

Interview between Carl Gershman and Lenka Kabrhelová:

Biography: Carl Gershman was born in New York City in 1943. He has been president of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) for more than 30 years. The organization describes itself as an American, congressionally-funded institution aiming to “strengthen democratic institutions around the world through non-governmental efforts.” In this *Havel Conversations* interview, Gershman singles out Cuba, China, Russia and North Korea as countries currently of particular interest.

Gershman first met Václav Havel following the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, on a visit the then-Czechoslovak president made to the United States. While Gershman suggests he never knew Havel “personally very well,” he stresses that the NED and the Havel administration developed a mutually beneficial relationship over the years that followed. Gershman remembers with particular fondness an event the NED organized with Havel at the Library of Congress in 2007 at which dissidents from around the world spoke. Here, he also reflects upon written contributions Havel made to the NED’s journal, and a memorial service his institution organized for Havel in Washington, D.C. in 2012.

Gershman suggests he frequently finds himself quoting from Havel’s writings and that he has increasingly identified with Havel’s legacy over the course of his own “political evolution since the 1980s.” He states that he finds Václav Havel’s ideas on individual responsibility – and the ability of individuals to make a difference – particularly inspiring. Similarly, Havel’s insistence that politics address spiritual as well as material questions resonates strongly with Gershman’s own views.

Keywords: Charter 77, Declaration of Independence, Dissent, Foreign Policy, Forum 2000, Garton Ash (Timothy), Human Rights, Kleptocracy, Legacy (Havel), Lincoln (Abraham), Michnik (Adam), National Endowment for Democracy, NATO, Navalny (Alexei), Palous (Martin), Paya (Oswaldo), Pope John Paul II, Power of the Powerless, Putin, Responsibility, Russia, Solidarity, Syria, Trump, Uncanny Era.

Chapter I: Context – An Archetypal Democrat, 00:00:30

Lenka Kabrhelova (LK): Mr. Gershman, thank you very much for doing this interview and finding time. If I may start from the obvious question: when you think about Václav Havel, what did he mean for you personally?

Carl Gershman (CG): It has a lot to do with my identity. The kind of person I think I am – somebody committed to certain fundamental values. And he was arguably the most articulate representative of those values; he had the ability to write and to speak about them in the most coherent way. There are many moral leaders, but he also was an intellectual, and he wrote. And I strongly identified with him back then but, you know, frankly in terms of my own political evolution since the '80s, I've identified increasingly with his legacy and also find myself quoting from things that he wrote or said repeatedly to try to explain what's important today. So, very central...

LK: Do you still remember the time that you met him for the first time?

CG: You know, it's interesting. I can remember but, you know, I did not really know him personally very well. I knew the people around him, and those relationships have developed. I did have meetings and, I think it was around when he came here in 1990, we had a remarkable meeting. It was sort of very funny, in a way; the NED [National Endowment for Democracy] was always

controversial in the Congress and we had difficulty getting our budget, but in January of 1990 (you know like right after the revolution), Ivan Havel came along with Martin Palouš, and we brought them around the Congress. And there was one senator who... He was from South Carolina, and he always wanted to kill the NED. In other words, in the beginning, NED was very controversial. And nobody could understand what it was, why we were doing anything, you know? There were all sorts of arguments from both the left and the right. And we always had our battles. And I took Ivan and Martin into see this senator who had said (and this is sort of imitating his South Carolina accent), he always used to say 'NED is dead!' And he wanted to kill it. And when I brought them in, he was so impressed, he was so taken with it, he said 'Why didn't you tell me about this?' You know, 'Tell me what you want!' And we had a friend after that. And so that is how we would help in Czechoslovakia, and they would help us, because we had battles here, and we always saw ourselves helping each other. And so the relationship, you know, was very close with people around him. And then today, for example, we work closely with Forum 2000. I work with Šimon Pánek, Jakub Klepal, you know, Tomáš Pojar, Igor Blaževič. These are all people that are core parts of the work that we do. And so I find that growing.

I've thought about it, and I know Havel was close with Oswaldo Paya. I never knew Paya. I never met him. When we organized the memorial service for Havel here, actually on the anniversary of Charter 77 – it was January 6, 2012 – we had a big memorial service, and we got a video message from Paya, which was beautiful. Really a beautiful, beautiful tribute. And we had published dialogues, in our journal we had published dialogues between Paya and Havel. But you know, I never... Just this, I didn't feel like I knew Havel closely, I didn't know Paya. And then, six months later, Paya was really killed by the Cuban government. And since then, I've gotten to know his daughter and, you know, really to work closely with his daughter, who is emerging as a very

important activist, and even today I'm going to be taking her to the Congress, because we are hoping to get the street in front of the Cuban Embassy here named after her father, and there are a lot of senators that are pushing that and so I am accompanying her to some meetings today. But, you know, we are working very closely, and I feel there is a parallel. In other words, I feel spiritually and intellectually close to Havel and close to Paya, but I am actually now working with the people who are the children of Havel and Paya, and that's somehow my role as an activist, to connect with such people.

LK: What do you think it is about Václav Havel that means he is still relevant, and that there are these children, who you are sort of mentoring right now? And what is it for you? What are the main traits?

