

VÁCLAV HAVEL AND THE INVASION OF IRAQ

(with Constant Reference to the Soviet-led
Occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968)

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*The fact that I'm not you doesn't free me – at least before my conscience –
from the obligation to assume a position and inform you of it...*

Havel's letter to Alexander Dubček of August 9, 1969¹

Skimming over the front page of their favorite newspaper on Wednesday, August 21, 1968, and skipping the all too familiar masthead “Proletarians of all lands, unite!” the readers of Moscow's Pravda came across news that suddenly made the meaning of that slogan quite relevant: “TASS was authorized to announce,” the official communiqué stated in typical Soviet newspeak, “that the representatives of the Party and the government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic addressed the Soviet Union and other allied governments with a request to provide their brothers the Czechoslovak people with urgent help, including military force.”

¹ Václav Havel, „Dopis Alexandru Dubčekovi z 9. srpna 1969“, in Václav Havel, *Do různých stran*. ed. Vilém Prečan (Prague: Lidové noviny, 1989), pp. 428–441, here 435. The abridged English translation of the letter does not contain this passage; see Václav Havel, “Letter to Alexander Dubček,” trans. A. G. Brian, in Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings 1965–1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage, 1992), pp. 36–49.

This appeal was made because of the threat to the existing socialist order in Czechoslovakia and to established constitutional statehood by contra-revolutionary forces in collusion with external forces inimical to socialism. Invoking “the right of governments to individual and collective self-defense” and “the real interests of the [Warsaw Pact] countries in defending European peace against forces of militarism, aggression, and revanchism that more than once have plunged the European nations into war” (TASS), Comrade Brezhnev could not turn a deaf ear to the heartfelt plea by “the healthy kernel of the CCP,” as the signatories of the letter subsequently became called, and he provided “brotherly assistance” in the form of a half million troops to overthrow the local government so that one more corresponding to the Soviet image could be put in its place.

Some thirty-five years later in yet another paper – with an ideological spin diametrically opposite that of good old Moscow *Pravda* – a letter similar in self-righteous tone and aggressive purport appeared on the editorial page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Entitled “United We Stand,” it was signed by eight European statesmen and more or less regurgitated the United States’ accusations against Iraq to which the UN Security Council had proved so egregiously unresponsive. In the name of values shared with the US, “democracy, individual freedom, human rules and the rule of laws,” they demanded to “rid the world of the danger posed by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction” which, combined with “terrorism, is a threat of incalculable consequence [...] Resolution 1441 is Saddam Hussein’s last chance to disarm using peaceful means,” the letter charged – or else.² Given the military muscle of the eight countries whose leaders issued the warning, such an ultimatum might have at first glance looked rather quixotic. But only if one disregards the implicit addressee of the letter – the man commanding enough power to make Hussein say uncle. If not for the sake of tried and true trans-Atlantic unity then at least to assuage the fears of his allies, George W. Bush had to act. On March 20, 2003, he launched a war against Iraq.

These two letters are an excellent example, I believe, of what linguists call the perlocutionary effect of language: the power of words to have consequences in the real world. A short missive scribbled by a small cabal of men can move military troops across continents, bring tanks into the middle of modern cities with all the consequences that tons of loose might have on human lives. But does the similarity between the two instances of a peculiar epistolary genre go beyond mere formal resemblance? Do these letters have more in common than meets the eye? Such a question might seem frivolous at first glance. Separated by decades and continents, if not by the enormous political change that the world has undergone during intervening decades, including the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the two texts seem utterly incomparable. But not according to Václav Havel! Reminiscing about the Soviet-led invasion of 1968 at

² Jose Maria Aznar, et al., “United We Stand,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 30, 2003 (online at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/extra/?id=110002994> [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

a meeting on the transformation of NATO, he observed: “This [...] experience makes me extremely cautious. It seems to me that whenever we wish to intervene against a particular state in the name of the defense of human life we must always and again – albeit if only for a moment and only in the depths of our souls – ask the question whether this is not, perchance, a version of ‘brotherly assistance’ [...] It is necessary, therefore, to weigh again and again on the finest scales whether we are truly helping people against a criminal regime and defending humankind against its weapons, or whether perchance this is not another – understandably more sophisticated than the Soviet one of 1968 – version of ‘the brotherly assistance.’”³ When some two months later Havel appealed to Bush to deal with the Iraq situation in a decisive manner he had to be, it seems, well aware of the profound ambiguity of his act. Let me pick up the gantlet thrown down in such a challenging manner and compare the incomparable.

The context of the 1968 invasion is well known. Alexander Dubček’s attempts to liberalize the Communist regime in his homeland posed a tough problem for Kremlin suzerains. Since the country was nominally independent, there was the danger that the reformed leadership of the Communist Party might subordinate proletarian unity to national interests and slip out of the Russian bear’s hug, with the rest of the socialist camp eventually following suit. Which would have finished the Soviet empire twenty years prematurely. Moscow sent Dubček plenty of signals about its unhappiness with his reforms, far too popular among the Czechoslovaks for Soviet taste, but, alas, these went mostly unheeded. So, as of March/April 1968 military intervention became a viable solution to the problem.

Missing at this point was political legitimization of such an action. We do not know exactly when the letter of invitation signed by five prominent Czechoslovak Communists was composed and how exactly it reached its destination. According to an apocryphal story, it was a member of a conspiratorial quintet, the Slovak party leader Vasil Biľak, who passed the missive onto the First Secretary of the Ukraine CP, Petro Shelest, in the men’s room during last minute negotiations in Bratislava on August 3. Whether true or not, the epistle eventually reached its addressee, Leonid Brezhnev, who read it aloud at a meeting planning for intervention that took place in Moscow on August 10.⁴ And it was put to good use in justifying the August 21 invasion.⁵ But the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops did not achieve the desired effect, for the signatories of the letter failed to form a workers’ and peasants’ government. After initial hesitation, the Soviets succeeded

³ Václav Havel, “The Transformation of NATO: Opening speech by Václav Havel, President of the Czech Republic at the conference organized by Host Committee and Aspen Institute of Berlin,” Nov 20, 2002 (online at <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s021120c.htm> [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

⁴ For details about the letter and its text itself, see František Janáček, et al., “Příběh zvacího dopisu,” *Soudobé dějiny* 1, 1993, no. 1, p. 87–95.

