Riley: This is the President Vaclav Havel interview as a part of the Clinton Presidential History Project. I’d like to begin if I may by asking a question not about President Clinton but about his predecessor. In your book To the Castle and Back, you indicate that George H. W. Bush was a friend of yours. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your relationship with the first President Bush.

Havel: About one month after the revolutionary change in this country, about one month after I became the President, I visited the United States of America and it was the first time I met with President Bush. We had many discussions, we had many talks when I visited him there. He organized a luncheon for me and for the delegation as well. That was quite a fundamental thing because I was the first non-Communist head of state from the Communist bloc whom he met with. President Bush was very interested in the prospect of the future development, of future liaisons between the United States and this part of the region. Of course he was looking to forge the relations between the U.S. and between the dynamic development and the dynamic situation that was here.

Then I held quite a significant speech in the Congress as well and that was the time when our friendship began. Subsequently I visited him at his private residence in Maine. I was a private guest there and we met many times since. I would really describe our relationship as friendly.

Riley: One of the press accounts that I’ve read in preparation for the interview indicated President Bush played an instrumental role in bringing you to the idea that Czechoslovakia ought to be a member of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organisation], and in reading your own account of your sense of that question there is some ambiguity to me about your thought process. There are those who have said that you at one point held the opinion that NATO ought to be dissolved along with the Warsaw Pact. So I wonder if I could get you to talk a little bit about the evolution of your thinking, and is it true that President Bush was helpful to you in perhaps altering your views about this question of NATO and Czechoslovakia?

Havel: I felt, and I wasn’t on my own, I wasn’t by myself, that it was very important for the post-Communist countries to belong to NATO, to get into the North Atlantic alliance and into the EU [European Union], to the western structures. These organizations were, of course, hesitant for very understandable reasons, but for us it was very important to be a member of those organizations because the alternative to this membership would be bad.
However, in the ’80s we were a bit hesitant, we didn’t know how to approach this because the situation was different. We didn’t know how to approach the situation because there were many countries, the new countries that were supposed to join NATO did not form part of the Atlantic coast. The message from NATO was different, the whole doctrine was different. Of course, NATO wasn’t this reaction of the separated world as it was in the first place.

So the new organization had to be, the alliance had to be transformed and I knew before the visit to the United States that NATO had to be expanded. It was better to have an expanded NATO rather than having a new organization built on green fields because it would be too expensive and too strenuous to build. It was good to use the already existing organizations. So President Bush didn’t really push me to any of these sort of stances, I already went to America with a stance that we had to be members of NATO. I asked him a rhetorical question, saying perhaps it would be quite appropriate if they renamed NATO because the new joining countries have nothing to do with the Atlantic, and perhaps it would send a message that NATO is an organization of a different meaning now. But it was just something that got sort of swept under the table in the conversation. He said it was an interesting idea, but we never followed up on that. So I didn’t have to be convinced about the necessity to expand NATO.

Riley: Did you have an alternative name for NATO in mind when you suggested that?

Havel: A certain role was played by the fact that for many years the propaganda was massaging the public opinion and the public as well that NATO was a tool of imperialism and that it was managed by the U.S. armament industry. Of course the general public was somehow influenced by the propaganda as well. One side thought it might be slightly true, and the other side knew that it wasn’t true but they were still a bit afraid that it is too radical, the move that we want to be members of NATO.

Of course in those deliberations the respect toward the domestic opinion played a certain role too.

Riley: Yes. Given your affinity with President Bush, were you at all distressed in 1992 when he was defeated and you were looking at a change of party in the United States?

Havel: I must say that I had very good and friendly relations with both of them, be they Democratic or Republican President. That didn’t play any role. I am one of the few Czechs or maybe the only Czech who met up with seven U.S. Presidents. In office there were four of them; that was President Bush, President Clinton, [George] “W” Bush, President [Barack] Obama. Those were the ones in office and then I met three or four who had already passed their terms of office. [Ronald] Reagan I met somewhere, and [Jimmy] Carter and [Richard] Nixon visited me here, and I met President [Gerald] Ford somewhere, but it was at a funeral so we didn’t talk. So I would say I’m quite an expert on American Presidents.

Riley: Do you remember when you first became aware of Bill Clinton?

Havel: I can’t tell you exactly time-wise when I found out about him. I think it must have been sometime when he was running for the Presidency, for the office of the President, sometime around the primary elections or so, but I don’t think I had heard about him before.
Riley: President Clinton later mentioned in a press conference that he had had conversations with you before he became President, which I had taken to mean during the transition period after the election in November of ’92 and his arrival in office in January of ’93. Do you have any recollections of that conversation?

