

## ICELAND

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**WILLIAM C. TRIMBLE**  
**Chargé**  
**Reykjavik (1946-1948)**

*Ambassador William C. Trimble was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He received a bachelor's degree in political science from Princeton University. He entered the Foreign Service in 1931, where his career included positions in Estonia, France, Argentina, England, Brazil, and Germany, and an ambassadorship to Cambodia. Ambassador Trimble was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.*

*Q: Well, you left Northern European Affairs, but you then moved to--*

TRIMBLE: Iceland.

*Q: Iceland, which makes some sense, which is sort of unusual.*

TRIMBLE: I had been dealing with Iceland, too, among other--

*Q: What was the situation? You went there in 1947, and you were there in '48.*

TRIMBLE: Well, actually, I first went to the National War College. It was the first class of the National War College. I think ten of us or twelve of us were from the State Department, the rest from the Army, Navy and Air Force, and it was an excellent experience. Excellent! George Kennan was Deputy for International Affairs and General Gruenther, the Deputy Commandant, was outstanding.

*Q: Really, probably the great intellectual of the military.*

TRIMBLE: Yes. And, unfortunately, because there had been no recruitment in the Foreign Service during the war years, such a shortage of officers and so many new posts opening up that they took all but one of us out--I think the course started in August 1946--in December when the first semester was over, and assigned us in the field. Jack Cabot went to Shanghai, others to various posts and me to Iceland. So I only had half the academic year there, which was, fortunately, the first semester which dealt mostly with political and economic affairs, as the second was military, which wasn't particularly my field.

So I went to Iceland as Chargé, and apparently the Department liked my work sufficiently to let me remain as Chargé for over a year, rather than send in a new minister.

*Q: Well, what was the situation? We must have been withdrawing our--we had a naval base and we had Meeks Field there and all.*

TRIMBLE: We had signed an agreement with Iceland in 1946, early in '46, that we would withdraw our military forces on such and such a date. They were largely Air Force, and at Meeks Field. It was a landing field with planes going from Canada to there to refuel and then over to

England. And so, let's see, the Russians were very much interested in Iceland because of strategic position, as we were, of course, in the North Atlantic. So I was sent there to try to prevent the Russians from getting a foothold, which we'll discuss a little bit, and also to see that American troops were moved out on time, which was a difficult matter.

*Q: Why was that difficult?*

TRIMBLE: As the deadline came closer and closer, a military ship vessel, a military transport with troops and officers from Germany was meant to pick them up. It was very rough weather in March or February of 1947. So the officers and brass on board, the generals, got terribly seasick, and they told the captain that he could not stop in Iceland. He had been ordered to embark the troops there. But, no, the brass said, "No, don't stop." So I had to arrange an airlift, a couple of PBVs to take this group over to--

*Q: PBVs being the seaplane.*

TRIMBLE: Flying boat, that type of thing. And flew them over to Greenland. But we met the deadline.

*Q: Well, the Icelanders always have been unhappy with too many foreigners on their soil.*

TRIMBLE: Oh, yes.

*Q: And so, I suppose, the fact that we really were living up to this agreement in getting out must have helped your position.*

TRIMBLE: It did and helped me a lot, and there was very fine Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bjarni Benediktson. He died some years ago. Excellent man. Very pro-American. He got them into NATO; it was largely due to him. And also their Ambassador in Washington, Thor Thors, was very good, and I worked very closely with him. Also they had a shortage of oil and needed oil for their fishing fleet, very much. They depended on fishing. And I was able to arrange for a special tanker to come over there and bring it to them, and they appreciated that.

*Q: Well, you say your job was to keep the Russians out. Now, how does an American chargé to a legation keep Russians out?*

TRIMBLE: Because I found out who the Russian agents were, and I could pass the information to the Foreign Minister. He was anti-Soviet, too, very much so, as most of the government were, most, not all of them. There was a strong Communist Party. And the Russians would have wanted but didn't actually have the economic means or resources to take over the country or try to take over the country. Rather what they were doing was spying on what we were doing.

*Q: But your main occupation then was to keep Iceland from getting isolated and become a--*

TRIMBLE: Yes, neutral like Sweden.

*Q: Or being an easy target.*

TRIMBLE: Yes, exactly.

*Q: Was this difficult dealing with Washington? Because Iceland is sort of off there.*

TRIMBLE: No.

*Q: It wasn't?*

TRIMBLE: No. Because Washington realized the importance, strategic importance of Iceland. That's why they got Iceland into NATO.

*Q: Yes. Because, I guess, it also it was the first country we had sent troops to before we even got into World War II. So we knew its importance.*

TRIMBLE: Oh, yes. We had, as I said, when we got the troops out, we wanted continued use of an air field there which is called Keflavik now for transatlantic planes. They had to refuel somewhere. They couldn't go across on a flight direct to Europe as they can now. And so we worked out an agreement that the American Airlines would have a subsidiary called American Overseas Airlines to take charge of operating the field from the military when the Air Force was withdrawn. Unfortunately, many of the group the AOA sent over came from the scum of New York and were awful drunks.

*Q: The AOA is?*

TRIMBLE: American Overseas Airlines. And some were also homosexuals, all types. It was pretty bad, really. So we had to clean that mess up. Somebody in their organization had picked up these people in New York. So we finally got that group out and got in some Scandinavian Americans from Minnesota, and they were good. But that was one of the problems I had. And the then head of the so-called "air department" of the Icelandic government was a commie. That didn't help.

*Q: You know, sometimes there are communist parties and communist parties, and they change over the years. But in the post world war years, these communists were closely allied to the Soviets?*

TRIMBLE: Oh, yes.

*Q: And they were moving to Soviet orders?*

TRIMBLE: Oh, yes, very much so. There's no question about that. You remember, the COMINTERN had been very important, if you know what the COMINTERN was.

*Q: Yes.*

TRIMBLE: Yes, they were very strong. Anyhow, I liked the Icelanders, and I think they liked me. They're different people, very stubborn, very nationalistic, but honest and sincere and able people--I'm very fond of Icelanders--and very well educated. Even though they're insulated in their outlook in certain respects, very well-educated people.

So I stayed there until the Department finally decided that they would send a Minister. That was 1948. And I remained with him a couple of weeks to break him in on the situation, and then went home on leave, after which I was transferred to London.

**JOHN A. MCKESSON III**  
**Deputy Chief of ECA Mission**  
**Reykjavik (1947-1951)**

*Ambassador John A. McKesson, III was born in New York March 29, 1922. He received a bachelor's degree and a master's degree from Columbia University. He then entered the U.S. Navy, where he served for four years. Mr. McKesson entered the Foreign Service in 1947. His career included positions in France, Iceland, Germany, Vietnam, and Senegal, and an ambassadorship to Gabon. This interview was conducted by Arthur Day on May 7, 1990.*

MCKESSON: My first post was in Reykjavik, Iceland which turned out to be a very interesting assignment. I did consular work there to begin with. Then the Marshall Plan was started. An ECA mission was set up in every country in Western Europe, including Iceland. As it was such a small country they named the minister, who was the head of the legation there, as the head of the ECA mission, and he needed only one assistant. I happened to be chosen, and I became the deputy chief of the ECA mission, the information officer, the finance officer, etc. I would go back and forth to Paris about every other month during the rest of my tour in Iceland for the various meetings (program, information, finance...). I even attended two or three chiefs of mission meetings when the minister was too busy with his other responsibilities to go to Paris for ECA. I would sit at the table, as a brand-new FSO, with people like David Bruce, Zellerbach, Hoffman and Harriman. They were all, I think, as amused as I was.

*Q: That was before Iceland became so much involved in the American defense perimeter?*

MCKESSON: Iceland, of course, had become very important during World War II when first the British sent troops there, and then we did. We had troops there all during the war. We pulled them all out at the end of the war, but then they came back with NATO. During the war we had as many troops as there were male Icelanders so that did cause some problems. We tried to keep our troops totally on the base, away from Reykjavik, so they would not disrupt the local community too much.

**RICHARD P. BUTRICK**

**Minister  
Reykjavik (1948-1949)**

*Richard P. Butrick was born in Lockport, New York in 1894. He joined the Consular Service in 1921. His career in the Foreign Service included positions in Chile, Ecuador, Canada, China, Brazil, and Washington, DC. Mr. Butrick was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1993.*

*Q: Then you went to Iceland shortly thereafter?*

BUTRICK: I went to Iceland as EE and MP and from there Jack Peurifoy, who was Under Secretary at the time, asked me to come into the Department and be Director General of the Foreign Service. I couldn't very well say no. I would have liked to have stayed in Iceland a little longer. I was only there for nineteen months.

*Q: You were the Minister in Iceland. What were our major concerns there at that time?*

BUTRICK: The major concern at that particular time was the airfield, Keflavik. It was a stopover point for our big planes going to Europe. We had to have a long runway and make sure that we could land there and refuel and go on. So that was the principal thing, but there were other things. American business was anxious to get in too. One of the American airlines went through there.

*Q: How did you find dealing with the Icelandic government?*

BUTRICK: The Icelandic government...I was dealing with the Minister, Bjarni Benediksson, in the Department of Foreign Affairs and going back and forth every week, sometimes twice a week. Our office was not very far from the Department of Foreign Affairs. I became very close to the man I dealt with on a regular basis. He didn't want me to leave when I left, he wanted me to stay on. He made a very nice speech at the time of my departure. He said, "In the nineteen months that Mr. Butrick has been here we have had more to do in foreign affairs than we had in the previous nineteen years." So we got along very well together.

I liked the Icelanders very much and apparently they liked me. They are a highly, highly independent people. You have to be terribly careful about everything there. Getting them to join NATO was a major problem. The party in power just barely had a majority in Parliament. So it had to be their idea. It couldn't be mine. I had to be very careful that joining NATO was entirely their idea. I was in the background. They would ask me a question and I would say, "I really don't know but will get in touch with Washington and find out." So I fed them the information, but I didn't force it on them at all. You had to be very, very careful with the Icelanders because of their love of independence. He also said that if Mr. Butrick ever felt that he was the representative of the most powerful nation in the world to the weakest nation in the world, I never noticed it. It was true, I had never put forth our power in any respect. I wonder if my successors have been equally as fortunate as I was.

Then the Parliament voted to join NATO and there was a great ruckus there with stones being thrown at Parliament. When the Prime Minister was coming out of the building some Icelandic woman spat right in his face. So the Foreign Minister called me about 6:00 that night and said, "Dick, I think I had better get out of the country as soon as possible. Can you get me out tonight?" I said, "I don't know, but I will be in touch." I called up the airfield. Fortunately I was on very good terms with the airfield people. They had an air sea rescue plane which was the only one they had capable of flying to the United States. It would have been a B-17. He called me back and said, "Yeah, we can take him, but not before 10:00 tonight. We have to get the plane set for the trip." I said, "That would be fine."

