**Václav Havel’s Views on Politics and Commitment**  
  
**Introduction**  
  
Václav Havel (1936 - 2011) was a Czech writer, playwright, dissident, human rights activist and politician. He was the last president of Czechoslovakia (1989 - 1992) and the first president of Czech Republic (1993 - 2003). Havel became famous outside Czechoslovakia first as an author of philosophical plays and essays, and later - as the leader of anticommunist movement of Czechoslovakia, who contributed a lot to the country’s peaceful transition to democracy.   
  
In this essay I am going to analyze Havel’s views on politics and commitment and to evaluate his political and social engagement according to the major concepts of intellectualism.   
  
The year 1968 was critical for the history of Czechoslovakia. Following the so-called «Prague Spring» (a short period of political and cultural liberalization of Czechoslovakia) Brezhnev announced the doctrine of limited sovereignty, which lead to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact countries’ troops (also known as *Operation Danube*). In one of his interviews Havel stated that it would be possible to avoid the invasion - not by the military means, but due to «moral mobilization», similar to the measures undertaken in Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement in 1938. The invasion was not unexpected, as everyone understood that under totalitarian communist rule civil rights and freedoms cannot be given for granted. However, after the intervention ordered by the Soviet authorities, Havel became one of the leaders of Czechoslovak dissident movement. Of course, he could have emigrated, but he chose a different path instead - he decided to fight for his ideas. He wrote an open letter to Gustáv Husák (the Secretary General of the central committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia) where he was talking about the discord prevailing in the Czechoslovak society and pointed at the permanent nature of political crisis in the country. He stated that the driving force of the Communist rule was fear, and he warned Husák that the shell of communism will begin to crack one day.  
  
In 1977 Havel and a group of other Czechoslovak dissidents published so-called *Charter-77* - a public declaration of human rights, which immediately gained worldwide support. The government at the same time issued a reactionary document named *Anticharter* which was signed by numerous representatives of Czechoslovak cultural and political elites. The dissidents seemed to be powerless, they lacked broad people’s support and did not possess enough means to start a full-fledged campaign against the authorities. However, the Velvet Revolution of 1989 showed that many people were ready to follow Havel, they just had no opportunity to express their points of view under Communist rule. Of course, Havel was constantly persecuted, which only meant that the Communist regime admitted that he can be a serious hazard.   
  
Havel identified himself, above all, as a writer. Although the Communist authorities regarded his works as senseless, he was given several prestigious literary awards, including the Erasmus prize as well as being included in the Royal Society of Literature.  
  
Havel himself stated that the collapse of communism brought a new postmodernist epoch - an epoch of non-doctrinal pluralistic thinking.[[1]](#footnote-1) Such way of thinking prevents conflicts, provides multiple views on the same topics, and suggests many solutions and opportunities for resolving certain political and social problems. Havel was a true committed intellectual, which can be proven by the fact that his social involvement corresponded with major existing theories on commitment. Havel’s works analyzed in Chapter 1 also illustrate his positions of active social engagement.

**Chapter 1. Analysis of Havel’s Works.**  
  
Above all, Havel was a writer. His creativity let him avoid oversimplification and populism in his speeches when he was a president. It is worth mentioning that he wrote all his speeches himself using his own writing patterns and thoughts without relying on help of the professional political speech-writers. According to one of Havel’s interviews, he never wrote as much as he did during his presidency. As a writer, he tried to transmit the values common in literature (conscience, morality, spiritual strength) to the political stage and everyday life. Havel’s interest in language is obvious in all his works: he admitted that his plays lacked deep psychoanalytical dimension, but he used his language skills to shape and fashion his works, using common language and social concepts. regarding this question Havel said: « I enjoy writing rhetorical speeches in which nonsense is defended with crystal-clear logic. I enjoy writing monologues in which pure truths are expressed with veracity and subtlety, truths which are pure lies from beginning to end».[[2]](#footnote-2) All in all, the leitmotif present in all Havel’s works is condemnation of totalitarianism (he invented a term «Absurdistan» to ironically describe fictional countries where absurd things have become normal, especially in politics).  
  
Apart from numerous plays, Havel is also known for his philosophical works. Two of his essays - «The Power of the Powerless» and «Politics and Conscience» (1984) deserve detailed analysis, as they are directly connected with the topic of intellectualism and commitment.