Havel: It’s possible. He probably has a better memory than I do and he probably has it somewhere recorded in his files so he has it at hand somewhere, but he has probably a better memory than I. I might have it muddled up a bit.

Riley: Of course. In the American press accounts, your visit to Washington at the opening of the Holocaust Museum in the spring of 1993 is considered to be a very important meeting because your conversations at that time about Czech membership in NATO were expressed to President Clinton in what he said was a very persuasive way. You and President [Lech] Walesa from Poland were also there. Do you have any recollections of that meeting or that event that you can share with us?

Havel: I met with President Clinton many times, so I don’t remember exactly what we said at each occasion, but I remember this particular situation at the opening of the Holocaust Museum very well because there was some sort of peculiar scenario, peculiar situation where 13 Presidents were sitting in a crooked line next to each other on chairs, and this confused protocol. Security made it that way that they set us on these chairs. President Clinton of course arrived with an hour delay because he was always like that, always a bit late. After that each of these Presidents had like a 20-minute audience with President Clinton. It was like in a dentist’s waiting room.

The funniest thing was that this line of chairs was crooked, it wasn’t a straight line. It was a sort of crooked line, which was not straight for very strange reasons.

Riley: Like this?

Havel: So we were sitting like that, that was how the line of chairs—

Riley: President Havel, just for the record, has shifted the chair next to him at a 45-degree angle and behind him, with a warm smile associated with it.

Havel: I was a smoker at the time and of course I didn’t dare to light up a cigarette there but President Walesa lit up a cigarette and then I followed as well. These are my funny recollections. But I think even more important is the process of the negotiations about NATO and about our membership in NATO, because I’m sure if it wasn’t for the United States of America we wouldn’t be members of NATO. The USA was the driving force for our membership. Of course that was a certain goal that we set, setting pressure for us to become members, and Clinton understood this very well and he adopted this idea for his own and followed up on Bush’s idea.

Riley: Sure. There was an interim idea that had originally developed, I think within the United States, of the Partnership for Peace, which was viewed by some in America and I guess some in Europe as a half step. As I understand it, you had embraced the idea originally. In fact, it was only an interim measure. Do you have any recollections or can you tell us anything about how
we went from a proposal to the Partnership for Peace and then on to full membership in NATO? Were there any crucial moments there that you recall?

Havel: The initiative of Partnership for Peace was designed by Clinton’s aides, by Clinton’s advisors because it was to reflect the new situation that was established in this part of the world. At the same time they felt the situation wasn’t mature enough for the alliance to be opened up for new members. So the Partnership for Peace was some sort of peculiar stage. It was declared here in Prague at Clinton’s visit, and Walesa was here and [József] Antall from Hungary was here as well. But we jointly felt that we shouldn’t be appeased by this fact, that we should not be in agreement that it would substitute for full membership of NATO.

We issued a declaration and by just a coincidence I was the author of this declaration. We said that we welcomed the Partnership for Peace initiative, but we understood that this was not a replacement for the full-fledged membership. The Partnership for Peace was even offered to countries that were not striving for full-fledged membership of NATO. It was a wider area that it was covering the whole OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] countries.

Riley: Could you tell us anything about your relationship and negotiations with the Poles and the Hungarians as you’re moving toward trying to get membership in NATO? I know a bit more about the direct relationship with President Clinton, but I’m not sure people in the United States know much about what was going on behind the scenes in Europe as you were trying to figure out how best to deal with the U.S.

Havel: In the first years after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the countries of the central European region, the post-Communist countries, had very good relations amongst each other and with each other. After the revolution, we organized in Bratislava a conference for those countries and we set up a group that exists until now, which is called the Visegrad Group. We wanted to demonstrate the ability of cooperation that we can realize because in history, those countries or in this region there have been many wars and many sorts of fights waged amongst each other. We agreed that we would like to become members of NATO, that we would like to become members of the EU, and that we would like to cooperate in peace.

The first years were under the signs of agreement and under the signs of mutual accord, and I think that was the reason why the alliance opened itself to us as well. It wasn’t easy, as I said already. They were very hesitant, but of course we could understand their hesitancy.

Riley: Sure. I’m not going to ask you about every meeting you had with President Clinton, but I do want to ask about that first visit President Clinton made to Prague, if you have any stories or recollections about the meeting with the trip across the Charles Bridge and your visit to a nightclub for some saxophone music.

Havel: Yes, I can recollect the very first meeting. We organized a present for him, we had given him the saxophone, then we organized for him to play in the jazz club and visit the jazz club, and we organized a walk along the Charles Bridge. This is all what had happened. He was very happy to be engaged in this and he appreciated it. But of course the people around him were rather desperate when this was happening because we went to the pub Tiger, which is quite a famous Czech pub, and there was Mr. [Bohumil] Hrabal, who is quite a famous Czech writer,
deceased now unfortunately, but he read to him long stories out of his Czech book in Czech. Rather peculiar. Madeleine [Albright] was with us as well, so I have quite vivid memories of that. Some of these things are already captured on the movies as well as in these documentary films too.

