

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
Remarks at the National Library of Estonia
Tallinn, Estonia. July 9, 1996

President Meri, President Vāhi, Ambassador Taylor, members of the diplomatic corps, distinguished guests and all the people of Estonia.

It is a pleasure to be with you today in Tallinn, and especially to join you in this beautiful library, a monument to the enduring culture of the Estonian people.

Ever since I was a teenager I have been interested in this part of the world. Not because I have family roots in Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, or even any distant cousins here. But because I grew up out of Chicago, a city that is home to many refugees who fled persecution in other lands.

I remember going to a meeting at our public library one night with men and women who had come to America from the Baltic states. I heard their stories about life under Soviet communism, as well as about the indigenous history, traditions and cultures of people in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Now I am here, in their ancestral homeland, helping to celebrate the freedom and independence they could only have dreamed of so many years ago.

Estonia is my final stop on a trip that has taken me through Central Europe and to the Baltic Region. Words alone cannot convey the excitement, inspiration and hope I feel as an American visiting countries whose democratic and economic reforms are reshaping the landscape of the European continent.

At every stop, I have seen optimism overcoming despair; economic progress overcoming economic inertia; and a spirit of tolerance and civic responsibility overcoming a legacy of tyranny that for decades deprived good men and women of their basic freedoms.

In Romania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and here too in Estonia, brave people are striving to build on the promise of democracy in the wake of communism's fall. Against great odds and under trying circumstances, the people of Central Europe and the Baltic States opened the door to democracy's return, and are now walking through it to a brighter future.

To the men and women of Estonia – and to the people of Latvia and Lithuania whose ambassadors are in the audience today – I bring a special message from America and the American people: We rejoice in the freedom you have restored here; we admire your courage and tenacity; and we will continue to stand with you as you regain your rightful place in the family of Western democratic nations.

For more than half a century, the blue, black and white flag of Estonia was absent from atop Tall Herman, replaced by a hammer and sickle, just as the flags of Latvia and Lithuania were exiled from their native soil. But throughout the dark years of occupation, those three flags flew proudly in the foyer of the State Department in Washington. Americans never lost faith in the sovereignty of the Baltic republics during the Cold War, and Americans will not lose faith in your march to democracy.

Two weeks ago, when President Clinton met in Washington with Presidents Meri, Ulmanis and Brazauskas, he reiterated American support for the sovereignty independence and security of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. He believes you are on the right path. Free market and democratic reforms are working, and your efforts to join together as regional partners will only accelerate the reintegration of the Baltic States into the European Community.

It is particularly fitting to celebrate the achievements of this region in Tallinn, a city that for centuries embodies Estonia's diversity, openness and links to the world. After arriving yesterday, I had a chance

to visit the Old Town with President Meri. I saw the old guild houses that nurtured a middle-class here and cemented your ties with the rest of Europe; the churches of different faiths, representing the pluralistic character of Estonian history; and here in Central Tallinn, the library where we meet now, filled with books than span the breadth of human knowledge and experience.

A decade ago, who could have imagined we would be here today, in a free city, in a free country and in a free library? And what better symbol is there of freedom and democracy than the books that line these shelves and the ideas they contain – all part of the lively, passionate and noisy debate that is so essential to democratic life.

In my discussions yesterday and today, I have learned more about Estonia's courageous economic reforms and the progress you have made in establishing the foundations of a lasting democracy: a free press; the separation of church and state; respect for the rule of law and minority rights.

To ensure that democracy continues to thrive, every citizen must be able to participate fully in all aspects of civic life. Here, as elsewhere in Central Europe and the Baltic Region, men and women are joining together in voluntary activities, non-governmental organizations and community groups to make democracy work for all citizens by ensuring that women are not relegated to the margins of society, that relations between ethnic groups are strengthened, that the press remains strong and free, that the climate is right for small businesses to prosper and that children are nurtured and cared for as they should be.

This morning, I visited a clinic that is the first in Estonia to offer a broad range of health services for women. And just a few hours ago, I had the chance to meet with representatives of non-governmental organizations, many of whom are involved in promoting civic education – not just teaching children the values and lessons of democracy, but teaching teachers, business people, elected officials and ordinary men and women who are the lead actors in any democracy.

As one of the participants said: “Democracy is a mechanism that people must learn to use.” Here in Estonia, civic education is critical to building a more engaged, informed and vigilant citizenry.

Today the greatest threat to democracy is no longer a communist monolith with imperial designs. It is not a line on a map, or a geographic boundary. It is the volatile economic and social conditions that emerged with the collapse of the old authoritarian regimes and the discontent and demagoguery that those conditions can generate.

These challenges are not unique to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania or Central Europe. These are challenges shared by democracies new and old. To meet them, the West needs to expand its democratic family by opening up the institutions that have served us for decades. As I said of America's Independence Day when I spoke on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague, democracy is not just about government institutions: it is also about the internalization of democratic values in people's heads, minds and everyday lives.

