

in making this moment possible, holding to the difficult path of political and economic reform, leading Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania back to the community of free nations where they belong. This charter of partnership underscores how far your nations have come. Almost exactly 7 years ago today, Baltic citizens were facing down tanks in the struggle to reclaim their independence. Today, your democracies have taken root. You stand among Europe's fastest growing economies. Your nations are a source of stability within your region and beyond, through the Partnership For Peace, the Baltic Peacekeeping Battalion, and your contributions in Bosnia.

America has been proud to support this progress through our SEED assistance program, more than 500 Peace Corps volunteers, and in many other ways. We share a stake in your success. And with this charter, we set out a framework to achieve our common goals. It affirms our commitment to promoting harmony and human dignity within our societies; it stresses our interest in close cooperation among the Baltic States and with all their neighbors; it launches new working groups on economic development to spur greater trade, investment, and growth, complementing the efforts of our European friends; and it furthers America's commitment to help Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia to deepen their integration and prepare for membership in the European Union and NATO.

Of course, there can be no guarantees of admission to the alliance. Only NATO's leaders, operating by consensus, can offer membership to an aspiring state. But America's security is tied to Europe, and Europe will never be fully secure if Baltic security is in doubt. NATO's door is and will remain open to every partner nation, and America is determined to create the conditions under which Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia can one day walk through that door.

The hopes that fuel the goals of this charter must be matched by our will to achieve them. That's why we're forming a new partnership commission which Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott will chair. I'm pleased to report that the charter is making a difference already. Yesterday our nations signed treaties to eliminate double taxation, which will encourage American business to play an even greater role in Baltic prosperity. We're also expanding our common efforts to combat organized crime with

better information-sharing and more joint operations.

And this year the United States, in a unique public/private partnership with the Soros Open Society Institute, will be creating a Baltic-American partnership fund to promote the development of civic organizations. Nothing is more crucial to democracy's success than a vibrant network of local groups committed to their communities and their nation. I want to thank George Soros for his visionary generosity.

I also want to say a special thanks to the Baltic-American communities. For 50 years, Lithuanian-, Latvian-, and Estonian-Americans kept alive the dream of Baltic freedom. Now, on the verge of a new century, they are working here at home and with their Baltic brothers and sisters to make sure the hard-won blessings of liberty will never be lost again.

President Meri, President Brazauskas, President Ulmanis, we recall the August day in 1989 when hundreds of thousands of people linked hands from Tallinn to Riga to Vilnius, forming a human chain as strong as the values for which it stood. Today, that Baltic chain extends across the Atlantic Ocean. America's hands and hearts and hopes are joined as one with yours. Working together, we can build a new Europe of democracy, prosperity, and peace, where security is the province of every nation and the future belongs to the free.

Thank you very much.

*President Guntis Ulmanis of Latvia.* Dear President, ladies and gentlemen, today is a happy day as we are signing the U.S.A.-Baltic charter. This charter will serve as a key for the next century. It makes us allies. Our signatures write the strategic philosophy for the next century. They mark strong Atlanticism and also the formation of a new Europe. The Baltic region is a success story for all who shape it by their everyday work.

I call on President Clinton and his administration to get actively involved in the formation of its future. The symbolic meaning of the charter has been expressed in its first words, which speak about our common vision of the future. It has been created by people of our countries in continuous work by mutual enrichment. I am proud of my people and its strengths. I am proud of my friends who I am happy to welcome here.

Thank you.