



Speech
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of
The Friendly Arctic
The Age of Exploration and Discovery in the North
American Scandinavian House
New York
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Mrs. Evelyn Stefánsson Nef
Distinguished representatives of Alcan
and the American Scandinavian Foundation
Friends from Alaska, Canada, Russia, the United States and Iceland
Ladies and gentlemen

A thousand years ago the Icelandic discoverers came to this continent and settled here for a while, a story well documented in the ancient Icelandic sagas and substantiated by archaeological research. As I have some times pointed out if our Viking ancestors had not been wise enough to leave we would all be speaking Icelandic here today and President Bush in his recent State of the Union Address could have enriched his text with the vision of the Edda poems.

The stories of Eric the Red, his son Leifur and his daughter-in-law Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir – the most remarkable female discoverer of all times and the first person in world history to visit both America and Rome, 500 years before Christopher Columbus appeared on the scene – these accounts presented in the Saga of the Greenlanders and Eric the Red's Saga were the legacy which Vilhjálmur Stefánsson's parents, relatives and friends brought with them to North America when the second wave of Icelandic settlement began in the late 19th century.

Vilhjálmur Stefánsson was inspired by the Icelandic culture of discovery and exploration and later in life saw himself as a standard bearer of this ancient Nordic legacy and tradition. While visiting Iceland as a young man his motivation was indeed strengthened and deepened.

He became one of the greatest explorers of the 20th century and through his lifetime he weaved together Iceland, Canada and the United States with an extraordinary rich experience, making fundamental contributions to all three countries.

He discovered vast unknown territories in northern Canada and deepened our knowledge of the native people who for thousands of years had crossed Canada, Alaska and Russia, showing how survival in the cold Arctic Regions could contribute to scientific understanding of human nature and health.

He became a prominent figure at Harvard, Dartmouth and here in New York, a leading and founding member of the Explorers' Club, that remarkable American institution; he served the Roosevelt Administration and established in the United States the most extensive library of Russian Arctic literature, both scientific and cultural.

He was so highly respected and even adored in Iceland that close to the establishment of the Icelandic Republic in the early 1940s there was a strong movement to make him the first president of Iceland, even though he was not a formal citizen of our country.

The Canadian, American and Icelandic connections make it highly appropriate that the exhibition which we open here today should be a joint Canadian, American and Icelandic effort.

I want to thank especially the great Canadian aluminium company Alcan, both its international leadership and its Icelandic representatives for having so generously supported this exhibition, indicating its desire to further not only Icelandic-Canadian relations but also to strengthen the legacy of the most famous Icelandic-Canadian of all times, and signalling as well the willingness to promote a culture of discovery and exploration at the opening of this new century.

I also thank the American Scandinavian Foundation for hosting the exhibition and for their strong interest in thus promoting the legacy of one of the greatest Nordic-American personalities. Furthermore I thank the Stefánsson Arctic Institute in Akureyri, Iceland, for creating this exhibition and once again showing how an acquaintance with the northern explorations in the early part of the 20th century can deepen our awareness of how important the North has become at the start of the 21st century.

For the first time we now have an interlocked network of cooperation in the North where the United States, Canada, Russia and the Nordic countries have joined hands in order to further important projects, important not only for the Northern Regions but also for the entire world.

The Northern Regions harbour a quarter of the untapped energy resources in the world: hydro, geothermal, oil and gas resources which will become increasingly significant for the global economy.

The potential Northern Sea Route, linking North America and Europe to Asia in a new way and revolutionising world trade just as the Suez Canal did over a century ago, could make the Northern Regions an extremely important commercial growth centre in the decades to come.

Furthermore the North American, Russian and Nordic territories are most suitable for monitoring environmental changes, giving the world critical evidence of climate change and therefore serving as the frontier where it will be determined whether life on earth, our conditions, economies, human and ocean resources are indeed being threatened in a fundamental way.

With the end of the Cold War the Northern Regions have become the ground where a renaissance in international cooperation is being developed, where the United States and Russia have the opportunity to strengthen their new relationship in a unique way. Canada and the Nordic countries are both pleased and willing to be partners in this new and fascinating American-Russian endeavour.

For nearly all of us assembled here today these are indeed both new and fascinating prospects – for all except the great lady and our dear friend Evelyn Stefánsson Nef who, first when she worked with Vilhjálmur Stefánsson in the 1930s and then later as his wife and partner, saw this future coming many decades ago. How great and thrilling it is to have Evelyn with us here tonight. Above all, dear Evelyn, this is indeed your evening.

With these words I thank you all for being with us here today and express to you how pleased and honoured the people of Iceland are to be partners in this fascinating exhibition.