Then I called up Washington on the phone and got the night duty officer there. I told him what was happening and that the Foreign Minister was coming on a plane and would land in Springfield, Mass. I told him from then on it was up to him and he took over.

So he went to the United States on that plane and the man I talked to in the Department had a plane there to meet him in Springfield to bring him to Washington. He arrived there an hour before the meeting of NATO. So Iceland became a Charter Member of NATO by one hour.

**JOSEPH A. MENDENHALL**  
**Officer, Marshall Plan Mission**  
**Reykjavik (1949-1951)**

*Joseph A. Mendenhall was born in Maryland in 1920. He received a bachelor's degree from the University of Delaware in 1940 and a master's degree from Harvard University in 1941. Mr. Mendenhall served in the U.S. Army from 1941-1946 and joined the Foreign Service in 1946. His career included positions in Turkey, Iceland, Switzerland, Vietnam, Laos, and Madagascar. Mr. Mendenhall was interviewed in February of 1991 by Horace Torbert.*

*Q: Well, then you went off to quite a different part of the world--Reykjavik.*

MENDENHALL: That is right, I went to Iceland and I will give you the history of why. I left Istanbul assigned to Manila and came back to Washington and went into a training course in the Department of Commerce for a few weeks. While I was in that my Manila assignment was canceled and I was assigned to Jakarta. Meanwhile, the man who had been the economic counselor in Ankara, Edward Lawson, was named as our Minister to Iceland. At that time, as you remember, we still had quite a number of Legations. Lawson was named as Minister and was concurrently going to be the head of the Marshall Plan Mission in Iceland. They didn't have a separate head as in many European countries. He asked me if I would go to Iceland with him to run the Marshall Plan for him. I replied that I would be delighted. But, the Department said he could have Mendenhall if he found a replacement for him for Jakarta. So Lawson spent all summer of 1949 trying to find a replacement for me and I didn't know whether to buy tropical clothing or arctic clothing for my next assignment. He finally succeeded in September in getting

a replacement and my assignment to Reykjavik was made official and I had to rush around and get myself ready to go to a cold climate.

Interestingly enough, when we arrived early October in Reykjavik, the ground was already frozen. We checked in to the only hotel that then existed in Reykjavik, the Hotel Borg and within two nights after our arrival I broke out into a heat rash. Why? Because we were sleeping under eider down quilts. I never have been able to distribute those feathers in eider down quilts in such a way that I am comfortable under them.

We stayed in Iceland for a bit over two years and both my wife and I learned to love it and the Icelanders. The Icelanders are a very reserved people. Not easy to break into, but if they conclude that one treats them as absolute equals and doesn't make any disparaging remarks about their small country and limited population, pretty soon they take you in and they are the warmest friends one will have in the world.

I was extremely busy in the Marshall Plan Mission. By the time I left the United States had extended \$30 million in aid to Iceland, which I suppose in today's money would be somewhere between \$300 or \$400 million. I was the only officer administering that whole program. Minister Lawson preoccupied himself almost completely with the diplomatic mission and I did all the negotiating in connection with the Marshall Plan as well as the administering. The Marshall Plan Headquarters here in Washington and the European Headquarters in Paris were mechanisms that churned out immense amounts of paper destined for the much larger missions in other countries and Iceland got every bit of paper that went to everyone else. I had to winnow it out. Just that job alone took a lot of time.

The substantive part of the job was interesting and required a great deal of time. We constructed three major projects under the aid program--two hydroelectric projects and a nitrogenous fertilizer plant. We worked with the Icelanders to improve their exports, particularly with the United States. We inaugurated a technical assistance program to Iceland and the first project under that was to bring a fish marketing expert from Boston over to advise the Icelanders about their marketing procedures to the United States. One of the things in particular that he recommended was that for the U.S. market you don't need to skin the frozen fish as you do for Europe. The Americans eat the skins so just freeze it and send it--you will get more money that way.

*Q: You don't happen to remember the name of the Boston expert do you?*

MENDENHALL: I can't remember his name. I might add that the position to which I was assigned in the Marshall Plan organization was the equivalent of an FSO-3 and I was then an FSO-5. At that stage, remember, we had only 6 numbered classes in the Foreign Service. I was in the next to the bottom. I did get some differential in salary because of this assignment, but the Department would not permit me to draw the complete differential between an FSO-5 and an FSO-3 assignment. Typical at that time on the part of the Department, like my argument when I was coming in whether I should get \$3600 or \$3900. The Department never conceded very much in financial terms.



**MARY SEYMOUR OLMSTED**  
**Political Officer**  
**Reykjavik (1949-1951)**

*Ambassador Mary Seymour Olmsted was born in Duluth, Minnesota and raised in Florida. She received a bachelor's degree in economics from Mount Holyoke College and a master's degree from Columbia University. Ambassador Olmsted's Foreign Service career included positions in India, Iceland, Austria, Washington, DC, and an ambassadorship to Papua New Guinea. Ambassador Olmsted was interviewed by Ann Miller Morin in 1985.*

*Q: Of course. Back to '46. Then you went up to 05 very quickly, didn't you? You moved on then to Reykjavik [Iceland]. Was that your choice?*

OLMSTED: No.

*Q: But you were the political officer. You had already done some political reporting, had you?*

OLMSTED: No.

*Q: Not at all? When you were in Amsterdam, you were in two rotations?*

OLMSTED: Three. First I was commercial officer, then I handled passports and American citizens' affairs, and then I became a visa officer.

*Q: I see. How did you like political work?*

OLMSTED: Very much. I got very interested in it.

*Q: Did you think of wanting to specialize in that?*

OLMSTED: Yes.

*Q: You were there for two years, apparently.*

OLMSTED: Two and a half.

*Q: Then went to Vienna as an economic officer. Was that a disappointment?*

OLMSTED: Yes. I would have preferred staying in the political function.

*Q: But you were given no choice. Given your background, your very strong background in economics, it made sense for the Department, didn't it? But what about the language when you were in Reykjavik? What did you use?*

OLMSTED: Used English, which is quite widely spoken. Icelandic is spoken only by the small population of Iceland. English was the diplomatic language. No question about that.

*Q: Did you learn much Icelandic?*

OLMSTED: Enough to make a few social remarks, greetings, thanks and so on.

*Q: Was that with special lessons?*

OLMSTED: I took lessons for a little while, yes.

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*Ambassador Olmsted was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1992.*

*Q: You went to Reykjavik in 1949 where you stayed until '51.*

OLMSTED: Yes.

*Q: And you were what? A political officer there?*

OLMSTED: Yes.

*Q: You went to Iceland doing political work. What was the situation in Iceland at the time, politically?*

OLMSTED: The matter of greatest concern at the time I went there was whether or not Iceland would permit the United States to establish a NATO air base. That was what dominated the political scene insofar as we were concerned. The government of Iceland, when I went there, was I think a coalition government dominated by the Independence Party, and the Social Democrats were challenging that coalition. There was a lot of politics at the county level, and I was following the ins and outs, but behind all that was this question of whether or not we would be permitted to open up an air base there. That was negotiated during my tour.

*Q: This was the Keflavik air base?*

OLMSTED: Yes.

*Q: We were talking before about the attitude towards the Soviet Union. I take it this need for the air base was directly related to...*

OLMSTED: Yes, it was.

*Q: How did that translate to the Icelandic community which has always tried to remain as neutral as possible?*

OLMSTED: Well, there was a good deal of very genuine feeling in opposition to having an American dominated air base there. Not necessarily because they disliked Americans, but there are all kinds of practical considerations; having all these young men running around, and dating Icelandic girls, and perhaps marrying them. I remember one Icelandic mother said to me, "I don't want my daughter going out with an American, even if he is a nice boy, even if he would be a good husband for her, because," she said, "my daughter will follow him back to the United States and I may almost never see her again, and I don't want that."

Also, there was the concern over the introduction of American chewing gum, and all the other facets of our culture that they rather deplored.

*Q: Did you find that Icelanders have a different view of the Soviets than we did? Because we were just moving into the Cold War at this time. Things had happened in Czechoslovakia, and the Korean War had started. Did they look at things through a different prism?*

OLMSTED: Yes. It was a prism that was in many ways clouded by their own reluctance to get drawn into the larger picture. They saw themselves as an island which they very much wanted to be isolated from a lot of the rest of the world. They liked the way things were in Iceland, and they really didn't want to get very much involved, particularly in this bipolar world in which they thought they could only lose.

*Q: As a political reporter, how did you deal with Icelandic officials? Did you find they were stand-offish as far as talking to an American on political matters?*

OLMSTED: No, they weren't. Generally speaking I didn't have trouble in making contacts with them, and sitting down and talking to them about various issues. They were willing enough to express their views on the situation.

*Q: Our ambassador at that point was Edward B. Lawson?*

OLMSTED: First it was Richard P. Butrick, and then he left and Edward B. Lawson came in. He was extremely hard of hearing. He wore a hearing aid but the hearing aids weren't as good in those days as they are now, and this tended to affect his relations with the Icelandic government.

*Q: Did you get involved in the Keflavik negotiations?*

OLMSTED: No. Ambassador Lawson--Minister Lawson--kept that entirely to himself. He didn't involve the staff in any way in that. He turned the running of the embassy over to the DCM, and devoted almost full time. However, I did some reporting that led up to it. I remember one ambitious report that I wrote which was detailing the attitudes of the various political parties towards a new agreement, and I talked to a number of important people, and quoted from things they had said, and written, about the matter. I understand the report was very useful in Washington.

*Q: They had a fairly strong Communist Party, didn't they?*

OLMSTED: Yes.

*Q: There are Communist Parties, and Communist Parties. How would you characterize the Icelandic Communist Party at the time you were dealing with them?*

OLMSTED: I think I would say that it was a two-headed party, one group being very hard line, and one group being somewhat more moderate. I was able to talk to the people in the more moderate wing. I could go down and have tea with them once in a while, and find out what was on their minds. But for the other side, I don't think I ever even tried it.

