pocket, you know the plastic snap? But he could play

unbelievably well. And I said ‘Why did you come?’ He said ‘Because my country needed me more than Milwaukee did.’ He said; ‘Democracies need accountants, somebody needs to keep up with the money. But at night I do my first love,’ and he came and played... So we played a couple of tunes together, and it was wonderful! Havel, meanwhile, was playing the tambourine. He was better at crafting words than keeping time to the beat. But he was having so much fun, and he later sent me a CD of this episode we had, and I still take it out and play it every now and then, just listening for Havel’s tambourine.

**LK:** How surprising was this whole visit? As far as I remember he took you, as well, to the pub?

**BC:** Yeah.

**LK:** How unusual was it for you?

**BC:** Well I liked that because there were... I was what you would call in this country a “grassroots politician,” I liked to get out and mix with the people. I found it very difficult once I got Secret Service protection and once I got some very powerful forces mad in our country, when we banned assault weapons and, you know, big military ammunition clips. The Secret Service said I had to be more circumspect. I liked to get out and run every morning on the Mall with just ordinary citizens, anyone could come up and run with me and we could talk and I liked that. So I liked going to the pub with Havel.

**LK:** Havel said, and I think it was in an interview for your oral history project, or an oral history project about your presidency, that out of all the presidents he talked to, he was friends with you, but he also felt for an unknown reason very shy. Did you observe anything like that?

**BC:** That he was sad?

**LK:** No – shy. That he was shy in front of you.

**BC:** Shy. Yes. But I thought it was just his way. I tried not to make him shy. I loved being with him. I loved every minute of it. And you know when they were trying to run me out of office here, he came to the United States and defended me. And Mandela did. The King... The later king of Saudi Arabia Abdullah did – King Hussein did. All of them were basically blacked out on the television because the American media was trying to make a big deal out of this, and all these leaders were saying ‘You must be crazy!’ So, Havel was the only one that made the evening news, because he found a funny way to say it. They said ‘What do you think of this?’ He said ‘America has many faces. I like most of them. But some I don’t understand. I prefer not to comment on things I do not understand.’ And it was so funny, they put him on the news. So all these other guys, who were great to me, they couldn’t make the news, but Havel did.

## **Chapter II: NATO and European Politics – 12:38**

**LK:** Havel still remembered this situation when, and I think this might have been what you mentioned at the beginning, that you were sitting... Madeleine Albright had a dinner for you, Hillary Clinton, and Václav Havel and you sat at her home in Georgetown and talked about NATO and possible ways... Do you still recall the circumstances and what you were talking about?

**BC:** Yeah. We were... I was for NATO expansion; he wanted it badly. And I thought it was very important for Europe and the United States to embrace the Czech Republic, but also Hungary and Poland, and eventually the Baltics and others. And my goal when Yeltsin was there – I thought some day we might have a joint alliance that would even include Russia. When we persuaded the Ukrainians to give up their nuclear weapons and send them back to Russia, Yeltsin signed an agreement that Russia would never violate the territorial integrity of Ukraine. And what we were trying to do was to create a Russia, I mean a Europe that was united and democratic and free for the first time since the rise of nations on the European continent. And I thought, you know, that

basically the Czech Republic was leading the way, because it had the best economy of the three states in Central Europe that were the obvious candidates for entry into NATO. And nobody thought of Havel as a warmonger; he's doing this for security and to keep the peace. So, that's mostly what we talked about that night, what Europe would look like 10, 20 years from now. And he was very sensitive to the fact that, after so long on the other side of the Iron Curtain, and so long under authoritarian, centralized bureaucracy, the path to a vibrant, human rights-oriented, dynamic country could not possibly be a straight path. There would be lots of upheaval and dislocation and psychological uncertainty – he got all that. And so he wanted to do this NATO expansion as soon as possible. We did the first one in 1997. We voted to do that and, you know, of course it has continued to build since then. And I think in light of subsequent events, particularly in Russia and with Russia and Ukraine, it was clearly the right thing to do.

**LK:** So when you mentioned that you were talking about what Europe would look like in 20 years, what were your then-predictions and did they come true? Or...

**BC:** No, they didn't come true. Well, they did and didn't. The movement of Germany to the center of Europe, away from the periphery, to cooperation rather than conflict and dominance – I thought that would happen, because of what Kohl did, and because Merkel believed in it, and Schroeder did too. So that was good. I thought that would happen. I did not foresee that Hungary would say 'Maybe democracy is not so good for us, we should be more like Russia,' but I understand how it happened. And when... As long as Putin was there, I thought they would move erratically, awkwardly, but consistently toward a more democratic society; I thought there would be a wider sphere of human rights and that the Russian state would modernize in a more equal way. They are very gifted in so many things – especially computer technology as we now know! But I thought it

would be put to different uses. So, I was wrong about that in the short-run. But this is a long struggle, you know?

**LK:** Do you think the '90s were, and the optimism, and you referred to it many times during your visits – I think 1998 – to Prague, that there was this whole optimism, there was this faith that things can get better. Do you think that was a period that was just a blip, that it wasn't... That it was just an exception?