CG: You know, it is interesting as to why what he represented is so durable. And you know, he represented something very profound. You know, he was not a polemicist, he really was not very political, in a certain sense. He had a much deeper understanding of humanity, of the kind of problems that we face, which reflected in his art. It's reflected in his humor – he didn't take himself too seriously. I mean, he understood the complexity of all the problems we are facing. And in that sense, you know, he was not so much a political Democrat, but he was a human democrat. He also had – and this is also very important to me – he had a sense of the importance of what goes beyond everyday life, of the transcendent. He talked about it all the time; he was not a religious person, but he understood that somehow we are not just here to satisfy our own needs, there is something deeper about who we are; what he would call a sense of responsibility, of what he said was living in truth. And that's pretty deep.

And, you know, one can say that it was relevant only under communism, but that's not true. And what we are finding today as we are, all of our societies are deeply, deeply troubled today, we are

finding that we have to discover what it means to live in truth in our own societies where we have formal freedoms, but the real challenge is how to understand freedom; not just as freedom from being repressed, but freedom to be a responsible human being. And I think he talked about that, he understood that, he was very skeptical of, you know, all this celebration of democracy after 1989, because he anticipated all the problems, not just the external problems like Russia, but the internal problems, the spiritual problems. In that book, you know, *An Uncanny Era*, that Michnik put together, he refers to – and Michnik is extremely secular – but he refers to Havel as *homo religiosus*, who had a deep, deep understanding and respect for Pope John Paul II, and what he represented. I mean, Havel said (I think in that book) that the state is the work of people, but the person is the work of God. I mean, those are deep thoughts. This is not just a political person speaking who represents a certain political message; he represents something fundamental about who we are as human beings, and what we have to do to make our societies successful and durable. Because with all the triumphalism about democracy after 1989, no one feels comfortable about the future of democracy today. We know we have to earn it; we have to work at it, all the time. And that's sort of what Havel means to us today.

LK: It's of course a very universal message, as you say, but despite that, do you see some specifics which would connect to his background, to the Czechoslovak background? Is he in any way different, or does it somehow shape his message?

CG: That what?

LK: That he was from Czechoslovakia? His own Central European background?

CG: Well, you know, I mean, there's that famous passage in that book about Jan Patočka, and he would talk about the difference between being from a small country with the ability to speak about universal values versus small-mindedness, and that kind of conflict. And he had the ability to, even

though he was from a small country, speak to universal truths and universal values, and that made that small country relevant in a much, much larger way. Not just because he's from Central Europe and the struggles that were taking place in Central Europe, but because he was able to connect with certain fundamental truths about humanity. And I think what he stood for is a standing rebuke, and I think that Patočka said that as well, to people today who have a much narrower view of what life is about, and what Havel would call an unbridled self-interest, greed, focusing inward and not outward. And I think it ultimately diminishes the Czech Republic, you know, in terms of only being associated with small, internal values. But I think we are all dealing with that problem today. You know, this is a period when people are elevating the idea that we should only be concerned with ourselves. Whereas Havel understood that living in truth had something to do with responsibility. And we have to rediscover that and understand why that also is in our self-interest. I mean, you don't serve your self-interest only by serving yourself – that's really what Havel was talking about. And I think that's why people remain, continue to be, interested in him.

LK: When we talk about his works and you say that you are still, even today, quoting from him...

CG: All the time!

LK: ...Which ones are the ones that inspired you the most?

CG: The words? Well obviously, 'living in truth,' *The Power of the Powerless* – to understand what that means... And this notion that we can't by ourselves change the world. I mean, these problems are so complex, are so big; and in a way they are more complex and larger than they were under communism. I think the problems today, as we think about the complex problems today... But you have to behave as if it were in your power to do so. That's a profound thing to say, you know? That you can have an effect, even though it doesn't look like you are having an effect. If you think about the way that social changes come about, they accumulate with small acts

over time. And everybody can make a difference. And so he really speaks to the power of individuals to have an effect by living in truth. I remember after the revolutions of 1989, there was a meeting in Poland. And one of the people at the meeting – I think it was Timothy Garton Ash – said something to the effect that under communism there was living in truth, but now that we are beginning to have democracy, we are working in half-truth. In other words, democracy is different, it is messy, you have to make compromises, you have to do all those things. But I think that what we've discovered, especially today, when democracy is in such crisis today, not just in the non-democratic parts of the world, but in the democratic world, that you have to learn what it means to live in truth in a democracy, in order for that democracy to succeed. And so the truths that Havel was talking about were not just relevant to communism, and then you have to understand why they continue to be relevant today.

LK: He was very much trying to reach a Czech audience, of course a world audience, but a Czech audience especially about this.