*Q: Was the Soviet Union sort of pulling the strings there, did you feel?*

OLMSTED: Well, to a certain extent. I think probably the Icelanders--even the Communist Icelanders--were displaying some independence toward them. I wouldn't say that the party was completely in the hands of the Soviet Union. And I'm not sure the Soviet Union was so interested that it tried to dominate it completely. But certainly the Soviets made some real efforts in the cultural field. They sent some very impressive musicians, Khachaturian came and give a piano concert for us, and there were other musicians--I can't remember their names now--but there was quite an intensive effort on the part of the Soviets at the cultural level. I think it was more evident there than perhaps in other places.

*Q: I'm not sure about the names of the parties, but the equivalent to the socialist party...*

OLMSTED: Social Democrats.

*Q: How did they fit in on things?*

OLMSTED: We tried to keep them on our side, as you can imagine. There were some Social Democrats who were on the left side, and were flirting with the Communists; whereas others were middle- of-the-road, or even rather conservative Social Democrats. Some in the university I knew particularly who were certainly not extreme leftist at all.

*Q: Where were the Allies of the Americans coming in? Were there any groups that really felt it was important, or was everybody reluctant about this?*

OLMSTED: The Independence Party was more inclined to welcome the Americans than any other group. The others ranged from neutral to being somewhat opposed on the whole. There was also a Progressive Party there which was largely agricultural, and it did a certain amount of shilly-shallying back and forth, but it was not as interested in the air base question as some of the other parties.

*Q: To refresh my history, when did Iceland become independent?*

OLMSTED: Independence was proclaimed in 1944.

*Q: We sent our troops there, of course, really before we got into the war, didn't we?*

OLMSTED: Yes.

*Q: 1940 or '41. Did the Danes play any role in the politics? Were there still strong ties there?*

OLMSTED: There were both animosities and ties. There were people who felt the Danes should keep at arms length, and other people, who had been educated in Denmark and who had good friends among the Danes, who felt differently.

*Q: So there wasn't a Danish card where our embassy in Copenhagen could use its influence to get the Danes to use their influence?*

OLMSTED: I doubt that very much. I've never heard it discussed one way or the other, and I can't remember that we were in contact with our embassy in Copenhagen on any issue.

*Q: Did you get any contact with the American military that they were briefing people who were coming in and looking at the base. Of course, the base was already there, wasn't it? It was a major wartime...*

OLMSTED: Yes, and it had been a civilian air base following that.

*Q: Did you get involved with the American military at all?*

OLMSTED: Yes, I did somewhat. I was one of their principal contacts in the embassy because of the political work that I was doing. They would come and talk to me about various matters. I can remember one little incident. I was taking a trip around Iceland in a coastal vessel, and on the north coast I got off the boat and was wandering around town, and I saw a Soviet fishing boat at anchor there. I knew that there had been some concern about those fishing boats as to what they were doing, why they were coming in to shore, were they unloading munitions, and so on. I had a camera, a little 8-millimeter movie camera, and I took some pictures of it, and one of the officers of the Soviet vessel tried to walk me down. But I just let him go by and I took my pictures, and when I got back I told the ambassador about it, and he said, "Oh, the military people have been looking for that vessel." So he got on the phone and called up the commanding officer and told him that I had seen it up there a few days earlier and had taken some pictures of it. The military were exercised about that, and the ambassador thought it was a great intelligence coup that we had put over on the military people. There was a little bit of friction. It's inevitable.

*Q: Was the base agreement settled by the time you left?*

OLMSTED: Yes, it was.

*Q: How did this play, as it was developing? Was this causing rifts within the Icelandic community?*

OLMSTED: It was certainly not a cementing factor. There were Icelanders who were deeply concerned about the impact of this. Iceland, after all, was a country of, I think, 100,000 people then and it doesn't take a very large military contingent to make a real impact on the country.

*Q: Having been on both sides, including in the military, an enlisted man in the air force, part of this period I know what we did. How about fish? Did fishing rights cause a problem in those days?*

OLMSTED: That was largely a British problem. We weren't very much involved in it. We watched from a distance. The British had what they called the Fisheries Flotilla, which was I guess an arm of the navy. They sent frequent vessels up to Iceland to protect their fishing vessels in case the Icelanders tried to take action against them. Of course, the Icelanders didn't have a navy, or an army as far as that goes. I don't think the Icelanders ever took action but the British wanted to protect what they saw as their rights. They came into Reykjavik regularly, gave very nice cocktail parties which they invited all the Americans to, and we enjoyed very much.

**SIDNEY SOBER**  
**Economic Officer**  
**Reykjavik (1950-1952)**

*Sidney Sober was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on February 21, 1990. His Foreign Service career has included assignments in Madagascar, Czechoslovakia, Iceland, Turkey, Bombay and Pakistan. He also served in Washington, DC in INR (Intelligence Research), the Bureau of Near East and South Asian Affairs. Mr. Sober was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1990.*

*Q: Then after two rather isolated posts, you got another. You went to Iceland, Reykjavik, where you were from 1950 to 1952. Was the direct transfer a result from this clamp down in Czechoslovakia?*

SOBER: It was a direct transfer, punctuated by home leave. But it was a transfer that had been unexpected in as much as we stayed in Czechoslovakia only for about a year, for the reasons we mentioned.

I drove our car from Prague to Paris while my wife stayed behind with our two very young children. The Briggs' put them up for a week before they joined me in Paris. It was in Paris that we got the word that we were transferred to Iceland, which was somewhat of a shock. I had been persuaded by our association with Ellis Briggs, that Latin America would be a good place to be because that's where he'd spent much of his career. And I think when we were evacuated from Czechoslovakia and we were asked where we'd like to go, as I recall it although it might not be in the correct order, for where I'd like to go I put Buenos Aires, Montevideo and Santiago de Chile. So when we were told we were going to Iceland, it was a bit of an abrupt shock.

But we went. And that too, yes, was isolated in a way but quite different. After all, it was part of NATO, and was western Europe, although geographically isolated. To me it was a very interesting professional challenge. I was sent there as an economic officer, but for the two years that I was there, a good part of the second year, I was doing political work. I was still quite a junior officer, and lo and behold, for a couple of periods but at least for a month at one time, I was elevated to be Chargé d'affaires. It was then a legation; it had not yet been raised to an embassy. For a young officer, that was interesting. For example, I was Chargé at a time when our air base at Keflavik was reactivated in 1952.

*Q: This had been a base during World War II, a very important base as far as the ferrying of aircraft to England and also anti-submarine patrols. But it had fallen into what?*

SOBER: It had been a civilian airport but we negotiated a bilateral agreement with the Icelandic government which was a member of NATO although it did not have, and still does not have, any military force of its own. It was exhilarating, if you will, for a young and inexperienced foreign service officer to go in the legation's car, with the American flag flying, down to Keflavik to greet the Air Force General who was coming in to open the base.

It was very interesting to be there. Then, and to some extent now, it had an interesting political situation in that about 20% of the popular vote in the national elections went communist. Within the NATO context, that was a pretty interesting situation.

*Q: What was the political situation in Iceland at the time?*

SOBER: Basically, you had conservatives who had been in charge almost all of the time. But you had some social democrats, some agricultural elements and the communist elements all vying for power. A very literate society. Illiteracy was totally unknown. We used to be told at the time, I think perhaps it was true, that Iceland had the highest book purchasing per capita in the world. It was extremely clean. My wife never had to worry about any dirt around our two infants. The water was very clean. Everything was spotless. It was a little tough to get used to the very short days in the winter and a little difficult to get around, outside Iceland, of course. But from a professional point of view, the types of things I had to do and the political situation were of interest. And after the base was reopened, the concerns that the Icelanders had, not to have their social system, their culture, diluted in any way by having too much outside exposure, was pretty obvious to us in the embassy. The Icelanders were very concerned about the number of GIs who would be allowed to come to Reykjavik, about twenty miles away, how many GIs should be allowed to come into Reykjavik at any one time. We had to have negotiations with them to make sure not too many would come at any one time.

*Q: Was this a problem with the Air Force?*

SOBER: No, they understood very well. Certainly it was not a problem with any of the leaders that I experienced. I think they understood that they had an interest in being there and surely they had an interest in seeing that their men had a chance at some decent liberty time. But they were quite sensitive to the concerns of Icelanders. I think there were incidents, once or twice, but never were they blown up into anything serious.

*Q: How about dealing with Icelandic government? Were they difficult to deal with.*

SOBER: No, they were very open. The base question was the major political issue we had to deal with them on. They were careful in protecting their rights. But they were not difficult to deal with. In terms of economic information, there weren't many secrets that they would be concerned about. Their major concern was fish and their major problem during the time we were there was the so called cod war, with the British, in particular with the British trawlers coming too close to their land. They were worried about over fishing and there was a little political dust-up but this didn't affect the United States very much because we didn't have any fishing boats up along those waters.

*Q: How would you characterize the communist party as you saw it in Iceland?*

SOBER: Literate, not extremist, or fanatic. Certainly did not go in for violence. They tried to play a rather sophisticated advanced type of political game. They had a paper which was read pretty widely. I remember having conversations with some of the communist leaders from time to time. You could have a rational conversation with them, not in terms of getting them to change their minds, but in terms of their sometimes legitimate concerns and grievances over some of the problems there. But they played within the rules as far as I could see.

*Q: So, even though this was at the height of the McCarthy Period, this wasn't a disruptive element.*

SOBER: McCarthy peaked a little bit after we were there. We left in August of 1952. Well, there was a concern. It was a country in NATO, and obviously, should the communists have come to power it would have been a serious problem. They never did come to power while we were there. They did form an alliance later on but they never had power. It was a legitimate concern but it didn't cause any frantic worries.

**VLADIMIR I. TOUMANOFF**  
**Administrative Officer**  
**Reykjavik (1954-1956)**

*Vladimir Toumanoff was born in Constantinople in 1923 to Russian parents. He attended Harvard University and joined the Foreign Service in 1950. He served in several posts including Germany, Iceland, Moscow, and Canada. He was interviewed by William D. Morgan in 1999.*

TOUMANOFF: Iceland, within easy reach of the major convoy routes across the North Atlantic to Britain and Russia, became a major factor in the struggle against German submarine, aircraft and surface raiders in the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. Under gradually receding Danish rule, the Icelanders took advantage of the German occupation of Denmark in 1940 to move toward full independence. Promptly that year Britain sent its forces into Iceland, which had



no defence of its own (and still doesn't) to prevent a German occupation; and by agreement with Britain the United States substituted its troops for the British in 1941, to establish a deterrent U.S. military presence. By the time Iceland declared full independence in 1944, U.S. base facilities and accessory installations had made Iceland a bastion of Allied military control over the North Atlantic. It was still growing and improving when I arrived in 1954, only by that time, as a NATO member, Iceland was a factor in the Cold War with the USSR.