«The Power of the Powerless».   
The main lesson carried out in this essay is to live in truth, as Havel stated himself.[[3]](#footnote-3) People should feel responsible for what they say; in other words, they have to fulfill their promises (and never promise something impossible). How can a single person or a small group of intellectuals effectively (but peacefully) confront violence, arbitrariness, lawlessness and brainwashing policies of the authorities? What can we do in order to stop this endless lies and immorality? Václav Havel raises these questions in his essay «The Power of the Powerless» written in 1978 right after the famous *Charter-77* was issued. This essay explains the essence of the *Charter-77,* talking about«the power of the powerless» (dissidents) and «the powerlessness of the powerful» (the government).   
  
In the beginning of the essay Havel is talking about the phenomenon of dissidents and poses a question whether they can change anything. He tries to define, who the dissidents are, what their position is and what are their initiatives about: «Where does their point of view come from, and what importance does it have? What is the significance of the "independent initiatives" in which "dissidents" collaborate, and what real chances do such initiatives have of success? Is it appropriate to refer to "dissidents" as an opposition? What does it do? What role does it play in society?».   
  
Havel stated that under authoritarian regime there must be a resistance of an active minority of intellectuals. In this context Havel tried to find a way for intellectuals to change something under the severe ideological pressure. Havel once stated that the most important thing about his political commitment was that often he was protecting the position of a minority, which did not correspond to a popular concept of politics as a reflection of the views of the majority.  
  
According to Havel, under any circumstances, an honest person is guided by his conscience, which is based on a moral imperative not to «live within a lie» created by the totalitarian system. Havel claims that it suppresses person’s individuality, dignity and freedom: «As long as living a lie is not confronted with living the truth, the perspective needed to expose its mendacity is lacking. As soon as the alternative appears, however, it threatens the very existence of appearance and living a lie in terms of what they are, both their essence and their all-inclusiveness. And at the same time, it is utterly unimportant how large a space this alternative occupies: its power does not consist in its physical attributes but in the light it casts on those pillars of the system and on its unstable foundations». Living the truth, according to Havel, is to be a good example for others. Precisely this ability makes the powerless powerful.   
  
«The Power of the Powerless» is, perhaps, the most important of Havel’s works. This text became a manifesto of the dissidents all over Europe. Living the truth, according to Havel, is not only a theory - it is a real moral action which requires many efforts and sacrifices. In the end, solidarity, love and truth must prevail over hatred and lies. Havel was convinced that ideas can change the world, and this assertion, first expressed in «The Power of the Powerless» became the core of his policy.  
  
Politics and conscience.   
This essay was originally written in 1984 as a speech to be addressed when Havel was given an honorary doctorate of the University of Toulouse, but due to being imprisoned for his dissident activity he was not able to deliver it. In this essay Havel is talking about what he calls antipolitical politics: «I favour “antipolitical politics”, that is, politics not as the technology of power and manipulation, of cybernetic rule over humans or as the art of the utilitarian, but politics as one of the ways of seeking and achieving meaningful lives, of protecting them and serving them. I favour politics as practical morality, as service to the truth, as essentially human and humanly measured care for our fellow humans. It is, I presume, an approach which, in this world, is extremely impractical and difficult to apply in daily life. Still, I know no better alternative». The imperative of «antipolitical politics» proposed by Havel served as a counterbalance to the existing form of Communist bureaucratic rule, which Havel severely condemned. And this principle of moral politics (which somehow confronts with Machiavelli’s concept of *exitus acta probat)* was not only theoretical, as Havel managed to follow this course during his presidency, which made him extremely popular among Czech population. His policy (both foreign and domestic) is admitted to be peaceful and humane; despite that under Havel Czechoslovakia fell apart to Czech Republic and Slovakia, there were no claims regarding territorial integrity or annexation propositions - because it was fair and humane to provide independence for Slovak nation, which strived for it.   
Indeed, some of the thoughts expressed by Havel in this essay appeared to be prophetic. «It is becoming evident that truth and morality can provide a new starting point for politics and can, even today, have an undeniable political power. The warning voice of a single brave scientist, besieged somewhere in the provinces and terrorized by a goaded community, can be heard over continents and addresses the conscience of the mighty of this world more clearly than entire brigades of hired propagandists can, though speaking to themselves». The «single brave scientist» is, of course, Havel himself, and several years after «Politics and Conscience» was written the democratic powers would prevail over Communist authorities in Czechoslovakia, ruining the 40-year-old dictatorship. And it was much due to Havel’s actions as an intellectual, as he never stopped encouraging other people to bring changes into social and political life of his country.   
  