Along with broader political, economic and strategic alliances, we must consciously develop an alliance of values to guide our democracies as we confront the inevitable challenges of the 21st Century: the challenge of keeping peace in a world where ancient hatreds are slow to die and new ones are too easily born; the challenge of giving all citizens the chance to fulfill their God-given potential and participate fully in the life of their country.

These challenges are made more difficult because of the historical moment in which we live. It is a time of rapid economic change, increasing global competition and scarcer resources – a time when families in every country are burdened by the pressures of the mass media and consumer culture, when the gap between rich and poor is growing wider, when personal identity and work are inextricably tied

to globalization and high technology, when ethnic pride and national citizenship are too often viewed as mutually exclusive.

Democracy gives us the capacity to cope with these challenges. But democracy can only thrive in the post-Cold War era if we are able to convey the values underlying it: the values of opportunity, responsibility, community and respect for human dignity.

And just how do we convey those values to ourselves and, more important, to our children?

We do it by strengthening civil society. By strengthening the daily associations and actions that weave together the fabric of democratic life.

Before coming to Estonia, I was in Hungary, where I visited a center that is helping the minority Roman community overcome obstacles to education, employment and full participation in Hungarian society.

In Slovakia, I met with caring and involved men and women who are working to overcome obstacles that now hinder the full flowering of citizen groups.

In the Czech Republic I talked to representatives at NGOs who are involved in local projects to protect the rights of children, safeguard the environment and install modern medical equipment in Czech hospitals.

I met citizens in Poland working to promote women's rights and improve health services. And in Romania, I heard from journalists who are working to build an independent press in a country where, for decades, the real news was considered subversive or even dangerous.

In many cases, America and Americans are supporting these local efforts. What we are creating through these partnerships is an ethos of responsibility, caring and initiative that allows people to participate in civic life and shape their own destinies.

In short, we are creating an alliance of democratic values.

And as partners in this alliance, we are discovering that we have much to learn from each other. The courageous men and women of Estonia who are erecting a democratic nation from the rubble of a communist past are reminding a new generation of Americans just how precious freedom is, and what a stake we all have in its success around the world.

America, in turn, offers first a reminder to the young democracies of Central Europe and the Baltic Region that democracy is inherently a messy business – as messy and hard to manage as human nature itself.

Understandably, there are some today who question the pace of progress and the pain of change. To them I say: Look at America. We have been striving to perfect democracy for more than 200 years. And we continue to do so without any assurance that we will ever fully succeed. Why? Because nothing is more precious to us than the freedoms our ancestors struggled to win and struggled to preserve.

The second reminder is that democracy asks us to live peacefully as neighbors with people who are different from us, maybe even beside people who, in the not-so-distant past, have actually done harm to us or to our families.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the United States was torn apart by a great civil war. If you had come to our shores in the 1860's, many Americans would have told you that the wound we sustained would never heal. Yet today, those old divisions have faded into history.

It took America 100 years to abolish slavery. It took America another 100 years to guarantee civil rights for all minorities. Even today we contend with periodic acts of intolerance and hatred.

But for most Americans, old animosities long ago gave way to pride that, no matter what corner of the world our families came from, we are all part of the same family, brothers and sisters rooted in common values and aspirations.

Here in Estonia, diversity has been your strength for centuries. Your nation, with its rich history as a trading center and marketplace for Europe, have thrived on its contacts with other regions of the world. Now, too, your diversity should be a source of strength, not division. As Estonia lives up to the ideals of democracy, all people must be made to feel at home here, proud of their ethnic heritage and confident of their place in Estonia's national life. All those who live in Estonia must fulfill their responsibilities to the nation of which they are a part.

Vice-President Gore said it best when he visited Tallinn last years: "[...] in this demonstration of tolerance, Estonia is a model for the rest of the world."

Earlier today, I had a chance to hear some famous Estonian folk songs, and also to dance with some Estonian folk dancers. When the music stopped, one woman said the best way to understand a people is through their art.

In the short time that I have been here, I can say that I have gained a new appreciation of the Estonian people through their songs.

Almost 200 years ago, Kristjan Jaak Peterson wrote:

Why should not my country's tongue
soaring through the gale of song
rising to the heights of heaven
find its own eternity?

Five years ago, a gale of song swept through Estonia, rising into a chorus for national sovereignty and freedom. Five years ago, Estonians sang their way to independence. Today, the power of song that has resonated throughout the centuries is empowering the people of Estonia to raise their own voices, speak their own words, for their own ideas and dream their own dreams.

Now you know that you are not singing alone.

May the chorus of all free people continue that sing of the values that brought the people of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Central Europe this far. And may those values guide all of our families, communities, nations and our world into the future that lies ahead.

Thank you very much.