



**Lecture**

**by**

**the President of Iceland**

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**“DISCOVERY IN THE NEW CENTURY:  
THE STEFANSSON – DARTMOUTH LEGACY  
AND THE ROLE OF AMERICA,  
RUSSIA AND THE NORDIC COUNTRIES IN THE  
FUTURE OF THE NORTH”**

**Dartmouth College**

**USA**

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Distinguished professors and scholars  
Evelyn Stefansson Nef  
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a particular honour for me to accept this invitation to deliver the Stefansson Memorial Lecture and pay tribute to the remarkable contribution that Vilhjálmur Stefansson made to knowledge and science. I welcome this chance to participate in the dialogue on how Iceland, the USA and Canada can build on Vilhjálmur Stefansson's legacy in order to highlight the opportunities that the 21st century presents us with through new cooperation in the Northern regions; how the life and work of one of the greatest discoverers of all times can help us to understand the importance of discovery as a motive force in the new century; and how our culture, progress and thinking will be enriched if we make the continuous process of discovery the central element of our endeavours.

Iceland and the United States have both benefited from the fact that our respective histories and cultures have been greatly inspired by the discoverers who settled our lands. In Iceland's case these were the Vikings who a thousand years ago ventured even further and crossed the ocean to discover the great continent in the west, five hundred years before the European exodus began the adventure which later became known as the United States of America.

Our identity as Icelanders, just like the Americans' sense of where their society's roots lie, has always been strongly moulded by the fact that our forebears were settlers and explorers. In this respect we still remain a frontier society, a community which holds in high esteem those who explore new realms, bring new knowledge and excel in harnessing the unknown.

In many ways Vilhjálmur Stefansson was shaped by these centuries-old Icelandic traditions on which the identity and culture of an island nation in the far north was based, a heritage that would acquire new value during the settlement by Icelandic immigrants in the US and Canada in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was brought up in the belief that the Vikings who originally settled Iceland and became the first European settlers of America were true heroes, and such was his faith to the Icelandic heritage that many people wanted to make him the first President of the Republic of Iceland when it was established in 1944.

One of my first duties on being elected President of Iceland just over six years ago was to open a noteworthy exhibition in The Hague, Holland, which was jointly organized by European cultural institutions

and dedicated to the greatest discoverers of all time – and Vilhjálmur Stefansson's contribution was there given ample credit.

The end of the Cold War has opened new channels for cooperation among the nations of the North, and the Nordic countries, Russia, the United States and Canada have been working together for this purpose. The Arctic Council, the University of the Arctic, the Northern Research Forum and the Barents Region Council are several examples of the organized framework that has been created to encompass this new Northern cooperation. Individual nations and alliances have also identified the need to develop a special policy towards the northern region, for example the Northern Dimension which the European Union made a formal part of its programme for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the northern policy formulated by the Government of Canada with its special platform for action.

The new political importance of the North has given renewed currency to the research and the writings which became Vilhjálmur Stefansson's legacy, to his journeys of discovery into unknown northern territories. We can see in the recent writings of scholars and in the activities of the new Stefansson Arctic Institute in Akureyri, Iceland, that his work offers a new form of guidance, a precedent for how the culture of discovery can be nourished and enriched.

It is my firm conviction that in Vilhjálmur Stefansson we have both an inspiration and a symbol which could personify three important elements that will play a critical part in the evolution of the 21st century.

The first is the role of discovery in human, 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 and religious and racial intolerance can only be won if inspirations derived from science and discovery are given a prominent place in the formulation of public policies.

The second is the emphasis on the environment, the need to understand the forces of nature which influence the human condition. In the North, this applies to the role played by ocean currents and their conveyor belt in the climate of the Earth, how the melting of the ice in the northern and Arctic territories could fundamentally alter the global environment and how the richness of the vegetation and fish stocks in the North contribute to the resources available to humankind.

The third is the new political and economic importance of the North which opens up a wealth of opportunities in American-Russian relations, encouraged by active participation by Canada and the Nordic countries.

The northern vision enables us, at the opening of the 21st century, to engage Russia in a positive way and consolidate a partnership which half a century of cold war and nuclear confrontation had made impossible.

These three chief tasks will constitute an important part of international dialogue and cooperation, and Vilhjálmur Stefansson can be an exciting synonym for them all. It has often been productive to adopt outstanding individuals as symbols or figureheads for new movements, to be able to link the quest for new approaches with the life and work of great achievers whose contribution has marked a turning point.

In Vilhjálmur Stefansson we have such a resource and I consider it important for us Icelanders, our universities and research institutes, for Dartmouth College where his collection is preserved, and also for American academe in general, to realise in full the opportunities that Vilhjálmur Stefansson's heritage gives for us to play an active role in tackling some of the most pressing challenges of the new century.

In many ways it is an exciting task to ponder the kind of strategies by governments, universities and research institutes that will later enable nations to excel in the many fields where discovery is the main vehicle of change.

