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Introductory Words by Dr. Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, the President of Latvia, to the Address by George W. Bush, the President of the United States at the University of Latvia, 28 November 2006 (+audio)

Audio: Introductory words of the President of Latvia before the Speech of the President of the USA

Mr President,
The Prime Minister,
Speaker of the House of Parliament of Latvia,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is truly a delight to be able to stand here in front of such a distinguished audience and for the second time in less than two years to be able to introduce the speaker here in Riga, the President of the United States. It is particularly gratifying to do so on this eve of the 2006 Summit of NATO in Riga, an event for which we have been planning for a long time, but the event that we have been dreaming about for even longer.

And indeed when Latvia recovered its independence at long last in 1991 it was all we could do to try and keep that independence to sort of blow that flame of liberty and see if we could survive in the world that, of course, was there to receive us, but receive us on its own terms. We had to change everything in our country and our system, we had to adapt and do it very quickly. Change which can be painful, reforms take a lot of effort, I am proud of my people and the efforts that they have expanded and the results they have achieved. But we have been able to do so because our people have never lost their faith in liberty and they have never lost their conviction that they have the right to be free and that the democratic system is the only one that is worth living, the one in which every citizen has a chance to contribute to making a better world.

As we recovered our democracy, of course, we have also seen it has failings, we have not reached perfection from one day to the next. We have made mistakes and that is precisely the privilege of democracy of making mistakes and learning from them. We have had disagreements and continue to do so on a variety of issues. That too is a fundamental tenet of democracy. But the one thing that is simply fundamental is the freedom to be able to express one's views, the freedom to chart one's course and to adopt it and the freedom to freely choose one's friends and one's allies. And in that sense every step of the way we have felt that for Latvia the United States is the country whose principles, whose ideals are very much the same as our ones. There is a country that in spite of its wealth and influence has never forgotten the principles set forth by its founding fathers. It is the country that believes in moral principles, that is ready to die for them if need be.

That sort of commitment, that sort of support that we have felt we have enforced in turn and now stand ready to pass on to others. We like to think of democracy as something that is catching in the sense that it is an example to others that they would wish to follow. It is not something that we can sell, it is not something we can force on people, but we certainly can convince them of the benefits of it, and most of all we would like to give them a chance.

I would like to thank very much the United States for its help to Latvia and the other former captive nations to regain their freedom and liberty, to regain their ability to make their own choices. It is a privilege for me for the second time in such a short period to give to you as a speaker today the man who believes deeply in the rights of democracy, the man who believes deeply in human freedom and human dignity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I give to you the 43rd President of the United States of America George W. Bush.