⁵ See the *Pravda* communiqué: TASS, “Zaiavlenie TASS,” *Pravda: Organ Tsentral'nogo Komiteta KPSS*, Aug 21, 1968, p. 1.

in bringing, voluntarily and otherwise, most of the old leadership to Moscow where all – with one notable exception to which I will return – ratified a protocol allowing the temporary stationing of the Red Army on Czechoslovak soil. “Temporary” in this context meant no less than twenty-three years.

The origins of *The Wall Street Journal* letter are not entirely clear either. Whose idea was it, how was it produced, to whom was it sent and why?⁶ Its very title – a clear allusion to Lincoln’s 1858 “House Divided” speech – betrays an American mytho-political imagination and suggests its non-European authorship or at least some trans-Atlantic input. What, however, has already been proven beyond any reasonable doubt is the fact that the two central points of the letter were patently false. Hussein could not have violated Security Council Resolution 1441, as the octet of concerned Europeans accused him, if only because he did not possess any weapons of mass destruction. And he could not have passed such bogus “weapons of mass destruction” (WMDs) onto anybody, not only because he did not possess them but also because his alleged links to Al Qaeda terrorists were yet another fabrication. That these charges were trumped up by Bush’s administration to hoodwink the American public into endorsing a war of its choice was known long before negative findings concerning the WMDs charges were published by Charles Duelfer and absolution of Hussein of any complicity in the New York terrorist attack by the 9/11 Commission. The speech by Robert C. Byrd, Dean of the US Senate, on May 21, 2003, explains eloquently, with a bluntness indicating the level of the speaker’s frustration, why this strategy worked on the western shore of the Atlantic:

Regarding the situation in Iraq, it appears to this Senator that the American people may have been lured into accepting the unprovoked invasion of a sovereign nation, in violation of long-standing International law, under false premises. There is ample evidence that the horrific events of September 11 have been carefully manipulated to switch public focus from Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda who

⁶ According to some commentators, the intended addressee of this letter was the Security Council of the United Nations. They most likely came to this conclusion because of the letter’s last paragraph urging the Security Council to “maintain its credibility” and authorize an attack against the UN’s member state before the Hans Blix Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission would publish its final report about the WMDs in Iraq. I find such an interpretation not convincing because it disregards the actual membership of the Security Council. The haughty phrases about “the real bond between the U. S. and Europe,” with which the letter opens, completely disregard the African, Latin American, and Asian countries wielding three-fifths of the votes in the Security Council. And even if the French, German, and Russian representatives were suckered by the siren sweet song of European unity into voting for a new resolution allowing military intervention in Iraq, its passage would still require the minimum of two non-European votes. It is hard to believe that Aznar *et tutti quanti* would be foolish enough to think that by extolling “American bravery, generosity and farsightedness” thanks to which “Europe was set free from two forms of tyranny that devastated our continent in the 20th century: Nazism and communism,” they could sway to their sides the representatives of China, Guinea, Pakistan, or Syria.

masterminded the September 11th attacks, to Saddam Hussein who did not. The run up to our invasion of Iraq featured the President and members of his cabinet invoking every frightening image they could conjure, from mushroom clouds, to buried caches of germ warfare, to drones poised to deliver germ laden death in our major cities. We were treated to a heavy dose of overstatement concerning Saddam Hussein's direct threat to our freedoms. The tactic was guaranteed to provoke a sure reaction from a nation still suffering from a combination of post-traumatic stress and justifiable anger after the attacks of 9/11. It was the exploitation of fear. It was a placebo for the anger.⁷

If the letter to Brezhnev was used retroactively to legitimize a military *fait accompli*, the function of that implicitly addressed to Bush was proleptic. It was a calculated element in the overall psychological campaign to whip up a war hysteria that would make the world overlook how contrived and conjectural this *causa belli* was.⁸ The Europeans (including the citizens of the countries whose representatives endorsed the letter) seemed genuinely annoyed by American neo-cons beating the drum of war with anything at hand; opposition to the invasion was gaining momentum on the continent. Moreover, at the time when the letter emerged a spark of hope that diplomacy might eventually work had been rekindled. On January 19 the UN Chief Inspector, Hans Blix, on a visit to Baghdad stated, "We do not think that war is inevitable. We think that the inspection process that we are conducting is the peaceful alternative"; and, the next day, "Iraq and the UN reached an agreement aimed at better cooperation on weapons" resulting in a new "10-point agreement."⁹ Franco-German opposition to the UN Security Council resolution authorizing the war frustrated the Bush administration's efforts to obtain endorsement for its aggressive plan by the world's most authoritative body and an "independent" European initiative was necessary to dispel the lingering doubt that *this* swashbuckling Middle-Eastern policy did not command solid trans-Atlantic

⁷ Robert C. Byrd, "The Truth Will Emerge," May 21, 2003, published in *The Nation*, May 22, 2003 (online at <https://www.thenation.com/article/truth-will-emerge/> [accessed Oct. 30, 2018]).

⁸ See, among other items, a compilation released by the White House on January 22 (The White House, "The Apparatus of Lies: Saddam's Disinformation and Propaganda 1990-2003," Jan. 22, 2003 [formerly posted online at www.whitehouse.gov/ogc/apparatus]), or the subsequent Vilnius letter of February 5 in which the ten Foreign Ministers from the Rumsfeldesque "New Europe" stated their full support for a military solution of the Iraq crisis. This action coincided with Colin Powells UN presentation of the evidence about Hussein's material breach of Resolution 1441 that the East Europeans found "compelling." Vilnius Group, "Statement of the Vilnius Group Countries," Feb. 5, 2003 (online at http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=19022 [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

⁹ Quoted in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "Iraq Chronicle: 2003" (formerly online at <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/s695368.htm>; see also Richard Norton-Taylor and Helena Smith, "US Offers Immunity to Saddam," *The Guardian*, Jan. 20, 2003, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jan/20/iraq.richardnortontaylor> [accessed Oct. 30, 2018]).

support. “United We Stand,” declared the eight “healthy kernels of Europe” partaking in this public spectacle.

