

BALTIC STATESMANSHIP AWARD

Toomas Hendrik Ilves



TOOMAS HENDRIK ILVES, 54, is the president of the Republic of Estonia. A former diplomat and journalist who led Estonia's Social Democratic Party in the 1990s, he later was named a member of the European Parliament. Ilves was elected to the presidency by electoral college on September 23, 2006 and his term as President began on October 9, 2006.

Ilves was born in Stockholm, Sweden; his parents were Estonian refugees. When he was thirteen his family moved to the United States, where Toomas Hendrik (he always uses both first and middle names) graduated from Leonia High School in Leonia, New Jersey in 1972 as valedictorian. He received a bachelor's degree in psychology from Columbia University and a masters degree in the same subject from the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1984 he packed his bags and left for Munich to work as an analyst with Radio Free Europe, and nine years later he returned stateside – only this time as ambassador to the United States, Canada and Mexico for a newly independent Estonia. Of his own background, Ilves has said: “I speak English like an American, I think like a European.”

Remarkably, as a member of the European Parliament from April 2004 to September 2006 he was tireless in using these two sides of his persona to bridge the transatlantic rift after the invasion of Iraq. He blasted Donald Rumsfeld's ‘Old Europe’ paradigm as a “disaster,” and when German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and the late French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida published a joint declaration calling on Europeans to unite under a banner of anti-Americanism, Ilves wrote a passionate rebuttal. “There was too much hysteria on both sides of the Atlantic,” he said.

Ilves eventually gave up his U.S. citizenship to become Estonia's foreign minister in 1996. In more than a decade of Estonian politics, he has stood steadfastly in the center as a member of the Moderates, a party he helped create. Thanks to Ilves's friendship with Mart Laar, a former prime minister, Estonia was the first European nation to introduce the flat tax. In 2004 the Moderates became the Social Democratic Party, which Ilves left after becoming president.

A striking trait of Ilves is his versatility. He loves the rustic life and enjoys sporting a pair of overalls and tilling the soil at his farmstead in Arma, just a short walk from the Latvian-Estonian border. Film is another favorite pastime. Recently he even tried his talents at acting, taking a cameo role in ‘186 Kilometers’ an Estonian picture about an out-of-luck actor who runs into sundry difficulties trying to make what should be a simple journey from Tallinn to Tartu, a university town southeast of the capital.