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Address of H.E. Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, President of Latvia, at the Opening Gala dinner of the Riga Conference 2006 at the Small Guild

Mr Secretary-General,
Mrs Hoop Scheffer,
Senator Lugar,
Mr Giuliani,
Madame Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Georgia,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

It is truly a pleasure for me as President of Latvia to welcome you here on this extraordinary event. Truly the NATO Summit 2006 here in Riga is a very special one for a variety of reasons, not least of which the fact that it demonstrates how the alliance from being a very defensive one holding the line of what was then the iron curtain has moved beyond the territory. I think the presence of NATO here in Latvia is another reminder how changed the world is, how fortunate we are in no longer having that division across the European Continent, how fortunate we are in so many countries beside Latvia having now regained their freedom, their opportunity to determine their own fate and their direction and live in peace, security and in democracy.

We have had so much help and support on our way in joining NATO and I would like to express my particular thanks to this evening's dinner guest Senator Lugar who has been a so much a supporter of the freedom of the Baltic countries at the time when it was not a dream, when many thought of it as something desirable and principal, but not necessarily achievable in their own lifetimes.

Senator Lugar I would like to thank you for all those years when you maintained a principal attitude and convinced your colleagues in the United States Senate and others, politicians and opinion makers, in the United States, of the importance of the principals of the right of nations to determine their own fate and the right of nations once independent to recover that independence again. You were supporter of us in our joining NATO.

I would like to express my big thanks also to the Secretary General who was fully supportive of the idea of Riga's venue for this particular summit. It is something that is not evident at the first glance but once the decision was taken everybody realized that it was truly a symbolically meaningful choice to have the 2006 Summit right here in Riga rather than anywhere else.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to see here such a stellar assembly of distinguished thinkers, of bright minds who have been portraying the questions of security and of the ways in which nations can ensure their collective security by working together, by supporting each other democratic and by having a free debate and discussion strategy about the long-term strategy and about the short-term tactics. We have gathered here today a variety of people who have experience as scholars and political scientists, as parliamentarians and as former

government officials.

We are also grateful to have here those from the NATO support group who have been generous with their donations to help such conference as this one take place right here in Riga.

My thanks to you all and may I wish you a very fruitful and interesting debate and particularly may your ideas be an inspiration and guiding light for those heads of state and government who are meeting here at the Summit Riga 2006 and taking the decisions that will influence the lives of the members of the Alliance and those of other countries as well.

Thank you for being here! It is a delight to see you.