



**Address by  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
President of Iceland  
to  
The National Press Club in Washington  
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Distinguished guests  
Ladies and gentlemen

It is an honour to be invited to speak to the National Press Club and I am thankful for the opportunity to address you here today and respond to your questions.

I come from one of the oldest democracies in the world, if not the oldest. Since the foundation of the Icelandic parliament, the Althingi, more than 1000 years ago, Icelandic society has valued highly open and free speech as symbolised by the ancient Icelandic saying: “Sá er vinur sem til vamma segir” which translates “Your critic is your best friend”.

Clearly the relationship between the members of the Washington Press and the White House and Congress could hardly be described that way. Perhaps we in Iceland could provide some lessons for our American friends.

Although a European nation, the Icelanders resemble the Americans in many cultural aspects. Basically because we are both nations of settlers.

Our societies were created by people who crossed the ocean to settle in a new land. The spirit of discovery, the energy of the pioneers, became the bulwarks of our civilisation. Although Iceland was settled by the Vikings 700-800 years before large-scale European emigration to America began, the similarities are striking.

It is therefore appropriate that two nations which value pioneers and discoverers so highly should join hands in the year 2000 to celebrate the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leifur Eiriksson's pioneering voyage to a continent which he called Vínland but in later times became known as America.

Leifur Eiríksson, Leifur heppni or Leif the Lucky, as he was called in his time, was born on a farm, Eiríksstaðir, in West Iceland, a place where the mountains and the summer sun still create a symphony of colours. His life and endeavours are described in the old Icelandic sagas, written down centuries before the days of Columbus on calfskin manuscripts which are now on display in the University Manuscript Institute in Reykjavík.

When mankind welcomes a new millennium, evaluates the past 1000 years and envisages what lies ahead, what could be more fitting than to celebrate the most important discovery made in the very year when mankind last passed such a milestone? Nothing that happened in the year 1000 is of such value and inspiration for us today as Leifur Eiríksson's journey to America, an event that invokes the daring human spirit, the courage and the determination that has led mankind from the ancient village to the seas, across the ocean to new continents, from earth to the moon and farther into space.

In my Inaugural address as President of Iceland on August 1<sup>st</sup> last year I called for co-operation between the United States of America, Canada and Iceland to celebrate in the year 2000, at the dawn of the new millennium, the momentous discovery of the American continent by the Vikings exactly 1000 years before.

And it was with great pleasure that I received last month, on our National Day 17<sup>th</sup> of June, a message from President Clinton in which he declared his willingness to join us in celebrating in the year 2000 the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leifur Eiríksson's discovery of America.

At the cross-roads which the millennium represents, the Viking voyages to America, the legacy of Leif the Lucky, could serve as an inspiration to us not just to look back, but also to look forward. They would give us a platform for examining the importance of discovery, the spirit of pioneers in our civilisation, and the forces that drive us to explore the unknown, to reach for new heights.

The joint celebrations on both sides of the Atlantic in the year 2000 could thus involve a re-examination of the Viking civilisation, the Vikings' knowledge of the oceans, their skills, wisdom and learning. Their achievement can teach us many things in today's world, where so much is taken for granted.

I am talking not just about the vital research that is being done into the ancient sagas and manuscripts, which are important sources of our knowledge of these times. The modern spirit, the public imagination and the world of the media could be inspired by a different series of events.

Let me offer you some ideas.

- 1) A big event with global media involvement to be staged at Leifur Eiríksson's birthplace, Eiríksstaðir in West Iceland.
- 2) Voyages on Viking ships along the known Viking route from Iceland through Greenland and on to America.
- 3) A film in the Pocahontas style about the first European boy born in America, the boy Snorri, the son of Leifur Eiríksson's sister-in-law. Snorri was the first child of European origin to begin life, walk, run and play in America, the new unknown continent. The life of the Viking boy Snorri in America could complement the film about the Indian girl Pocahontas as a source of fascination to children the world over.
- 4) The distribution of the new English translation of the complete Icelandic sagas to American libraries and other public institutions as well as general readers in order to provide access for all to the Viking past in American history.
- 5) Furthermore, a series of events such as adventure travels and visits organised from America to the known birthplaces of Vikings in Iceland, exhibitions on Viking civilisation and documentaries for television, schools and other educational institutions, conferences and forums for scholars and researchers.

