

## H.E. Rodolphe M. Vallee, U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia



**H.E. Rodolphe Vallee**

*Ambassador*

Embassy of the United States of America

*Under your leadership, the U.S. Embassy in Slovakia has been actively cooperating with AmCham member companies on issues related to innovation and intellectual property rights (IPR) protection in Slovakia. Why were these issues featured so prominently on your agenda?*

Slovakia has seen dramatic growth over the past few years due to the large influx of foreign investment, especially in the manufacturing and service sectors. This fast growth, together with the opening of borders to other EU countries, has led to a major shift in the availability of labor with unemployment dropping from 10.8 percent when I arrived in August 2005 to 8.3 percent today. Competition and increasing productivity levels are also putting upward pressure on salaries. So while an abundant pool of relatively inexpensive skilled labor may have drawn investors in the past, Slovakia and other countries in the region need to find other ways to attract new capital in the future. The U.S. provides a great model of promoting knowledge-based industries by linking up bright ideas with capital. One of the Embassy's top objectives has been to inform Slovaks of U.S. best practices by fostering stronger partnerships between U.S. companies and Slovak universities, promoting the formation of Silicon Valley type technology clusters, linking US capital to patentable ideas, and accelerating the number of exchanges between educational institutions in our two countries. The protection of Intellectual Property Rights is an important issue for

*In the past few years, IPR protection has been one of the top priorities of the U.S. Embassy in the Slovak Republic. AmCham has therefore approached H.E. Rodolphe Vallee, U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia, in order to discuss issues such as innovations, patents and business-academic cooperation.*

U.S. Embassies around the world. IPR protection is essential to the encouragement and promotion of innovation. Governments should view IPR protection in their countries as a key tool in promoting research and development. Our Embassy is proud of its strong cooperation with the AmCham to protect these rights; this cooperation will remain a top priority for US Embassy Bratislava.

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*Can you evaluate the progress achieved in the past two years? (in the area of IPR protection)*

As I noted above, protection of intellectual property is an essential component of knowledge-based economies. When I arrived in 2005, Slovakia was on a U.S. list of countries that failed to provide

adequate and effective protection of intellectual property, specifically in the area of pharmaceutical patents. Failure to protect valid patents was not only costly to patent holders in lost revenues and legal expenses, but sent a negative signal to all companies looking to bring or develop innovative technologies in Slovakia. Working in tandem with the AmCham Health Care working group, we succeeded in getting the Slovak government to adopt legislation that closed loop-holes that had allowed patent-infringing drugs to be sold on the Slovak market. This positive step, together with other measures, led to Slovakia's removal from the Special 301 Watch List, sending an important signal to the business community that Slovakia strongly supports knowledge-based industries and is willing to protect the ideas created by individuals and companies.

*In terms of attracting foreign investment to Slovakia, do you think that currently enough attention is being paid to knowledge-intensive industries? Where would you see the scope for further improvements in this area?*

The best thing that any government can do is establish the foundation for knowledge-based industries. Creating a welcoming business environment that promotes innovation and protects ideas is an important first step, but more needs to be done. Slovakia has a rich educational history and many well-respected technical schools and universities, but these schools are no longer able to meet all the needs of the business community.

Stronger ties between academia and business, a greater emphasis on science, technology and management curriculum, and a focus on quality over quantity would all be steps in the right direction. Several universities have formed partnerships with the private sector to promote research, and our Embassy is doing all it can to facilitate such arrangements. These arrangements will help form the foundation of the Slovak economy in the future and are essential to Slovakia's long term economic well-being.

*Given your previous professional background, which includes work in executive positions for several companies involved in the development of trash, biomass, hydro and other renewable energy facilities, and also reflecting on the relatively recent Renewable Energy Trade Mission to Slovakia, do you think that the Slovak market holds high potential for energy- and eco-innovations?*

The September trade mission clearly illustrated that there is great potential in Slovakia for investments in renewable energy and other „green“ technologies. The nine U.S. companies that were part of the mission met with more than 40 potential Slovak partners. We are confident this initiative will lead to new export and investment opportunities in the future.

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During my travels around the country, I saw first-hand a wide-range of renewable energy projects: from biomass boilers at municipal heating plants to new ethanol plants to solar panel production.

The emphasis on renewable energy in the government's recently released energy strategy, which is based on EU targets for renewables, provides further support for these types of investments.

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*While the commercialization of research remains an important element of any meaningful policy focused on the support of innovations, it is often mentioned that Slovakia is still lacking the vital links between businesses and universities. Are there any lessons from the U.S. experience in this respect?*

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The U.S. offers a range of examples of how public/private partnerships can flourish to the benefit of all participants and the economy as a whole and we were proud to introduce Minister Mikolaj to a number of them during his recent visit to the U.S. Our Embassy will continue to be pro-active in facilitating Slovak contacts with U.S. institutions in this key area.

*Veronika Slováková, AmCham Staff*

#### **Rodolphe M. Vallee**

Rodolphe “Skip” Vallee arrived in Bratislava August 11, 2005 to take up his duties as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Slovak Republic.

Previously, Ambassador Vallee served as Chairman, CEO, and owner of R. L. Vallee, Inc., a Vermont-based energy company that includes the “Maplefields” convenience store chain, a top regional motor fuels distributorship, and an environmental remediation and consulting unit. Prior to that, he worked in executive positions for several companies involved in the development and operation of trash, biomass, hydro and other renewable energy facilities.

Ambassador Vallee began his political career in 1982 as a regional campaign manager for U.S. Senator Robert T. Stafford and later served as a staff assistant of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Education. Active in Vermont and national politics, Ambassador Vallee was appointed by President Bush to the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiation in 2001, served as a member of the Republican National Committee from 1999-2004, and chaired the Vermont delegation to the 2004 Republican National Convention.

The Ambassador received a Bachelor's degree in biology (with a concentration in environmental studies) in 1982 from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where he was captain of the varsity hockey team. He received a Master's degree in Business Administration in 1986 from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, where he focused his studies on energy deregulation and investments in alternative sources of energy.

In community affairs, Ambassador Vallee was a trustee of the Nature Conservancy of Vermont, a director of the Mater Christi School, and a youth soccer coach. He and his wife, Denise, have two sons. Ambassador Vallee is an avid skier, hunter, and fisherman.