In «Politics and Conscience» Havel reflects on the nature of power and analyzes the typical behaviour of politicians. It appears that Havel did not really support the concept of «politics as a profession». He writes that politicians used to be persons with their own flaws, who were responsible to make hard decisions and be responsible for them. But the totalitarian political system and subordinance to ideology deprived people (including politicians) of consciousness and reasonableness, making them simply inhumane. An illustration can be an image of any modern politician who is more prone to discussions and populist statements than to thoughtful dialogue and accurate consideration of problems. His own (or his party’s) interests are far more important to him than those of the nation. Developing Havel’s thoughts, it can be said that a successful politician is a true intellectual who comes to power due to his high moral qualities and willingness to improve the current situation without manipulating public opinion, without insinuating and trying to please everyone, without making false promises relying on recommendations of his numerous consultants. On the contrary, a successful politician is the one who was elected by the nation because he deserves it, because he possesses internal dignity to represent the nation on the international level, because he knows what the words «honesty», «dignity» and «conscience» mean, and because he has an unusual and deep personality.  
  
In Havel’s last play called «Leaving» a journalist asks a former chancellor which values were the most important to him. And the chancellor replies: «My policy has always been about people. People as free, happy, and constantly self-educating citizens with happy families». Probably, these words can perfectly characterize Havel’s own policy as well, because it is precisely what he meant by his concept of «antipolitical politics»  
  
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In an interview to his old friend, Polish dissident Adam Michnik Havel stated: «It’s not only about the struggle with specific people connected to the old regime, its representatives, or concrete institutions, but above all, about the struggle against the habits of normal average citizens. While they hated the totalitarian regime, they spent their whole lives in it, and willy-nilly, got accustomed to it. They got accustomed to the fact that the omnipotent state towers over them - that the state can do anything, that it takes care of everything6 that it is responsible for everything. They got used to the paternalism of the state, and this habit cannot be shed from one day to the next. All those bad habits that this regime systematically ingrained in the people over many years cannot suddenly disappear. It is a powerful and troublesome legacy, one of the sources of the problems that the post-Communist world has to deal with». Creation of numerous right-wing parties at that time was a normal counterreaction to the Communist rule, but Havel never wanted to engage with them, so he was often regarded as a leftist.[[4]](#footnote-4) Havel always supported democracy, but for a long time considered himself as a socialist, but later he decided to avoid categorization.[[5]](#footnote-5) He wanted other citizens to get involved in political life, to become committed, to follow their ideas and to make a change in favour of a better world.

**Chapter 2. Theoretical Evaluation of Havel’s Commitment**

What characterizes an intellectual? There are various theories to answer this question. Taking into account the notion of an intellectual in European context, it becomes possible to define whether Havel was a committed intellectual. The correctness of this assertion can be proven based on the analysis of the ideas of the three major theorists of intellectualism - Max Weber, Julien Benda and Antonio Gramsci.   
  
As it was stated in the previous chapter, Havel did not really support Max Weber’s theory about «politics as a profession». Weber considered one as an intellectual in terms of profession and vocation. Havel himself was not a professional politician, neither was he a professional intellectual - yes, he was a talented writer and playwright, but he was never taught to be an intellectual (he had a degree in chemistry): still, Havel can be referred to as an intellectual by vocation. However, Havel agreed with Weber regarding other matters: Weber contradistinguished ethics of moral conviction and ethics of social responsibility, whereas in Havel’s view there was an opposition between moral and pragmatism. Weber described politics as the art of compromise and decision-making, which cannot be based only on conviction. Politics, according to Weber, is no realm for saints. On the contrary, the most important, according to Havel, is to follow your moral instincts and conscience, and not to be selfish and avaricious. Moreover, Weber also wrote about honour and consciousness in politics: he stated that a good administrator has a strong sense of duty, that even bureaucracy needs a moral and ethics. All these assertions also correspond with Havel’s views on the organization of political life.  
  
Talking about Julien Benda’s theory about the treason of the intellectuals, it can hardly be said that Havel actually committed such a treason. Yes, undoubtedly, he was mainly focused on real political involvement, on resolving problems of the Czechoslovak nation, but at the same time, his ideas were also concentrated on spiritual progress, namely the issue of moral and conscience in the world of politics. Havel corresponds with Benda’s understanding of an intellectual as someone who protects the values of the mankind - it is the main task of the intellectuals. And Havel devoted his whole life to protection of democratic and liberal values. One more proof that Havel did not «betray» (in Benda’s terms) is that he never adhered to ideology - on the contrary, he would always fight against ideology, bureaucracy and apparat. It is worth mentioning, that Benda in his theory in a certain way contradicts Weber, as he does not accept the concept of intellectuals’ «professionalization», and, as it was stated above, Havel never was a professional politician or a professional intellectual.   
  