**Riley:** Sure.

**Havel:** These things, when they happen, that wasn’t easy because this walk on the Charles Bridge, it wasn’t like a normal walk, but we were walking and before us we had this moving platform with all these cameras and with all these CNN [Cable News Network] and NBC [National Broadcasting Corporation] people hiding behind each statue on the Charles Bridge as if they were there by the way, to make sure they had this glorious panorama with the castle behind them. It was obviously something to make a show.

**Riley:** I’m sure.

**Havel:** I can remember one quite memorable story. When he was supposed to leave, we were saying goodbye to each other, and I gave him as a goodbye present a bundle of his letters because he was here as a student in 1969. He visited Prague for about ten days or a week or so. He was staying with a family and then they kept in touch, corresponding with each other. I gave him as a memento a copy of this bundle of letters that he wrote to those people. He was so moved and touched and he started to go through his own letters that he sent to the family. He started to read them. They were supposed to leave a long time before, all the delegation people were waiting for him, and he was so moved because of course it brought back all these memories, it was a reminder of those times. So it was a very interesting story.

**Riley:** Sure. You mentioned Madeleine Albright earlier, who had arrived a day or two before the President did on that trip. Was she an important figure in the first part of the Clinton Presidency as she becomes later on? She was at the United Nations rather than being Secretary of State. Was she somebody who was important early in your developing relationship with Clinton and why?

**Havel:** Of course, Madeleine had to be very careful not to be considered a Czechoslovak spy in the United States, but you know we are very good friends and she used to come here and she gladly used to visit this country. She helped us a lot. She helped us to arrange a few things and to negotiate a few things. I remember one particular occasion when she organized dinner at her private home in Georgetown, and she invited the Clintons for dinner. We had a very intimate and private conversation about NATO expansion and about all these things. She really has deserved a lot in terms of developing good relations between the U.S. and this part of the world and in Eastern Europe too.

She had to make sure that she behaves rather balanced so that she doesn’t look too much after this little country somewhere in the middle of Europe. She had to look after the whole of the world, so of course she had to make sure that it is not done at the cost of some other countries.

**Riley:** Was she a source of good information on President Clinton himself and his moods and temperaments and position?
Havel: She thought very highly of Mr. Clinton, but of course she wouldn’t disclose any sort of privacies or any confidentialities.

Riley: Of course.

Havel: But she was expressing her views, her opinions, and her ideas.

Riley: There was one visit you made to the United States, to I believe it was Iowa, to a Czech museum. That struck me. Do you have any recollections of having gone to the American heartland? Did you see things there that you had not seen before when your visits were limited to Washington?

Havel: I remember this trip to Iowa even though I must say I visited in my term of office 11 times in the United States, so I might mix one or the other, but I remember it quite vividly because it was before the Presidential elections in the United States when Clinton was running for the second time. They were opening the Czechoslovak Museum in Iowa and President [Michal] Kovác, the President of Slovakia, was there, myself, and President Clinton was traveling with us. They probably wouldn’t have put it on his agenda if it hadn’t been for the elections and of course he had to address the Czech and Slovak minority, which had its center in Iowa.

But it was interesting from another point of view for me because we were flying from Washington to Iowa and I was watching President Clinton, how he approached his speeches. He took the speech that the aides or advisors or speechwriters wrote for him. He had never read it before of course, but he took it and started to correct things and mark things and cross things out and just made a completely un-understandable picture. This was so inspiring for me and interesting—I had suffered for a long time because I couldn’t read something that somebody else would write for me and yet I had very little time to do my speeches myself. That was very interesting to watch him and see how he was doing this.

Riley: President Havel during his discussion had opened up his portfolio and vigorously marked up, figuratively, the text in front of him.

Let me ask you this question. You’re a playwright and so you capture in fictional ways the essence of human behavior and you develop characters. So you see, I think, characters differently than other people, especially people interested in politics. Describe for us Bill Clinton as you came to know him as a character, as a human. What pieces of this, if you were to write a play about politics, would you find most intriguing and wish to dig into?

Havel: I know President Clinton as a kind person, a friendly person, somebody with a perfect memory. I remember when we had a summit of the NATO alliance with the new members in it. That was a session very close and confidential where only the heads of state were present. There was a deliberation about the campaign about the attack on the regime of [Slobodan] Milosevic, and he had a very exhausting speech but it was by heart, he didn’t read it. He knew everything that was going on in Bosnia–Herzegovina. He knew it much better than all these other heads of state who were present there. He could talk very fluidly, very beautifully.
I remember sometimes he had this moment of pause when he was talking to somebody and he was discussing something, he always had this little pause and you could see he was thinking of something or remembering something or just preparing some future line of thought. Then he continued in his conversation as if nothing happened. So I noticed that he was monitoring something or thinking something, and that was a moment of reflection and recollection and probably some sort of moment of thought.

