

INTRODUCTION

U.S. Diplomacy in Czechoslovakia at the End of the Cold War

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with David Fishman and Narrelle Gilchrist

As the former United States ambassador to the Czech Republic,¹ a scholar of the history of the Czech lands,² and the child of a Czechoslovak expatriate, my experience of the country's turbulent history is punctuated by the miracle of the peaceful fall of Communism. In November 1989, countless Czechoslovak citizens took to the streets to call for an end to the repressive Communist regime, culminating in one of the most remarkable transfers of power in the twentieth century. In just over a month, Czechs and Slovaks had ousted the Communist government. After an initial night of police brutality, the days that followed were so peaceful that they became popularly known as the Velvet Revolution (*sametová revoluce*).

When looking in the rearview mirror at momentous historical events, there is sometimes the tendency to assume that events had to go as they did. But the Velvet Revolution easily could have been less smooth and soft. 1989 was not only the year of Tiananmen Square, but also of brutal repression elsewhere in the Soviet Bloc. In Romania, for example, one thousand civilians were killed by police during a cascade of anti-Communist riots.³ Czechoslovakia also came close to seeing the use of lethal force, with the

military poised to strike during a key moment that November.⁴ Fortunately, circumstances instead aligned to create a peaceful transition of power.

The contents of this volume offer important new evidence about the Czechoslovak and American actors whose work throughout 1989 helped make that happy outcome possible. This book includes fifty-two recently declassified U.S. diplomatic cables originating from this period in Czechoslovak history. The cables—which were transmitted from the U.S. Embassy in Prague to the U.S. Department of State in Washington, D.C.—shed new light on why the revolution was velvet and in particular the American role in helping to establish some of the conditions that made it so. Together with the previously declassified set of cables printed in the excellent volume, *Prague–Washington–Prague: Reports from the United States Embassy in Czechoslovakia, November–December 1989* (Václav Havel Library, 2004), these documents offer a unique behind-the-scenes view of the events of 1989.

The present collection is intended to complement *Prague–Washington–Prague*, and to follow its exemplary model. I obtained these fifty-two additional cables while conducting research for my book *The Last Palace: Europe's Turbulent Century in Five Lives and One Legendary House* (Crown, 2018), a history of the twentieth century as seen from the U.S. ambassador's residence in Prague. Soon after I began studying the *annus mirabilis* of 1989 for my book, it became clear to me that, as valuable as *Prague–Washington–Prague* was, additional State Department materials remained under wraps. This was apparent from clues and the occasional gap in the cables in the earlier book, from conversations with former embassy officials, but also as a result of my wish to cover a broader period of time than the prior volume. I aimed to go back to the summer of 1989 and trace the societal and political tensions in the months leading up to the Velvet Revolution that November, whereas *Prague–Washington–Prague* includes cables almost solely from November and December.

More than two years of cordial negotiations ensued with my former employer in Foggy Bottom, first under the Obama administration and then continuing into that of President Trump. In retrospect, I probably should have done a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request of the kind that resulted in the release of the cables for *Prague–Washington–Prague*. But the State Department had an enormous FOIA backlog, and I feared that the process would be too slow. Finally, as the manuscript submission dead-

line for *The Last Palace* approached in 2017, the State Department kindly suggested I make a request under their Mandatory Declassification Review process.⁵ In response to a list of twenty-four targeted questions I submitted on July 17, 2017,⁶ the State Department produced the cables collected herein.

