

The Uncertainty of Freedom, and the Freedom of Uncertainty

Freedom Lecture, American Friends of the Czech Republic and Friends of Slovakia

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Your Excellencies, Mr. Vice-President, my fellow Czechs and my Slovak cousins,
ladies and gentlemen,

I am deeply honored by the opportunity to deliver the annual Freedom Lecture of the American Friends of the Czech Republic, all the more for the fact that I happened to stand as a kind of a midwife at its birth. I would also like to compliment you, and your sister group Friends of Slovakia, on everything you have done over the last two decades to help our two nations build a strong relationship with this country, the United States of America. Finally, for hosting this event I would like to thank the Woodrow Wilson Center, one of the great institutions of civil society in the United States, named after a President, who at the end of World War I stood as a kind of a midwife at the birth of Czechoslovakia. But I think I had better stop talking about births and midwives and get to the subject of my talk, lest this gathering appears as some sort of an obstetrics convention.

I am sure it has occurred to everyone at least once in his or her life what a wonderful thing it would be to win the Jackpot in a lottery. And many of us have indeed bought a lottery ticket at least once in their lives, only to validate the well-known fact that the chances of winning in a lottery are rather small. Some of us,

however, may have not put up with this sober conclusion and proceeded on the assumption that if they bought two lottery tickets their chances of winning the Jackpot would increase twofold, and then they maybe extrapolated the logic to three, five or even ten tickets. And a few of us might have even entertained the theoretical possibility that if we bought all the tickets to a lottery we would be assured of winning the Jackpot.

There is nothing wrong with dreaming of a stroke of luck and trying to maximize one's chances. But it also pays to use common sense and elementary knowledge of the probability calculus. A more thorough analysis will immediately tell us, that while our chances of losing money when buying one lottery ticket are very high, our chances of losing money when buying two, three or five lottery tickets are that much higher, and that buying all the lottery tickets will not only give us an absolute certainty of winning the Jackpot but also an absolute certainty of losing vast amounts of money in the process.

But what, you might ask does buying a lottery ticket have to do with freedom? Freedom, after all, is arguably not an outcome of a random process like winning in a lottery. It is a conscious choice based on the belief that men are born with certain inalienable rights and should be thus free to make decisions about their lives. It is based on this belief, that we build the institutions of a free society, provide them with the necessary checks and balances, and guarantee the rule of law to prevent arbitrary punishment and attempts to hijack our freedom. For all the problems of a free society we believe with Winston Churchill that democracy, the political system that embodies,

maintains and administers a free society, is vastly preferable to all the alternatives. To a degree we believe that we have hit the Jackpot in the lottery of political systems.

All too often, however, the pride and the comfort of living in a free society lure us into underestimating dangers it is exposed to and into taking freedom for granted. We are more alert to these threats when they take an overt and brutal form, such as a hostile power or terrorist attacks against people, institutions and infrastructure. It is clear to us that such attacks are masterminded by people who do not approve of or even hate our way of life and would like to replace it with a secular tyranny or with an allegedly divine rule. Although such attacks could and did cause us immense harm and suffering in the past, not least in this country, we believe our societies are strong enough and our liberties robust enough to withstand them.

We are, alas, not nearly as vigilant when confronted with political systems which pay a lip service to freedom and democracy and do not act overtly hostile to us, but which claim exceptions on the grounds of culture, tradition, religion or state of development and deny the universal character of freedom and human rights. The question, I hasten to add, is not trying to impose our standards on such societies; that would be rightly seen as cultural imperialism. The question is whether by acknowledging their claims and making allowances in the interest of international cooperation, commercial advantage or the accommodation of large numbers of migrants from such societies into our own we do not, often unwittingly, relax our own standards as well.