CG: And he was worried about that. He was worried about that. In a way that we didn't understand, you know. He was worried about us, he was worried about us, because he saw the potential for decadence – of course he saw it, and greed, and self-interest, and materialism, and the loss of any sense of the transcendental. He saw that. He also saw the complacency. He worried. You know, people who lived under communism, but not all of them, of course, but a lot of people who lived under communism, understood the danger, understood the potential for totalitarianism, and also – in the Central European context – understood what it means to have a dangerous neighbor. And he really, really worried about that, and he tried to alert people in the West who were extremely complacent about what it means, about what Russian means to the world, you know. And I think it was one of the interviews he gave in 2008; he was referring to having read a book by Anna

Politkovskaya and Litvinenko, he said it made his hair stand on edge, and yes it would, if you actually know what you are dealing with here, and how dangerous it is. And how easy it is to be complacent. He worried about the complacency of people who live in stable, affluent societies, and he thought he had a responsibility to alert them. And then he even failed. He failed with us, just as he failed with the Czech people, so we are all part of the problem.

LK: That would be my question: did we fail to understand him, or did he fail to convey the message?

CG: Look, people are just... Not everyone can, you know, be alert to all these values, all these problems, all the time. Humanity has its limitations, we all do. And he was critical of himself, and we have to learn to be... That's what the humor was, self-deprecating humor that Havel had, so it's not being self-righteous but, you know, humanity is flawed, and we all know that, and people are not always going to be able to live in truth. But that still means that it is important to have a model, to try to do that, to know what it means, to know why it's necessary, to know what the problems are that we face. And I think we are beginning to understand that the problems that we face are far more serious than we thought, and more complex than they were during the Cold War. I mean, they were dangerous problems during the Cold War, extremely dangerous, but issues were a little bit clearer then. Today, you know, with globalization, a borderless world, immigration; these are much, much more complex and difficult problems, and there's a lot of alienation, there's a lot of people feeling that they are not connected to political leadership, to political reality. How do you reconcile issues of sovereignty and community with globalization? These are tough problems.

LK: When we go back to Havel and all the roles he took in life; he was a playwright, he was a dissident, he was a prisoner, he was then a president, and an international figure, and almost a sort of rock star. In which one of the roles do you think he was most comfortable?

CG: Probably as a dissident, and as a playwright. I mean, that's who he was, and he was sort of thrust into the role of political leadership. And he exercised it very well, but really, you know, events thrust him into that, not his own personal ambitions. I remember he was here in 2007, he was at the Library of Congress, so he was here. And he wanted to, we thought of having, a big event at the Library, which we organized with him. First, we thought it would be a dialogue among intellectuals, and so we started laying out a program. But the more we thought about it, the more it became clear that it had to be a dialogue with dissidents, and that's what it was in the end. And this was in February of 2007, I remember it well. And so we brought together a group of eight dissidents; two of them were from Iran, one was a Uighur from China, there was somebody from Cuba, there was somebody from Belarus, there was even somebody from North Korea, you know. And he was just in the audience there, and loving it! And loving it. We gave him our democracy service medal afterwards, so there was a certain ceremony, but it was a great event. And then he sort of repeated that in June of 2007; he loved it so much that he repeated it by having a big meeting with [Natan] Sharansky, and Bush came to that meeting, and Bush still remembers that meeting. You know, we are now approaching the tenth anniversary of that, and I think the Bush Center wanted to do something on that occasion. But he just loved the dissidents, and he felt that he could identify with them.

LK: How did he strike you as a person? What was he like?

CG: Shy. Modest. You know, he was humble. He had no great sense of his own self-importance. But obviously, he had great courage, he had imagination, determination, all those qualities. And

you know, in a way, he was the archetypal democrat – small ‘d-’ democrat. You know what it means to be a democrat; those types of qualities, what it means to live in a democracy, in a pluralistic society, and the need to have to work with other people, to compromise, to live together.

LK: Do you think he was enjoying the sort of very welcoming approach in the US which he got every single time when he came over here?

CG: Did he enjoy it? I hope he did! I mean, we did have some contact with him when he was here in 2006 and 2007. We did a big event up in New York on North Korea which he was part of. I think he was the first meeting that the secretary general of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, had (because Martin Palouš was the ambassador to the UN) on North Korea. And then he spoke with Ban Ki-moon about North Korea. You know, yes, he was kind of a rock star; that probably embarrassed him, but he appreciated America. He appreciated what I would call ‘The Real America.’ The America of our Declaration of Independence, the America of our constitution, the America of the core values that we represent, but sometimes we forget. Maybe he helps us remember those values.

Chapter II: From Dissident to President – 00:20:36

LK: When you mention him being comfortable in the role of a dissident and the relevance today for other dissidents, where do you see the relevance, for example, of Charter 77 today?

CG: Well, you know, after we had the memorial meeting for Havel here, at the NED, on the anniversary of Charter 77, because Havel died on December 18, and the anniversary was January 6, and so even though we rushed it, we wanted to do it on the anniversary. And then after that the Czech ambassador here was so impressed he said ‘You’ve got to do something every year on the anniversary! And what is its relevance to other movements?’ So the first year we did something on Belarus, and you know, it’s a divided opposition; how do you get people together around

common principles? And then the next year we did it on Cuba – we tried to do it on Ethiopia... I think it has some relevance to that, in other words: how do you unify a movement around core values and common principles? And it's very, very important to think about that. And, by the way, when we did this, there was a meeting in Minsk and in other places and you know, how do we build on that legacy of Charter 77? So I think it does have a certain relevance to movements today that are trying to figure out how do we act, how do we move forward in a very closed and repressive and difficult situation?