How do we bring new generations to maturity and train them to excel, to create new knowledge which will boost our nations' competitive positions? How can we ensure that society is open to innovation, adopts new ways of thinking and adapts itself to the changes that discoveries usher in? How do we dispel fear of the unknown and reluctance to introduce new customs? How do we foster at international level the sense that discovery has always been the foundation of progress, and prevent society from becoming entrenched inside fear and opposition to new perspectives? Haven't conflict and terrorism been nourished precisely where the chance to make a positive contribution by discovery has been excluded?

We could continue to list the endeavours and challenges facing us both at present and in the future and which relate to the basic role played by discovery in our culture and in our progress. It is important to understand how we can foster the ingredients which enable society to excel in this respect, and here Vilhjálmur Stefansson can serve as an inspiring trademark. His legacy could be the cornerstone of the contribution which both Dartmouth and we in Iceland could make in this field, thus giving our academic institutions a crucial role in the furtherance of human progress.

The spirit of discovery and the inspiration derived from being a frontier society contributed to the foundation of both our nations and enabled us to succeed in times of crisis. These characteristics are still of the utmost importance in the modern world and will enable us to master many of the challenges that lie ahead. I am deeply convinced that the culture of discovery is the key to success in the 21st century and that we therefore need to understand how it can be nurtured and made available to all.

Vilhjálmur Stefansson showed us how profoundly one man can change the life of others and transform our knowledge and understanding. By dedicating himself to the exploration of the North he pioneered what has now become a venue for a new dimension in American-Russian relations, paved the way for Nordic participation in the new political and economic relevance of the North.

Stefansson's legacy reminds us of the importance of the sustainable use of natural resources and provides us with fascinating insights into human-environmental relations. He made us realise that the North is not a barren eternally frozen wasteland but a region of diverse characteristics which call for wide-ranging international cooperation.

Among the crucial tasks of such cooperation are the protection of the Arctic marine environment, especially the fight against the pollution of the oceans, the conservation of Arctic flora and fauna with emphasis on biodiversity and sustainable use, the assessment of the impact of climate change on the Arctic region and the conceivable reaction to such changes, the utilization of energy resources in the northern regions and the prevention of environmental disasters caused by nuclear waste and the vast nuclear arsenals which are still kept in the northwestern part of Russia.

Iceland has recently taken over the responsibility of chairing the Arctic Council and we have declared that one of our emphases will be a broad assessment of human development in the region, in order to provide an overview of sustainable development and identify the factors that affect the well-being of the inhabitants. The focus will be on social, cultural and economical progress and how they relate to sustainable development and the use of natural resources in the region.

This priority project is titled the Arctic Human Development Report and will be co-chaired by the Director of Dartmouth's Institute of Arctic Studies and the Director of the Stefansson Arctic Institute in Iceland.

In addition, Iceland intends to strengthen scientific and technological cooperation for sustainable development through increased networking between scientists and research institutions. The aim is to build on existing international organisations and programmes, working with issues such as sustainable agriculture, communications, tourism, construction, and the use of natural resources. We will also promote collaboration between funding agencies and research councils of the member states of the Arctic Council so as to facilitate joint financing of research programmes and projects. One focus will be to develop the existing cooperation between the European Union and North America in order to link educational and research institutions dealing with Arctic research. In addition, high priority will be given to strengthening circumpolar and cross-disciplinary monitoring to help us to determine and analyse environmental changes in the Arctic. The aim is increasingly to integrate monitoring of biodiversity and the assessment of pollution, climate change and other environmental and social and economic factors.

Many of these issues which will be on the agenda of the Arctic Council in coming years were also discussed at last month's second assembly of the Northern Research Forum held in Novgorod – the ancient Viking city which a thousand years ago became the centre of the first Russian state. The assembly brought political leaders, business people, scholars and researchers, public officials and university students together to discuss and analyse future cooperation in the North and draw lessons from the experience of recent years.

Among the issues discussed in Novgorod were:

\*Human capital in the North: Population movements, employment, traditional knowledge and applications of new technology, education, gender issues, transportation and communication.

\*Innovation in Northern governance, the future of regional institutions, the voice of the Arctic in global governance, sub-national governments in the North and concepts of security.

\*Business initiatives for a joint agenda in the North: experiences of different regions in international business, interaction between business and politics, barriers to entry, legislation with respect to foreign investment and current challenges for northern economies.

\*The lessons of history: The Vikings and the Novgorodians, East-West as it reflects the importance of historical crossings for current relations, North-South as it reflects past experience and research into new approaches.

The first Northern Research Forum was held in Iceland two years ago and the University of Akureyri and the Stefansson Arctic Institute in Iceland have served as the secretariat for this effort. The Russians showed strong interest in this initiative and eagerly sought acceptance of their offer to host the second assembly, thus demonstrating their dedication to exploring new opportunities for positive and productive cooperation in the North.

During my State Visit to Russia earlier this year President Putin endorsed this northern cooperation in significant ways and two of the most forward-looking governors in Russia, Governor Prusak of the Novgorod region who has succeeded in drawing a great number of western business corporations to his home base, and Governor Neeolov from the gas-rich Yamal-Nemets region in Siberia, both played a leading role in the Novgorod meeting.