More seriously still, we seem to be the least aware of and the most tolerant of the threats to free society that come not from the outside, from its enemies, but from within our own ranks. By this I don't mean dangers stemming from radical groups hell-bent on bringing about a utopia of some kind, though they too exist, but rather those from people who are happy to share in the benefits of freedom and are proud of its accomplishments, people like you and me. Everyday we witness all around us the tireless activity of individuals, groups and politicians, who far from deliberately trying to subvert freedom, are aiming to improve upon it a little here or there, just like the person who buys another lottery ticket strives to improve his chances of winning. The flaw they are trying to fix in one way or another is exactly the degree of uncertainty in the system. Voters, that is to say, abhor uncertainty and crave security. So to improve our job security, admittedly a valuable consideration for any individual, we will introduce more safeguards for the employees, making them less prone to dismissal, and in case such safeguards fail we will have a comfortable cushion of unemployment benefits in place. We will prefer to disregard the fact that such measures will drive the cost of labor up, perhaps to the extent of becoming uncompetitive with other markets, with the consequent rise of unemployment and the decrease of job security as a result. To fight crime and terrorism, we will increase the surveillance over our cities, our citizens and their communications, perhaps to the extent of decreasing our own perceived level of personal privacy. To prevent a catastrophic epidemics which might never materialize we mobilize our public health care systems and immunize millions of people at an enormous cost without a perceptible benefit to our collective health. And to offset the specter of catastrophic global warming, we engage in pre-emptive

policies, which might at best make a marginal difference in return for a monstrous investment. I could go on but I'm sure that you have all witnessed similar strategies in your own experience.

Another, somewhat less altruistic, internal threat to a free society comes from people who exploit the rules of the system to make sure their number always comes up in the lottery. Rather than taking their chances on the open market, they will make use of the fact that in a typical European country about one half of all wealth, 50 percent of the GDP gets redistributed through public budgets. By means of their contacts, influence and not infrequently overt corruption they make sure they will be at the receiving end of a significant portion of that wealth. At its extreme such economic system, in a phrase attributed to Milton Friedman, provides socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor.

There is no underestimating the damage that corruption causes to freedom. More than two centuries ago its mortal danger to a free society was recognized by the conservative thinker and politician Edmund Burke: "Corrupt influence is itself the perennial spring of all prodigality, and of all disorder; it loads us more than millions of debt; takes away vigor from our arms, wisdom from our councils, and every shadow of authority and credit from the most venerable parts of our constitution... Among a people generally corrupt, liberty cannot long exist."

Finally, freedom may be threatened, albeit unintentionally, by the actions of the very governments we elect to guarantee and safeguard our liberties. I represent a government that since its inception, and even before then, has considered human rights

and their protection as one of the fundamental values of any society. It is, however, increasingly a question whether freedom and human rights are best served by judicial policies that makes us defenseless in dealing with terrorists, criminals and human traffickers, just as it is a question whether the cause of freedom will have been advanced by suspending human rights guarantees for certain categories of individuals. As Václav Havel wrote forty years ago, in his play *The Conspirators*: „It is a natural disadvantage of democracy that it ties the hands of those, who wish it well, and opens unlimited possibilities for those, who do not take it seriously.“

In an effort to protect our liberty, our rights, our prosperity, our health and our security, our governments, especially those in Europe that I am the most familiar with, excel at inventing ever new regulations that stipulate how things should be done, and even more how they should not be done, and dictate how many hours a week we are allowed to work, and how long we have to sleep, what we can and cannot eat, which substances are beneficial to us and which are harmful, etc. etc. The increasing volume of regulations makes us safer against a number of risks, real or alleged, but also comes at an enormous cost to our societies and our economies and makes us increasingly uncompetitive with respect to other societies not so burdened. If this trend continues, we Europeans are running the risk of becoming exceedingly safe but also pretty much useless. We might end up being not so different from the Amish people, insistent on preserving our quaint mores, strictures and costumes and living in constant fear of violating an endless number of prescriptions and prohibitions whose origin and wisdom cannot be questioned.