Written in the brisk style characteristic of internal State Department communications, the cables offer fresh insights into the historic events of the period—including the activities and deliberations of Ambassador Shirley Temple Black and her staff.⁷ Taken together with *Prague–Washington–Prague*, these cables offer a more comprehensive look at the activities of the U.S. Embassy in Prague during this critical year, including how embassy staff processed and reacted to the first signs of upheaval and saw events through to the advent of a new democracy—both by observing and helping promote that happy outcome. This introduction briefly offers some context for reading the cables. It begins by discussing U.S. democracy promotion in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War, a strategy carried out by American diplomats including those in Prague. Next it provides an overview of the events of 1989, showing the efforts of U.S. Embassy Prague at key moments of the Velvet Revolution and addressing some themes of the cables (although they speak for themselves magnificently).⁸ The cables follow this introduction. Finally, an afterword carries the themes of the cables forward, describing efforts to promote U.S. democracy post-1989 and assessing the ultimate legacy of the Czechoslovaks and Americans who worked so hard for freedom: the current state of democracy in the Czech and Slovak lands.

HUMAN RIGHTS: THE FULCRUM OF U.S. DIPLOMACY IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA BEFORE THE VELVET REVOLUTION

The significance of Embassy Prague's engagement in 1989 is best understood within the context of a broader American strategy in the run-up to the end of the Cold War that stressed the advancement of human rights. While numerous factors contributed to the demise of Communism in 1989—including socioeconomic challenges, charismatic dissident leadership, and the reforms of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his circle—U.S. advocacy for human rights played a part in fostering dissent and even-

tually revolution in the Soviet Bloc.⁹ In Czechoslovakia, U.S. diplomacy long provided inspiration and protection for opposition movements.¹⁰ Ambassador Black was the last in a line of Communist-era American diplomats and policymakers who supported the growth of dissent in Czechoslovakia, work that aided the peaceful downfall of one of the most oppressive regimes in the Soviet Bloc.

U.S. human rights advocacy behind the Iron Curtain marked an inflection point in 1975 with the signing of the Helsinki Accords. In this agreement, Czechoslovakia, along with the Soviet Union and other Communist states, reluctantly promised to protect human rights in exchange for diplomatic concessions from the United States and other Western powers, including the official recognition of post-World War II territorial boundaries.¹¹ When the Helsinki Accords were signed at the conclusion of the first Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), neither the Soviet nor the Czechoslovak government expected the human rights provision to have a major impact on their affairs. Among other considerations, President Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, showed no intention of making human rights predominate in their foreign policy because it would have jeopardized the *détente* with the Soviet Union that they sought. Within a few short years, however, a new consensus in U.S. foreign policy began to emerge—one that placed human rights advocacy at the core of Cold War strategy. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations were persistent in their pursuit of human rights—at times relentlessly so.¹² Ensuring compliance with the Helsinki Accords would become a focal point for American and international diplomacy, not to mention domestic opposition movements within Communist states. Indeed, as one historian puts it, “from Moscow’s perspective, the path from Helsinki to the ‘evil empire’ speech was straight, and all downhill.”¹³

By signing the Helsinki Accords, the Czechoslovak government had agreed to respect citizens’ rights within its borders, a commitment that radically changed the dynamic for opposition movements in Czechoslovakia. The Helsinki Accords helped embolden a wave of dissent, as activists rallied around the idea of enforcing government compliance with the agreement.¹⁴ Czechoslovak dissidents quickly signed and published Charter 77 in 1977, demanding that the government respect human rights and honor international norms. Prior to 1975, the Czechoslovak government might

have responded by silencing the Charter 77 signatories with complete or at least substantial impunity. In the aftermath of Helsinki, however, the government risked losing legitimacy through accusations that it had flouted its obligations to the international community. For the first time in years, civil resistance groups were allowed a small sliver of space to operate above ground, a notable development in one of the more repressive states in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁵

Over the next decade, sustained U.S. diplomacy and engagement on human rights issues supported opposition movements like Charter 77. Activists gained ground in part through their ability to link with transnational networks of human rights advocacy.¹⁶ The U.S. Congress established a Helsinki Commission to monitor governments' compliance, and dissidents formed connections with U.S. politicians, NGO leaders, and journalists, as well as with ambassadors and foreign service officers like those serving in Embassy Prague. As one historian notes, "it became commonplace for an Eastern European dissident to write to an American diplomat asking that his plight be addressed in upcoming talks."¹⁷ The Helsinki Accords created a standard under international law through which Western regimes could object to violations of human rights inside Soviet Bloc states.¹⁸ The latter still fought human rights; the hard-line Communist regime in Czechoslovakia continued to periodically harass and arrest dissidents. Yet, bound by Helsinki, the Czechoslovak state could not stifle dissent entirely without incurring significant costs. The dissidents persisted, at one point declaring, "We must keep fighting, we must continually point to the Helsinki Accords and say 'You signed this, you must honour this.'"¹⁹

Despite the growth of domestic opposition after Helsinki, Czechoslovakia and other Communist governments continued to participate in the CSCE process throughout the 1980s, contending with the human rights provisions in hopes of gaining additional diplomatic and economic concessions from the West. Czechoslovakia was soon bound by its commitments not only to Helsinki, but also to follow-up agreements made at CSCE convenings in Belgrade, Madrid, Stockholm, and Vienna, amplifying the pressure on the government to abide by international standards of human rights.²⁰

By 1989, the authority of the hard-line Czechoslovak Communists was beginning to fray. Gorbachev had made it clear that the Soviets would no

longer interfere to stop political liberalization. As Czechoslovak Premier Ladislav Adamec would eventually admit, “the international support of the Socialist countries can no longer be counted on.”²¹ Throughout the international community, the protection of human rights had become an established norm—a prerequisite to being considered a legitimate, modern, European state. Robbed of the full backing of the Soviet Bloc, the Czechoslovak government’s claim to legitimacy eroded.²² Moreover, the regime aspired to strengthen its economic ties to the United States and Western Europe. Though the nation was more prosperous than most of its Communist neighbors, its standard of living paled in comparison with Austria or Switzerland, as leading Party officials admitted.²³ Communist hard-liners clung (at least publicly) to the notion that state Socialism would bring about modernization, but the reality that economic growth would benefit from trade with the West was not lost on the regime. Yet, since Helsinki, U.S. trade deals and other economic incentives had been firmly attached to human rights. Most notably, the United States long withheld most-favored nation (MFN) trading status from Czechoslovakia over human rights violations, a diplomatic “carrot” that was fervently sought by the Communist government.²⁴

U.S. pressure on human rights issues continued throughout the pivotal events of 1989. After the dissident leader Václav Havel was arrested and ultimately sentenced to an eight-month jail term, the United States, along with other Western powers, invoked the Human Dimension Mechanism, the measure established by the Helsinki Accords that allowed countries to call out other states’ human rights violations. Faced with international pressure, the government released Havel several months early under “protective supervision”; while not completely free, Havel was able to continue his activities as an opposition leader.²⁵ As Communist regimes toppled one by one in other parts of Europe, the Czechoslovak opposition continued to gain momentum. The hard-liners who still dominated the Czechoslovak government eventually faced a choice: attempt to violently end the protests or negotiate a peaceful transfer of power. Some in the government advocated for a crackdown, but ultimately the Czechoslovak Communists opted to peacefully cede power to the people, an effort that was led in the Czech lands by Havel’s Civic Forum.²⁶ Though many factors influenced the Communists’ fateful decision, the international ramifications of violating the protestors’ human rights was one consideration.

U.S. diplomats made it clear that government brutality would have significant consequences. One U.S. official warned that if the regime chose to act with further brutality, it would “go down in history” as a government known for “senseless violence.”²⁷ Their message undoubtedly left an impression on the Communist leaders as they debated whether to crack down on protestors. In a November 24 speech before the Party’s Central Committee, Premier Adamec stated that, given Western support for human rights, the government could not “underestimate the international risks of a broad application of force. . . . Signed international treaties dealing with human rights cannot be taken lightly.” Adamec also noted that Czechoslovakia could face a “political and economic boycott” from Western countries if protestors were met with violence.²⁸ At the most crucial moment, warnings from U.S. diplomats about the consequences of human rights violations resonated with key figures in the Communist leadership, contributing to the peaceful, “velvet” end of a hard-line regime.