“Truth,” Havel observed about this topic of perennial interest to him, “lies not only in what is said, but also [in] who says it, and to whom, why, how and under what circumstances.”¹⁰ Who are these people, then, who were eager to sign so readily a letter whose contents were proven so false, and why? The hastily convened “union” seems such a motley crew that the individual motives of their desire to defend Western values are impossible to assay. The checkered past of several signatories should be noted, though. Say, for example, the accused money-lauderer, briber, and perjurer, Silvio Berlusconi, whom a conservative British weekly *The Economist* labeled “an outrage against the Italian people and their judicial system, and [...] Europe’s most extreme case of the abuse by a capitalist of the democracy within which he lives and operates.”¹¹ Or the Soviet-era Hungarian counterintelligence agent, Péter Medgyessy, forced to resign as his country’s Prime Minister in June 2003 when his sordid past was revealed by the press. And a Pole, Leszek Miller – a seasoned Communist apparatchik – who stepped down from his premiership in May 2004 after being implicated in the biggest ever Polish corporate scandal. These men, needless to say, had a keen need for the political clout that the White House could have bestowed upon them in exchange for their public support of the Iraq invasion. But by no stretch of imagination can they be considered guardians of “shared trans-Atlantic values.” On the contrary, such values, if they ever existed, may thrive only if protected from them.

Politics, common wisdom has it, makes strange bedfellows. Yet, while willingly associating with such curious characters, Havel’s position among the signatories was unique in one respect. All the others served at that very moment as their countries’ respective Prime Ministers, he as President. In Europe, where the heads of states are mostly symbolic figures, this difference means a great deal. By endorsing the document in the company of seven Prime Ministers, Havel might have misled the readers of *The Wall Street Journal* into believing that he was presenting official Czech policy toward Iraq. Whether this was intentional or not, the opposite is true. Czech foreign policy falls fully within the purview of the executive branch of the government (headed by the Prime Minister) which, to the chagrin of the US, always insisted that any military action against Iraq must be authorized through a UN resolution. For this reason, both the country’s Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister repeatedly stated in public that the letter to Bush was Mr. Havel’s private initiative, not binding in any way for the Czech

¹⁰ Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga: June 1979–September 1982*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), p. 347 (Letter from July 25, 1982).

¹¹ The Economist, “Dear Mr. Berlusconi...,” *The Economist* Jul 31, 2003 (online at http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=1957150 [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

government.¹² Furthermore, on January 30, Havel was the lamest of all presidential ducks. His occupancy lease on Prague Castle was expiring in three days (his term ended as of February 2, 2003), the circumstance of which only further underscores the performative character of his action. So why did Havel sign the letter?

To answer this question, I will turn to Havel's own writings. In his oft quoted *The Power of the Powerless* of 1978, he analyzes a similarly ostentatious unity-request by a hypothetical Czech greengrocer who in his shop window displayed the thin-worn Communist slogan, "Proletarians of All Lands, Unite!" Asks Havel: "Why did he do it? What did he wish to convey to the world by it? [...] Was he indeed personally so inflamed by the idea that he felt an insuppressible need to convey it to the public? Did he ever think just for a while how this unity is to be achieved and what would it mean?" Havel's reply to all the above is a resounding "no." "The greengrocer," he explains, "received this slogan from his company together with onions and carrots and he put it into the shop window simply because he has been doing it for years, because everybody does it, because it is done this way." For Havel, to make the story short, the greengrocer's acquiescence to the power of the post-totalitarian state is a prima facie example of an "inauthentic existence," of somebody who does not believe in what he does, yet does it anyway, of a "life within a lie."¹³

Applying, *mutatis mutandis*, the same criteria to Havel's signing of the letter suggests that his own behavior in this case was, lo and behold, not so different from the lamentable greengrocer's. With, perhaps, one slight difference. He – unlike the fictional vegetable vendor – did not receive "United We Stand" together with onions and carrots, but with theatre buffet edibles. Robin Shepherd of *The Times* explains: "It emerged [...] that [...] the first letter of support for the Anglo-American position had been anything but the result of considered deliberation. Then Czech President Václav Havel, for one, had not seen the letter before agreeing to sign it. He had been contacted by the Czech deputy foreign minister [Alexandr Vondra] during intermission at a [...] performance at Bratislava's National Theatre who related the gist of the letter by the cell phone."¹⁴ Did it occur to Havel, by some fluke, to question the veracity of the claims in the document he was asked to approve? Of course, but "only for a moment and only in the depth of his soul."

¹² David Král and Lukáš Pachta, "The Czech Republic and the Iraq Crisis: Shaping the Czech Stance," *Europeum*, Jan., 2005 (online at https://old.europeum.org/doc/publications/Irak_ENG.pdf, [accessed Oct. 30, 2018]), pp. 1-45.

¹³ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, trans. Steven Lukes (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1985), pp. 27-29, 39.

¹⁴ Robin Shepherd, "America's New Friends in the East: Does EU and NATO Expansion Promise to Re-energize the Transatlantic Alliance?," *EES News*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Jan.-Feb., 2004, pp. 3-4, 10-11, here 3-4; Michal Mocek, et al., "Spor o válku proti Iráku rozdělil Evropu," *Mladá fronta DNES*, Jan. 31, 2003, p. 14.

We might speculate about what made Havel behave in such an “inauthentic” manner. One reason can be that he had been informed of the irrevocable American decision to invade Iraq some six months before the fateful letter. This is, at least, what Jana Hybášková, the former Czech Ambassador to Kuwait – a hawkish supporter of the American invasion who was eventually fired from her office for insubordination – tells us. In summer 2002 she visited (at the instigation of her husband, one of Havel’s coterie) US Central Command headquarters in Tampa, Florida, and, apparently, dispatched back to Prague detailed plans for the Iraq operation that she had received from Lieutenant General Michael “Rifle” DeLong (whose name she misspells). “The Czech executive and Parliament’s Foreign Committee,” Hybášková insists, “had, as of end of July and beginning of August, all information available in 2002 that the war would happen and how it would happen. They knew.”¹⁵ Well aware, at the very moment of ratifying the letter, that the US would go ahead with the invasion of Iraq as planned, Havel – and his blasé attitude suggests as much – only pretended to act as somebody “personally so inflamed by” Hussein’s latest non-compliance with Resolution 1441 “that he felt an insuperable need to convey it to the public.” In reality he was just providing the Bush administration with what it asked him for at the moment: instant public endorsement of its premeditated military plans. Havel needed to verify the facts contained in the letter that he affirmed or to ponder its meaning as much as his greengrocer needed to read *The Communist Manifesto*. Or, put differently, the letter “United We Stand” appearing in *The Wall Street Journal* relates to the truth not unlike the sign, “Proletarians of all lands, unite!” amidst the heap of bulbous and tuberous vegetables.

