Despite unseasonably warm weather on a Friday afternoon, a near capacity crowd packed the Statler Auditorium on September 24 to hear Václav Klaus deliver a speech entitled, “A return to Cornell: Remarks by the President of the Czech Republic.” Klaus, who was a visiting scholar at Cornell in the spring of 1969, made his return on Cornell’s homecoming weekend as the guest of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies and the Cornell Institute for European Studies. In his remarks, given as part of the Einaudi Center’s Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series, he spoke of the broad perspective he had gained while at Cornell and told the audience how this perspective had impacted his professional and political life ever since.

After an introduction from Dean Peter LePage, Klaus began by looking back to the days of his arrival in Ithaca, shortly after the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in August of 1968. Pointing out that this occupation was the only military act undertaken by the Warsaw Pact during the cold war period, Klaus said, “Moscow rightly understood that the Czechs wanted to get rid of communism.” The subsequent resumption of authoritarian rule, he continued, “…led to a feeling of deep frustration that lasted until the fall of communism in 1989. But the beginning was the worst.”

When arriving at Cornell, Klaus said, “I hoped I had come to a quiet university where students were here to learn and professors were here to teach.” The occupation of the Willard Straight Hall by the Afro-American Society and subsequent SDS takeover of Barton Hall, however, quickly showed him that, “This was not the case.” Klaus reflected that the student activists at Cornell reminded him of activists in his own country with whom he did not agree, on both grounds of philosophy and methodology.

Klaus said that he left Cornell as a devoted monetarist and with mistrust in the ability of the state to control or regulate the economy. “Government failure,” he said, “is always much bigger and much worse than private failure.”
Klaus then went on to speak about his role in the “Velvet Revolution” of August 1989, when he was placed in charge of the reform of Czechoslovakia’s economic institutions. “I didn’t want to reform them,” he said, “but transform them.” In addition to dismantling the Soviet-style planned economy, Klaus wanted to re-integrate the Czech economy with the rest of Europe as it had been prior to communism. He explained that in the 1950s the European Community had been created as an intergovernmental organization. In the past 20 years, however, as it evolved into something resembling “supra-nationalism”, he lost faith in its ability to solve Europe’s economic problems and started to see many institutional similarities with Soviet economic regulation.

Next, Klaus addressed his writings on the economy and the environment. Having been deprived of freedom for 50 years, he said, Czechs are cautious of any loss of freedom and the rise of “-isms.” In a book entitled “Blue Planet in Green Shackles”, Klaus warns of the growth of environmentalism as another all-encompassing belief system that does not respond well to analysis or doubt. “Freedom is in danger,” Klaus said, “but the climate is OK.”

Klaus closed his remarks by saying that he has enjoyed his time in Ithaca and had learned quite a bit during his studies at Cornell but had not had a chance to say “thank you” until now, and that he appreciated being given the opportunity to do so.

Klaus then responded to a number of questions from students in the audience, moderated by Dean LePage. When asked if he thought it was dangerous to act in an environmentally conscious way, he replied that he was most sensitive of all to a loss of personal freedom and being told what to do and how to behave, and he cautioned the audience to avoid any sort of belief system that did not allow itself to be questioned.

When asked by another student why he had vetoed the Treaty of Lisbon and nearly caused the agreement to fail, only to have the Czech Republic subsequently join the European Union. Klaus reiterated that there was no way for the Czech Republic to be on the outside of European integration looking in, and with the fall of communism, the Czech Republic wanted to be a “normal European country.” Though he viewed the treaty of Lisbon as the final movement in the transition of the European Union from intergovernmental cooperation to “supra-nationalism”, he thought it best for the Czech Republic to try to influence its evolution from the inside as a voting member.

When asked to comment on the current global economic crisis, Klaus responded that recent events in the economy have been portrayed as an economic failure, but it is clear that the global downturn can be seen as normal economic change and the market regulating itself. Rather, he said, attention should focus on the failures in the monetary policy of the Federal Reserve Board, and not a failure of the market.

When asked a final question, “What do European leaders expect of the United States in the 21st century?” Klaus responded that this was a big question. However, he continued, the most important consideration was that there was no need to duplicate NATO, and that the trans-Atlantic relationship between Europe and the United States would continue to be important for the foreseeable future.

The Foreign Policy Distinguished Speaker Series features prominent leaders in international affairs who can address topical issues from a variety of perspectives. The Speaker Series is part of the Foreign Policy Initiative at Cornell led by the Einaudi Center, and is intended to maximize the intellectual impact of Cornell's outstanding resources in this area.