FROM DISSENT TO DEMOCRACY: THE VELVET REVOLUTION AS SEEN FROM U.S. EMBASSY PRAGUE

The cables in this book provide new insight into the persistent advocacy for human rights by the U.S. Embassy in Prague.²⁹ They detail how Ambassador Black and other embassy officers engaged frequently with dissidents through meetings that encouraged and legitimized opposition groups.³⁰ Embassy officers used these meetings to gather information on government repression, which formed the basis of human rights updates sent to the State Department.³¹ Embassy officers also attended demonstrations themselves, openly displaying support for dissidents’ rights and rapidly communicating to Washington about any violence.³¹

In addition to supporting dissidents, the cables show Ambassador Black and other embassy officers persistently and effectively wielding the tool of economic leverage. They made clear in their meetings with Czechoslovak government officials that MFN status and other economic incentives would only be granted after significant improvements in human rights practices.³² Ambassador Black also dangled diplomatic “carrots,” bringing up the possibility of high-level visits from U.S. officials, even from President George

H. W. Bush.³³ The cables demonstrate how embassy personnel tied this human rights advocacy to the Helsinki Accords. Ambassador Black and other cable authors frequently invoked Helsinki and the follow-up CSCE meetings, most frequently the then-recent Vienna Concluding Document.³⁴ She and her staff hoped that, if put under enough pressure, Czechoslovakia would abide by the human rights norms of the international community.

The cables in this volume begin on August 2, 1989, four months before the Velvet Revolution, and detail the reactions and activities of the U.S. Embassy in Prague during that preliminary period. It was a brief stretch of time during which, as Havel would later put it, history in Czechoslovakia “accelerated.”³⁵ In the decades that preceded the revolution, the mass of ordinary Czech and Slovak citizens had largely abstained from overt acts of dissent.³⁶ Pervasive threats and harassment by Czechoslovakia’s notorious secret police, the StB (*Státní bezpečnost*), stimulated fears of retaliation and violence. The memory of the 1950s, when the newly installed Communist regime enacted Stalinist measures to crack down on political dissent, played a part as well. As a result of these and other factors, the general populace tended to mask its contempt for the Communist Party through jokes, evasion, and indifference.³⁷ Reflecting on Czechoslovakia at the time of her arrival, Black would later remark that the citizens seemed downtrodden: “It was an oppression you could see and feel. . . . It was spooky. It was strange. Even the children were silent.”³⁸

The cables describe how the tide turned. They begin roughly a month after leading dissidents, including Havel, launched the “A Few Sentences” (*Několik vět*) petition, which called for “free and democratic discussion” and demanded that the government release political prisoners.³⁹ The petition quickly garnered thousands of signatures from citizens across the country, raising government fears of a snowball effect.⁴⁰ Cables penned by U.S. officials in Prague provided updates on the petition’s reception by the regime and among ordinary citizens. One sent on August 11, for example, notes that the petition had gained wide support among workers, but lacked buy-in from Slovaks.⁴¹ Another details the embassy’s “informal sampling” of support for the petition, which found “intense interest” among ordinary citizens coupled with a “fear of the dangers involved” in action.⁴²