The many encounters I have had with Russian leaders in recent months, during my State Visit to Russia, through participation in the Novgorod Northern Research Forum and on other occasions have convinced me that the Northern dimension can be of fundamental importance in the new American-Russian relations, especially since both the Nordic countries and Canada can play a strong supportive role and the problems which have affected the European-Atlantic approach to Russia are almost entirely absent from northern cooperation. Russia is mostly confronted by restrictions and limitations with respect to European economic and defence organisations, but no such hindrances are present in the North. There the field is wide open for extensive and positive engagements.

Such American-Russian cooperation in the company of Canada and the Nordic countries could focus on a multitude of issues:

- \*Management and utilisation of the rich natural resources in the North, both on land and in the oceans, including oil, gas, hydro and geothermal power.

- \*Economic progress through business partnerships, facilitated by investments in information technology and communications networks.

- \*The evolution of political systems in the North, including the strengthening of international councils such as the Arctic Council, the Barents Region Council and the Baltic Council, and extension of active cooperation between nation states in the regions and sub-state institutions such as provincial, local, regional and state governments in Canada, Russia and the United States. This cooperation across the

boundaries of diplomatic protocol has provided a wealth of new opportunities in the North and in recent years has made the region a fascinating political laboratory.

\*Legal issues concentrating on the rights of indigenous peoples, cultural and human rights and land ownership.

\*The enhancement of cultural cooperation, including artistic exhibitions, musical events, film festivals, publishing and theatre, as well as the important task of language retention and the preservation of traditional patterns of social interaction.

\*The growing importance of human health and the need to address the problems of suicide, homicide and inter-family violence.

\*The impact of globalisation on the North, including the growing presence of multinational cooperation and the critical role of the North for the global system.

The list could be longer, of course, but these topics indicate a wealth of opportunities for constructive research and dialogue within the framework of the growing cooperation in the North where the United States, Russia, Canada and the five Nordic countries – Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland – have committed themselves to constructive partnership in the coming years.

This outline shows the great change which has taken place in the North since the end of the Cold War, when all contact in this field had been completely frozen and absolute stagnation had prevailed for decades. Now there has been a thaw, much of the ice has broken and the rivers are surging forth, bringing a wealth of opportunities that were once unthinkable.

These gratifying changes create diverse possibilities for universities and research institutions which are linked with the Northern regions to rise to this challenge in the years to come and join in the projects that have been profiled under this new Northern cooperation between the US, Russia, Canada and the Nordic countries.

It is precisely in this field that universities and the Stefansson Arctic Institute in Iceland, and Dartmouth College in the USA, can productively join forces. These Icelandic establishments are determined to take advantage of Iceland's favourable geographic location close to the heart of this new region, while Dartmouth College, by preserving The Vilhjálmur Stefansson Collection, is in a key position among American scientific institutions in this respect.



People in Iceland would particularly welcome the opportunity to foster cooperation with Dartmouth College in these fields and make the college a leading vehicle for US academic involvement in the issues of the North in the new century. Vilhjálmur Stefansson's heritage, reputation and historical position are a common factor that links us together, but at the same time they serve as the key for giving such research and dialogue both realistic and academic credence. It was precisely in combining the scientific and the practical that Vilhjálmur Stefansson showed special skill.

I hope that my visit here to the heartland of Vilhjálmur Stefansson studies, and the discussions I have had with the president and the professors of Dartmouth College, will help to bring forth a wide platform of cooperation between us Icelanders and Dartmouth College in the years to come. In my opinion it will also prove easy to find funding and grants to foster creative work in this arena – we already have examples of the generous support provided to The Northern Research Forum by both The Ford Foundation and The Carnegie Cooperation of New York in the past few years.

The Washington administration – both President George Bush and his government, and before him President Clinton and influential figures from his terms in office – have repeatedly underlined the need to bolster the new relationship with Russia and engage it with the West through positive action. The attitude of Russia's President Vladimir Putin and many Russian leaders shows unequivocally that the Russians regard the North as an important arena for this new networking, and even as a test case for whether there is any serious commitment underlying the promises that have been given.

Thus it is vital for the academic community in the United States to follow these priorities through and give the government a helping hand with new studies and extensive discussion of the tasks and challenges that the North represents.

Dartmouth is here in a key position and we have great expectations of the contribution you will make in the years to come.

I am grateful for the opportunity that this visit has given me to develop these ideas at the talks earlier today and in the discussions that will follow. We Icelanders will take a pride in boosting our cooperation with Dartmouth College in this field and the positive response we have received is very promising.

In our cooperation, we would honour the memory of Vilhjálmur Stefansson and be inspired by his vision, which President John F.

Kennedy described in the following way: “Vilhjálmur Stefansson had an extraordinary career of exploration and teaching. His great human understanding, intellectual curiosity and unflagging zest gave him a large and influential role in our appreciation of geography and exploration. Both science and human knowledge owe much to his imagination and force of character.”

These words by President Kennedy capture the essence of Vilhjálmur Stefansson’s life and it is both an honour and a privilege to attempt to follow his example in the years to come.