

A Joint Session of the U.S. Congress

Washington, D.C., February 21, 1990

**Dear Mr. Speaker,
Dear Mr. President,
Dear senators and members of the House,
Ladies and gentlemen:**

My advisors have advised me, on this important occasion, to speak in Czech. I don't know why. Perhaps they wanted you to enjoy the sound of my mother tongue.

The last time they arrested me, on October 27 of last year, I didn't know whether it was for two days or two years. Exactly one month later, when rock musician Michael Kocáb told me that I would probably be proposed as a presidential candidate, I thought it was one of his usual jokes.

On the 10th of December 1989, when my actor friend Jiri Bartoska, in the name of the Civic Forum, nominated me as a candidate for the office of the president of the republic, I thought it was out of the question that the Parliament we had inherited from the previous regime would elect me.

Twelve days later, when I was unanimously elected president of my country, I had no idea that in two months I would be speaking in front of this famous and powerful assembly, and that I would be heard by millions of people who have never heard of me and that hundreds of politicians and political scientists would study every word I say.

When they arrested me on October 27, I was living in a country ruled by the most conservative Communist government in Europe, and our society slumbered beneath the pall of a totalitarian system. Today, less than four months later, I am speaking to you as the representative of a country which has complete freedom of speech, which is preparing for free elections, and which seeks to establish a prosperous market economy and its own foreign policy.

It is all very extraordinary indeed.

But I have not come here to speak about myself or my feelings, or merely to talk about my own country. I have used this small example of something I know well to illustrate something general and important.

We are living in extraordinary times. The human face of the world is changing so rapidly that none of the familiar political speedometers are adequate.

We playwrights, who have to cram a whole human life or an entire historical era into a two-hour play, can scarcely understand this rapidity ourselves. And if it gives us trouble, think of the trouble it must give to political scientists, who spend their whole lives studying the realm of the probable and have even less experience with the realm of the improbable than playwrights.

Let me try to explain why I think the velocity of the changes in my country, in Central and Eastern Europe, and of course in the Soviet Union itself, has made such a significant impression on the world today, and why it concerns the fate of us all, including Americans. I would like to look at this, first from the political point of view and then from a point of view we might call philosophical.

Twice in this century, the world has been threatened by a catastrophe. Twice this catastrophe was born in Europe, and twice Americans, along with others, were called upon to save Europe, the whole world and yourselves. The first rescue provided significant help to Czechs and Slovaks.

Thanks to the great support of your President Wilson, our first President, Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, was able to found a modern independent state. He founded it, as

you know, on the same principles on which the United States of America had been founded, as Masaryk's manuscripts held by the Library of Congress testify.

At the same time, the United States made enormous strides. It became the most powerful nation on earth, and it understood the responsibility that flowed from this. Proof of this are the hundreds of thousands of your young citizens who gave their lives for the liberation of Europe, and the graves of American airmen and soldiers on Czechoslovak soil.

But something else was happening as well: The Soviet Union appeared, grew, and transformed the enormous sacrifices of its people suffering under totalitarian rule into a strength that, after World War II, made it the second most powerful nation in the world. It was a country that rightly gave people nightmares, because no one knew what would happen and when to worsen the mood of its rulers, and what country it would decide to conquer and drag into its sphere of influence, as it is called in political language.

All of this taught us to see the world in bipolar terms, as two enormous forces, one a defender of freedom, the other a source of nightmares. Europe became the point of friction between these two powers, and thus it turned into a single enormous arsenal divided into two parts. In this process, one half of the arsenal became part of that nightmarish power, while the other the free part bordering on the ocean and having no wish to be driven into it, was compelled, together with you, to build a complicated security system, to which we probably owe the fact that we still exist.

So you may have contributed to the salvation of us Europeans, of the world and thus of yourselves for a third time: You have helped us to survive until today without a hot war this time, merely a cold one.

