



**A Speech by
His Excellency
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the Explorers Club Gala Dinner
Waldorf-Astoria
New York
19th March 2005**

Distinguished explorers
Honoured guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

To be with you here tonight is both a privilege and a pleasure, but also a fulfilment of a promise I gave to an Icelandic fisherman a few years ago.

He came to my office with the results of his research in genealogy – and in Iceland every fisherman and farmer is a scholar of sorts and genealogy a national pastime rooted in the classical saga texts written 800 years ago, but which incidentally enables us today to gain a competitive edge in genetic science – yes, he came to my office and presented a proof that I was indeed the 36th descendant from Eric the Red, Leif Eriksson's father, and consequently a close relative of the first discoverer of the American continent.

The fisherman urged me to re-establish the reputation of my kinsman, to make the Columbus lobby accept that family's role, to show in America that I was indeed worthy of being Leif Eriksson's nephew 34 times removed.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I have come here tonight to stake a claim on Leif's behalf, to ask the Explorers Club to accept him as an honorary founding member, to enable me to keep a promise to his family back home.

His was indeed a remarkable stock, the women as well as the men, and none more than Leif Eriksson's sister-in-law Gudridur

Thorbjarnardottir, who was born in Iceland a little after 970, moved to Greenland and married Leif's brother Thorsteinn Eiriksson, and when he died another explorer Thorfinnur Karlsefni became her husband. A few years after Leif discovered what you call America they sailed across the ocean and settled on this land where Gudridur gave birth to a boy, Snorri, the first child of European origin to be born in the New World.

Because they did not want to fight the native tribes and lead a violent existence, they later decided to return, first to Greenland and then on to Iceland. Consequently Gudridur decided on a new journey, went to Europe and all the way to Rome where she reported to the Vatican on the vast continent across the great ocean, then went back to Iceland and lived a religious life thereafter.

This remarkable Icelandic woman, Gudridur, was absolutely the first person in world history to visit both Rome and America, 500 years before Christopher Columbus arrived on the scene. I maintain until proven wrong that she is the greatest women explorer of all times. Just imagine, a thousand years ago, she went from Iceland to Greenland then to America, back to Iceland, across the ocean to Europe, all the way to Rome.

Ladies and gentlemen

I think it is high time for the Explorers Club Gala Dinner to give her a round of applause. It is my ambition to have her statue established both in the Vatican and in the Explorers Club on East 70th Street, two famous locations; the Pope has already accepted and I hope you will too.

I see from sceptical faces here tonight that some of you think I have made all this up, but let me refer you to the Saga of the Greenlanders and Eric the Red's Saga, both written in the thirteenth century and here in New York available in English and published by Viking. You are also welcome to visit Gudridur's home in the north on Iceland and meet her descendants, the family members in modern times.

It is a strong feature of Icelandic culture, of our identity and vision, that we actively see ourselves as descendants of discoverers and explorers, of the people who left Norway, Denmark and Ireland and crossed the ocean to settle in an unknown island, who established a thousand years ago a democratic commonwealth, the Icelandic parliament being the oldest in the history of the western world.

They were proud people, so sure of themselves that after they discovered America they did not bother to tell anyone else, just wrote about it on calfskin for themselves in a language that nobody else could understand. It is sometimes said back home that we did indeed discover

America but were wise enough to leave it. If we had stayed, you would all be speaking Icelandic here tonight.

The legacy of explorers, the spirit of discovery became the bulwark of our culture, inspiring men and women to test the unknown, to journey where no one had travelled.

It certainly inspired Vilhjalmur Stefansson, one of the founders of the Explorers Club and among its first presidents. He read the Icelandic sagas and saw his expeditions into the Arctic as a modern version of this heritage, of the ancient Viking spirit.

Our legacy, his life, can help us to understand the importance of discovery as a motive force in modern times, how our culture, our progress, our thinking can be enriched in this way.

Both the United States and Iceland have benefited from inspiration provided by explorers who settled in our lands. We both remain frontier societies, honouring those who explored new realms, excelled in harnessing the unknown.

We are both blessed with a heritage which can be a beacon in future years, the traditions of discoverers and explorers, a legacy which can provide guidance for facing the challenging tasks that lie ahead:

In understanding the forces of nature which influence the human condition, the role played by ocean currents, the conveyer belt which encircles the earth, how the melting of the ice in the northern and Arctic regions can fundamentally alter the global climate.

In understanding the role of discovery in economic and social progress, the need to further the understanding of how new knowledge will make nations more competitive in the global market – how the fight against diseases, ignorance, religious and racial intolerance can only be won if inspiration derived from science and discovery is given a prominent place in the formulation of public policies.

We need to ensure that our societies are open to innovation, adapt to new ways of thinking, to the changes that discoveries usher in. We must dispel fear of the unknown and reluctance to introduce new customs, understand that it is important to foster a sense of discovery as the foundation of progress, important to prevent our societies from becoming entrenched inside fear or opposition to new perspectives, remembering that terrorism has been nourished precisely where open access to discovery and exploration has been excluded.

In my country we have in recent years seen ample evidence of how productive this heritage can be, how it has influenced scientists and scholars, innovators and entrepreneurs.

Genetic research based on the genealogical legacy of the Vikings has given us a leading edge in medical science.

The hydrogen project is paving the way to the creation of pollution free cities.

The geothermal experience provides lessons for over fifty countries in all parts of the world.

And Icelandic entrepreneurs have now established dominant positions in European and global markets in areas as far afield as prosthetics and pharmaceuticals, banking and finance, retailing and healthy food products, to name only a few.

Many find it perplexing how such a small nation can be so successful in global business. Part of the explanation lies in the heritage of exploration and discovery which is bred into our education, into our identity, celebrating the importance of the personal trust and integrity praised in the ancient Edda poems, reminding us that wealth might wither away, but our reputation stays with us forever.

These qualities have perhaps helped our entrepreneurs to move faster and more effectively, to be more original and more flexible, more reliable but also more daring than many others, demonstrating that in the interconnected world, smallness is a blessing and not a curse, that there are no longer any hindrances on our road to achievement, that globally successful companies can now originate from anywhere.

There is much to suggest that in the new global economy the small state can be a profitable basis for business innovation, can serve as a laboratory or a research station in precisely those sectors which will increasingly dominate our progress.

Yes, dear friends, these are indeed exciting times, ahead of us lies an extraordinary epoch in the history of our countries. Never before have we had such opportunities to enrich our cooperation with so many fantastic endeavours.

It is in that spirit that we come here tonight and my wife and I thank you for the honour of being your guests, for this splendid evening.

We hope that you have indeed enjoyed the Icelandic lamb, a product of the livestock which the Vikings brought to Iceland more than a thousand years ago. The sheeps have remained pure-bred on our island

ever since, environmentally sound, the lambs running wild in the mountains all summer.

This is a prelude to the culinary feast that awaits you in Iceland, but also an invitation to come and witness for yourself the spectacle of the ongoing creation, the lava fields and the volcanoes, the glaciers and the geysers, the rivers and the lakes, the green fields and the black sands, a symphony of colours the like of which you will hardly ever have seen before. Yes, do indeed come and be a witness to the creation, come and enjoy a country where anyone at any time can be an explorer.