The main base, on the barren Keflavik peninsula, some 35 miles southwest of the capital, Reykjavik, inevitably had great political, economic, social and cultural impact on the Icelanders. That impact had been, was in 1954, and probably continues to be the main concern of the American diplomatic mission, (a Legation in 1954, to become an Embassy a year later).

Picture an isolated island in the middle of the North Atlantic, touching the Arctic Circle, with a population of less than 100,000 in 1900, fishing and farming in tiny coastal settlements, with 80% of their country arctic, volcanic and uninhabitable, speaking a language unknown elsewhere, a minor colony for centuries of a distant, Danish, imperial power. An almost crofter, poor, patriarchal society. Iceland had barely entered the modern age when it was suddenly inundated by mid-20th century American culture, itself under the frantic pressures of wartime. Iceland had been so isolated for so long that its population was, as Hitler noted in Main Kampf, and contemporary genetic research has recognized, the most predominantly Nordic strain in existence. That nation of strong, healthy, handsome and hospitable people was so uniformly blond and blue-eyed that one could recognize villains on stage by their dark hair, the aberrants. By contrast the thousands of Americans on the Base looked like the New York subways and, under the press of the Battle of the North Atlantic, had no time to explain, accommodate or learn. Powerful and rich beyond imagining, utterly ignorant of their surroundings, they had a savage struggle in appalling conditions on their hands in which every minute counted. Everything but warfare was expendable.

After the war, I think in 1951, the American presence was regularized by formal agreement with the Icelandic government, by then fully independent of Denmark. In 1954, when I arrived, the Base generated as many problems for the Icelanders as it did benefits. As I'm sure it had since 1941, and probably still does.

Economically, the Base poured out money, absorbed labor, materials and services, and leaked volumes of all sorts of goods, including alcoholic, at an alarming rate in a very high tariff, impoverished and frugal nation. Prices had risen by a factor of eight since the war, and a black market flourished. Politically, one of the most important prizes of electoral victory was favored access to its manifold benefits. Consequently losers kept the existence of the Base and its ill effects a leading political issue, not just in elections but all the time. The Communist Party was, if course, the most vigilant, strident, and probably effective in its criticism, but was not alone in its appeals to nationalism and condemnation of alleged mismanagement of Base affairs by whatever Party was in power.

Socially, Americans, especially contract civilian workers, were, as the British once said, overpaid, oversexed, and over there, to such a degree that both military and civilian personnel were allowed off Base only by severely limited individual permission. Attempts to limit the

range of Base radio (and later TV) broadcasts to the Base area were ineffectual. Base entertainment had to be provided and Icelanders, especially the young, inevitably flocked in for movies, dances and parties. Efforts to discourage marriage to Americans stopped no one.

Culturally, the Base fractured the society. The young swallowed America's exciting youth culture, manners, music, style, slang, behavior and general irreverence as though famished, while bewildered parents resisted and resented. Something of the same division held among adults. The result was a generation gap on the scale of the Grand Canyon and a contentious dissonance in the society as a whole, beyond anything we experienced in post-war America.

The Embassy's task was to mediate between these two very disparate cultures, with almost diametrically opposite local purposes: the huge and hyper-dynamic United States for whom Iceland was in essence just a miniature ball bearing in the works of a global hot and cold war; and tiny Iceland emerging from a centuries-old time warp, striving frantically to contain and survive an unstoppable imported revolution in all aspects of its existence. The Embassy was advocate, mediator, trail guide, medic, grease monkey and safety valve for both sides.

For example: As I said, Iceland had joined NATO, and in 1951 signed a treaty with the United States for its forces to be stationed in Iceland. In 1955 the Icelandic Parliament passed an Opposition-sponsored Resolution calling for revision of the 1951 treaty. Failing that, the Resolution stated, Iceland would cancel the Treaty as was its right by its terms, and the U.S. Forces would have to leave. (Coincidentally, the USSR, on a Peace and Friendship campaign, was preaching that there was no longer any need for NATO, and was offering to buy all of Iceland's fish exports.) The American press sensationalized the event with headlines such as "Legislature of Iceland Wants U.S. to Withdraw Its Forces," "Eisenhower Worried By Reykjavik Action," and the Alsops devoted their column to a prediction that at stake were Danish and Norwegian withdrawal from NATO, and the loss of U.S. foreign bases in Morocco and Saudi Arabia, while the loss of Keflavik alone would tip the whole world balance of power decisively in favor of the communist bloc.

I doubt that the Icelanders were already so adept at manipulating American public opinion in preparation for negotiations. More likely they were surprised, and pleased, at the stir they had created. Iceland rarely appeared in the U.S. press and this coverage might serve well in what would likely be unequal negotiations. The Resolution's call for renegotiation did reflect a majority of Icelandic public opinion. The time had come for some changes in the Treaty and in habitual practices. The Base was in the midst of a major construction program and American contractors with imported U.S. labor were unduly favored over Icelandic. That was a major complaint in the Resolution, and a welcome one to Icelandic ears. In due course the Treaty terms were renegotiated at the Embassy in favor of Iceland, and some social sore points were adjusted. The U.S. forces remained and the Icelanders felt safe to sign a very large and favorable fish-for-petroleum agreement with the USSR, one provision of which was that Iceland would purchase no oil from other countries.

But I was not involved. The task of the Administrative Officer was the care and feeding of the Embassy, keeping that apparatus running smoothly so the substantive work could go on without distractions. And to do so within the strictures of some Icelandic, but vast amounts of U.S. rules

and regulations, standardized for every kind of Embassy in every kind of nation and circumstance, all of them designed to ensure documented accountability. It was no mean trick, especially when superiors don't know and don't wish to know, much about rules. It quickly became apparent that the less I explained them the better, seniors didn't have much patience for it.

*G. Shall we switch? How did that go?*

TOUMANOFF: Okay. Besides, all the substantive exchanges must be in the archives and declassified by now, and in press morgues.

Reykjavik was my first foreign assignment, and was a fascinating place. First of all, the arrival was a bit daunting. I left my family in Washington until I could find housing, and flew in on Pan American to the big American military base and airfield out on the Keflavik peninsula. It was late December of '53, or early in January, and we circled and circled and circled. At mid-afternoon it was pitch dark, of course, because there is very little daylight in Iceland at that time of year. The airplane, a large transatlantic four-motor, propeller-driven plane kept circling and circling in a very rough air. I finally asked a stewardess what was happening. She said there was a howling snow storm, visibility was zero, the runways were coated with ice, and we were circling hoping for a break in the weather to be able to land. I asked no more questions. We circled for half an hour or more. It felt like forever. Finally, there was a desperate effort with engines roaring. The plane landed on the icy runways and eventually came to a stop on reversed propellers only, as braking was too dangerous. But there was no taxiing and we sat on the end of the runway with all four engines going at a fair clip to keep the plane stationary and pointed into the wind. On the ground the plane still bucked. Eventually the stairway was lowered and we slowly came down the steps, holding hard onto both railings. As each one of us reached the ground, we were knocked flat by the wind. So we crawled on hands and knees across the ice to a military bus, which took us in blinding snow to the airport terminal, by dead reckoning I guessed.

That was the arrival. I decided not to ask if we had enough fuel to have just kept on going across the North Atlantic to some place where the weather might have been better - like Ireland, or back to Thule in Greenland.

Iceland was a very interesting place, Bill, for a variety of reasons.

*Q: What kind of training did you have to go to Iceland?*

TOUMANOFF: Nothing, really. It was on very short notice and I didn't have time for much except the Post Report and conversations with the Desk and INR Officers, and a quick scan of the administrative files. No, I take that back. The fact is that when the Department was searching for a non-sensitive position for me shortly after the McCarthy Hearing, I spent about a month at the Foreign Service Institute in an Administrative Officers' training course. Long enough to find there were a couple of fat loose leaf binders full of administrative laws, regulations and procedures, and to read most of them. The embassy had copies or I would have been lost. Substitute pages with changes arrived about every month, and woe betide the Administrative Officer who fell behind.

*Q: You also had some experience, in Departmental personnel work, for example.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes.

*Q: Not in GSO work necessarily.*

TOUMANOFF: Well, Administration of an embassy involves a good bit more than General Services. It is not for nothing that in large embassies the Admin Officer is apt to be an FSO-1. As a matter of fact, it was very fortunate, because in terms of its administrative condition the Embassy (actually a Legation, which became an Embassy shortly after I arrived) was in really pretty desperate condition. The previous Administrative Officer had departed some months earlier. We were in the middle of building an addition doubling its size, with Icelandic contractors who spoke no English. So I learned my Icelandic from blueprints. The Disbursing Officer had just arrived, newly promoted from a clerking position at his only previous post. The General Services Clerk had no training as he had been the embassy chauffeur, and still was whenever needed.

*Q: And not American.*

TOUMANOFF: Not American, a young Iclander. The Disbursement Officer (equivalent of a treasurer) was American, and he had a clerk assistant, also an American. The Embassy files had expanded to the point where they had run out of storage space, so they were simply stacked in boxes in the attic, which was not secured due to construction. The Code Clerk, also new to the post, had been a file clerk. And the Administrative Officer, myself, was on his first foreign assignment and had never seen an embassy. Most of the embassy food had to be purchased and brought from the military base over 35 miles of unpaved track, through ice, snow, mud and potholes, sometimes impassable. There was an unofficial Embassy commissary operating on the honor system from an unsecurable basement two houses away. Fortunately our diplomatic pouches, which had to be handled by cleared American personnel only, also came and went through the Keflavik Base, so the Embassy used off-duty Marines (all six of them) and added the food and all sorts of supply orders to their chores. On top of that, the Minister and his wife kept making changes in the design of the new construction, which filled an empty lot between the Chancery and Residence, and connected with both. Each change, of course had to be designed for security both during construction and permanently, then worked out with the Icelandic contractors, costed, and approved by the Department. It was nearly two years before the work was finished and we could move in.

It took a lot of cleaning up, that embassy did.

Early on in my tour, when we were not responding quickly enough to the flood of administrative mail from the Department, I received a polite but unmistakable prompt. So I sat down one Sunday and described the situation in a dispatch. The Department, which had, understandably, not paid much attention to Reykjavik and had no idea of its condition, panicked and cabled an offer to send a batch of emergency administrators to help. That's all I needed! So I cabled back, no thanks, we have good, talented people and we'll sort this place out ourselves. Just be patient.

It worked. We were never bothered again and were treated very gently, i.e. given prompt, generous attention, and a lot of slack. The Department must have had a guilty conscience.

