



**Speech by  
the  
President of Iceland  
Olafur Ragnar Grimsson  
at the  
American-Scandinavian Foundation  
Gala Dinner  
New York  
1 May 2014**

Your Excellencies  
Ladies and Gentlemen  
Dear friends

I am indeed both humbled and honoured to receive the Gold Medal of the American-Scandinavian Foundation and I thank the Board and the distinguished Trustees profoundly for this recognition.

I was also deeply moved by the words of my dear friend Ólafur Jóhann, who has succeeded in combining a great business career in this vibrant city with the writing of novels dear to hearts of the Icelandic people.

It is now more than forty years since I first visited the United States and throughout this time I have been privileged to learn from many distinguished Americans, not only Presidents and Members of the House and the Senate, but also pioneering scientists, activists, visionaries, artists and entrepreneurs; learned to value the search for innovation and the desire for discovery; values at the core of the American journey.

The highlights of all this have included a multitude of projects in which the American-Scandinavian Foundation has provided both leadership and support and given the inspiration needed for success.

As we approached the year 2000, the audacity of our plans surprised many, but thanks to the support of President Clinton and Hillary, and through cooperation with the Smithsonian Institute and many others, we

were able to create long-standing celebrations of the millennial anniversary of the Viking discovery of America.

It showed the dedication of President Clinton that before the lunch at the White House prior to the opening of the *Vikings in the West* exhibition in Washington, he took me to his library to demonstrate how prominently he kept the comprehensive English edition of the Icelandic Sagas displayed, but then confessed rather shyly – yes, an unusual occurrence – that he had twice tried to finish *Njáls Saga*, but had been defeated by all those names: sons and daughters of sons and daughters of sons and daughters; generations back in time.

It was fascinating to me to note that the Icelandic Sagas had succeeded in defeating this President who was so globally admired for his unique ability to remember the names of anyone he ever encountered.

Later, I was honoured to thank the Clintons on behalf of the American-Scandinavian Foundation for their friendship towards the Nordic countries by presenting to them a special award, received by Hillary at the Gala Dinner in November 2004.

We should also celebrate here tonight the fact that earlier this week, new comprehensive editions of the Icelandic Sagas in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish translations were formally launched in Reykjavík with forewords by Their Majesties Queen Margrethe of Denmark, King Harald of Norway and King Carl Gustav of Sweden. This is indeed a cultural milestone in the history of the Nordic family.

But let us not forget that Hillary, who has visited Iceland both as a First Lady and as a Senator, and was the first Secretary of State to attend the Arctic Council, and last October addressed the first Assembly of the Arctic Circle in Reykjavík, has applauded Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir in her speeches.

If she runs for President, the Republicans will be hard put to match that record. No candidate who is not familiar with Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir will stand a chance!

I see from the faces of some of our Swedish and Finnish friends here tonight that they are still in that Republican category: not familiar with Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir; so let me enlighten you with the latest update on her extraordinary journey.

Her brother-in-law, Leifur Eiríksson was, as his nickname suggests, more lucky; primarily because everybody could pronounce his name; Guðríður was nevertheless a more extraordinary traveller and explorer. She was arguably the greatest woman discoverer of all time; the first

person in world history to visit both Rome and America – and did so 500 years before this Christopher Columbus started to throw his weight about.

A few years ago, it became the ambition of the people in Guðríður's Icelandic birthplace to get the Vatican to acknowledge her historic role as the first Christian mother on the American continent. At a local reception in a light-hearted moment I said: No problem my friends – and then had to deliver on that mission.

Surprisingly, we succeeded. So now I am able to report to you here tonight that on 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2011, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI received in his Vatican office a statue of Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir with her son Snorri, the first European baby born and baptised on the American continent. A small group of fishermen and local leaders from Guðríður's birthplace on Snæfellsnes had brought the statue to Rome.

Snæfellsnes is also, as some of you may know, the region where Kristján Tómas Ragnarsson, the former Chairman of the ASF Board of Trustees has his Icelandic summer house – so he certainly knows how to choose holy historic places!

So now, my dear friends, the Vatican has formally acknowledged that Christopher Columbus was not the first European to set foot in America; that Guðríður Thorbjarnardóttir, in the tradition of strong Nordic women beat him to it by about 500 years.

The next step would be for President Obama to declare a special Guðríður Day here in the US, a national holiday, at least equal to Columbus Day – but maybe we will have to wait for Hillary to do that!

It is indeed remarkable to reflect on how, a thousand years ago, what we now call the Arctic became a territory of settlement by our Nordic ancestors who encountered the native people there. This is an important historic legacy when now the Nordic countries, together with the United States and other Arctic partners, are engaging in the growing 21<sup>st</sup> century Arctic cooperation.

Next year the United States will take over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council, a manifestation of a new era in our joined endeavours, built on the legacy created by the famous Nordic discoverers Roald Amundsen, Fridtjov Nansen and Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, all of whom were in their time lauded and celebrated in America.

The Arctic is fast becoming the new economic and political playing field, of great global importance, where leading powers in Asia and Europe now want to join the US, the Nordic countries and other Arctic states in shaping the future. They are attracted by the utilisation of the

vast natural resources and the evolution of the new Northern sea routes, which promise to revolutionise global shipping and trade like the Suez Canal did more than a century ago.

The Arctic is also the most sensitive barometer of climate change and the home of indigenous peoples rich in culture and traditions.

Its future constitutes a new epoch in the evolution of American-Scandinavian cooperation, and the Foundation is well placed to contribute to it in dynamic ways through dialogue and discussions, exhibitions and cultural events.

Thus while we celebrate here tonight the success of our previous endeavours, let us also welcome the fascinating prospect of what lies ahead.

I thank you again for the profound honour you have shown me, and pledge my support for our continuous cooperation.