The above parallel between Havel and the meek vegetable-monger has, I am ready to admit, one serious flaw. The said greengrocer was a simple, disaffected citizen of a post-totalitarian regime, powerless against its massive repressive apparatus. He bought his right to a peaceful existence by acting contrary to his own convictions, by saying what he was asked to say rather than what he really thought. Havel, on the other hand, was the head of a state endowed with many powers and free to act as he saw fit. In this respect, it might be more felicitous to compare his theatre buffet act to that of the five Communist leaders seeking comfort and help from their Soviet friends. In their psyches, the split between private and public stances seemed definitely less pronounced than among their unhappy subjects, those selling vegetables included. True, the restoration of socialism in the country that “brotherly assistance” was to bring about would be personally beneficial to them in every conceivable respect – prestige, perks, positions—and their cry for foreign military intervention to some degree self-serving. At the same time, however, their life-long identification with the Communist movement set them far apart from the hapless greengrocer from whom they extorted involuntary support

¹⁵ Jana Hybášková, *Čekání na válku: Výpověď odvolané české velvyslankyně v Kuvajtu* (Prague: Rybka Publishers, 2004), p. 34.

of their regime. In contrast to him they shared a particular group psychology – a false consciousness some might say – which skewed their understanding of what was transpiring in the Czechoslovakia of 1968 in a very particular way. If we are to believe in the sincerity of Václav Havel's claims about Hussein's material breach of UN security resolution 1441, why not extend the same courtesy to the signatories of the Brezhnev letter, like Vasil Biřak, who as of late June 1968 became convinced that "the leadership of the CCP either cannot or does not have the power to prevent an encroaching catastrophe, an outbreak of civil war."¹⁶ From this vantage point, then, his inviting the Soviet Army to deal with this particular security threat to his country seems as warranted as bidding its American counterpart to rid Iraq of WMDs.

Though quite unlike each other in many respects, what makes Biřak and his cohort similar to Havel is their explicitly internationalist and activist perspective on foreign affairs, the conviction that under certain circumstances the sovereignty of independent states ought to be disregarded. In the case of the Czechoslovak Communists, the claim derives from the Marxian privileging of class identity over any ethnic or national allegiance. Capitalism is a global system and its overthrow necessitates mutuality among proletarians across state boundaries as attested to by Marx's slogan that I have quoted several times.

The coveted proletarian reciprocity, however, eventually turned one-way. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 made Moscow the Mecca of World Communism and unswerving loyalty to the Soviet Union the litmus test of being a true believer. After World War Two, during which the Red Army liberated most of Eastern Europe and directly or through local proxies managed to establish Communist regimes in the region, this intra-party agreement became the norm for the relationship between local governments and Moscow. "The Brezhnev doctrine" of limited national sovereignty advanced after the 1968 invasion that granted the Soviet Union the right to interfere in the affairs of another socialist country if it threatened the common interest of the entire Eastern block was merely an explicit formulation of knowledge common to everyone "since an iron curtain has descended, from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, across the Continent." And though to the great majority of Czechoslovak citizens the inviting of a foreign army in 1968 might have looked like high treason, it did not to the quintet of inviters, as long as the army was Soviet. In their hearts they knew that they were serving a higher cause and their conscience was untroubled. Toward the end of his informative memoirs, invoking the solemn promise that he gave his mother on her deathbed, Vasil Biřak says as much: "I think that I fulfilled the wish of my dying mother not to break the law. If, however, some of my deeds contradicted it, my good and just mother would agree to it without hesitation, for the law itself contradicted the people's interests, the interests of the workers." And, quoting in his defense the founding father

¹⁶ Vasil Biřak, *Paměti Vasila Biřaka*, Vol. 2 (Prague: Agentura Cesty, 1991), p. 43.

of the CCP, Bohumír Šmeral, he concludes: “Nothing in the world is ever legal. All law is grounded in power. Thus, the will to fight for power on behalf of the working class must be our highest virtue.”¹⁷

Havel, who found the chief value of Biřak’s speeches in their “being funny,”¹⁸ should not be expected to share the latter’s view of legality. If “consciousness precedes being,”¹⁹ as he declared during his speech to the joint session of the US Congress in 1990 (for which statement he received huzza from the members of both Houses), justice cannot be a function of economy, Havel’s youthful infatuation with socialism notwithstanding.²⁰ Yet, neither can it be reduced, he stated unequivocally, to a set of cooperative rules for the orderly management of society. “It is not in rational calculation where the fountainhead of law and, whence, of jurisprudence lies,” he told the Central European Judicial Forum, but “in an ethical order that has metaphysical moorings.”²¹ Without the “absolute horizon of being” (which Havel sometimes calls God) that transcends all individual beings, we would be unable to distinguish right from wrong, to resume responsibility for our own deeds vis-à-vis ourselves and others.²² According to Havel, it is this ultimate moral horizon – the invisible soundboard against which all our deeds always resonate – whence spring the absolute, universal and indivisible values of “human rights, human liberties, and human dignity”²³ that allow for no exception,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹⁸ Václav Havel, “Farce, Reformability, and the Future of the World,” in Václav Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writtings 1965–1990*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 357.

