

## **Václav Havel Receives the W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award**

*Remarks by NDI President Kenneth Wollack at the Library of Congress/National Endowment for Democracy event honoring President Václav Havel.*

Feb. 20, 2007

Sixteen years ago, in 1991, NDI recognized Václav Havel with its W. Averell Harriman Democracy Award, honoring him for his years as a dissident, political essayist and leading figure in the Velvet Revolution of 1989—the bloodless end to communism in Czechoslovakia.

In accepting the award on behalf of the then-President of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, Ambassador Rita Klimova commented on the difficulties of consolidating the new, democratic government. “The transition to a parliamentary democracy and to a market economy are proving to be much, much more difficult than we had anticipated in the good old days when we were dissidents and had only the police to fear,” she quipped. No longer facing arrest or harassment, President Havel went on to successful terms as the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the Czech Republic.

Also quite clear in the decade and a half since that occasion, is that Václav Havel could have rested on his accomplishments and celebrity status, and retired gracefully from the world stage. I am certain that his doctors would have advised such a course of inaction. Instead, he took a cue from another Czech-born playwright, Tom Stoppard, who wrote in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that “every exit is an entrance someplace else.”

For President Havel, that someplace else was a voice of conscience and a force of solidarity for those who today suffer and sacrifice for their democratic ideals, as he once did. He is still a passionate believer in the notion that the individual can make a difference. “The cry of freedom, the free action of a person is the most important,” he once said. “It is the first nail in the coffin of a system based on a lie.”

This explains, in part, his tireless efforts on behalf of courageous individuals, such as Oswaldo Payá of Cuba and Ang San Suu Kyi of Burma, who struggle against tremendous odds to advance peaceful democratic change. “I remember vividly what the support of the democratic world meant for me when I was persecuted and imprisoned,” President Havel told the *Prague Post*. “I feel obligated to repay this debt to those who are in a similar situation now.”

In that 1991 ceremony, NDI also presented the Democracy Award to then- AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, who also believed in the triumph of the human spirit, and more than most understood the value of timely and sustained international support to democratic forces in need.

NDI was to have given President Havel the Harriman Democracy Award for the second time in 2004. That was the year that NDI celebrated its 20-year anniversary and paid tribute to an era of democratic transformation by presenting the Award to recipients from each region of the world – seven in all. So this Award, Mr. President, is engraved with “2004.”

President Havel, this Award bestowed on you is as close to family as it gets. Mr. President, NDI's Czech roots run deep. Our founding Vice Chair and current Chairman, Madeleine Albright, is on travel. Otherwise she would have been here herself to present the Award.

So, 16 years ago, we honored President Havel for one set of accomplishments and today, the homage is even deeper, richer and more profound.

We are proud to have given this Award to you in 1991, in 2004 and now today. Just 30 years after co-founding Charter 77, 24 years after enduring almost five years in prison and 17 years after the Velvet Revolution, NDI is honored that we can finally make the presentation in person and celebrate a lifetime of individual engagement, of personal courage, of public service and of making a difference.