



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the Award Ceremony of the Gold Medal of Merit
of the City of Athens
19th of September 2001**

Distinguished Mayor
Representatives of the Athens City Council
Ladies and gentlemen

It is with deep humility and profound pleasure that I accept the great honour you have bestowed upon me and I thank you for your splendid words and kind remarks about my nation.

Athens and Iceland have both given Europe and the world a great democratic heritage which for centuries has inspired people with new visions and courage. In ancient times the citizens of Athens and the people of Iceland established in their respective ways democratic institutions and traditions which shine among the greatest achievements in western civilization. The philosophers and thinkers who made Athens the birthplace of democratic government, and the seafarers and farmers who established in Iceland more than a thousand years ago what is now the oldest parliament in the western world, have earned the special gratitude of us all for the legacy which they created. In our civilisation both Athens and Iceland have provided key elements which are deeply rooted in its democratic core.

In receiving your Gold Medal of Merit here today I want to pay my respect to the history and the traditions which have made Athens so great and honour the generations who throughout the ages have kept the democratic spirit alive.

During the early years of my public career I came to Athens a number of times to discuss with the distinguished and courageous Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou and his closest advisers proposals to further peace and harmony in a world which was then torn apart by hatred

and conflict. I learned to value and respect their determination and foresight which was inspired by the classic Greek ideals and which led them to chart a new beginning. In due course when the Cold War came to an end the wisdom of their proposals became clear to all.

Not only was Athens their home and workplace but I also experienced how the spirit of the people here, the culture of the nation, the old and the new in closer harmony than anywhere else in the world provided a unique inspiration to think new thoughts, to dare to take new actions, to proceed where others withdrew.

Thus Athens symbolised the pinnacle of cultural achievements and I hope that my visit now will also lead to further cooperation between our nations, a better understanding of each other's arts and music, literature and films, the manifold creativity which characterises our modern way of life.

At the opening of the 21st century Athens continues to offer us inspiration and encouragement. The strong spirit of the people as it unfolds in the streets and the cafés, in the homes and the workplace is living proof of how modernity can at the same time be deeply rooted in old traditions and inspired by new visions and bold innovations.

It has indeed been a moving experience for me to return to your great city and to be able to reflect on the memories it brings. I am deeply honoured to receive the Gold Medal of Merit and may I express the wish that your great city will continue to inspire the world and bring happiness and prosperity to its people; and may we who are now your guests have the wisdom to return many times home to Athens.

Thank you indeed, distinguished Mayor, for this honour.