

Interview between Henry Kissinger and Martin Řezníček:

Biography: Henry Alfred Kissinger was born in Germany in 1923. He moved to the United States with his family in 1938. Kissinger served as American Secretary of State between 1973 and 1977, during which time he was instrumental in the negotiation of the Helsinki Accords between the United States and the Soviet Union. The agreement recognized the boundaries of Central European countries which had been put in place following World War II. In return for this acknowledgement, the Soviet Union agreed to implement and uphold human rights legislation. Human rights infractions then became a point of protest for campaigners around the Eastern bloc. In his memoir, *Years of Renewal*, Kissinger singles Václav Havel out as one of the “great men” who, in this way, “transformed a diplomatic enterprise into a triumph of the human spirit” (*Years of Renewal*, Simon & Schuster, 1999, p. 663). He continues today to commend the creativity of Havel in Czechoslovakia and Walesa in Poland, both of whom were able to “mobilize the world’s pressure on their behalf by their conduct inside the country.” Speaking for those who represented the United States in Helsinki, Kissinger concludes that the actions of Havel and other Eastern bloc dissidents “went beyond our expectations.”



Henry Kissinger and Václav Havel in Prague, 1998. Photo courtesy of Yale University Library’s Digital Collections (http://findit.library.yale.edu/images_layout/view?parentoid=11776990&increment=1 – last checked 3.17.2017)

Kissinger recalls first meeting Václav Havel through émigré Czech director (and the latter's old schoolmate) Miloš Forman in Prague. In 1998, the former secretary of state traveled to the Czech capital to deliver a keynote address at Forum 2000, an annual conference organized by Havel (who was then president of the Czech Republic). In his presentation, Kissinger declared himself "an extraordinary admirer of the President," a sentiment he reiterates in this interview. In Prague, Kissinger called for a recognition of the role idealism played in politics (as a counterpoint, perhaps, to the politics of "realism," with which he is often associated). Kissinger continued that a good politician should "take his society from where it is to where it has never been. And he must do that at a time when the consequences of his actions are not clear." For this, suggested Kissinger, moral conviction and a sense of history were required. In this *Havel Conversations* interview, the former chief of US diplomacy (who wrote a PhD on the history of the field) reiterates his belief that the study of history helps shape "inspirational leaders."

Kissinger has served as Assistant to the US President for National Security Affairs (1969-1975) and as a member of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (1984-1990). He is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. The author of numerous books (including *Diplomacy*, *White House Years* and most recently *World Order*), Kissinger describes fellow author and politician Havel as having been "a personal friend." A self-described "strong advocate of Czech membership of NATO," Kissinger reflects that this was a point of initial disagreement between the more pacifically-inclined Havel and himself, before Havel grew to become one of the Alliance's staunchest supporters. Discussing present American politics, Kissinger considers US NATO membership still to constitute a chief component of the country's "international role," as well as a pillar of the United States' relationship with the states of Central Europe.

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Martin Řezníček (MR): Doctor Kissinger, thank you so much for your time and your thoughts. When was the first time that you met Václav Havel and what is your recollection of this statesman?

Henry Kissinger (HK): I think I met him for the first time through Miloš Forman. I had developed a great admiration for him in terms of his public performances and his history. But I believe my first meeting with him was in Prague, and I was introduced by Miloš.

MR: Who was he for you? Was he a politician, was he a dissident, was he an author?

HK: Well, I first got to know him as a dissident, and as an example of the striving for freedom in the countries we considered satellite countries of Russia – of the Soviet Union. And then I got to know him and we became personal friends. He visited my house in the country in Connecticut several times; I visited him in the Castle in Prague, I think several times. We went to jazz music in downtown New York, which he knew much better than I did, and in fact he had to introduce me to a number of these performers whom he knew at least by reputation.

MR: What about your thoughts? You're a conservative, he was more of a liberal. And it doesn't mean that you shouldn't admire each other, but what was it like to be dealing with him on these political issues?

HK: The issue of conservative and liberal really never arose. When I first met him he was opposed to NATO, and he didn't want Czechoslovakia to be involved in any military arrangements. And he and I took a walk in the Castle, and we talked about it. I had a different view. I was in favor of Czech membership in NATO, and I can't say that I persuaded him in this conversation, but then

after a year or so, he changed his view, and he favored entry into NATO. And after a while he became a more passionate defender of it than I was.

MR: Why was that? Why do you think that he changed his view?

HK: Well he became convinced that there was a potential threat to the security of the Czech Republic. And he also thought that there were fundamental issues of freedom involved, and that it was not appropriate for the Czech Republic to stand aside. And he was of course emotionally committed to the success of democracy in Europe.

MR: Well in 1997, let me quote, you testified before Congress “an ardent human rights activist (meaning Havel), he surely appreciates the argument for encouraging a democratic evolution in Russia, but he obviously believes that even the most optimistic outcome will take longer than is safely compatible with the establishment of a vacuum in Central Europe.” So basically, similar words to the ones you use now. How do you view these sentences of yours 20 years after?

HK: I think I was right. He was convinced that whatever the evolution in Russia might be, there might be forces that would come into power that would insist upon traditional power relationships, and he wanted the Czech Republic to be on the side of freedom.

MR: I don't like these questions ‘what if’? But what if he were alive, how would he view Russia now, and relations between NATO and Russia?