LK: And when we move back to the times of the Cold War, how important was Charter 77 back then?

CG: Well, you know, it was one of the key movements – it was not Solidarity, a mass movement. It was something different, and in that way it was very Czech and Slovak. It was dissidents, more. But it was part of this movement and, as we know, you know, there was a special relationship between the dissidents of Charter 77 and the Polish dissidents. And through the essay, *The Power of the Powerless*, he was able to transmit a certain understanding of how you can have influence and effect the situation under communism. And it was said by Poles who in the late '70s were extremely depressed and discouraged, it gave them hope; it gave them a sense that they had power and that they had influence and that they could shape the situation. Obviously it was also helped by Pope John Paul II, but it had a real influence, and so even though you could say that the Polish movement was the mass movement that ultimately was the driving force in, you know, beginning the process of the unravelling of communism, Charter 77 and Havel's ideas had a real effect on that.

LK: What do you think happened with the region, when we talk about Central Europe, that meant it was back then easier to cooperate than it seems to be now?

CG: Well look, in that book, *An Uncanny Era*, which has a lot of dialogues and interviews which took place immediately after 1989, what's interesting is how troubled people like Havel and Michnik were early on about the problems of nationalism, populism, division. You know, Havel said in that book that, I guess, 'politics abhors a vacuum.' And so, when the Cold War ended, that vacuum that was created, that political vacuum, was filled in many respects by nationalism, and people became in a way more divided in that period. And that may be inevitable, and we have to somehow work ourselves beyond that, and it has gotten worse today – it has gotten a lot worse today.

But I think, you know, there'll be countervailing forces and we've got to rebuild a sense of why, you know, in this world that we live in, we need community, we need, in a sense, a healthy nationalism, we need identity, but that doesn't mean we need a malignant nationalism, something which is hostile to others. We need to find a balance between identity and nationalism in that sense, and division, hostility.

LK: Politically, do you think we could see it as a failure of Havel's presidency that he wasn't able to transform society? Or, on the other hand, is it in the power and the strength of one person to change all that?

CG: It's not. It's obviously not. I mean he personally, because he was a person who had a sense of moral responsibility, he might blame himself. But nobody could blame him for that. Those are larger historical forces. And the only thing you can do is to do your best and do the right thing, and to continue to try to do the right thing under these circumstances. You know, there are people who look at an institution like ours, the National Endowment for Democracy, and say 'Things are going so badly, you failed!' You know? We never thought we were responsible for all the successes! You know, all you can do is to try to help. And to try to, then, explain what democracy

is; why it's important, what the values are. And we have to continue to try to do that today, because these things are being forgotten. And frankly, as we do it today, we are consciously, and in a very real, meaningful way, doing it on the basis of the Havel legacy. In other words, we are in the process, even as we speak now, of gathering together a new international coalition of intellectuals to affirm democratic values at a time when democracy is on the defensive. And we are doing that in cooperation with Forum 2000, and the founding meeting of this will be in Prague.

LK: But again we are here facing the problem of conveying the message from the intellectuals to the people. How do we do it? Or how do the intellectuals do it?

CG: It's an enormous challenge. It's an enormous challenge. First of all, we have to be very conscious of the problem of elitism. You cannot approach these values with 'These intellectuals have all the wisdom and you have the people, who have no wisdom, and all they have is prejudice.' That kind of an attitude will obviously get you nowhere. I mean, we really have to find ways of understanding what the concerns are of people who feel neglected, who feel that globalization has passed them by, who feel that they have lost a sense of community, lost a sense of identity. Some of them can react in a very hostile way to this, but these issues have to be understood, and intellectuals have to begin to analyze and understand such problems and to begin to figure out how do you connect? How do you revive a sense of commitment to democratic values? You know, intellectuals themselves are a big part of the problem. You have a lot of the kind of intellectuals that George Orwell would criticize, and that Havel would criticize too. People who were utopian intellectuals who wanted to impose their own vision of the world on the masses, and we have to get beyond that. Intellectuals have to become responsible citizens, and part of that is to explain why our core democratic values are important to the wellbeing of all people, and then to engage in dialogue and education to talk about these things. We have to learn how to connect. And that's

going to be a great challenge because it's a difficult and complex period today, and there are forces at work which are very divisive. Forces that contribute to people feeling alienated and marginalized.

LK: Is there something in Havel's works, in his essays or in his speeches, that would give us a lead how to approach it?

CG: Yeah, I think so. I think so. You know, intellectuals have always been very hostile to religion, to nationalism. And he felt that the things that we talk about, the values that we have, would resonate more if we would recognize what, you know, these core values somehow across cultures. People do have an aspiration to recognize that there are transcendent forces in the world, that it is not just [we] who control everything. And he appreciated that, and he said we have to get beyond our just democratic processes, and our materialism - we have to look for something that goes beyond that, and a lot of that, he would say, is the transcendental forces, the transcendental anchor; it's the values that go beyond the everyday life that we have. And how do you make what we are talking about resonate? How do you connect with people who some intellectuals might look down upon because they still believe in these old values? But maybe there's something good about some of the old values. Not all of them, but some of them. And we have to find ways of connecting with people on the basis of those values.