*Q. One of our greatest problems we faced when I was assigned to the American delegation to NATO in Paris, was the taking control by the Communist Party of the Government of Iceland. How to keep NATO secrets, and which ones, from the Icelandic delegation.*

TOUMANOFF: Iceland had, as I recall, six political parties, of which one that played a prominent part was the Communists, but they were not in the Government in my time. The Conservative-Farmers Parties in coalition were in power when I arrived, and the Communists, I guess, did not participate in a coalition government (probably with the Socialists) until some years later. As I recall, their ideological convictions were flexible enough to accommodate the benefits of Base retention.

*Q: And it was only a part, it wasn't taking over the government, was it?*

TOUMANOFF: No, I believe the most they ever attained was minority membership, and carefully limited at that. But that was not in my time. While I was there their orders from Moscow dictated a vociferous opposition.

*Q: But it was out there. It was a big threat to what we were going to do.*

TOUMANOFF: Exactly, because as coalition members they would be part of the Government, and however limited, in a position of formal and informal access, and even influence, in many spheres of government activity.

*Q: Yes.*

TOUMANOFF: Iceland had an elected parliament, two houses, upper and lower. It was a full scale democracy with a President and a Prime Minister, a Supreme Court and lower courts - all of the usual institutions of democracies. At the same time, by 1954 the total population was only about 150,000, of whom 50,000 lived in the capital city of Reykjavik, and almost all the rest were scattered in isolated, small coastal fishing villages and farmsteads. Most Icelanders had only a first name and patronymic. Thus: Olaf Trygvysson whose son would be Thorgir Olafsson and whose daughter would be Helga Olafsdottir. There being lots of Helgas and Thorgirs and Trygvis, the telephone book listed professions or occupations to help identify individuals, and which you needed to know to tell which number to ring. The island was about 200 x 300 miles, and the interior was nearly all at elevation, from some 1500 to above 5,000 feet, arctic in winter and uninhabited. It was a full fledged western, democratic nation, but in miniature. The Foreign Ministry, as I recall, had seven Officers, and we had eight in the Embassy, from three Federal Departments.

*Q: Seven Officers in the home office.*

TOUMANOFF: In the Foreign Ministry.

*Q: And then they had a Diplomatic service - but very few people.*

TOUMANOFF: Right. Iceland was an ideal first post, so small it was comprehensible, almost a society in a test tube. So few people in the Government that access was easy. It had essentially a one-product export - fish. Its currency was blocked, limited to some Scandinavian arrangement. The Icelandic krone was not in circulation anywhere else in the world. Its language (close to old Norse) was unknown except in Scandinavia where, if understood at all, it was apt to be treated as something of an antique joke.

Let's see, what else? It had a very strange geography; that is, it was very fresh, very new, and it was entirely of volcanic creation. In June the sun barely set and people mowed lawns and gardened in daylight at all hours of the night. In December there was a little watery daylight from about 11:00 to 1:00 in the afternoon. Many of us got by on three or four hours of sleep in summer, and could barely wake up after eight or more hours of sleep in winter. The light came at such a shallow angle that all colors in nature were different from ours, augmented by volcanic origin, and air so clear distances shrank.

*Q: But warm, from the Gulf Stream environment.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, the island was surrounded by the Gulf Stream, which made the coastline quite habitable. On the coast it was a climate very much like New York, although changeable in minutes. But the moment you got inland, in some places the escarpment to the inland was right at the water's edge and in some places it was a very gradual gentle rise, but the inland averaged somewhere around 1,500 to 5,000 feet, and there it was quite Arctic with glaciers, some huge. About 80% of the island was uninhabitable. One effect of the Gulf Stream was to dump 40 or 50 feet of snow inland in the long winter. But you can read about the place in any number of books. It is stunningly beautiful and different. Run, do not walk, to see it.

*Q: Heavy snow.*

TOUMANOFF: Very heavy. As a consequence, it was probably the best possible first assignment, because if there was a dock strike, the effects of the strike would be immediately obvious, and a great deal else was on such an almost test-tube scale that it was accessible and comprehensible. Whereas if there were a dock strike in New York City you never could figure out what the consequences really were. Something of the same was true of political, social, and cultural developments.

*Q: Whereas most governments where one serves in the Foreign Service, you had to find out behind the scenes what is motivating or what is happening and what is truly happening, certainly with Soviet affairs.*

TOUMANOFF: The motivation and underlying causes weren't always that transparent, although there really was a principal motivation, which was: Who will receive the profit from the American base? It was a matter of millions of dollars, and in Iceland a million dollars was a gigantic sum. One way or another the Base was almost inevitably involved.

*Q: Was this Air Force-oriented mostly?*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, by the time I was there it was air oriented. There were several installations, radar, weather, a naval air station flying anti-submarine PBY's, and the huge Keflavik Base which served commercial as well as military air. The other main function during the war was sea transport, convoy assembly and protection. But the "Icelandic Defense Force" as the U.S. forces were called probably contained some of every service.

*Q: Were there any other NATO nations there in support of our support of Iceland?*

TOUMANOFF: Not military, I think, except for liaison. There were a few embassies - Russian, French, British, the Scandinavians, Germany - but nothing like what you'd find in any major capital city. There was certainly a prominent British Embassy, but the British troops had all gone back to England early in the War to participate in other warfare while we defended Iceland.

*Q: So we really were the defense, the NATO defense.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, after NATO was established and Iceland joined. But it was called the IDF, Icelandic Defense Force, a totally American operation after U.S. forces arrived in 1941. British naval forces, of course, until well after the U.S. entered the war, conducted convoy protection and anti-submarine operations, doubtless operating out of Iceland. Later in the war, I believe, the U.S. took responsibility for the North Atlantic traffic all the way across.

*Q: Because this was the point, we recall, that the Soviet threat began to be explicit.*

TOUMANOFF: Early in the War convoys to England and the USSR assembled in Icelandic fjords and harbors, and later it served as a staging area for convoys when ships had to travel in convoy all the way from the Atlantic Coast of North America. But initially, ships would arrive singly, unescorted, in Iceland, and the convoys would be made up there, so there was a huge naval support operation going on.

When I was there, the Cold War opponents were the Soviets and their bloc, and our main focus was to keep track of their naval, especially submarine operations. Iceland stood in the middle of their access to the Atlantic and beyond, until submarine passage under the North Pole opened.

*Q: Now were you involved, other than administrative work in the embassy, with any of that effort, or was that totally done by the military?*

TOUMANOFF: No, that was a totally military operation.

*Q: And good relations?*

TOUMANOFF: Basically, yes. But the Base had such a huge impact on all aspects of life in Iceland that, together with its benefits, it could not help but be a constant source of irritations and tensions, on both sides. Keflavik Base, was constantly being worked on and expanded, and so there was not only a large military population but also a large civilian labor force, brought from

all parts of America by U.S. contractors. We brought in equipment, construction methods, and technologies unknown in Iceland, and some of it classified. Icelandic contractors and labor learned quickly, but availability, urgency and language requirements made heavy use of American labor imperative. So there was this great big foreign operation going on in this tiny isolated and insulated country, nearly overwhelmed by our presence but eager to reap the manifold benefits. The overarching goal of the enterprise was common to the two countries. The ready means available to them were anything but. Small wonder there was friction and heat.

*Q: Did you have a good USIA? What kind of cultural support did you have there?*

TOUMANOFF: There was a small USIA unit. Two Officers and a secretary, working at a library across town.

*Q: They couldn't come to grips with this.*

TOUMANOFF: They were talented and skilled, but this was a force of vast, vast power, driven by a global imperative. This was a fantastic, ultra modern mid-twentieth century America descended upon, by comparison, an almost primitive, microscopic, alien culture. ('Nobody speaks Icelandic.') It and they were amazingly strong to survive. It is also a tribute to America's beneficence that they have.

*Q: It's such a difficult language. Maybe this is time to bring in the rest of the Embassy, because this is one of the main issues, I sense, of your time in Iceland-maybe still is. But who else was there? Who was the ambassador? What was the staff like that your American presence could focus on this?*

TOUMANOFF: Well. It was a Legation when I arrived, and our Minister was Edward Lawson. Due to the complications of building an addition which connected his Residence with the Chancellery, with provision for passage to and fro, and the frequent changes of design involved, I saw a good deal of him. He was a kind and gentle person, thoughtful and effective in his quiet way with Icelanders and Base Military Officers alike. He was a Career Officer with previous service, as I recall, in the Middle East. His wife was of delicate health and his concern for her was steady.

*Q: Was he there for the entire tour you were there?*

TOUMANOFF: No.

*Q: He was your first Chief*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, our first. And the staff was really very good. It was young and energetic, and there were few but enough of us so that there was no problem about communications, you know, one hand not knowing what the other hand was doing. We all knew each other very well, were close at work and after, had children of like ages and got along well. Morale tends to be high at small, hardship posts with heavy, interesting and important workload and lots of



individual responsibility. We had all that and a fascinating, novel and beautiful country around us.

*Q: And all new to the Foreign Service, for the most part.*

TOUMANOFF: Not really. Except for myself and the Consular Officer, who was new, I think the rest of the officers had all served in at least one previous post. They were the Economic Officer, two Political Officers, two at USIA, and the Disbursing Officer.

*Q: Your guidance from Washington? Your support beyond the post?*

TOUMANOFF: Well, except for the fact that the administrative side and the consular office were staffed by brand new people who had relatively little if any experience at doing what they're supposed to do, the other Officers had Foreign Service experience and knowledge. It wasn't that complicated a place to understand or to operate in. As I said earlier, once it woke up to our administrative condition, the Department gave me generous and attentive support.

*Q: Maybe Washington wasn't focusing on it very much.*

TOUMANOFF: Well, Washington was not focusing on it very much except for the military side, and its political and economic consequences.

*Q: Like that Resolution.*

TOUMANOFF: The actual fact is that the Icelanders really were not in a position to do very much about the base anyway. They understood perfectly well that this was a vital link in two gigantic global confrontations. The Resolution was calculated more to catch Washington's attention than a realistic threat. Neither country, for quite different reasons, could tolerate termination of the Base. The U.S. for reasons of NATO and the Cold War. Iceland had no alternative choice, certainly not the USSR, and the economic effects alone of Base closure would have devastated their country. They could, and did, force changes, minuscule for the U.S., vital for them.