¹⁹ Václav Havel, *The Art of the Impossible: Politics and Morality in Practice: Speeches and Writtings, 1990–1996*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p. 18. The general kudos that the Hegelian dictum about the primacy of consciousness over being received from the US legislators who, as a rule, are not steeped in continental philosophy, puzzled *The Washington Post* and led it to ruminate about what these politicians actually heard in Havel’s words. The *Post*’s editorial of February 23, 1990 ventured to suggest that it was either “Let’s stick it to the Japanese,” or “No one should get welfare who refuses to take an available job – and I mean any job.” Its readers, though, respectfully disagreed and came up with their own imaginative “misprisions,” like “Confucius precedes Beijing,” purportedly indicating Havel’s support for Bush’s China policy or, because of the impending lunch break, “Nacho chips precede beans.” Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), pp. 181–183.

²⁰ Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 61.

²¹ Václav Havel, *Spisy*, Vol. 7 (Prague: Torst, 1999), p. 119.

²² This is a rather minimalist rendition of Havel’s views on moral responsibility that he elaborated extensively in his *Letters to Olga*. The earliest attempt at a theistic grounding of morality I was able to find appears in the 1953 essay “Hamlet’s Question” (vol. 3: 34).

²³ Václav Havel, “Address to the Senate and the House of Commons of the Parliament of Canada, Parliament Hill, Ottawa, 29 April 1999,” see (online at http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=projevy&val=105_aj_projevy.html&typ=html [accessed Aug. 24, 2018]).

superseding all national boundaries, and obliging everybody to intercede on their behalf by any means available wherever they are violated.

The actual fulfillment of these lofty ethical aspirations is the matter of mundane political decision-making. Yet, for Havel, morality and politics are just two sides of the same coin: “[...] both morality and immorality have direct political consequences, just as political decisions have a direct bearing on morality. That is why I think that it is nonsense to separate politics from morality, or to say that the two are totally unrelated. To put such thoughts into practice, or even just to speak them, is – paradoxically – not only deeply immoral, but very wrong politically as well. [...] politics that dissociates itself from morality is simply bad politics.”²⁴ In calling the punitive bombing of Gaddafi’s Libya ordered by President Reagan in 1986 “a conditioned reflex of a physiologically reacting primitive,” he put his money where his mouth is. Havel – the dissident – was outraged by the flagrant discrepancy between the high-horse ethics espoused by Western democracies and their actual foreign policy. His argument is worthy of repeating because of its uncanny bearing on the Iraq invasion: “For years now, the entire West has known that Khaddafi is a terrorist, and for years the West has bought oil from him and helped him extract it from the ground. So, in fact, the West has cultivated him and continues to support him. [...] Westerners are risking their security and their basic moral principles for the sake of a few barrels of crude oil. Particular interests take precedence over general interests. Everyone hopes the bomb will not fall on him. And then, when the situation becomes untenable, the only thing anyone can think of doing is bombing Libya.”²⁵

But how different is this from what happened in Iraq? Just a few years before Khaddafi was bombed, we may recall, Saddam Hussein was suddenly recognized as an invaluable US ally by Reagan, who was eager to counter the spread of the Ayatollah Khomeini-inspired Islamic revolution that was so inimical to American interests. As such, Hussein was allowed to purchase fairly large amounts of the US armaments that he needed for the war he declared on Iran. After all, he had the oil to pay for it. This despite his abominable human rights record and the well-known fact that he used forbidden chemical weapons not only against his Iranian foes but also against domestic Kurdish rebels. It was none other than Donald Rumsfeld himself who, as Reagan’s personal envoy to Hussein, was instrumental in forging these friendly US-Iraqi ties.²⁶ What happened to Havel’s moral consciousness some seventeen years later when he saw this very man,

²⁴ Havel, *The Art of the Impossible*, pp. 213–214 (Catalonia International Prize, Barcelona, May 11, 1995).

²⁵ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hviždala*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 168.

²⁶ See, e.g., Julian Borger, “Rumsfeld ‘offered help to Saddam,’” *Guardian Unlimited* Dec. 31, 2002 (online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,866873,00.html> [accessed Oct. 25,

now the US Defense Secretary, leading the charge against the very same Hussein “once the situation became unsustainable?” And why, instead of calling George W. Bush “a physiologically reacting primitive,” did he endorse the invasion? Comparing the two existing super powers in 1985, Havel declared candidly: “As for myself – should anyone care to know – I have no great illusions about America, about the American establishment, and about American foreign policy.”²⁷ How charmingly daring then, how miserably pathetic now!

The Khaddafi-Hussein parallel exemplifies how thorny the application of unworldly ethical categories to the messy reality of the quotidian is and even Havel himself has, on rare occasion, reluctantly admitted as much.²⁸ But when push comes to shove he was a moral absolutist of interventionist bent who in several of his speeches did not shy away from proposing specific conditions which would allow for preemptive strikes against states offending the code of behavior he upheld. “The Havel doctrine” of a limited sovereignty justifying a war of choice around the globe consisted, according to my count, of three articles of faith. Let me quote them briefly in the order that they appeared to see how they square with his case against Iraq (emphasis within quotes are mine). The first was formulated during his 1997 visit to Washington, D.C.: “As for security matters,” Havel stated, “I believe that in *any cases that are beyond any doubt and with general support of freedom-loving people and peace-loving democratic states*, the USA must have the strength to intervene with force – that is by military means – against evident evil.”²⁹ The second emerged in his address to the Canadian Senate and the House of Commons in 1999 apropos of the NATO campaign in the former Yugoslavia: “But no person of sound judgement can deny one thing [about the fight against Milošević]: This is probably the first war ever fought that is not being fought in the name of interests, but in the name of certain principles and values. If it is possible to say about a war *that it is ethical*, or *that it is fought for ethical reasons*, it is true of this war. Kosovo has no oil fields whose output might perhaps attract somebody’s interest; no member country of the Alliance has any territorial claims there.”³⁰ The last came in New York on September 19, 2002 when Havel, most likely, already knew of the impending Iraq intervention: “Evil must

2018]); and Jeremy Scahill, “The Saddam in Rumsfeld’s Closet,” Aug. 2, 2002 (formerly online at <http://www.commondreams.org/views02/0802-01.htm>; now available at http://dissidentvoice.org/Articles/Scahill_Iraq.htm [accessed Oct. 30, 2018]).