Chapter III: Havel's Foreign Policy - 00:30:14

LK: Your main area is human rights of course, and that was also one of the main focuses of Václav Havel during his time as a politician, but also as a dissident and in his other roles. How do you think Havel's input shifted the way we understand human rights?

CG: Well, I think it's not just human rights, it's also democracy, which is different. You can argue that they are all part of the same larger whole; human rights is obviously more important in a dictatorial situation, because you can't practice democracy... Because Havel moved from the one situation of living in a dictatorship to then trying to build a new democracy. He was able to try to connect these two ideas and these two values. And, you know, we are now discovering that that's a very, very difficult thing to do.

LK: Do you think he found the right balance between reconciliation and being forgiving, and the answer to the broader nation which needed some sort of answers?

CG: Certainly, what he did, he found the right balance. I mean, he couldn't hold Czechoslovakia together, but it was a velvet divorce. And I think he tried to find the right balance between having these values and letting the political and democratic processes play out. You can't control these things; you just have to find... I think the secret is trying to find the right balance always in democracy. And I think he showed a certain pragmatism, as a political leader.

LK: In what ways do you... What would you name?

CG: Well, there was this one incident where he was saying 'What do you do with a law that you?'... As president, he had to approve the law. He approved the law, but then recommended amendments to the law, to try to find the balance. The intellectuals would have had a more purist position. But he understood that purism doesn't work in politics. It may in some ways work in being a dissident, because on some level you have to be uncompromising, and you have to find the truth. But when you are in politics, you have to find ways of reconciling differences and finding compromises. That's just the nature of it. And I think he understood that as a political leader. But these problems continue, the problems are larger; you have a lot of bad actors, who make things a

lot worse. Not to say it's all the fault of the bad actors like Russia. But it is something he was really concerned about and saw the dangers.

LK: Do you see any mistakes he made as a president?

CG: You know, I'm not close enough to it to see how he handled lustration or the separation with Slovakia. I'm sure he made mistakes, and I'm sure he'd be the first to say what they were. But I can't make a list of them. I mean, some people might say that inviting the Dalai Lama to be the first visitor might have been a political mistake in relations with China, but I'm happy he did it!

LK: ...And in terms of foreign policy?

CG: Well, I think it was proper to move on the integration with NATO, even though... It was done in a way that, in my view, was not threatening to Russia, but there was a reaction there. I think he understood what the dangers were. And I remember that when Obama came in, he and about 20 other Central European intellectuals sent Obama a letter just sort of saying 'Don't forget us, and there are still problems here that we want you to be aware of.' When you go back and read that letter and see what has happened since 2009, the period back then seems almost idyllic compared to the way it is right now, and the dangers that have accumulated over time. And there, I think, our country has to take some responsibility. You know, I mean, basically that letter was ignored. And the concerns in that letter were ignored. And the US just withdrew. And, as Havel would say, 'Politics abhors a vacuum.' When we withdrew, some other people filled that vacuum, and that's very, very dangerous. And we live in a much more dangerous world today.

LK: Some critics say that Václav Havel, and also other post-communist leaders in Eastern and Central Europe, were (and I hope I phrase it correctly), that they were sort of victims of American policy; that they didn't understand the internal politics sometimes, in terms of foreign relations.

And they got drawn into political clashes here in the US, for example, with Iraq or other major foreign policy issues. Do you think that was the case?

CG: Victims? Look, they were pro-American – I mean Havel and Michnik and these other dissidents. They understood the dangers. They supported the United States. The United States can make mistakes. And then we just have to do the best we can. We're still learning. There's so many things we have to learn and we have to do better. There are some people, and I'm not saying this was Havel, but there are some people who rely too heavily upon us. Because, you know, in the end the United States has to exercise leadership. And people also have to fend for themselves in this world and can't assume that their problems are going to be solved by the United States, which they won't – we don't have the power or the wisdom to do that. Again, you have to find the right balance there. And we have not. In other words, I think what happened in our own country is that we swing in one direction, then we swing in the other direction. And there are people in Central Europe who can feel like they get buffeted by these very, very sharp swings. And, okay, that's something we have to live with, and we just have to sort of then make our course corrections. We're trying to do that under very difficult circumstances. I guess the one advantage that we have in that process is that we sometimes forget that countries like Russia have their own very severe internal problems. And we have to understand what those are, and we have to understand how to protect ourselves from... And if we protect ourselves successfully against their efforts to aggress or interfere and so forth, I think it will tend to sharpen the internal contradictions in their own systems. And so we have to learn how to do that as well.

I don't necessarily think that the future is bleak. It's reasonable to be discouraged today about certain things that are happening, but we should never forget that dictatorship doesn't work. It can possibly work in the short term, and under certain circumstances, but in the long term, those

contradictions are going to play themselves out. And that goes for China as well as Russia and North Korea and Iran and so forth. If we can remember who we are and try to support our friends and hold together, I think we can get through this difficult period.