Another intellectual theorist, Antonio Gramsci, distinguished between two categories of intellectuals - traditional and organic, depending on their social functions. Traditional (professional) intellectuals, according to Gramsci, are scientists, philosophers, etc. - their intellectualism derives from their class position. On the other hand, organic intellectuals can belong to any class, being its thinking and organizing element. Coming from a wealthy bourgeois family and being a playwright Havel can be called a traditional intellectual in Gramsci’s view, but at the same time, according to his social position he may also be called an organic intellectual, since his aim was directing the ideas and aspirations of Czechoslovak dissidents and members of opposition of the time in fighting against the Communist rule. Unlike Benda, Gramsci thought that a true intellectual has to actively participate in practical life - and that is what Havel always did. It is interesting that Gramsci and Havel both opposed dogmatic communism, they both were leftists and they both were imprisoned for their political views,  
  
There is no doubt that Václav Havel can be called a true committed intellectual. First of all, he devoted his life to resolving a very acute social-political problem, which, to his mind, was suffocating Czechoslovakia for 40 years. Havel stated that it is wrong to «diabolize» the enemy and to «angelize» yourself. It is important to mention that he did not perceive the communists as enemies, his enemy was Communism as a whole. According to Havel, democratic regime does not need the intellectuals to participate in political life as actively as under a totalitarian rule, because democracy implies the freedom of speech, and everybody is entitled to speak his mind. But he believed it is extremely important they the intellectual elites speak out during the post-Communist transition to democracy, as at this time there can be too much populism and misleading promises on the political stage. «I often have an impression that they are more interested in traveling to various conferences and promoting their books abroad than in taking positions on crucial matters».[[6]](#footnote-6) On the contrary, common people should not be necessarily interested in politics, but they should be more active in their local communities, because that is what builds a civil society.

As an intellectual, Havel never was afraid to question the existing norms and ideas accepted in the society. He was brave enough to propose something new and to promote his ideas regardless of prosecution, although it actually threatened his personal freedom and safety. But he was not only suggesting something new, he also tried to *do* something, so he was really involved in the processes that were going on in Czechoslovakia of that time.   
  
Havel was totally against any oppression, he was a great advocate of freedom and equality, and this became one of the main reasons why he decided to «let the Slovaks go», because everyone has the right to be independent and free. The same applied to those who collaborated with the Communist regime: Havel understood that at that time everyone had to contribute to the system.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Without any doubt, there are a lot of possibilities for an intellectual to actually commit. Havel as an intellectual chose the path of political resistance and promoting his ideas peacefully and in a civilized way.

In his essay «The Power of the Powerless» Havel wrote: «The intellectual should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity». This was Havel’s own vision of an intellectual. And it was a precise description of Havel himself. Playwright Havel became the leader of the intellectual resistance against the Communist ideology in Czechoslovakia and (symbolically) in whole Eastern Europe.

**Conclusion**.  
State of mind is extremely important in politics. It defines our perception of the world, it gives us hope. Havel stated that hope and optimism are completely different things: «Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out».[[8]](#footnote-8)  
  
Being lead by moral and ethics in defining his policy, Havel managed to peacefully transit Czech Republic to democracy by abolishing death penalty, conducting economical reforms (transition to market economy), establishing diplomatic relations with the Western countries, and participating in negotiations to join NATO and EU. However, he was severely criticized for his term «humanitarian bombings» in relation to the Yugoslavian war, which was obviously said to support the actions of the USA in the region.  
  
During his presidency, in an article Václav Havel proposed five suggestions to bring some change into the modern world:[[9]](#footnote-9)

* to promote policy of multiculturalism and multipolarity worldwide;
* to be oriented at our common interests, including those of future generations;
* to admit our moral responsibility for today’s world (attention to social, environmental, cultural, political and economic issues);
* to provide equality of states on both global and regional levels;
* to conduct a fundamental reform of the UN.

From Havel’s point of view, an ideal state meant a state characterized by economical and political pluralism, political dialogue and democratic representation. Havel believed that the only way to build a democratic state rules by the law is to build a humanistic, moral, intellectual, spiritual and cultural state. His role in the Czechoslovak transition to democracy was not just that of a political leader: he became a symbol of the new era. He demonstrated the importance of aspirations for freedom and dignity.   
  
According to Havel, he never wanted to be a politician. And he never truly was. First of all, he was an intellectual, a man with high moral standards. He was a talented writer, who appeared to be able to persuade other people to follow him (again, due to his writing and rhetorical skills). His main principles were thoughtfulness, fairness and kindliness, in his policy there was no place for intrigues or greed. Václav Havel proved that a dissident intellectual is able not only to rule the state, but also to change it. The only condition for that is not to lose your conscience.

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2. Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvíždala (*London: Faber and Faber, 1990) pp. 193-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matynia, p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matynia, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Havel, p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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