²⁷ Václav Havel, “Anatomy of a Reticence,” trans. Erazim Kohák, in Havel, *Open Letters*, p. 319.

²⁸ David Remnick, “Exit Havel: The King Leaves the Castle,” *The New Yorker* Feb. 17–24, 2003, pp. 90–101, here 101; Viliam Buchert, “Havel se vyhýbá domácí politice,” *Mladá fronta DNES* Feb. 18, 2004, p. 2.

²⁹ Václav Havel, *NATO, Europe, and the security of democracy: Selected Speeches, Articles, and Interviews 1990–2002*, trans. Alexandra Brabcová, ed. Luboš Dobrovský (Pardubice: Theo, 2002), p. 80 (The Fulbright Prize Washington, 3. 10. 1997).

³⁰ Václav Havel, “Address to the Senate and the House of Commons of the Parliament of Canada.”

be confronted in its womb and, if there is no other way to do it, then it has to be dealt with by the use of force. If immensely sophisticated and *expensive modern weaponry must be used*, let it be used *in a way that does not harm the civilian population*. If this is not possible, then the billions spent on those weapons will be wasted.”³¹

The Iraqi invasion flies in the face of all three of these principles and made Havel’s crying Wolfowitz a hypocrisy. Hussein’s case was not extreme by any conceivable measure. He was no longer a credible threat to anybody, sandwiched between two no-fly zones patrolled by British and the US Air Forces which pummeled Iraqi military installations at will and on a regular basis. Thus the Kurds and Shiites living on these territories were safely out of Hussein’s reach. Furthermore, his connections to terrorism – the peril which the letter of the eight flaunts – was a red herring and Havel, at least according to *The New York Times*, knew this.³² Whether he discretely informed the White House that the alleged meeting in Prague between Mohammed Atta and an Iraqi diplomat could not be substantiated by any evidence, as reported by *The New York Times* and subsequently denied by Havel’s spokesman, is ultimately irrelevant because as of mid-December 2001 the fact that such a rendezvous never took place was widely reported in Czech newspapers.³³ And, needless to say, the Iraq invasion did not enjoy “the general support of freedom loving people and of peace loving democratic nations” – the best proof of which is the very existence of the “United We Stand” letter that would be fully superfluous were not such a unity merely rhetoric.

I do not wish to comment on Havel’s second principle, the chivalrous idea of a purely moral war: a quest for justice devoid of any crass, tangible payoff. It does not deserve serious discussion. We might have granted Havel, if it would have helped him to sleep better, that on the killing fields of Kosovo, for the first time in the “memory of being,” GOOD at its most sublime revealed itself to the world because there was no oil there. But we would have had to remind him as well that there is a lot of “sweet crude” in Iraq, which information he himself could have secured with relative ease from both President Bush and the Vice President Cheney, whose deep involvement with this profitable commodity left many wondering as to their true economic disinterestedness in having the oil fields of Iraq under American control. But these two are honorable men and Havel, I am sure, ruled out any potential conflict of interest on their part while he was pondering – “albeit only for a moment” and, for understandable reasons, “only in the depth of his soul” – whether to sign the letter.

³¹ Václav Havel, “A Farewell to Politics,” trans. Paul Wilson, *The New York Review of Books* Oct. 24, 2002 (online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/15750> [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]), pp. 1–4, here 3.

³² James Risen, “Threats and Responses: The View from Prague; Prague Discounts an Iraqi Meeting,” *The New York Times* Oct. 21, 2002, p. A1.

³³ Peter S. Green, “Threats and Responses: Havel Denies Telephoning U.S. on Iraq Meeting,” *The New York Times* Oct. 23, 2002, p. A11; Sabina Slonková, “Jediný důkaz o spojení teroristů s Irákem padl,” *Mladá fronta DNES* Dec. 14, 2002, p. 1.

But it was the last tenet of Havel's doctrine of a "war of choice" that I find most troubling, especially in light of what actually happened in Iraq. Did this self-avowed humanist really believe that "immensely sophisticated and expensive modern weaponry" would "be used [...] in a way that does not harm the civilian population," or was this opportunistic hedging against his future culpability for encouraging the deployment of such lethal weaponry in Iraq? To keep the record straight, it was a week before "United We Stand" appeared that the US media divulged the Pentagon's strategy for the war: so shocking and awesome that any other name but "Shock and Awe" would be utterly inadequate. According to the CBS News report from January 24, 2003, "one day in March the Air Force and Navy will launch between 300 and 400 cruise missiles at targets in Iraq [...] On the second day, the plan calls for launching another 300 to 400 cruise missiles. 'There will not be a safe place in Baghdad,' said one Pentagon official who has been briefed on the plan."³⁴ It is simply unimaginable that such a massive strike would not harm the civilian population even if aimed solely at what might be deemed legitimate military targets. Yet, Havel signed the letter.

However executed, military occupations inevitably result in civilian casualties, and Iraq confirms this rule in a particularly odious manner. The US armed forces, while meticulously recording their own dead, not only do not keep any data on the natives killed but, according to the ACLU, "the defence department has gone to unprecedented length to control and suppress information about the human cost of war."³⁵ Consequently, our entire knowledge about Iraqi civilian casualties is based solely on estimations of various kinds. Let me mention the two most authoritative sources on this grim matter. One independent public database known as Iraq Body Count (IBC) "is derived from a comprehensive survey of online media reports and eyewitness accounts." According to this source, in the period from the invasion to April 2007, the number of civilian deaths directly attributable to the military invasion of Iraq lies somewhere between sixty-two and six-eight thousand (Iraq Body Count).³⁶ The other estimate is a cluster survey carried out across Iraq between May and July of 2007 by an international team of doctors led by Gilbert Burnham, with the results reported three months later in the venerable British medical journal *The Lancet*. "We estimate," the authors assert, "that, as a consequence of the coalition invasion of March 18, 2003, about 655 000 Iraqis have died above the number that would be expected in a non-conflict situation. [...] About

³⁴ CBS, "Iraq Faces Massive U.S. Missile Barrage," *CBS Evening News* Jan. 24, 2003 (online at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/01/24/eveningnews/main537928.shtml> [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

³⁵ Mark Tran, "US Compensation Payments to Iraqi Civilians Made Public," *Guardian Unlimited* Apr. 12, 2007 (online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,2055493,00.html> [accessed Oct. 25, 2018]).