*Q: And they weren't making trouble for us in the sense that there wasn't an aggravating issue out there other than their Communist element.*

TOUMANOFF: By and large, the only complication was that whichever of the Parties were not in the Government, sought to oust the governing Party in an election so that they could be on the favored receiving end of the benefits of the Base. So there was a good deal of criticism of the way any Government in Iceland was running, relating to, or managing this whole Base issue. The criticism was not limited to the Communists, who, on Moscow's orders, tried to make life difficult for any Government, and for the U.S./NATO Base.

*Q: But the inter-generational ones, which you've just explained in depth, because it was an issue that was affecting relations in some ways. After all, it was our government, or rather, our people*

*who culturally were feeding out all of these disturbing issues wasn't anything else that really bugged you?*

TOUMANOFF: No, oddly enough, perhaps the most interesting and unimportant part of the cultural shock for me - I was dark-haired, dark eyebrows, and reasonably dark-featured - dark complexion - was that the uniformly blond and blue-eyed Icelanders were sometimes initially cautious with me as an anomaly, and that the blondness and the blue-eyedness from time to time became somehow uncomfortable for me. So I, and others at the embassy, would occasionally go out to the base, and there was this refreshing, extraordinary, wonderful conglomeration of people.

*Q: It was all colors.*

TOUMANOFF: All colors, all shapes, all sizes, all accents. It was like going home. It was, in fact, a bit of home.

*Q: And the PX.*

TOUMANOFF: Not so much in that sense. Thanks to the PX, duty free imports and a very strong dollar we were not materially deprived. But a trip every now and then out to the base was a refreshing change.

*Q: Re-Americanization.*

TOUMANOFF: Re-Americanization, exactly.

What else about Iceland? Yes, you asked me about being Vice Consul.

Sometime early in 1955, Minister Lawson left, and Ambassador John Muccio arrived. He was quite different.

*Q: Oh, yes!*

TOUMANOFF: We couldn't quite make out why he came to Iceland, because he had most recently been Ambassador to Korea, in that war, and Iceland seemed to us some considerable demotion, especially as it was still a Legation when he arrived. Rumors began to fly that he had run into some trouble with General MacArthur. Perhaps so, but we never knew. In any case the Legation was promptly raised to Embassy status, and the Ambassador took hold. He had the habit of command and we all knew promptly that any laxity could be painful. He expected active brains and applied skills, appreciated them when present, and his displeasure at less was clear and blunt. He suffered frequently from attacks of gout in one leg and we learned not to trouble him overmuch on those days. Not long after he arrived he instructed the Vice Consul and me to swap jobs. We didn't ask for an explanation and never received one. I think Muccio simply wanted to train us more widely for our own good and the Service's. So Greg Novakowski became Administrative Officer, and I became the Vice Consul.

*Q: By act of the ambassador.*

TOUMANOFF: By act of ambassador. Well, I knew next to nothing about consular work, and Greg knew literally nothing whatever about administration, so he and I both had a hard time at first, but we helped each other, and we had the regulations, and we could read.

*Q: I was going to say, in both sections you did have a degree of strength of local employees that helped.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, an Icelandic consular clerk and myself - that was it. That was the Consular Section. But he, fortunately, had been in that position for a considerable number of years, so he guided me pretty carefully at first. And Greg had, by then, a fairly experienced administrative Icelandic staff, as well as the financial section and code/files clerk, who were all American. So it worked out all right.

One aspect of having this extraordinary military Base full of Americans was that by some informal arrangement no Icelander could marry an American, temporarily in Iceland to work at the Base, without the approval of the Embassy. That task fell to the Vice Consul. Now many Icelanders, especially the young, most of whom due to the war had never been off the island, thought of the United States as paved with gold. They had all sorts of illusions about that extraordinarily attractive, marvelous, almost magic place - compared to the croft with sheep, or the fishing village that they were used to. The American workers were mainly single men as there was little if any housing for families. Icelanders are not only a handsome nation known for striking blondes, but attitudes were more Scandinavian than puritan. It was a potent mix.

*Q: And to emigrate.*

TOUMANOFF: Emigration to the U.S. was one factor. In any case the couple had to come and be interviewed by *me* to get permission, formal permission from me, to get married.

*Q: This is an Icelandic law, it must have been.*

TOUMANOFF: I doubt it was a law. More likely a tacit arrangement reflecting the preference of both the Base and Icelandic authorities.

*Q: To protect their own-*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, to protect the country from loss of their young population, and to avoid the anguish of broken marriages which were a too common result. For the Base, marriages involved scarce housing, labor turnover, and other complications including security.

Moreover, such marriages resulted not infrequently in tragedy when a young Icelandic bride with little English found herself with an older, heavy equipment operator, living with his family in the back woods of America where to her dismay the streets were not paved with gold. Such young women, if they returned to Iceland, especially if with a child, also faced a very hard time.

In practice, all that was involved was that there would be a quick, discreet name check by the Icelandic authorities to see if there were any kind of obstacle.

Q: *And no red lights.*

TOUMANOFF: No. Actually Iceland had almost no criminality, and offenses were more likely drunkenness or minor pilferage. The police force was almost nonexistent, and those few individuals who were jailed were allowed out on weekends. I'm not even sure what the name check involved, quite truthfully, it was handled by the Political Section and I never had a rejection.

Q: *They're all -ssons and -dottirs!*

TOUMANOFF: Right. The task fell on me. I would try to get the Icелander and the American to talk about the United States, what the one expected and how the other lived. It might be the last chance before marriage for a grand romantic illusion about the United States, if there were one, to emerge.

Q: *But they liked blondes.*

TOUMANOFF: Who doesn't? But to get the American to explain something about the United States, and his life there in case it had never come up between them, really to try to make sure there was some shared knowledge of it. But that's all I could ever do, and as a consequence it became something of a *pro forma* visit. Especially as I had to avoid like the plague any appearance of trying to discourage the marriage. It was, at the same time, awkward for all three parties concerned. Their basic interest in this kind of interview was to get in there and get out as fast as they could and get this thing out of the way. It was a ridiculous, really, truly ridiculous business. I'm sure it daunted no one from marriage.

Q: *My counterpart, in the late '50s, in Birmingham, England, was my association, as Consul, with the Transatlantic Brides Association, which had the same object: the British mother and father didn't trust what they saw happening, the Americans stealing away their young bride. Love at first sight, perhaps, but this exact same cultural conflict. Another part that probably was with you, too, were some unhappy parents that were watching this child going off to America. They were against the marriage.*

TOUMANOFF: I think that's true, Bill, parents in opposition. But I never had a parent come in and say, "You're going to interview my daughter and her boyfriend, for goodness sake talk them out of it if you can." Or worse, "prohibit it." That would have called for a soft landing. I think it continues to be true in a great many parts of the world, Bill, that the United States is still an extraordinarily attractive place, so there's pressure to emigrate to it or to get to it one way or another. And one way is to marry an American.

Q: *The easiest and fastest. But you didn't sense that was actually happening.*

TOUMANOFF: Well, actually it was happening in Iceland, and that's where part of the pressure came from. It wasn't just that the Icelanders were so handsome, and so friendly. It's the magnetic pull of the United States.

Q: *We can't stop being a magnet.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, exactly. And a good many of these marriages break up.

Q: *Yes, oh, yes, because of the difference of cultural realities.*

TOUMANOFF: I remember what one hoped for was that there would not be children involved, that the disillusionment or the conflict would arise before children were the product of the marriage.

Q: *Now it sounds to me as if you are about to leave Iceland, I think, in 1966. Would you like to venture into the next part of your career, including your entry into the Foreign Service as an Officer? I say, "as an Officer" - you were a Staff Officer. I meant a Career FSO. I am correct, am I not, that in Iceland you were a Foreign Service Staff Officer?*

TOUMANOFF: Most of the time there. I was trying to recall when I became a Career Foreign Service Officer. The Wriston program was going strong, and my recollection is that someplace around the middle of my tour in Iceland I came back to Washington for my oral examination. I had applied.

Q: *You had to come back, rather than a team coming out.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, and it may be that I just took advantage of Home Leave.

Q: *But you were examined by the Board. I think we had better stop, and tell us about the Wriston Program.*

TOUMANOFF: Bill, do you remember enough about it to fill us in? As I recall, a law was passed.

Q: *I was "Wristonized," so therefore I do remember some details. It was set up by the Secretary, I presume, or maybe even by Congress, under Wriston, who was president of a university, as I remember. He was told to examine this growing, changing Foreign Service. You were describing earlier in your interview, the personnel and programmatic needs which resulted in an ever-growing Foreign Service as well as the continued demands for better integration since 1924, of the two systems: staff and officer corps (in both consular and diplomatic services) along with the Civil Service employees in the State Department.*

TOUMANOFF: Not only that, though, but the personnel system was completely out of balance. My recollection is that when I was recruiting for the Foreign Service, even then, earlier, there were something on the order of 2,000 Career Foreign Service Officers and 5,000 Staff and Reserve officers.

*Q: Yes, because Staff was the way to fill the need in a hurry.*

TOUMANOFF: And so there was that pressure also, somehow to amalgamate all of this.

*Q: Would you describe it in terms of what happened to you and how it happened?*

TOUMANOFF: As soon as I had my citizenship for the requisite 10 years I applied under this Wriston Program which moved Staff Officers into the regular Career Foreign Service Officer corps. The process involved writing an application explaining why you wanted to apply for Career status, and if the application was accepted, to be examined by the equivalent of the Career Examination Board. My application was accepted and I took advantage of Home Leave from Iceland to come to Washington to the Department for the oral examination. The examination was an interesting one because no one on the panel knew much about Iceland, and in fairly short order they were asking me about it. I took advantage of the fact that the country was really so transparent, compared to most, and so fascinating in every way, from its geology to its economics, its politics and its culture, that we wound up talking about Iceland for most of the time. I was lucky, or perhaps they were impressed by how much I knew about the place, despite the fact that at that point I was still listed as Administrative Officer with my nose pointed inside the Embassy rather than out into Iceland and the problems of the Base. At any rate, they passed me, so I became a Foreign Service Officer. That was 1955.

As I think back about it, perhaps the McCarthy episode had something to do with it. The Board had my file and it would have reflected my full testimony and the manner in which McCarthy had made his splash. Perhaps that, and the fact that I had withstood the McLeod aftermath and refused to resign, may have stood me in good stead. Or maybe the recommendation for a Meritorious Service Award surfaced. Who knows.

*Q. But you went on after Iceland into Soviet work. How did that happen?*

TOUMANOFF: Just before we go to that, there was a traumatic moment connected to that FSO application. I had just been transferred to be Vice Consul before Home Leave. The first visas, the very first visas that I signed and issued, was to an Icelandic parliamentary delegation coming to the United States under U.S. Information Agency sponsorship. By coincidence I left Iceland for that Home Leave on the same Pan American flight as the Parliamentarians. Pan Am was flying sleeper aircraft, and the parliamentarians and I all wound up with bunks, upper and lower berths.