I am sure you all understand where I am heading with this. I am not trying to deny the importance of a basic social security net for the well-being and harmony in a society. Neither am I trying to deny that climate changes occur, that they are attributable to human activity and that something should be done about it. And I am not denying that the complexity of a modern society requires a degree of regulation that might have been unnecessary in earlier times. What I am driving at is simply the observation that freedom is not a state of grace, the end of history, that is granted to us who are lucky enough to live in it but rather a dynamic equilibrium, comparable to the modern, inherently unstable fighter jets, which trade off stability for maneuverability and are constantly bordering on a state of stall, prevented from falling only by the infinite number of minor corrections which keep them airborne. Likewise, the greatest and quite unique strength of the democratic system of government is its self-corrective capability, its capacity to learn from the past mistakes and possibly to avoid them the next time. But take away that capability, let considerations of welfare, security, political correctness or profit outweigh those of the liberties of the people, and freedom will decay and wither away, as it did in a number of places a number of times in the past.

Which brings me from the uncertainty of freedom to the second part of my remarks, the freedom of uncertainty. Statistics, one of the most pedestrian of scientific disciplines, operates with what is in my mind one of the more poetic metaphors in the history of human thought. It is called „degrees of freedom“, and it is defined as a number of variables or parameters in a system that may vary independently. In its essence it expresses the degree of uncertainty we are able or willing to cope with in

conducting a scientific experiment or analyzing empirical data. Taken metaphorically, it expresses the intrinsic link between freedom and uncertainty. The more parameters we are able to vary, the greater the uncertainty about the outcome of our experiment. If we apply this model to the area of human conduct it becomes clear that uncertainty is not just a side-effect, an unavoidable drawback to human liberty, a price we have to pay for being free, but its necessary condition. It is not freedom, that gives rise to uncertainty, as its enemies would like us to believe, but rather uncertainty, that gives rise to freedom.

In the winter of 1968-69, a few months after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia there occurred one of those occasional grand debates of Czech intellectual life, that have often occupied a disproportionately large space in our political history, more so than comings and goings of Kings and Presidents, decisions of the government, or military campaigns. Milan Kundera, already on his way to become one of the best-known Czech and European writers of the second part of the 20th century wrote an essay called „The Czech Destiny“, in which he attempted to cement the relatively meager accomplishments of the Prague Spring in the few months it had been allowed to exist before the invasion, by pointing to the allegedly unique and lasting significance of the effort to build a „socialism with a human face“, thus creating a legacy that “placed Czechs and Slovaks in the center of world history”. In Kundera’s mind it was the destiny of a small nation in the middle of Europe, surrounded by big and often aggressive neighbors, to shine as a beacon of light for other nations even if it was itself destined to live forever under the cloud of oppression

and tyranny. Coming as it did just before Christmas 1968, the essay offered a soothing balm on the fresh and festering wounds of the nation.

To many people it came as a shock, when Kundera's argument was resolutely rejected a month later in an essay written by his younger colleague and friend, the playwright Václav Havel, who rejected Kundera's claims to the exclusivity and the lasting appeal of the Prague Spring. In Havel's mind the reform movement largely aspired to goals, like freedom of expression, freedom and association and political and economic freedoms, that much of the rest of the world took for self-evident. At the same time Havel denied there was anything immutable about the national history of suffering under the yoke of more powerful neighbors.

“Whenever the Czech patriot lacks the courage to face a cruel, but open-ended present, to admit all its aspects and to draw, mercilessly, the necessary conclusions, even should they be aimed into our own ranks, he will turn to a better, but already definitive past...” wrote Havel, choosing uncertainty over security. By going on to write, “Our destiny depends on us. The world does not consist... of dumb superpowers that can do anything and clever small nations that can do nothing,” Havel shattered the myth of Czech intellectual superiority and physical impotence in the anticipation of the day, twenty years later when the nation would be free to choose its own destiny, which would not be that of the Prague Spring, either.