LK: When we talk about Russia, I remember Václav Havel was one of the leaders who, in 2011 after the parliamentary elections in Russia and the first major protest, warned the corruption, the cronyism, the whole connection between economical power, politicians, and organized crime is very dangerous, and it is like a cancer, which is spreading further from Russia to the West. Why do you think he saw it so clearly the whole time, because you mention he was warning, even during the late '90s? And no one else did. Or of course people saw it, but leaders didn't feel the urge to act. Why do you think that was the case?

CG: You know, I guess it's inevitable that people are going to assume in the aftermath of the Cold War that you have common interests. You try to work things out. I mean, really nobody fully understood what was going on. There were a few people like Havel, but if you think back, how Putin came to power with these apartment bombings; 293 people killed, and from all the evidence, these apartment bombings were done by the FSB [The Russian Federal Security Service] to create a panic and... Nobody knew who Putin was until those apartment bombings took place. Who would do something like that? I mean, it's shocking! I mean, when you think about it, what you are dealing with here. And so it was dangerous from the very beginning. And you know maybe people didn't do enough in the '90s when there were some openings to try to help and encourage more. But these are very, very difficult things to do, and I am not the first one to cast blame. But you know that Havel had a clear view on these things.

We organized a meeting in Ukraine in 2009 and he sent a message, and he was really saying it's suicidal for Europe to subordinate human rights to the economic deals they were making on energy

with Russia. Suicidal. And he was deeply, deeply worried about that. I didn't realize that, from what you say, he understood the problem of what we now call 'kleptocracy' (rule by thieves), which is a central pillar of modern authoritarianism, and which is something we are looking at very, very closely today. Because it effects our democracy. Because if they steal tens of billions of dollars, tens of billions of dollars, which they have done – and all the evidence explains, the book by Karen Dewisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy*, and the recent report of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, which documented 20 billion dollars, but it is probably more like 80 billion dollars – what do they do with that money? They invest it in our institutions, in our financial system. We take the money and we protect it – first it gets laundered, it gets protected, invested, it can grow. And then what do they do with that money? In addition to buying very fancy properties, they can influence and corrupt our own democracy with that money.

We have to understand what that is, and we have to find ways to prohibit that. I mean, we can talk all we want about how much we support democracy and how we oppose authoritarian systems but, with the other hand, we are actually helping those authoritarian systems by taking their money and protecting it and investing it. And there are things we can do about that. But we have to look at how to do that, how to change possibly our own laws on the kind of money that we will accept. We need to have all the companies that may want to invest money; we need to know who's owning those companies. Anonymous companies are very, very dangerous. Shell banks. We have an international financial system that works to the advantage of a lot of corrupt people in the world today. These are complex problems. I think we can address these problems, and it is important that someone like Havel at an early stage understood this. Because he understood what Russia and what the Putin system was like. But it's not just Russia and Putin. It exists all across Africa and China. It's part of the modern world in which we live – the new, what we sometimes call, resurgent

authoritarianism in the world today. I sometimes imagine what would Havel's role be in... It's a more complex thing. He wouldn't have all the answers, but I think he would be able to point in the right direction.

LK: What do you think his recommendations would be?

CG: I think it's a lot of what a lot of us are trying to do right now. I mean, there are so many problems, dealing with kleptocracy but also, something that he might have been more... You know, I don't know what he could have done, but how do you revive democratic commitment, democratic conviction? The spirit of democracy. How do you do that? How do you understand what democracy is, and why it is vulnerable? And how can we talk among ourselves to try to develop strategies for, you know, defending democracy, and strengthening it in the world today? There are both external problems, like Russia, but there are also internal problems – real, deep internal problems. And then there is the context in which we live today, the context of globalization. The context of a borderless world, which makes people feel very, very uneasy. I mean I think he would have, obviously – I mean, he wouldn't have had all the answers, but he would have been an important part of the conversation.

LK: You mentioned the trend which we can follow in many countries of sacrificing human rights for economic gain, for example in relations with China, in relations with Russia, and other countries as well. How dangerous is that in terms of foreign policy, and in terms of preserving democracy?

CG: Well, you know, Havel said it was suicidal. And that's one of the quotes I've used a lot! We have to understand why it doesn't serve our interests, and what the nature of these systems is. And the possibilities in these systems for change. I mean we want to... Look, you've got to preserve world peace, you've got to get along with other countries, but there are forces at work in the world,

and we can influence those forces. Maybe gradually, and over the long term, but we can influence those forces. We shouldn't forget that there are people in China who don't want a kleptocratic system. Look at what just happened in Russia, really, with the Navalny demonstrations on March 26. These were demonstrations against kleptocracy, and who was demonstrating? Young people. That's the most amazing thing.