The first chance to test that intense interest came in late August at demonstrations marking the twenty-first anniversary of the Warsaw Pact

invasion of Czechoslovakia that crushed the Prague Spring. Leading up to the demonstrations on August 21, 1989, embassy officers offered incisive commentary, including warnings of potential violence against unauthorized demonstrations. In one cable, the Deputy Chief of Mission Theodore Russell warns of a “bloody (August) 21st” and proposes a blueprint for Washington’s response should violence break out.⁴³ Another cable sent just days before the demonstrations remarks on a “mood of tension” pervading the city along with palpable hope for change.⁴⁴ The embassy’s warnings proved accurate. While the protestors remained mostly peaceful, police attacked demonstrators and arrested more than three hundred individuals for independent political activity.⁴⁵ In a cable signed by Ambassador Black, the embassy provided its assessment of the day: “The regime appears to have been the clear loser in the confrontation, demonstrating once again that its concept of the freedoms of assembly and speech are sharply at odds with the Western (and its own population’s) understanding of such principles.”⁴⁶ She knew whereof she wrote: she was present.⁴⁷ Following up a week later, the embassy conveyed three prescient takeaways from the demonstrations: “increased willingness by Czechoslovaks, especially the young, to challenge the regime, an ‘internationalization’ of the fight for human rights in Czechoslovakia, and the importance of pressure from both the governments in East and West in nudging the Czechoslovak regime towards a more tolerant view of political dissent.”⁴⁸

Around the same time as the August 21 demonstrations, the newly arrived Ambassador Black was preparing to present her credentials to President Gustáv Husák. In a cable sent several days before her credentialing, Black describes her “cordial” meeting with the East German ambassador, the dean of the Prague diplomatic community. While lighthearted in tone, the meeting provided Black an opportunity to pepper the man with questions about protests, independent activists, and Gorbachev. The East German in turn delivered some counsel of his own: “Do not ask Czech officials any tough questions.”⁴⁹ Black did not follow his advice. In a meeting with Foreign Minister Jaromír Johanes on August 22, the new ambassador emphasized the United States’ interest in the region and its desire to see progress in human rights.⁵⁰

The cables from September show the Americans continuing their strategy of engagement with a hard edge. As summer ended, an important meet-

ing loomed on the horizon. For the first time in eleven years, a Czechoslovak foreign minister was set to meet with his U.S. counterpart.⁵¹ Recognizing the potential of the encounter, Ambassador Black and her staff cabled recommendations to Secretary of State James Baker. Human rights should be the focus of the conversation and be further stressed in any subsequent comments to the media.⁵² Other agenda items should include access to officials, embassy housing, and war monuments. In a final word of emphasis to Baker, the embassy returned to the Helsinki Accords, pointing out that he could undercut the legitimacy Foreign Minister Johanes stood to gain from the meeting by “hit[ting] hard” on human rights.⁵³ The advice was well received. In his October 1 meeting with Johanes, Baker presented a list of political prisoners and tied economic reform to improved human rights.⁵⁴

Notwithstanding that message, October saw harsh measures against independent journalists and activists, setting the stage for an end-of-month showdown.⁵⁵ October 28 marked the seventy-first anniversary of Czechoslovakia’s birth and provided another occasion for independent political action.⁵⁶ Concerned about a “new crackdown” on activists in order to “minimize the size of October 28” demonstrations, the embassy recommended that Washington issue a forceful statement on the “deteriorating human rights situation.”⁵⁷ It was a gray and cold autumn day when nearly ten thousand people spontaneously appeared on Wenceslas Square to express their dislike of the regime.⁵⁸ Carrying signs that bore slogans such as “Truth Prevails” and “We will not allow our republic to be subverted,” demonstrators began to sing their national anthem.⁵⁹ Suddenly, riot police appeared just as they had during the August protest. After demanding that the protesters vacate the square, police waded into the crowd, randomly beating some demonstrators and detaining at least two hundred and fifty others.⁶⁰ In the aftermath of October’s demonstration, U.S. officials assessed that “the wider population here is yet unwilling to risk direct confrontation with the regime,” noting that the turnout at the demonstration was “relatively small” compared with protests in nearby countries like East Germany.⁶¹ At the same time, however, the turnout far exceeded that in August and continued a trend of “increasing activism.” Like in August, Ambassador Black again attended the demonstration to see for herself, this time at even greater personal risk.⁶²