There I was in my berth preparing to get undressed for the night and all those parliamentarians were still up, talking with great interest and excitement about their arrival in New York and their visit because none of them had been in the United States before. I suddenly realized with a terrible start that when I had issued their visas I had not checked to see if they all had their international inoculation certificates or had been inoculated. I started having visions of arriving in New York City surrounded by the parliamentarians when they would be stopped by the U. S. Public Health Service, packed back on the plane and shipped back to Iceland. And I knew that my career at that point would likely come to a sudden end.

*Q: And you're on your way to reinforce your career at that point.*

TOUMANOFF: Right. Needless to say, I got no sleep, I didn't even bother to undress. Instead I arranged with the stewardess to be the first one off the aircraft, thinking to appeal, probably in vain, to every U.S. authority in sight. It was a very bad night. The wheels had barely stopped when I jumped off the plane, dashed to the Immigration Offices and breathlessly explained the terrible situation. They looked at me benignly and explained that Iceland was the only country in the world from which we did not require immunization certificates. I blessed my Consular Clerk, Harold Wright, and fled.

*Q. Thank God for local employees. They have saved most of us at some time in our careers. But now you are still far away from Soviet affairs. What happened?*

TOUMANOFF: Well, as I may have mentioned at the very beginning of our discussions, the reason that I joined the Foreign Service in the first place was that I was interested in working in some fashion in the field of U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, using my knowledge of the language and my background knowledge of that country. And here I was in Iceland being an Administrative and Consular Officer. Pretty far from U.S.-Soviet relations. Happily, the Department was operating a Soviet Area Training Program, involving a year at a university, which was a kind of ticket to Soviet area assignment, and at the same time a sine qua non. Applications were open for the 1956-57 academic year when I got back to Iceland, and I applied.

The history of my application was not without its hurdles. For those abroad, the Chief of Mission was required to add his appraisal of the applicant, and to endorse the application.. Ambassador Muccio, when I told him that this was my professional career goal, and why, he explained to me that it was the Department's practice to avoid appointing ambassadors of foreign ancestry to their earlier native lands for reasons of possible bias or involvement of remaining relatives. He then said "Well, Vlad, I come of Italian ancestry, and I can never be ambassador to Italy, so you'd better forget the whole thing." So there I was, stuck. I thought it better not to explain that I had no ambition to be ambassador to the USSR, or Deputy Chief of Mission, or any inappropriate rank. On the other hand, he had not said "Do not apply"; he had simply said what he thought was the Department's practice, and had dismissed my plans. I could understand the practice if there were relatives, or other close ties, or the opposite, resentment or residual hostility, which could risk bias, improper influence or divided loyalties. But I had no relatives behind the Iron Curtain, knew no one there, had lived in America since I was five months old, and my opinion of the country was about that of any interested American in the Cold War. With the advent of nuclear weapons it was the dangerous state of U.S.-Soviet relations that concerned me. Besides, several American children of Russian emigrés had already served in Moscow. I decided to pursue my application and let the Department decide.

As luck would have it, Ambassador Muccio left Iceland on vacation shortly later, and I explained the situation to the Deputy Chief of Mission, who was Chargé in the Ambassador's absence. He took a more sympathetic view, agreed with me that this was a matter for the Department to decide, endorsed my application and sent it in.

*Q: And who knew the system.*

TOUMANOFF: Yes, he knew the system and realized the risk he was taking in not following the Ambassador's course in this case. But I think it was, for him, a matter of judgement he was prepared to defend. I doubt that Ambassador Muccio ever gave it a second thought, for him it was such a small matter. Perhaps he never knew, or had already forgotten his previous action. In due course my application was accepted and, at the end of my Iceland tour, I went home to an academic year of Soviet studies at Harvard, my alma mater.

Bill, I think that ends my tale of Iceland.

**HARVEY F. NELSON JR.**  
**Country Director for Sweden, Finland and Iceland**  
**Washington, DC (1959-1961)**

*Ambassador Nelson was born and raised in California. He was educated at Occidental College, The University of Stockholm, Sweden and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. After serving in the US Navy and teaching at Bowdoin College, Ambassador Nelson joined the Foreign Service and served in Washington and abroad, primarily as a political officer dealing in Scandinavian and African affairs. In 1985 he was appointed Ambassador to Swaziland. Ambassador Nelson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2000.*

*Q: And you did that from '59-'61. It's sort of an odd combination in a way. You've got a NATO, a neutral and kind of a Soviet thing.*

NELSON: Right.

*Q: What happened to Norway and to Denmark in this?*

NELSON: They had an office of their own. They were members of \_\_\_\_\_.

*Q: Except for, of course, Iceland being the odd man out.*

NELSON: That's right. But that is strange and it just struck me at the time and I'm not quite sure why that was but that was the way it had fallen out. You know when these things get established and so people forget what were the reasons for establishing it that way. They don't know that and they just carry on as they did before.

*Q: Let's talk about Iceland first. Was Iceland still a concern?*

NELSON: Finland was less of a concern.

*Q: We learned to live with it or something?*



NELSON: Oh yeah, sure.

*Q: And the Icelanders learned to live with us?*

NELSON: I think that was probably the bigger thing because we had that big Keflavik base. I don't know if we still have it?

*Q: I think we do but...*

NELSON: They established, I think during that period, very restrictive rules about movement of our people. We were pretty well confined to Keflavik so life became a little bit more difficult for people at that time and we were unhappy about that but I think understanding at the same time.

*Q: Well Icelanders just didn't want the impact of so many Americans to really upset their culture and they are absolutely right, sure. You didn't get involved in the cod wars or anything? Was that going on or did that...*

NELSON: No that was later. We didn't get into that.

**HALVOR C. EKERN**  
**Political Officer**  
**Reykjavik (1959-1961)**

*Halvor C. Ekern was born in Montana in 1917. He served in the U.S. Army from 1941-1947. Mr. Ekern entered the Foreign Service in 1947. His career included positions in Austria, Iceland, Sierra Leone, Germany, and Washington, DC. Mr. Ekern was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1992.*

*Q: Then you finally got overseas.*

EKERN: Yes, I went from there to Iceland, Reykjavik. This was not exactly a high exposure job. I was political officer for the Embassy. Our main purpose there was to keep the base at Keflavik...to keep the Icelanders from kicking us out as the Communist Party, which was strong there, wanted to do. There were demonstrations and they tried to get it on the ballot.

*Q: At that time the major Soviet fleet was stationed up out of Murmansk and Archangel. Iceland sort of acted like a cork or at least a channel so Keflavik as a base was not just a base, it was extremely important and remained so until the demise of the Soviet empire.*

EKERN: Yes, I guess they had underwater listening devices, etc. It was important. I had three Ambassadors there. John Muccio. Did you know him in Korea?

*Q: No, but he was there at a very difficult time when the North invaded the South.*

EKERN: He was a funny man. I remember him saying after a telegram came in from the Department, "Well, we got the base, we got the political people with us, what more do they want?"

Then Tyler Thompson was there for quite a while. And then Jim Penfield who was the Deputy Commissioner Austria with me.

*Q: Did you get the feeling that Iceland for Ambassadors was sort of a resting spot?*

EKERN: We had good Ambassadors there, they certainly were not sending out duds. The work certainly was very routine. The economic officer reported on the trials and tribulations of their economy, which were many.

*Q: Mainly fishing?*

EKERN: Yes, and sheep. The Icelanders were good people. They were rather sensitive about their nationality and culture, there were only 210,000 of them, which was being overwhelmed by TV, etc.

*Q: Did you find that coming from good Scandinavian stock helped?*

EKERN: I didn't speak Icelandic, there was a lot of English spoken. Their language was what was spoken in Norway 1,000 years ago and kept pure by virtue of their isolation. But the Norwegian language evolved so much they couldn't even read each other's newspapers.

*Q: With this strong Communist Party in Iceland at this time how did we deal with it? It was a time when we just had to have that base. How did we mollify and deal with it?*

EKERN: Persistent diplomacy I would call it. There were three parties there. The Conservatives were with us, the Communists against us, and the Farmer and Labor were in the middle. We had to stroke the latter a lot. Iceland actually voted to leave NATO at one point so we had to work to get them to nullify or ignore the vote. It was a day to day job of presenting our point of view to the leaders.

*Q: Was it a matter of personal persuasion...explaining what the situation was...or was it a matter of as many politicians do of getting things for their constituency in the form of favorable trade, etc.?*

EKERN: Both I would say because in a little place like that you knew almost everybody in the parliament. So it was a good amount of persuasion and helping them to present the case to their constituents. We had an AID program there but it didn't amount to much. The main thing was getting Icelandic fish on the American market. We helped them. They did set up a factory over here, etc. It was sort of touch and go but we did our best.

We had a small amount of clandestine activity, but it didn't amount to much.

**DOROTHY M. SAMPAS**  
**Spouse of the Political Officer**  
**Keflavik (1966-1969)**

*Dorothy M. Sampas was born in Washington D.C. in 1933. As a foreign service spouse she lived in Ottawa, Paris, Iceland, and Washington D.C. After re-entering the Foreign Service she had positions in Brussels, China, New York, and an ambassadorship to Mauritania. Ambassador Sampas was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in October 1998.*

*Q: Iceland. You were in Iceland from when to when?*

SAMPAS: '66 to '69.

*Q: What was your husband doing there?*

SAMPAS: He was the political officer there. It was a nice small embassy. You had an ambassador, a DCM, one political officer, one economic officer, one consular officer, one administrative officer, and two Foreign Service secretaries.

*Q: This is before the period when they were looking hard at utilizing qualified wives to handle things in our organization?*

SAMPAS: Yes, that came about after we came home from Iceland. My husband's next assignment was back here in the Department, and I think it was something like '71 to '73 that revolutionizing the Department's treatment of women came along. And I remember the Department of State newsletter had an article in it one time about the Department was going to seek to keep some of the Foreign Service women who would otherwise resign, making it possible for them to have joint assignments with their husbands if that proved practical, and the last paragraph or two said something that I recall - not word for word, to be sure, but I recall - "And we'll even consider taking some of the old bags back." And I said, "They mean me! They really mean me."

Iceland was a very peaceful, pleasant country. They had some issues with the military base that we have there.

