



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at
the East West Awards Dinner
on the occasion of
The 200th Anniversary of US-Russian Diplomatic Relations
Washington DC
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It is difficult now to recall how deeply frozen the Cold War had become twenty-five years ago, to recall the tensions, the terror, the threats, the nuclear arms race, how the entire world had become almost a political Arctic.

What was to be done? In my dialogues in the early 1980s with American scientists and some members of Congress I first heard the name of a young Soviet scientist, learned there was at least one man within the Soviet system with a positive vision, one man willing to think in an open way, one man with the courage to advocate new approaches and urge his leaders to abandon their previous course.

When I met Evgeny Velikhov for the first time in Moscow, more than twenty years ago, I realised that he was indeed a unique visionary, courageous and productive; a man of action, certainly an excellent product of the Soviet scientific establishment, yet also a leader willing to challenge his masters and urge them to seek cooperation instead of strategic conflict.

I remember how strongly he supported our proposal, made on behalf of six presidents and prime ministers from different parts of the world, including Rajiv Gandhi and Olof Palme, that the Soviet Union should allow American scientists to visit its test sites that it was scientifically possible to confirm, through remote sensing, whether arms control

treaties were being adhered to and thus meet the primary requirements put forward by President Reagan.

More than anybody else, Evgeny Velikhov created the framework of scientific confidence which enabled Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan and their successors to transform the US-Russian relationship in a fundamental way, to bring about the changes that have benefited the entire world in so many different ways.

For that, and for many other extraordinary achievements, the East West Institute honours Academician Velikhov here tonight. Without his tireless and visionary work, the Cold War would certainly have lasted much longer.

His friendship and cooperation with American scientists, including our friend the late Jerry Wiesner, President of MIT and formerly President Kennedy's scientific advisor, was an example of how outstanding scientists can become political path-breakers, how scholars can – and must – actively influence global affairs, become the guardians of knowledge and wisdom in the halls of power and prestige. As such a guardian in the evolution of US-Russian relations, Evgeny Velikhov has indeed provided an inspiring example.

I vividly recall our meeting in Reykjavík in October 1986 when he came with the Soviet delegation to the Reagan-Gorbachev Summit. Evgeny Velikhov presented me proudly, his eyes shining, with a book, fresh off the press, published under his editorship by the Soviet Academy of Science. The book proved in no uncertain scientific terms that President Reagan's favourite idea, Star Wars, would never work.

We now know that Reagan and Gorbachev discovered at the Reykjavik Summit, perhaps to their surprise, that both were willing to abolish nuclear weapons entirely – even if Reagan was the only member of the American delegation to agree to such a revolutionary proposal. One problem, however, remained; Reagan said to Gorbachev: You must allow me, if we agree to abolish all nuclear weapons, to keep my favourite Star Wars Programme.

What I have never understood – and have eagerly awaited all these years to ask Velikhov – is this:

If you had already proved to Gorbachev that because of the fundamental laws of physics the Star Wars was an empty dream, why did Gorbachev not immediately say yes to Reagan's simple request? If he had done so, the two leaders would have walked out of the small Höfði House in Iceland and declared their decision to rid the world entirely of all

nuclear weapons – and consequently my country's place in history would have surpassed all others.

In the light of all these memories it is for me a profound honour and a deep personal pleasure to witness Evgeny Velikhov receiving tonight the Outstanding Leadership Award. It is indeed fitting that he should receive it when we are celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the establishment of US-Russian Diplomatic Relations.