Somebody sent me a video from a high school in the small town of Bryansk, which is 350 miles southwest of Moscow, and one of the students in this high school had tried to recruit young people to participate in the demonstrations (so it took place right in March), and then the principal came to the school to lecture the students, and to tell them that they have to support true patriotism. True patriotism. And one of the kids filmed this with an iPhone. And there's a transcript of this, it's a nine-minute video, and it's a remarkable video. These are 15-, 16-year old kids. What is clear from this is that Putin, and the Russian leadership, have lost these kids. They only know Putin, because Putin has been there for over 17 years right now. They only know Putin. And at one point the teacher says to the students 'Well, what is it that you want?' And they say, 'Well, we want justice.' 'What do you mean by justice?' 'Well, we want leaders who actually represent us, and don't steal from us.' That's a pretty good definition of justice! These are kids, in Russia. So in other words, there is something innate, there is something inherent, that's a certain source of hope. And even in Russia, where you can really get into a lot of trouble for taking to the streets to protest kleptocracy – it's a dangerous place – thousands went out, and thousands are going to continue to go out. And they kill people for protesting; we know it happened to Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Nemtsov and Natasha Estimirova, and Magnitsky, and so forth. And we should never forget these people, and they exist also in China, and they exist in Iran, and they exist in Azerbaijan, and they exist in Cuba, and they exist in all these places. And that's sort of the reason for hope.

Chapter IV: Current Affairs Through Havel's Lens, 00:48:33

LK: What do you think the new American administration's approach will be in this regard? So far, we don't know yet, we are not even at 100 days of Donald Trump's presidency, but at the same time, there are the proposed cuts to the State Department. Do you see hope over there?

CG: Look, I never give up hope! But it's a difficult period. It's a difficult period. But I think there is a learning process that is taking place, you know. Because here you have 'America First!', but all of a sudden Syria uses chemical weapons on its people in Syria, and the US responds. Okay – how does that connect to 'America First'? You can argue that it is in our vital interests, but that wouldn't have been said maybe a few months ago. There's going to be a learning process. And, you know, we have an open society, we can talk about these issues, we can debate. And there are some good people in the administration who understand these problems, I think. And we have to continue to try to move forward. And I think we will. I just don't think there's any reason to assume there is just no possibility for progress.

LK: Do you think Syria has been a turning point for Trump's presidency and his understanding of the role?

CG: Well, it just happened yesterday with the strike, but I think, right now it strikes me as... Look, I'm speaking as an individual now, the National Endowment for Democracy is not a policy institution, but I think there cannot be impunity when you use chemical weapons on people of this kind. And I think before when nothing was done, that reinforced some very bad forces in the world, and I think this could conceivably have a positive impact if it is followed up, and if you have coherent policy. And we are a long way from that right now.

LK: I know that it is very complicated to say ‘What would Václav Havel think of current affairs?’ of course, but at the same time, when we have problems like Syria for example, which are so complicated, and so messy, what do you think his solution would be? Or where would he stand?

CG: Well, look, he would certainly understand the connection between allowing the Syrian situation to deteriorate, the way we all did, and the consequences, which are not just the suffering of the Syrian people and the destruction of the country, but millions of refugees which then try to come to Europe and exacerbate all kinds of problems in Europe, and the rise of populism and so forth. And I think we all need to develop a sense of understanding of those problems – the interconnectedness of these problems – and I think he would certainly be a voice that would, on the one hand, you know, want to be generous toward people who were suffering, but also understand that the core of the problem are the vacuums that were allowed to exist. And you then have this imploding of a country. And you know, again, you have to find a kind of middle ground here. But at the core of the problem is we have to do more to, frankly, support democracy.

You know the Russian chess champion Garry Kasparov recently testified to the US Congress and gave a brilliant speech about how all these problems that we see, from conflict to refugees and so forth, are so related to the breakdown of political order. And we just have to find ways of, not withdrawing, but working with friends to reinforce the political order, and to try and then use our influence and power to try to get certain countries that are violating certain rules to observe those rules.

LK: When we talk about Russia, how do you personally see the whole problem of Russia meddling in the US elections?

CG: Well this is a national... There are all sorts of investigations going on about this right now, and it’s part of the new world in which we live. The world of social media, where that is possible,

and they will do it. And so we have to find ways of protecting ourselves against that. You know, and there are a lot of things that are being done. We're supporting a lot of initiatives to try to expose fake news, and to track the ways these stories can get around. And then how do we... You know, it's not just a matter of criticizing, you've got to protect yourself in the new world we're operating in in a way that never existed before. Just as the internet can have a lot of positive consequences, because of the way it connects people and shares information and raises awareness and all of that, it also can obviously be misused and abused. It is being done, and not just by Russia, but by China and by Iran and by others. And we have to begin to develop ways of understanding these new forces and how to deal with them. You know, you can actually track where fake news is coming from, and how it's being promoted by fake websites and bots and trolls and all sorts of things. And then you've got to try to increase what we call 'media literacy.' I mean, democracy requires an educated citizenry, so you've got to work very hard at that. It could be that this will have a backlash and it'll make it a little bit easier to deal with the problem. I think a lot of the problems we're having today – there will be a reaction to this. So there are opportunities out there, in a way, because of the problems that we have.

LK: So what sort of reactions do you think there will be?

CG: Well, I mean people are certainly going to be more aware of the dangers; they don't like this kind of meddling in our system. I think it will be counterproductive from Putin's point of view.

LK: But at the same time a lot of the information was out there. We all knew that Russia hacked the servers of the Democratic Party before the convention, so a lot of that information was there, in reach of people, and yet it seems the electorate didn't care about it...