³⁶ According to the IBC's last available tally of March 13, 2017, there were 171,174–190,937 documented civilian deaths from violence. See <http://www.iraqbodycount.net>.

601 000 of these excess deaths were due to violent causes.”³⁷ Rather than lamenting “the waste of the billions spent on those weapons,” one should mourn the wasted Iraqi lives. “When is this dear lad going to comprehend,” and I am hurling back at Havel his own rhetorical question from the essay “Politics and Consciousness,” “that even the most promising project of ‘general well-being’ convicts itself of inhumanity the moment it demands a single involuntary death?”³⁸ Is it not time to start beating around the Bush and name W.’s accomplices in this crime? Havel is definitely one of them.

By their very nature military invasions tend to be a bloody business. Innocent bystanders get murdered whether the lethal force is unleashed to eliminate a perceived threat to the socialist order or to stop the proliferation of putative WMDs. Yet, whatever their ideological difference, such violent actions can be compared at least in one regard: the quantity of their respective victims. And from this vantage point the Soviet military occupation of Czechoslovakia fares incomparably better than its US analogue in Iraq. According to a source with impeccable anti-Commie credentials, the September 12, 1968 report by the Paris Bureau of the Assembly of Captive European Nations, in the aftermath of the Soviet-led incursion “186 Czechoslovak citizens had been killed, 362 seriously wounded and several hundred deported to unknown destinations during the first week of the occupation.”³⁹ True, all signatories of letters that bid troops to enter a foreign territory by force end up with blood on their hands. But, in this respect, the despicable Communist functionary, high traitor, and quisling, Vasil Biřak, had considerably less soap to waste than the man who mentored Laura Bush as to what democracy is, “playwright, intellectual, freedom fighter, political prisoner,” Václav Havel.⁴⁰

Let me return now to Havel’s aporia with which I began: how can one distinguish between a “brotherly assistance” and imperialist conquest? The issue seems a difficult one, indeed. If at the onset of my paper I did not see much similarity between the 1968 and the 2003 letters, by now I am having considerable difficulty in telling them apart. Are they the repetition of difference as sameness or of the same as different? And if I cannot resolve this paradox, how am I to emplot my paper, provide it with its narrative epiphany, a finalizing ending? Let me turn, once more, for help to Havel. Poking fun at

³⁷ Gilbert Burnham, et al., “Mortality after 2003 Invasion of Iraq: A Cross-Sectional Cluster Sample Survey,” *The Lancet* Oct. 21, 2006, pp. 1421–1428, here 1426.

³⁸ Václav Havel, “Politics and Conscience,” trans. Erazim Kohák and Roger Scruton, in Havel, *Open Letters*, p. 266.

³⁹ Quoted in Vojtěch Mastný (ed.), *Czechoslovakia: Crisis in World Communism* (New York: Facts on File, 1972), p. 79.

⁴⁰ Laura Bush, “First Lady Laura Bush’s Remarks to the Republican National Convention with Introduction via Satellite by President George W. Bush,” Aug. 31, 2004 (online at <https://georgew-bush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/08/text/20040831-15.html> [accessed Oct. 30, 2018]).

Hegel (at a forum considering Karl Popper the acme of Western thought), he credited this “con man of philosophy” with a single truthful insight: “reality is ambiguous.”⁴¹ If he is right, and inasmuch as his doubt about the world’s seeming simplicity is sincere, any singular conclusion to my essay would be palpably inappropriate: a fallacious disambiguation of what seems unamenable to such a treatment. To remain what it is, it must forever remain undecidable. The dual ending of my story is a (de)ontic must.

Historical repetition? This phenomenon, Biřak and Havel again seem to concur, can beget a comical resolution. Marx is correct in “that it is often difficult to find a boundary between comedy and tragedy” asserts the former,⁴² only to be seconded by the latter’s affirmation of “Marx’s well known dictum that events in history repeat themselves, first as a tragedy and then as a farce.”⁴³ The comic emplotment renders Havel a parody of Biřak, a clumsy imitator of the genre – “the letter of invitation” – which in the Czech “memory of spirit” will forever be inscribed in that most ambiguous *anno mirabilis* and *horribilis* of 1968: the year of the highest national aspirations and of even deeper humiliations. This is not cruel mockery, I hasten to add. Comedy is a reconciliatory genre: where there is laughter there is a hope. “The only thing that I can, at this point, personally recommend” to Václav Havel is Václav Havel’s own personal recommendation for coping with the shocking incongruities of the contemporary world, “a sense of humor; an ability to see the ridiculous and the absurd dimensions of things; an ability to laugh about others as well as about ourselves.”⁴⁴ For “the man fully conscious of himself and of his situation, who is, therefore, fully authentic,” the young Havel observed shrewdly in 1963, “say, a statesman with the sense of how comic his position is [...] is usually not an object of humor.”⁴⁵

At this point, however, I ought to self-critically concede that the comic emplotment of the Havel story is not entirely faultless. Its legitimacy is suspect because the meaning of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*’s first sentence is far from being as simple as Biřak and Havel purported. For if Marx truly believed that a historical reiteration entails a generic catachresis – tragedy turning into farce – why would he enframe this assertion as a double play of disclosure and concealment? He, on the one hand, explicitly disavowed his title to this idea, fingering Hegel as the citation’s true author while, on the other hand, immediately discrediting this very source by substituting the indefinite

⁴¹ Václav Havel, “Address in Acceptance of ‘Open Society’ Prize,” Budapest, Jun. 24, 1999 (online at http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=projevy&val=102_aj_projevy.html&typ=HTML [accessed Aug. 24, 2018]).

⁴² Biřak, *Paměti*, p. 123.

⁴³ Havel, “Farce, Reformability,” p. 355.

⁴⁴ Havel, “Address in acceptance.”