And now the totalitarian system in the Soviet Union and in most of its satellites is breaking down, and our nations are looking for a way to democracy and independence. The first act in this remarkable drama began when Mr. Gorbachev and those around him, faced with the sad reality in their country, initiated the policy of "perestroika." Apparently they too had no idea what they were setting in motion or how rapidly events would unfold. We knew a great deal about the enormous number of growing problems that slumbered beneath the honeyed, unchanging mask of socialism. But I don't think any of us knew how little it would take for these problems to manifest themselves in all their enormity, and for the longings of these nations to emerge in all their strength. The mask fell away so rapidly that, in the flood of work, we have had literally no time even to be astonished.

What does all this mean for the world in the long run? Obviously a number of things. This is, I am firmly convinced, a historically irreversible process, and as a result Europe will begin again to seek its own identity without being compelled to be a divided armoury any longer. Perhaps this will create the hope that sooner or later your young men will no longer have to stand on guard for freedom in Europe or come to our rescue, because Europe will at last be able to stand guard over itself.

But that is still not the most important thing. The main thing is, it seems to me, that these revolutionary changes will enable us to escape from the rather antiquated straitjacket of this bipolar view of the world, and to enter at last into an era of multipolarity. That is, into an era in which all of us, large and small, former slaves and former masters, will be able to create what your great President Lincoln called "the family of man". Can you imagine what a relief this would be to that part of the world which for some reason is called the Third World, even though it is the largest?

I don't think it's appropriate simply to generalize, so let me be specific:

1) As you certainly know, most of the big wars and other European conflagrations over the centuries have traditionally begun and ended on the territory of modern Czechoslovakia, or else they were somehow related to that area. Let the Second

World War stand as the most recent example. This is understandable. Whether we like it or not, we are located in the very heart of Europe, and thanks to this, we have no view of the sea, and no real navy. I mention this because political stability in our country has traditionally been important for the whole of Europe. This is still true today. Our government of national understanding, our present Federal Assembly, the other bodies of the state, and I myself, will personally guarantee this stability until we hold free elections, planned for June.

We understand the terribly complex reasons, domestic political reasons above all, why the Soviet Union cannot withdraw its troops from our territory as quickly as they arrived in 1968. We understand that the arsenals built there over the past twenty years cannot be dismantled and removed overnight. Nevertheless, in our bilateral negotiations with the Soviet Union, we would like to have as many Soviet units as possible moved out of our country before the elections, in the interests of political stability. The more successful our negotiations, the more those who are elected will be able to guarantee political stability in our country even after the elections.

2) I often hear the question: How can the United States of America help us today? My reply is as paradoxical as the whole of my life has been: You can help us most of all if you help the Soviet Union on its irreversible, but immensely complicated, road to democracy. It is far more complicated than the road open to its former European satellites. You yourselves probably know best how to support, as rapidly as possible, the non-violent evolution of this enormous, multi-national body politic toward democracy and autonomy for all of its peoples. Therefore, it is not fitting for me to offer you any advice. I can only say that the sooner, the more quickly, and the more peacefully the Soviet Union begins to move along the road toward genuine political pluralism, respect for the rights of nations to their own integrity and to a working that is a market economy, the better it will be, not just for Czechs and Slovaks, but for the whole world. And the sooner you yourselves will be able to reduce the burden of the military budget born by the American people. To put it metaphorically, the millions you give to the East today soon will return to you in the form of billions in savings.

3) It is not true that the Czech writer Vaclav Havel wishes to dissolve the Warsaw Pact tomorrow and then NATO the day after that, as some eager journalists have written. Vaclav Havel merely thinks what he has already said here, that American soldiers shouldn't have to be separated from their mothers for another hundred years just because Europe is incapable of being a guarantor of world peace, which it ought to be, to make at least some amends for having given the world two world wars. Sooner or later Europe must recover and come into its own, and decide for itself how many of those soldiers it needs, so that its own security, and all the wider implications of security, may radiate peace into the whole world. Vaclav Havel cannot make decisions about things it is not proper for him to decide. He is merely putting in a good word for genuine peace, and for achieving it quickly.