CG: Well you know, we don't know what the impact was on the election of all of that, but most of the really reliable, professional observers said this was not the reason for the way the election

turned out. But it's a serious problem, and it's a problem that could affect the election in France, that could affect the elections in Germany that are coming up. So this is a very, very big problem, and we have to begin to get our arms around this problem by understanding the nature of the new information world that we live in. And how to deal with these problems? You know, you can have the view of freedom of expression, but if you have deliberate efforts to spread lies and false news, you've got to find a balance between society's commitment to freedom of expression, and how do you protect yourself against this kind of hostile meddling in your system? And I'm sure that our system, you know, will evolve, and I think that there's a role for people who are trying to analyze and understand the new information systems, I mean to develop techniques to navigate this new world of information, to identify false news and all those things.

LK: How do you think Václav Havel would see the rise of Donald Trump and the elections in the US and subsequent elections in Europe, even before... Brexit, for example?

CG: All the people who were his friends are obviously very, very troubled about this. But I think that he would also try to understand larger forces that are at work here and, you know, how do we respond to these forces? In other words, not just sort of throw up your hands, but there are things you can do. And we're, you know, with the organization that Havel created, bringing people together to actually talk about this. And there are things that have to be done on different levels so that it's both... You know, the problems are both external and internal. And we have to operate at both of those levels, and not just sort of blaming the bad guys on the outside. It's also understanding our own internal problems. And they are very, very diverse, these problems, and they are complex. And we don't just need to have better ways of protecting ourselves, but we need to have a moral and an intellectual awakening. It's really large and difficult. But no reason that we shouldn't talk about that and then try to think about how something like that might happen.

LK: So what would be the message for an ordinary person who is troubled by what is happening in the world and in the respective communities, and they want to do something? What would be the message, maybe even based on what you know from Havel and his works?

CG: Well, it depends on where that person is. If you are saying a person in the United States, or a person in Western Europe, or in Europe – Central Europe and so forth – I mean, part of my message is to understand what’s going on in a lot of other places around the world. In other words, in many countries, like the young people who took to the streets in Russia, or I know who some of these people are in so many other countries; these are people who are not cynical about democracy, who are not jaded, because yeah, we have democracy, but life is not perfect, we still have troubles – okay, these are people who are fighting for these fundamental values. And one of the things I would like to do is to connect more the young people in this high school in Russia with young people in a high school here, have them know who they are. And have students here begin to connect with, and somehow know, understand, and maybe support some of the people who are in these struggles. And that can happen.

In other words, I think there is a hunger for this type of engagement, and there are ways to do it. And you come back to the famous quote by Havel, you know, that even though it’s... Even though you’re just an individual, don’t think you’re irrelevant. And you have to act as if you are not, as if you can make a difference. And then if enough people do that, there will be a change. And you know, I think that really at the root of what his thinking is here is having a sense of responsibility, and not giving up. Never giving up. He used to say that hope is not a prognostication of the future, it is a dimension of the soul. But then to act upon that. To act upon that, and to find ways of practically acting upon that in the world in which we live. And that can be done. In other words, you take any problem – you can find ways, not to solve the whole problem, but just sort of to take

the first step, and to do something that will move the problem, and then as you do that, you begin to grow and learn, and before you know it, you're engaged and you're no longer just an isolated, marginalized individual, but you're an activist of some kind. And I think it is possible.

My hope is that the problems we have today, the crisis that exists today, will make it more possible for people to act, to find solutions. We don't take it for granted. Sometimes, we have to be hit over the head. Sometimes we have to be hit over the head very hard: Pearl Harbor and 9/11. I don't know that the current crisis is that big, but it certainly has alarmed a lot of people, and they no longer assume that democracy is permanent, that you can take it for granted. We've run some articles in our journal about the possibility of what we call the 'deconsolidation' of democracy. Just as communism collapsed, and nobody thought that communism would collapse; well, when opinion polls start showing a declining support for liberal values and liberal democracy, you can't take democracy for granted. You know, when you have a political system that is somewhat dysfunctional and paralyzed, and people are not taking decisive action, people are going to say 'We need a strongman!' That's just inevitable. You have to make the system work better, you have to become engaged. And you have to be ready to find common ground with somebody you disagree with, not assume that the other person, in a democracy, is just evil, and you can't compromise. You have to try to work to find common ground.

For us as Americans, I think – I try to say this without being sentimental or overly unrealistic – but it comes back to our core values. I mean, you read any speech by Abraham Lincoln; he was always coming back to those core values. He said he was once, when he was traveling to Washington for his first inauguration, he stopped in Liberty Hall in Philadelphia, and he gave this extemporaneous talk (it's a marvelous thing to read), but he said 'Not a single political act I have ever taken has not been influenced by those words of the Declaration of Independence,' that all

men are created equal and endowed with these rights like liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Everything he did, and he said it was not just for us, it was for others, it was for the world. And that we had to solve our problem because if we didn't solve our problem of slavery, then how could we be a model for others? In other words, those are the values that are there, and you have to sort of go back and understand those values. I mean, who was Abraham Lincoln? What did he stand for? And in a way, I think Havel stands in that tradition of Lincoln.