



**Speech by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the American Scandinavian Foundation
Gala Dinner in New York
19th October 2000**

Your Majesties
Your Royal Highnesses
Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen
Dear friends

Það er í senn ánægja og heiður að ávarpa ykkur hér í kvöld og fagna glæsilegum áfanga í kynningu á norrænni menningu í hinni nýju álfu.

It would indeed be a pleasure to continue to address you in Icelandic here tonight – and that almost could have happened. If Leif Eiríksson and the other Nordic seafarers who came to these shores a thousand years ago had not decided to leave soon after their arrival we would indeed all be speaking Icelandic here tonight. And Hillary Clinton and Rick Lazio would be quoting the Icelandic Sagas to prove their wisdom and learning.

Even though Leif was called the lucky, Christopher Columbus had a better PR firm – in the Vatican. But mark my words. We are getting there. It has admittedly taken us a thousand years, but as all of us who have lived through the cold Nordic nights know, all good things are worth waiting for.

This has indeed been a remarkable year. Not only have we celebrated the thousand anniversary of the Viking discoveries with the outstanding exhibition which was opened in Washington in the spring and will do so here in New York later this week. We have also seen extensive coverage of the historical heritage of the Nordic people in prestigious periodicals, magazines and newspapers all over America, and the remarkable television coverage of the voyage of the Viking ship "Icelander", an exact replica of the wooden Viking boats, from Leif Eiríksson's birthplace in western Iceland, across the Atlantic to

Greenland, Canada and the United States, ending her journey by passing the Statue of Liberty and arriving at New York harbour (and since the Captain and his crew are with us here tonight we should salute them with a round of applause).

Not only has Leif the Lucky finally been granted his due but so has his sister-in-law, Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, who shortly afterwards followed his course and came to America, settled here for a while, gave birth to her son Snorri, the first child of European origin to be born on this great continent, then travelled back to Iceland and went on foot and horseback all the way down to Rome to report to the Pope on the great continent discovered across the ocean.

Five hundred years before Christopher Columbus even appeared on the scene with his idea of setting sail, Guðríður, this remarkable Icelandic woman, became the first person in world history to visit both Rome and America. She is indeed the greatest woman explorer of all times, a symbol and an inspiration to all her sisters, the ultimate victor in the macho test between Columbus and Leif, because who would dare to challenge an Icelandic woman. Certainly not us, and heed my advice: You are better off never to try.

These have indeed been great times. In the year 1000 we came to discover America. In the year 2000 we open the great Scandinavia House in the centre of Manhattan. To our American friends I simply say: Just you wait and see what we will do in the year 3000.

Apart from the Native Americans, the people from the Nordic countries are the only settlers in this great land who can justly celebrate anniversaries measured in thousands of years. Others, with all due respect, must make do with a few decades, at the most a couple of a hundred years.

The Scandinavia House is indeed a splendid manifestation of Nordic co-operation, of our determination to present our cultural heritage to the American people, to show the variety of modern Scandinavia in the arts and the sciences, in business and technologies, in food and exquisite design, in creativity and innovation.

Nordic people have always tried simultaneously to nurture our roots and be cosmopolitan in our presentation. Our writers and scholars, singers and painters, composers and playwrights, film makers and actors have preserved their identity while enriching the rest of the world with their insights and interpretation of the human condition.

The plays of Ibsen and Strindberg, the novels of Laxness and Hamsun, the music of Grieg and Sibelius, the adventures of H. C. Andersen and Astrid Lindgren, the films of Bergman and Lars von Trier, the songs of Björk and ABBA – the list of the Nordic gifts to the world of culture is a long and growing.

In our new home in New York City we have built a centre from which to advance even further, where in the years to come new generations of Nordic talent can bring their creativity and contributions, where people in business and science can measure their potential in constructive dialogue with their American counterparts and prospective partners.

We have, dear friends, a lot to offer to enrich this great country, to make the American journey an even greater success.

The Nordic experience is a lesson in democracy and truly decent and civil society, an example of how it is possible to achieve prosperity, education and health for all, a symbol of human rights and the rule of law, an inspiration to others of how to make a significant contribution to peace and development in the rest of the world.

In times of violence and civil wars, of hunger and starvation, of crimes and cruelty, it is a noble endeavour to bring hope and inspiration, to show that together we can create a world which is open and free, where every child enjoys the birthright to decency, prosperity and peace.

We in the Nordic countries have been blessed by a great heritage and a multitude of opportunities. In the new Scandinavia House we hope to enrich America by giving our modern contributions a more splendid setting than ever before.

I congratulate the leaders of the American Scandinavian Foundation on their outstanding achievement and I thank you all for helping to make it possible.

May those who a thousand years from now will look on our contributions be worthy of the great American-Nordic endeavour, launched by Leif the Lucky in the year 1000, celebrated by the new Scandinavian presence in Manhattan in the year 2000 and directed towards the momentous anniversary waiting for us in the year 3000. May all of us, a thousand successful fundraisers from now, be present then in both spirit and heavenly joy.