But we were good friends and I think most friendly with any of the other American Presidents, but I always felt a little bit shy in front of him. I don’t know where it came from. I hadn’t had this feeling with either of the other Presidents, not with Obama or anybody else, but with him I always was a little bit shy in spite of the fact that we are most friendly.

Riley: You and he were very different kinds of leaders, yes?

Havel: It is very difficult to judge, it is very difficult for me to say because the U.S. Presidents, of course they have a very important role in the domestic policy internally, the steps that they have to undertake, it is very different, they have to be very much present on TV as well. They have much more power as well than is the case with the Presidents in the European parliamentarian systems. It is very difficult to say where the execution of the function of the President differs because the country is different, the function itself is different, and of course the whole context is different. So it is very difficult to say.

Riley: Let me try one other way at this. In your speeches there is an evident change in the way you approach your leadership position, moving from the movement period to the period of your Presidency where the burdens of leadership seem to be more prominent for you when you become President than before. With President Clinton you get the sense that the day-to-day struggles of being President were something he actually relished, that this was something he looked very much forward to. Is that a fair assessment?

Havel: It is quite possible because the U.S. politicians, some of them strive to become President, some of them secretly think that they might become the American President—

Riley: Many of them.

Havel: Whereas with me it just happened, from one day into another. These changes were so huge and unusual, so absolute that I felt it as a burden on my shoulders and I was very happy that it was over. On the other hand, I’m very grateful to the fate, that I had the possibility to witness these changes and to be there, to meet very interesting people. Of course I don’t want to downplay it at all. I perceived it as a burden, but obviously President Clinton is a different character and I felt that he was taking it as a sportsman. He had this sort of sporty attitude. Even in his suffering on this worry that he had with Monica Lewinsky, I saw that he took it as a sort of sportsman with a sportsmanlike attitude.

At the end of my term of office I visited President Clinton and I received the highest respect a head of state can possibly receive. I think it doesn’t happen very often because there are 200 states all around the world, and you don’t very often have all these military parades and all these luncheons and official formalities, whereas I received it. They asked me before I came what sort of music I would like to have played at the official dinner. And I said would it be possible to
have Lou Reed playing there? He felt a bit uneasy about it with those bureaucrats from the office, from the administration. Hillary [Rodham Clinton] went down to the rehearsals to see that it was not too wild or too inappropriate. I think it was the first time and last time that such music, such hard rock music was played on the premises there. But you know the result was excellent because I could see all these gray-haired distinguished Congressmen, Republicans and all sorts, they were all jiggling and wiggling about in the rhythm of the music, probably just enjoying it because it was evoking their youth and their young years, so they enjoyed it.

It was possible with him because it wouldn’t have been possible with any other President, so I appreciated it. He felt this inconspicuous but still permanent fight with his office, with his bureaucrats there.

If I may, because we have to draw to a close, I’ll perhaps just mention something about the case of Monica Lewinsky.

Riley: Yes, please.

Havel: I would just like to say that this very state visit that I was mentioning took place at the time when this story or this scandal with Monica Lewinsky broke out, and it was a very exposed state visit. After this opening of the scandal and it was even the first press conference after this started, the American side asked me, “Would you want to postpone the visit because you don’t want to be entangled in these things?” We said, “No, no, we don’t mind.”

After the negotiations we had a press conference at the State Department and President Clinton said something and I said something and after these introductory words this forest of hands went up and everybody wanted to know about Monica Lewinsky of course, nobody was interested in our country, hearing about the Czech President, about me. Then they turned the question to me as well, what I thought of this, and I said it in English and President Clinton mentions it in his memoirs. I said to him, “America has thousands of faces and I understand most of them but some of them I don’t, and I don’t really want to talk about things that I don’t understand.” President Clinton really appreciated this answer. He liked it so very much that he included it in his memoirs.

Riley: One follow-up. Did you talk with President Clinton in private about this and about the American reaction to this? There is a sense in the United States that Europeans would be much more forgiving.

Havel: The only mention we had about this scandal, that referred to this scandal, was after the press conference he came up to me and thanked me for my reply. He said as well that he didn’t understand it either, all this publicity and all this interest that broke out from the side of the media.

Riley: I’m very grateful for your time, thank you so much for this. I think it will be immensely useful to people in the future who want to understand your relationship, so I thank you.

Havel: Thank you.