November 17 marked the fiftieth anniversary of a Nazi crackdown that

targeted students protesting the Nazi occupation and shut down major Czech universities.⁶³ The planned protests on that chilly November day did not initially seem remarkable to embassy officers.⁶⁴ The anniversary was less high profile than those in August and October, and the initial gathering had been officially sanctioned by government officials and co-organized by the Socialist Union of Youth.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the embassy tracked the coming event, remarking on the creation of two independent student groups a few days earlier and speculating about the new developments that November 17 could bring.⁶⁶

Three U.S. foreign service officers traveled to observe the protests that day, just in case they proved consequential.⁶⁷ Upon arrival, the American onlookers found an unusually large crowd gathered on the university campus, which later marched to a nearby cemetery.⁶⁸ The formidable turnout and rousing speeches energized the students in attendance. Rather than disperse after the approved ceremonies concluded, the demonstrators turned toward Wenceslas Square chanting slogans like “Forty years of Communism is enough” and “Warsaw, Berlin, and now Prague.”⁶⁹ The U.S. embassy representatives moved with the crowd, continuing to observe events. The protesters’ path was blocked in a side street by riot police. After a tense standoff with a substantial fragment that lasted late into the evening, regime forces cut off all escape. Czechoslovak security waded into the crowd and severely beat hundreds of peaceful demonstrators.⁷⁰ The horrified U.S. diplomats watched the carnage, themselves ultimately having to flee from the advancing forces.⁷¹

News of the violence shot through Czechoslovakia, galvanizing civilian resistance and outrage among activists. Western journalists were present, and news of the events rapidly spread globally. From her perch at the embassy, Ambassador Black helped rally international attention. She told one reporter, “The government is scared and out of control. . . . We are very angered by it.”⁷² Black urged Washington to condemn the regime’s “brutal” and “bloody-minded” response to the demonstrations and continued to file reports about growing unrest.⁷³ On November 20, three days after the regime attack on the student-led marchers, around one hundred thousand people gathered in Wenceslas Square.⁷⁴ The size of the demonstrations grew daily and by November 26 would balloon to more than half a million.⁷⁵ Initially diffuse, the dissidents soon gained an organizing structure. On

November 19, Havel and other dissident leaders announced the creation of a partnership of independent groups called the Civic Forum, which united most independent initiatives and representatives of churches, artists' unions, and other like-minded citizens' organizations.⁷⁶ Commenting on the week's developments, Black cabled the next day that "the official structures of power are beginning to creak" and "[General Secretary Miloš] Jakeš's chances of surviving this week are looking very unlikely."⁷⁷

As pressure on the government mounted, the possibility loomed that officials would rely on violence to maintain power. Ominously, the army was put on alert, with preparations made for a possible intervention in the protests.⁷⁸ On November 24, Defense Minister Milán Václavík told the Communist leadership that they had the support of the army and made the case for military intervention to restore order.⁷⁹ The decision was in the hands of the Party leaders. Fortunately, more moderate voices carried the day. Most of the Communist leaders were unwilling to risk the domestic and international consequences of further November 17–style violence.⁸⁰ Bowing to pressure, the entire Party leadership resigned, leaving behind younger leaders to salvage the Party.⁸¹ Speaking to a closed-door audience, Jakeš said the country sat at "fateful crossroads" and admitted that "our restructuring has been and is accompanied by many great words, without the necessary deeds."⁸² Many of the hard-liners, including Jakeš, had been ousted, but the remaining Communists dug in their heels, attempting to present themselves as a legitimate reform government.⁸³ Frustrated by the unyielding officials, most of the country on November 27 took part in a two-hour general strike organized by the Civic Forum.⁸⁴ Independent leaders called it a referendum on support for the Communist Party and reiterated their calls to end one-party rule.