4) Czechoslovakia thinks that the planned summit of countries participating in the Helsinki process should take place soon, and that in addition to what it wants to accomplish, it should aim to hold the so-called Helsinki II conference earlier than 1992, as originally planned. Above all, we feel it could be something far more significant than has so far seemed possible. We think that Helsinki II should become something equivalent to a European peace conference, which has not yet been held; one that would finally put a formal end to the Second World War and all its unhappy consequences. Such a conference would officially bring a future democratic Germany, in the process of unifying itself, into a new pan-European structure which could decide about its own security system. This would naturally require some connection with that part of the globe we might label the "Helsinki" part, stretching westward from Vladivostok and all the way to Alaska. The borders of the European

states, which by the way should become gradually less important, should finally be legally guaranteed by a common, regular treaty. It should be more than obvious that the basis for such a treaty would have to be general respect for human rights, genuine political pluralism and genuinely free elections.

5) Naturally, we welcome the initiative of President Bush, which was essentially accepted by Mr. Gorbachev as well, according to which the number of American and Soviet troops in Europe should be radically reduced. It is a magnificent shot in the arm for the Vienna disarmament talks and creates favourable conditions not only for our own efforts to achieve the quickest possible departure of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia, but, indirectly as well, for our own intention to make considerable cuts in the Czechoslovak army, which is disproportionately large in relation to our population. If Czechoslovakia were forced to defend itself against anyone, which we hope will not happen, then it would be capable of doing so with a considerably smaller army, because this time its defence would be not only after decades but even centuries supported by the common and indivisible will of both of its nations and its leadership. Our freedom, independence and our newborn democracy have been purchased at great cost, and we will not surrender them. For the sake of order, I should add that whatever steps we take are not intended to complicate the Vienna disarmament talks, but on the contrary, to facilitate them.

6) Czechoslovakia is returning to Europe. In the general interest and its own interest as well, it wants to coordinate this return both political and economic with the other returnees, which means, above all, with its neighbours the Poles and the Hungarians. We are doing what we can to coordinate these returns. And at the same time, we are doing what we can so that Europe will be capable of really accepting us, its wayward children, which means that it may open itself to us and may begin to transform its structures which are formally European but de facto Western European in that direction, but in such a way that it will not be to its detriment but rather to its advantage.

7) I have already said this in our Parliament, and I would like to repeat it here, in this Congress, which is architecturally far more attractive: For many years, Czechoslovakia as someone's meaningless satellite has refused to face up honestly to its co-responsibility for the world. It has a lot to make up for. If I dwell on this and so many important things here, it is only because I feel along with my fellow citizens a sense of culpability for our former reprehensible passivity and a rather ordinary sense of indebtedness.

8) Last but not least, we are of course delighted that your country is so readily lending its support to our fresh efforts to renew democracy. Both our peoples were deeply moved by the generous offers made a few days ago in Prague at the Charles University, one of the oldest in Europe, by your secretary of state, Mr. James Baker. We are ready to sit down and talk about them.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I've only been president for two months, and I haven't attended any schools for presidents. My only school was life itself. Therefore, I don't want to burden you any longer with my political thoughts, but instead I will move on to an area that is more familiar to me, to what I would call the philosophical aspect of those changes that still concern everyone, although they are taking place in our corner of the world.

As long as people are people, democracy in the full sense of the word will always be no more than an ideal; one may approach it as one would a horizon, in ways that may be better or worse, but it can never be fully attained. In this sense you are also merely approaching democracy. You have thousands of problems of all kinds, as other countries do. But you have one great advantage: You have been approaching

democracy uninterruptedly for more than 200 years, and your journey toward that horizon has never been disrupted by a totalitarian system. Czechs and Slovaks, despite their humanistic traditions that go back to the first millennium, have approached democracy for a mere twenty years, between the two world wars, and now for three and a half months since the 17th of November of last year.

The advantage that you have over us is obvious at once.