The main purpose of all these events, the guiding themes, would be to use the celebrations of the Viking explorations of America to inspire the spirit of discovery for the new millennium, to mark the start of a new era.

The world has been blessed with a new beginning. Now that the Cold War is over we must replace fear and suspicion with positive ideas.

Next October it is 11 years since Presidents Reagan and Gorbatsjov met in Reykjavík, the capital of my country. There the foundation was laid for the momentous change which in an incredibly short time, one decade or so, has transformed the entire world.

So fast has the wheel of change turned in each of those eleven years that we have hardly had a moment to reflect on what should be the guiding principles of the new world, which ideals should inspire individuals and steer the policy of states.

What better time than the approaching new millennium to decide on new guidelines, guidelines for big states as well as small.

Iceland and America, two nations created by settlers, inspired by pioneers and discoverers, one small, one a superpower, bound by a long-standing respect for democracy and human rights, allies across the North Atlantic - Iceland and America are well placed to initiate such a dialogue, a dialogue akin to the discourses of the Founding Fathers which over 200 years ago inspired the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Democracy must be the key in all our efforts, policies and plans; plans for the new world of international relations.

The history of the Icelanders from the days of the ancient parliament through eleven centuries to modern times, and the adventure of the American experience inspired by the Founding Fathers, both bear witness to the enduring success of true democratic society.

The world has changed in such a fundamental way that we need to learn from those who founded our nations. We need to look back at the values and motives that have made us what we are today. Only by knowing where we have come from can we influence where we are heading.

The spirit of discovery, the respect for the pioneering spirit, the desire to explore the unknown could certainly be key elements in our testament for the new century.

Democracy, inspired by the spirit of discovery, should indeed be the model for civic society in all parts of the world.

But then security must also be provided.

The changes in Europe have brought sovereignty and independence to nations that previously were within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when many of our allies on either side of the Atlantic urged caution with respect to the freedom movements in the small Baltic states and were then not prepared to recognise their right to sovereignty and independence, Iceland decided to take the lead and actively support the Baltic states.

My country is proud to have been the first to formally recognise the sovereignty and independence of the Baltic states. As a small nation, we respected immediately the call for freedom from other small nations that had suffered suppression and dictatorship for most of the century.

NATO is now engaged in a dialogue with other nations which until now have been outside the Alliance on how to create a new security structure for Europe and the Atlantic community. As a founding member of NATO, Iceland is deeply involved in this process. We therefore emphasise once again the right of the small, newly independent states, especially our friends the Baltic states, not to be excluded from such reforms.

Unless the rights of the smaller European states are fully respected, the new Atlantic security structure will be democratically and morally flawed.

The conscience of the new Europe is not provided by the economically powerful. The heart of the new Europe is in those communities which, although small, kept the spirit of freedom and democracy alive during the darkest decades of this century.

But now we live in times of creation; creation that dominates all human activity: technology, trade, politics, culture and the arts.

Maybe the Icelanders are especially responsive to this transformation because in our country the creation of the Earth is still going on.

The Bible says that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Whether or not we believe in this literally, Iceland seems to have been an afterthought, or maybe the Almighty forgot to rest when it came to Iceland. In my country the creation has been going on and on until this very day.

Last fall a volcanic eruption below the largest glacier in Europe demonstrated the forces of creation in a very dramatic way. For the first time in the modern age, people could watch a mountain being formed and rising up through the surface of a glacier. The volcano melted a 600-metre layer of solid ice and split the glacier apart, creating floods that covered the black sands with huge blocks of ice the size of some of the biggest buildings here in Washington.

The Mid-Atlantic rift, separating the European and the American continents, is nowhere visible above sea level except in Iceland. These two continents are moving apart, by an inch every two years, and Iceland spreads across the rift as they do so, providing an ongoing demonstration of the forces that are still transforming Mother Earth. At the site of our ancient parliament, Thingvellir, you can literally walk from the American continent to the European continent in less than one hour.

With growing interest in the environment and the future fate of the Earth, Iceland is proud to provide a “live show” of those forces that are much greater than us all. To witness the creation of the Earth at first hand is an exciting experience, but also a humbling one. We invite you all to come and enjoy with us that unique spectacle.