HK: That's a very good question. Of course, as our relationship developed, we tended to wind up on the same side, and with the same point of view. But I think his instinct would have been maybe less ready to negotiate with Russia than I am. And so it is possible that he would have taken a somewhat stronger line. But that's not exactly the right point, because the issue is not whether one takes a strong line with Russia or not, the issue is whether one can define an outcome with which

Central Europe can live. And of course the Central European countries have been exposed to a much greater immediate pressure than we could possibly be so far away.

MR: Well, let me get back to the mid-70s, the Helsinki Accords: you were a bit skeptical at the beginning of the whole thing, and then dissidents in Central Europe view it somewhat differently. And then you said about NATO that you had different views as well. Did your views get closer over time?

HK: Look, we were all going through the experience of the '70s, so at first I considered the offer of European security by Russia a means of dividing NATO. Then, when we held NATO together, and when we had a common position at the conference, I thought we could use it for encouraging an evolution in the East European countries by making some of the human rights provisions obligatory in the national provisions. So we began to insist that some of the human rights terms be made part of the human rights agenda, and we thought that we could use them in case there was an uprising in Eastern Europe, by appealing to international agreements. So this is why I evolved. And then Havel and others used these provisions not just as a safety valve, but as an objective that they could attain, and that they could mobilize the world's pressure on their behalf by their conduct inside the country. And this went beyond our expectations, though we were of course delighted by the outcome.

MR: So, before we get to that point that you were talking about, how do you view Charter 77, as one of those consequences of what we have just been talking about?

HK: I think it was a turning point in the history of Central Europe and of Europe.

MR: ... That led eventually to the fall of communism?

HK: Yes.

MR: Well let me ask you one provocative question— who defeated communism? Was it more Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, or was it more Havel and Walesa, and the likes?

HK: Well, I don't think Havel and Walesa could have had the reactions if it had not been for Reagan and Mrs. Thatcher. But I think Havel and Walesa deserve the ultimate credit, because they had the courage to stand up to a totalitarian system, and they ran the risk of debt to their personal safety, and we did not, when we were pushing for these human rights provisions, think it possible that the people of Eastern Europe would use them this creatively. That was a pleasant surprise to us.

MR: In hindsight, do you think that something along the lines of a Marshall Plan after the Second World War – if something like that was established in the 1990s in Europe, that it would help Central Europe and Eastern Europe way more, and that we wouldn't see some of those maybe negative tendencies now, and that the development would be faster?

HK: Well, by the late 1970s, the economies of several of the Western countries were under strain. But theoretically, of course, I agree that if Eastern Europe could have evolved more rapidly, it might have been... Many of the problems would have certainly been eased.

MR: Havel was a strong supporter of a unified Europe, there's no doubt about that. How do you think that he would view the current disintegrational tendencies?

HK: He would regret that Europe is occupying itself with essentially bureaucratic debates, and that it doesn't understand the historic mission of creating a European identity that could participate in international affairs as a principle, rather than an economic adjunct.

MR: So what can be done so that Europe doesn't fall into this so deeply?
Or so we can avoid his dream not coming true?

HK: It needs inspirational leaders, and the tendency of modern governments is to focus on the immediate problems, to seek practical solutions, but to forget that societies need dreams and not only practical issues.

MR: You're the most influential foreign policy thinker in the United States, you see these things in perspective...

HK: Well you know how to get to my good side!

MR: [Laughs] So how can you change this? How can you make leaders more responsible in the long term? Where do you get those leaders?

HK: I don't know a practical solution to that. I have been advocating – but this is not relevant to your immediate question – but I have been urging our educational institutions to give more emphasis to a study of history, and to the relationship of events to human aspirations. So much of our educational system is now focused on technical issues and in fact the teaching of history as sequential events has almost been abandoned. History is now taught as a series of practical problems that had different answers at different times, but not as a stream of events. But a full answer would have to be tied to the Internet, to learning from pictures, rather than from books. It's a cultural problem.

MR: Do you see that in Western society as such?

HK: I see that in Western society as such. Maybe more in America than Europe, but with Europe being on the same basic curve as America.

MR: What do you see the relationship between the United States and Europe to be in the foreseeable future – with the new administration here, with so many things happening in Europe, with so many things happening quite differently than Mr. Havel would have thought?

HK: Well, in fact, I agree with Trump that the relationship between Europe and the United States should be redefined. I do not agree that it should be done on the basis of a threat of American withdrawal. It should be done, but on the basis of learning the lessons of our experiences from the last two decades, of the changed nature of the economies of the countries, and of the concerns that have arisen. But for the purpose of maintaining and indeed strengthening the Atlantic relationship. Now I'll take one more question, and then I'll have to go.

MR: Given your background in Central Europe – do you think that Central Europe should be afraid of Russia under the Trump administration?

HK: That America should be afraid?

MR: No, Europeans – Central Europeans should be afraid of Russia with the new administration in the United States?

HK: The question implying that the new administration will increase the threat?

MR: I'm not implying anything. I'm just asking whether you think that Central Europeans will not be able to rely as much on the United States as they have been – rightly or wrongly – able to recently...

HK: If the United States abandons its allies in Central Europe, it will have abandoned its international role. And I cannot imagine, nor do I think it is possible that, no matter what is said in a political campaign, an American president will even imply that the American commitment to the defense of NATO could be altered.

MR: Doctor Kissinger, thank you so much for your time and your thoughts. Thank you.