The Communist type of totalitarian system has left both our nations, Czechs and Slovaks as it has all the nations of the Soviet Union, and the other countries the Soviet Union subjugated in its time a legacy of countless dead, an infinite spectrum of human suffering, profound economic decline, and above all enormous human humiliation. It has brought us horrors that fortunately you have not known.

At the same time, however unintentionally, of course it has given us something positive: a special capacity to look, from time to time, somewhat further than someone who has not undergone this bitter experience. A person who cannot move and live a normal life because he is pinned under a boulder has more time to think about his hopes than someone who is not trapped in this way.

What I am trying to say is this: We must all learn many things from you, from how to educate our offspring, how to elect our representatives, all the way to how to organize our economic life so that it will lead to prosperity and not poverty. But it doesn't have to be merely assistance from the well-educated, the powerful and the wealthy to someone who has nothing to offer in return.

We too can offer something to you: our experience and the knowledge that has come from it.

This is a subject for books, many of which have already been written and many of which have yet to be written. I shall therefore limit myself to a single idea.

The specific experience I'm talking about has given me one great certainty:

Consciousness precedes Being, and not the other way around, as Marxists claim.

For this reason, the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human humbleness and in human responsibility.

Without a global revolution in the sphere of human consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our Being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which this world is headed, whether it be ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization, will be unavoidable. If we are no longer threatened by world war or by the danger that the absurd mountains of accumulated nuclear weapons might blow up the world, this does not mean that we have definitively won. We are in fact far from definite victory.

We are still a long way from that "family of man;" in fact, we seem to be receding from the ideal rather than drawing closer to it. Interests of all kinds: personal, selfish, state, national, group and, if you like, company interests still considerably outweigh genuinely common and global interests. We are still under the sway of the destructive and thoroughly vain belief that man is the pinnacle of creation, and not just a part of it, and that therefore everything is permitted. There are still many who say they are concerned not for themselves but for the cause, while they are demonstrably out for themselves and not for the cause at all. We are still destroying the planet that was entrusted to us, and its environment. We still close our eyes to the growing social, ethnic and cultural conflicts in the world. From time to time we say that the anonymous megamachinery we have created for ourselves no longer serves us but rather has enslaved us, yet we still fail to do anything about it.

In other words, we still don't know how to put morality ahead of politics, science and economics. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions if they are to be moral is responsibility. Responsibility to something

higher than my family, my country, my firm, my success. Responsibility to the order of Being, where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where, and only where, they will be properly judged.

The interpreter or mediator between us and this higher authority is what is traditionally referred to as human conscience.

If I subordinate my political behaviour to this imperative, I can't go far wrong. If on the contrary I were not guided by this voice, not even ten presidential schools with 2,000 of the best political scientists in the world could help me.

This is why I ultimately decided after resisting for a long time to accept the burden of political responsibility.

I'm not the first nor will I be the last intellectual to do this. On the contrary, my feeling is that there will be more and more of them all the time. If the hope of the world lies in human consciousness, then it is obvious that intellectuals cannot go on forever avoiding their share of responsibility for the world and hiding their distastes for politics under an alleged need to be independent.

It is easy to have independence in your programme and then leave others to carry out that programme. If everyone thought that way, soon no one would be independent.

I think that Americans should understand this way of thinking. Wasn't it the best minds of your country, people you could call intellectuals, who wrote your famous Declaration of Independence, your Bill of Rights and your Constitution and who above all took upon themselves the practical responsibility for putting them into practice? The worker from Branik in Prague, whom your president referred to in his State of the Union message this year, is far from being the only person in Czechoslovakia, let alone in the world, to be inspired by those great documents. They inspire us all. They inspire us despite the fact that they are over 200 years old. They inspire us to be citizens.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote that "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the Consent of the Governed," it was a simple and important act of the human spirit.

What gave meaning to that act, however, was the fact that the author backed it up with his life. It was not just his words, it was his deeds as well.

I will end where I began. History has accelerated. I believe that once again, it will be the human spirit that will notice this acceleration, give it a name, and transform those words into deeds.