⁴⁵ Václav Havel, “Anatomie gagu,” in Václav Havel, *Spisy*, Vol. 3 (Prague: Torst, 1999), p. 607.

pronoun “somewhere” for a proper bibliographical reference.⁴⁶ And not without a good reason, I should add. Until now, nobody has ever been able to locate this “quotation” in Hegel’s oeuvre. Was not Marx, the master dialectician, intimating, through a sly game of seek and hide, that Napoléon-le-Petit’s metamorphoses from the first President of France to its last Emperor (in this order) was, despite all the attending farcicality, still a tragedy? Yes, maybe, perhaps. But rather than trying to figure out what this down-and-out partisan of being’s primacy had in mind, let me try to obtain inspiration for a more apropos denouement of my story elsewhere – preferably in the land that blessed our planet with George Walker Bush.

How does F. Scott Fitzgerald’s oft-quoted jocularly, “show me a hero and I’ll write you a tragedy” apply to my hero?⁴⁷ A tragic plot requires the calamitous stumbling of a noble protagonist, caused by error, excessive pride, or wrongdoing. According to this script, the meritorious leader of the forces of the day overthrows the unworthy lord of the night to establish a rectified state ruled by “love and truth.” Yet, then something goes awry and the celebrated hero is discredited – his mission marred by a moral lapse – Václav Havel resembling in the eyes of some... Vasil Biľak. It is a tearful story of one who wished to live eternally in the truth but, as if by sleight of a wicked hand, could no longer tell the truth from a lie.

Tragic narratives, however, are more than simple psychological machines that arouse pity for the sake of subsequent purging. They have their axiological aspect as well: the clash of equipotent values, each compelling, each with a logic of its own that, however, are mutually incompatible. A tragic hero who must choose between them but cannot is a victim of this paradox. Havel, I must observe, employed precisely such a script in portraying someone I have so far mentioned only obliquely, whose predicament he himself presented as the epitome of tragic perplexity. The individual under the scrutiny was František Kriegel, the lone figure among the Czechoslovak political representation who, during post-invasion “diplomatic” negotiations in Moscow in August 1968, categorically refused to sign the shameful protocol of surrender and subsequently became a prominent member of the Prague dissident underground, Havel’s comrade-in-arms. A man of the staunchest moral principles and behavior, Havel assures us, generous and selfless to the limit. It was, no doubt, his keen sense of social justice that made Kriegel join the Communist party in 1931. The peripeteia without which there is no tragedy came in 1948 when he as the *Politrak* of the People’s Militia—the iron fist of the Czechoslovak proletariat—played a decisive role in the Communist coup that established

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 11: Marx and Engels: 1851–53 (New York: International Publishers, 1979), pp. 99–197, here 103.

⁴⁷ Matthew J. Bruccoli (ed.). *The Notebooks of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 51.

in that country a regime patently inimical to everything he practiced in his life. But Krieger's biography, puzzling as it is, led Havel to raise some larger questions relevant for my paper: "Can people who are truly pure in heart, people of independent spirit determined to be guided by it alone, attain the summit of real power in a world of sectional interests, irrational passions, 'political realities,' power-seeking ideologies, and blind mutinies, in short, in the chaotic world of modern civilization? Can such people be successful in these spheres? Or have they no alternative but to get involved – either for reasons of realistic compromise or idealistic belief – in something else, something that the world finds more credible, something that may be in accord with their consciences in the immediate term but can turn against them at any time?"⁴⁸ Does Havel's own involvement with politics provide a convincing answer to this tragic dilemma? Did he manage to enter the proverbial "labyrinth of the world" without ever leaving "the paradise of the heart" – yes or no? But let me stop here lest tragedy is to turn into satire.

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the conference "Poétique et politique dans l'œuvre de Václav Havel," organized by Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Civilisations Slaves, Université Michel de Montaigne – Bordeaux 3, on June 9, 2005. It was published in the conference proceedings as "Václav Havel et l'invasion de l'Irak (avec des références constantes à l'occupation par les Soviétiques de la Tchécoslovaquie en 1968)," trans. Carole Paris-Formanek, in Milan Burda (ed.), La politique et la poétique dans l'œuvre de Václav Havel (Toulouse: Slavica Occitania, 2007), pp. 149–176. For a Czech version in Milan Machovec's translation, see Václav Havel a invaze do Iráku: Úvaha vedená se stálým zřetelem k sovětské okupaci Československa v roce 1968 (Prague: Rubato, 2014).

Abstract: Since the late 9th century the genre of "the letter of invitation" has enjoyed an uncanny status in Czech political discourse. Great Moravia's incorporation into Slavia orthodoxa ensued from Prince Rastislav's request for Christian missionaries addressed to the Byzantine Emperor Michael III. Consonantly, the eastward political orientation of Czechoslovakia after WW2 was, in part, the result of František Palacký's refusal to accept the "Committee of Fifty's" invitation extended in its missive of April 6, 1848 (attributed by K. H. Borovský to Franz Schusselka) to represent his people at the German Parliament convening in Frankfurt.

My paper juxtaposes the two most recent variations on the said epistolary genre: 1) the letter authored by Vasil Biľak together with four other top CPC functionaries in mid-1968 asking Leonid Brezhnev for "a brotherly assistance," that is, a military intervention

⁴⁸ Václav Havel, "Thinking about František K.," trans. A. G. Brain, in Havel, *Open Letters*, pp. 371–372, translation slightly revised.

thwarting the imminent counterrevolution in their homeland; and 2) the letter “United We Stand” (Wall Street Journal, Jan. 30, 2003) co-signed by Václav Havel and an assorted septet of European prime ministers urging its implied addressee, George W. Bush, to dispatch the military that would “rid the world of the danger posed by Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction.”

The compelling need to compare these two texts was highlighted by Havel himself in his speech of November 20, 2002 insisting that “it is necessary [...] to weigh again and again on the finest scales whether we are truly helping people against a criminal regime and defending humankind against its weapons, or whether perchance this is not another—understandably more sophisticated than the Soviet one of 1968—version of ‘the brotherly assistance.’” My analysis demonstrates that the latter is the case and that the US invasion of Iraq solicited by Havel’s letter was as unjustified and unsophisticated as the earlier Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia that Biřák’s epistle legitimized.

Keywords: Václav Havel, 2002 invasion of Iraq, rhetoric