



# The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice

*By Václav Havel*

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## **The Art of the Impossible: Politics as Morality in Practice** By Václav Havel

There is no shortage of politicians who make a habit of shooting from the hip, but it is much rarer to find one who speaks from the heart. Václav Havel knows no other way to speak, or to write. Both as a dissident and as a playwright it was his sworn purpose for many years to combat evil with nothing but truth. As president of Czechoslovakia, and now of the Czech Republic, he has clung to that habit, refusing to turn over either his conscience or his voice to political handlers and professional speechwriters. Instead he assumes the additional burden--for him, it is a distinct pleasure--of composing all of his oratory. Audiences from New York to New Delhi, Oslo to Tokyo, have been the luckier for his decision.

This volume consists of thirty-five of these essays, written between the years 1990 and 1996, that manage to be both profoundly personal and profoundly political. Havel writes of totalitarianism, its miseries and the nonetheless difficult emergence from it.

He describes how his country and the other postcommunist countries are learning democracy from scratch and are encountering obstacles from inside and out. He marvels at the single technology-driven civilization that envelops the globe, and the challenges this presents to multicultural realities. He invokes the duty of every person alive to prevent hatred and fear from derailing history ever again. He acknowledges "the advantage it is for doing a good job as president to know that I do not belong in the position and that I can at any moment, and justifiably, be removed from it." And he reminds us that--contrary to all appearances--common sense, moderation, responsibility, good taste, feeling, instinct, and conscience are not alien to politics, but are the very key to its long-term success.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

This collection of 35 essays written by the Czech playwright and human rights dissident who became the president of his country in 1989, focuses on the challenges facing an East learning democracy from scratch and a West unused to the multicultural complexities this process involves. Their organizing principle is that what is necessary now in politics and statecraft is the reaffirmation of values. "It will certainly not be easy," Havel writes, "to awaken in people a new sense of responsibility for the world, or to convince them to conduct themselves as if they were to live on this earth forever and be answerable for its condition one day. Who knows how many cataclysms humanity may have to experience before such a sense of responsibility is generally accepted? But this does not mean that those who wish to work for it cannot begin at once." The best vehicle for pulling this off, Havel says, are "those organisms that lie somewhere between nation-states and a world community." What he has in mind are "regional communities" like NATO, world organizations like the U.N., and another force that he thinks might be the best suited of all for this task--the mass media.

#### From Library Journal

Havel is the president of the Czech Republic as well as a dramatist and human rights activist, and this book presents approximately 35 of his speeches and writings given from 1990 to 1996. The selections are well chosen and illustrate how this postmodern politician has continuously tried to establish links among modern society, politics, and fundamental spiritual values both at the individual and collective levels. Havel believes strongly that spiritual and moral values must form the bedrock of all intergovernmental organizations, and he laments that politicians have become captives to the mass media to the point where Western electorates feel detached from their political systems. His spiritual journey combines his dramatist background and unique perspective on politics and politicians. An excellent book that will demand from readers invidious comparisons with their own political system and leaders, this is a terrific choice for all libraries. ?Stephen W. Green, Auraria Lib., Denver  
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#### From [Booklist](#)

If speaking truth to power remains an ultimate test of political (and moral) courage, then Havel, the longtime dissident elected president of Czechoslovakia in 1989, now president of the Czech Republic, is as brave as he is famously eloquent. A playwright and essayist before he became a politician, Havel crafts his own speeches, which blend a deep philosophical commitment to democracy and civil society with a commonsensical insistence that both West and East are scarred by the tragedies of the past half-century, that *both* must change to produce a more peaceful and humane international environment. Although many of the speeches in this collection were delivered as Havel accepted international awards and honorary degrees, others challenge their audiences (and readers) on issues of controversy, from the Holocaust and the atomic bomb to the slaughter in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the changes needed if Western Europe's security arrangements are to be expanded to include former Communist states. Always, Havel insists, what human beings share must override the ideas and issues that divide them. *Mary Carroll*

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**Brent Cook:**

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