The embassy's primary role during those heady days in late November and into December was one of meticulous reporting—with a particular eye toward preparing Washington for a more active role in supporting the new regime that seemed likely to emerge. The embassy met with representatives of the Civic Forum and other dissidents, reporting on their assessments about unfolding events and analyzing their evolving tactics.⁸⁵ For their part, dissidents pressed the embassy to show political support for the opposition "in a way that would minimize the potential that force might be used to thwart the democratic forces and processes now present in Czechoslovakia."⁸⁶

By the end of November, the Communists had begun a dialogue with opposition leaders, promising to compromise on a new government.⁸⁷ The initial proposals, however, were modest at best, leaving the Communist Party firmly in the majority in the government. Unsatisfied, masses of Czech and Slovak citizens continued to march and strike in protest.⁸⁸ The dissidents asked that the United States not prematurely extend MFN status to the weakened regime, a gesture that would overly legitimize the Communists' attempt at reform.⁸⁹ Keeping in mind the dissidents' requests, embassy officials met with the embattled Communists to discuss ongoing events and remind them that the world was watching.⁹⁰ In a meeting with Foreign Minister Johanes, Ambassador Black rebuffed his requests that the United States normalize relations with Czechoslovakia, telling him that it was "a little soon to raise some subjects," including MFN.⁹¹ Devoid of both international and domestic support, the Communists reluctantly began to cede their grip on power—paving the way for a new, democratic government.⁹²

The final cables from November and December reflect the embassy's growing role as a bridge from Prague to decisionmakers in the United States whose choices would help shape the future of a democratic Czechoslovakia. Members of the Senate and the House came to Prague for meetings facilitated by the embassy with emerging leaders.⁹³ These conversations between U.S. and Czechoslovak politicians foreshadowed the strong alliance between the two countries that would soon emerge. Czechoslovaks hoping to reestablish liberal democracy benefited significantly from the political and economic advice of American lawmakers highly experienced in the practice of that system.⁹⁴ In addition, meeting with U.S. officials lent the budding Czechoslovak democratic leadership encouragement and support as they struggled to replace the decaying Communist regime with a new political order.

Just six weeks after the revolution had begun, the Czechoslovak dissidents achieved that goal. Addressing a jubilant crowd outside Prague Castle on January 1, 1990, the newly-elected President Havel quoted the seventeenth-century Czech educator Jan Amos Komenský: "People, your government has returned to you."⁹⁵ With the election of the former political prisoner as the country's first non-Communist president since 1948,⁹⁶ the Communist regime had been formally replaced, and the hopes of the Czechoslovak people, and their interlocutors in U.S. Embassy Prague, had been achieved.

FROM THE AFTERMATH TO THE PRESENT

Jubilation soon gave way to the hard work of building a new democracy. The United States continued its active supporting role, now pivoting from human rights advocacy to a broader focus on the many modalities of liberalism. The afterword to this volume traces how the seeds of democracy that were planted in 1989 were cultivated in 1990 and the years that followed, including with support from the United States, as well as the evolution of aid from the United States and the assumptions that undergirded it. The aid included a focus on helping Czechoslovakia build free markets on the assumption that doing so would support (or even guarantee) concomitant political freedoms. The afterword argues that the successes and failures of American democracy assistance after the Velvet Revolution are reflected in the complex state of liberal democracy in the contemporary Czech Republic and Slovakia, which is subject to populist and other challenges that confront democracies across Europe, but is proving surprisingly hardy in both nations and is outperforming some of their neighbors in that regard. That would surely gratify the authors of the cables presented in this book, who witnessed and aided the efforts of the Czechs and Slovaks to secure that democracy in the first place.

The cables follow this introduction, with annotations as needed to define unfamiliar names, terms, and events. The time that each cable was sent is derived from the originals and is listed before a “Z” for “Zulu Time,” a military term for the time zone better known as Greenwich Mean Time. We have also corrected minor typographical errors made in the original cables; these changes do not affect the cables’ meaning and enhance readability. For additional reference in reviewing the cables, please see the timeline of events; list of acronyms and abbreviations; and list of key terms, names, and events.