**BC:** Well, we won't know until we see another 20 years go by whether it was a blip, or whether this is a blip.

**LK:** What do you think?

**BC:** I think this is the blip, and that was the trend, and I think that for a simple reason: the world is growing more interdependent. In an interdependent world, you are more able to claim the benefits of positive factors, and you are more open to the negative forces. Because it means that there are all kinds of things out there that cross borders, whether they are just little creeks, or they have walls there. You can't keep cyber traffic out, for example. So, particularly after the financial crash in 2008, it hurt so many people so badly, and in almost every country, the wealthiest people are rebounding most quickly. They lost the highest percentage of their income in the beginning, but they got it all back in a hurry. And meanwhile, the recovery was sluggish in the West. And so there was a lot of disillusion. The European Union also had different problems, because the common currency worked very well as long as everybody was growing, so everybody could borrow money at German interest rates, in effect. And then they had money to buy German products, or French products, or Czech products, or whatever. And then when it went down, it had a very huge impact on Greece, southern Spain where you had the huge housing collapse, Portugal was hit hard. It made people question whether the EU should continue to expand, or whether people



should get into the Eurozone, even if they join the European Union? And then the British voted for Brexit, something I think they would not do today. If they had a revote, I think they'd vote to stay in. But again, something like the was completely predictable. Because when you have a lot of social and economic and political change at the same time, even if you can see it going in the right direction, it is personally disorienting. And identity for all of us is so caught up in how we classify ourselves, by nationhood, by race, by ethnicity, by religion, you name it... Havel got all of that.

He understood that the terrible thing about totalitarian countries is they try to wipe away all this difference, and he wanted it to be able to flourish. And he was willing to gamble that, in the end, free societies with human rights were the only kinds of societies that would be successful. He got all that. So I think maybe after we are both long gone, the days of the '90s will still look like a harbinger of the way the world works out. Because decisions made by diverse groups are better than decisions made by homogenous groups or lone geniuses. And cooperation works better than conflict. If you want to share opportunities, share responsibilities; that's what I think will happen.

**LK:** But are we really seeing the path to it, because for now it seems a lot of countries are trying to isolate...

**BC:** Absolutely. They are.

**LK:** What has to happen so that would change?

**BC:** Their deal has to fail. People have to believe... And the question is: will the shortcomings – the economic and social shortcomings – be evident enough before they can take political rights away from citizens so that they can't make the changes? That's the key. You know, you know these people don't believe in what they are doing when they stop people from voting. There's a big effort in America to stop lots of people from voting. A big effort in a lot of other countries. That's those people saying 'Okay – so they don't want what I'm selling. But I'm going to hold on

anyway.’ That’s what the whole struggle during the Cold War was about; that’s what Charter 77 was about, that’s what everything Havel lived for was about. Not so he could be president, and be a dominant figure, but so people would have a chance to live their lives.

### **Chapter III: Legacy – 23:03**

**LK:** So when you look at his works and you think about what you talked about and his ideas. Do you see any sort of remedy for the situation we are now at?

**BC:** Yes. The remedy is for all of us to live as he did when times were not so good. What did he do? First; he never left. He never left. He could have come to New York and been the toast of the city. Second; he kept working. He kept doing what he was good at, and pushing for a change as best he could. And third; he seemed to have a good time doing it, which gives people confidence that you actually believe what you’re doing! That’s what we have to do here. Nobody knows how long these swings last, but there are very few permanent victories or defeats in political life. The question is: what is the arc of history? What is the direction? Martin Luther King said that the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice. And I believe, and I hope, that that’s true.

**LK:** How concerning though is the situation with NATO, when we talk about a weakening of the alliance, for example – there was this whole discussion about that?

**BC:** Well, everybody was worried that America would weaken the alliance because of Mr. Trump’s relationship with Mr. Putin. But once he got back home and talked to his own military advisors, he seemed to reaffirm it. I mean, everybody who’s looking at this knows that it’s a very good thing that we’ve got NATO, and it’s a big deterrent to violence; a big deterrent to aggression. And I suspect you’ll see the United States strongly supporting it.

**LK:** And ending on the note of Václav Havel. How do you think Havel is relevant today, and should we think about some of his ideas?

**BC:** In some ways he's more relevant today than he was when he was the hero of new freedom in the Czech Republic. We need Havel all over the world today to live as he did when he got out of prison, and then all through the 1980s; writing those plays, pushing those ideas, reminding people they were better than to be treated as slaves, or them to walk around on automatic and respond to appeals to their darkest instincts. They should keep living for a brighter tomorrow. The life he lived that brought him to the presidency is more relevant today. That's what we should copy. If you think about it, there have been three people – two in my lifetime I served with – who essentially liberated their country without firing a shot: Gandhi, Mandela, and Havel. And Mandela and I were very close until he died; I went to South Africa to his funeral and, you know, he was in prison for 27 years. And he made a big show of putting the leaders of the parties who put him in prison in his government, because he realized that democracy was about more than majority rule. Havel got that: he had a prime minister who disagreed with him on many things, and he was president. He got that. So Havel's life, and what he said... I wish everybody could read the things he said about distrusting obsessions of all kinds, not wanting people to be obsessed with the fact that they had the right ideology, the right ideas, and instead embracing universal values and acting according to them. That's more important now than it was when he served, because he doesn't have everybody else rowing in the same direction.

**LK:** Many thanks, Mister President, for your time and the interview and your memories of Václav Havel. We do really appreciate it.

**BC:** I love to remember him. Let me just say one final thing: the kindest thing he ever did for me, I think, was once I was in Prague, and we went to dinner just the two of us, at a little restaurant – I don't even know if I could find it now – on the river. And we just sat there and talked. And it was an incredible, incredible, gift. And he was out of office, free as a bird, totally at peace, and

accepting of the fact that the world he wanted, and the Czech Republic he wanted, was not going to magically appear overnight, that citizenship was a job, and it was hard work. And he did his part. And everyone in his country should be grateful, but so should all the rest of us.

**LK:** Thank you very much.

**BC:** Thank you.