In his writings Havel keeps coming back to this idea of uncertainty as a pre-condition of freedom. In his thinking, which owes much to the influences of Martin Heidegger, and existentialist philosophers, this uncertainty is an essential part of the

condition of modern man, his manifest destiny. It is not so much that modern man chooses freedom as that he is thrown into freedom, condemned to it.

True, uncertainty has been a part and parcel of human existence since times immemorial. What makes modernity distinct from previous eras is the wholesale recognition of this fact and the withering away of concepts that provided a semblance of certainty to our ancestors, whether they were the ironclad operation of the laws of nature or the absolute authority of a divine presence. „Without God, everything is permitted,“ is the famous quote from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*.

The inseparable link between freedom and uncertainty is at the bottom of the undeniable duality of freedom and of the anguish that it often produces. By being free, we are not only liberated from the shackles of tyranny, dogma and prejudice, but we are also expelled from the stifling but familiar edifice of regulated life into a vast, foreign and unknown universe, in which we can use our newfound powers to do harm just as well as to do good. Without guidelines, such life may become just an exercise in absurdity, void of any meaningful goals except those with which we are endowed by nature, i.e. survival, personal comfort, and reproduction. This in turn creates the feeling of emptiness, alienation and insecurity, even despair that leads so many people to turn to false prophets, esoteric thoughts and populist demagogues for salvation. It is a vicious circle, in which freedom becomes a threat to itself. „Only a God can save us now,“ said Martin Heidegger of this existential quandary in a quote often referred to by Václav Havel. But wouldn’t such salvation come at the price of freedom itself?

The key to this dilemma may lie in nothing more than the choice of the grammatical article. In German, the above quoted sentence of Heidegger reads, *Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten*, Only some god can save us now, with the clear implication that there is an element of human choice in the matter of salvation. If we can offer a single certainty, some god, in the face of the vast uncertainty, which spawns the world of freedom, then we can perhaps embrace freedom without the fear of falling into an abyss.

There is more than one name for the kind of god I have in mind, but they all come down to self-limitation. Just as a government of a free society is by definition a limited government, paradoxically a free man cannot for long remain free without imposing limits on his own conduct of his own volition. You can call it morality, you can call it responsibility or you can call it humility. It is inseparable from the history of human conduct in all societies, albeit as often in breach as in observance. The prohibitions against killing another human being, stealing their property, lying and cheating, against imposing arbitrary power over the powerless, the commandments to provide for those closest to you and help your fellow men, the stern warnings against pride and hubris, seem to be universal to the most diverse societies in spite of considerable definitional differences about what constitutes such a prohibited act. We can argue whether such moral strictures are God-given as all religions believe, whether they are biologically rooted and came into being as a result of evolutionary pressures, as the sociobiologists would claim, or whether they are man-made as a way to organize a society and protect its stability, as the institutionalists among us would argue, but we cannot deny their importance. „No society, no matter how technologically advanced,

can function without a moral basis, a conviction, which is not a matter of opportunity, circumstances or anticipated benefits. However, morality is not here for the society to function, but simply because it makes a human being human,” wrote the philosopher Jan Patočka in his essay “On the duty to resist injustice” under circumstances that led directly to his death following the launch of Charter 77. This does not mean reintroducing the constraints of the god-ordained universe through the back door. But if we are free to choose our God, then perhaps we are also free to choose our morality, or, to our detriment, the lack thereof.

I am not claiming that embracing responsibility, showing humility and putting a renewed emphasis on the moral roots of all human conduct, all things that you will recognize not as an original recipe of mine but rather as something already advocated by our great countrymen, Václav Havel, Jan Patočka and Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, and a long line of thinkers before them, would repair everything that is wrong with the current state of the Western society while simultaneously protecting the liberties we all hold dear. But I am confident in thinking that without such emphasis, the great edifice of liberty, nowhere more in evidence than in this great capital of a great nation, might be at risk.

We cannot guarantee that everyone wins in a lottery. But if we are wise enough, responsible enough and moral enough, we can make sure that the lottery will be there for him or her to play the next time.