*Q: Keflavik.*

SAMPAS: Yes. But they are not a violent people, a very pleasant people; I had met someone in Paris who was the wife of a senior Icelandic Foreign Service officer, and they had been transferred back to Iceland at about the same time we were going, so I had one friend who could tell me how things were done. It was hard because of the language. Not everybody spoke English, although a great many people did. And you can learn to shop with no language at all. You could shop if you were deaf and dumb by pointing to whatever you wanted, but if you wanted to know

exactly how to get your child enrolled in the local nursery school, you needed some help. And my friend was very helpful there and went over with me and got my older boy enrolled, and that was that. I was able to take him around the corner to school every afternoon and pick him up about the time the northern lights came on - 5:00 or 6:00 pm. And he enjoyed it, and I enjoyed it, the peace and quiet. Obviously, it's not a country where you look for extensive libraries of French or English documents, diplomatic documents, but it is the time for thinking some things through where you really could reach a conclusion that said that the French were no more able to react to the Germans in 1936 than they were in 1940.

It's a very well-developed country for its size. They only have about a hundredth of the people we have here, but they have a university with seven faculties, which you can attend for free if you've got the grades. They have three highly qualified academic high schools that would turn out the equivalent of a baccalaureate in different parts of the country, so that you could get a very good education in the public school system. They had a symphony orchestra. They had children's musical school. They had a national theater. It was incredible what these people, with no resources but fish, had been able to achieve. They brought in theatrical groups from time to time. We saw *Fiddler on the Roof* there, in Icelandic, and they brought in visiting conductors for their biweekly symphony concerts. So there certainly was an abundance of things that one could do and find really quite interesting.

They have a problem with alcoholism, but I must say that didn't bother our particular relationships with our friends. No one ever made a fool of himself at our house, although they certainly could drink until way into the morning hours, but never showed a sign of it. And as it turned out, my very dear first friend was herself an alcoholic, but very disciplined, and I had never noticed it. But it didn't affect her then as it did later on when they were transferred overseas again. I suspect that that problem with alcoholism among the residents of the Nordic countries has something to do with depression and the lack of light in wintertime.

*Q: Yes, you find people much more susceptible to light and what it does to you than we used to think.*

SAMPAS: That's right, and if people had known years ago about these electric lights that can bring the full spectrum of daylight anytime of year and help people ward off depression, we might not see the quantity of alcoholics we have in these northern regions. Certainly as soon as the spring showed signs of coming, you would find Icelanders sitting outside all over the place, soaking up the sun's rays. So inherently, intuitively, they knew that that was what they needed, but doctors weren't yet giving medical prescriptions for a certain amount of time in front of intense light, and engineers hadn't yet perfected full-spectrum intense lights.

*Q: What about Vietnam during this period? One thinks of the Swedes as being so strongly anti-American over the Vietnam issue, which was raging at this time. How about the Icelanders?*

SAMPAS: You know, I don't think they much noticed. I'm sure some of them did. I don't mean to belittle them or their interest in foreign policy, but I'm not sure that anyone even brought it up while we were there. I don't feel they followed it very carefully. It just wasn't very much a part of their lives. But they saw themselves rather apart from the rest of Europeans. Other Europeans

would come up for part of the summer, but there was definitely a division there. The major east-west confrontational issue with the Icelanders was the Keflavik NATO air base and whether it should remain an open base staffed with U.S. military personnel.

*Q: Well, Iceland, of course, was terribly important to us because it's sort of the cork in the submarine bottle or something. The Soviets had to go through one side or the other of Iceland, and that's what we were doing there. So it was not just a base, it was on every count a very strategic point.*

SAMPAS: That's right.

*Q: Were we nervous about our situation there during the time you were there?*

SAMPAS: No, I don't think that... The U.S. military officers were concerned that we wouldn't have serious events such as recently have happened on Okinawa. They certainly didn't want any of those. And Iceland had one dry day a week where no alcohol was served. I think it was Wednesday, so that was the day that they let a number of the U.S. military people stationed in Keflavik off the base. The other days, the U.S. military were pretty much confined to the base, because it's just too easy to get drunk and have some sort of incident. The Icelanders did have a couple of marches about something, perhaps the base. Another issue that upset them that so many of our military people were marrying their pretty women. Icelandic women tend to be quite beautiful, and they didn't like it that their women would be enticed to marry our men and then go off to the USA to live. And not too many of those women got into social contacts when they came back to visit. I'm sure most of them came back once a year or once every second year to visit their family, but I was never in a context where they went around and visited all their other friends as well. Their disappointed suitors remained disappointed.

*Q: Was this the period of the "cod wars" with Great Britain?*

SAMPAS: That was just after we left.

*Q: Just after, you were fortunate to get out - of having to choose between allies. What about relations with the base people? Was there an effort on the part of our embassy to try to make the people on the base (one) feel loved and wanted and (two) to understand what they were doing, and all that?*

SAMPAS: Yes, there was one ambassador's wife (Mrs. Penfield) who had been a former USIA [United States Information Agency] officer, and worked with the base commander's wife on developing social contacts between embassy and military wives. The embassy women would drive out to the base on a monthly basis for an officers' wives' lunch, where we would sit at the table and talk about things. But that was not so much structured. They did have a speaker, but the speaker didn't say, "Here's what our major interests are." That would have been done separately because there were Icelandic women who came as well. The base and the embassy were far apart, over a very bleak road and sometimes - often - very bad weather. Once or twice a month, the military wives would come to the ambassador's residence and help produce items for a Christmas bazaar. Embassy high school children had to go to the base school - or to a boarding

school elsewhere. There was a school bus that eventually came in for the children, the embassy parents were concerned about putting their children on that school bus that would take this 40 mile trip to get over this windswept barren peninsula to Keflavik. I think more could have been done, particularly if the wives and their husbands had had small dinners and get-togethers. I think that would have been useful, but difficult because of the difficult road.

Q: *Who was the ambassador while you were there?*

SAMPAS: Well, we had three. The first one was Ambassador James K. Penfield, who had been there about five years when we got there and knew everyone of note in Iceland. He had been in Greenland during the Second World War, so he had a good background for it.

Q: *It's sort of unusual for ambassadors.*

SAMPAS: Absolutely. And he understood the Icelandic people and their willingness, like the Greenlanders, to go for an hour without saying much. And he by that time had met everybody. He didn't like his DCM at all.

Q: *Who was that?*

SAMPAS: David Henry. And I felt badly about it. It affected everyone in that small an embassy.

Q: *Oh, yes.*

SAMPAS: When he gave his two farewell parties, he worked it out so that all the officers were invited to one or another party except for the DCM.

Q: *Oh, God!*

SAMPAS: The very person who most needed to pick up on his contacts. And Iceland is not an easy place to get to know people. The names are complex. The wives' names aren't the husbands' names, and the children's names are something else again. Icelandic children didn't come to the American schools, so that was not a point of contact. It just took a while. You know, even when somebody is trying to nurture contact, people on both sides have to be willing, have to be reaching out to each other. You can lead the horses to the bucket, but maybe neither one will take a drink, and that's something that every ambassador has to think about.

Q: *Well, who was the second ambassador?*

SAMPAS: It was the former governor of Minnesota, Karl F. Rolvaag. He had been defeated, but remained close to Hubert Humphrey, President Johnson's Vice President. So when he came, he had enough clout to have the Department do some extensive work on the ambassador's residence - enlarging the dining room so that it could seat more than the 12 it had, and modernizing the kitchen. After the basic work was done, the Department's interior designers furnished it very nicely. Unfortunately, Mrs. Rolvaag became ill shortly after arriving in Iceland, and no one learned exactly what the physical problem was until much later. The Rolvaags were kind, but I

think it was a great jump from Minnesota politics - as boisterous as they were at times - and Reykjavik's. The fact that Governor Rolvaag's father had been Ole Rolvaag, author of Giants in the Earth, impressed Americans more than Icelanders, who were mostly unfamiliar with American literature.

I'm no doctor, but eventually began to suspect that both Ambassador Rolvaag and his wife might be alcoholics. Iceland just wasn't good for that sort of problem. They returned to the U.S. in late 1968 or early 1969. He attended the infamous Democratic political convention in Chicago in 1968 and gave the embassy staff much to think about when he recounted to us what had happened there and in Washington after the King assassination.

*Q: And the third ambassador?*

SAMPAS: He was the person who makes your globes - Replogle. He was a very sweet businessman from the Chicago area whose first wife had been a journalist and had an idea of making low-cost globes, so he got into that and became "Mr. Globe" in the United States, everything from small to huge. And he was very sweet. We met him first here in Washington just before he went over. His wife had died or was removed from the scene - perhaps by a coma. His daughter was very bright and was working on a Ph.D. in Greek history, but she said something to our Icelandic hosts at the time indicating that she wasn't certain that her father would actually be living in Iceland. That, of course, set people to looking very perplexed. But he was very sweet, and tried to do a nice job.

*Q: Going back to your remark about how people felt when Governor Rolvaag talked about the Washington, DC reaction to the King assassination, I would imagine we were at that point really wrestling with a racial problem, and in a country like Iceland, where they're... You know, just by the pool of people there, there's no racial problem. It would be hard for them to understand what we're doing and also the depth of the problem.*

SAMPAS: Yes, that's right.

**JOHN E. HALL  
Economic Officer  
Reykjavik (1967-1970)**

*John E. Hall was born in Niagara Falls and was educated at Kenyon College. He entered the Foreign Service in 1962 and has served in a variety of posts in Switzerland, New Zealand, Liberia, and Canada. Mr. Hall was interviewed by Raymond Ewing in 1998.*

*Q: And you were there what, two years?*

HALL: Two years, then went on to Reykjavik, where I was the second person in the Economic Section. Nominally called the commercial officer but then, as I suspect now, there wasn't really

that much trade with Iceland. Also did the consular work as a part-time occupation and back-stopped the administrative officer. Again, a very small post and over time one did just about everything.

*Q: You probably did some fish reporting.*

HALL: Oh, of course... the good old cod count.

*Q: Wasn't there a cod war going on at that time?*

HALL: Not at that moment. We were between wars. The British were not totally out of favor at that time. But we have a naval base on Iceland, and for us there was a good deal of interest in why it was that the Russian embassy in Iceland had to be so large, why it needed so many vehicles with high antennas on them... all things like that. We managed to operate somehow with a very small embassy reinforced by 3,000 sailors.

*Q: But you weren't directly involved in the politico-military base relations.*

HALL: No.

*Q: Who was the ambassador in Iceland at that time?*

HALL: For most of my time it was the former governor of Minnesota, Carl Rolvaag, who was really very, very good and had a not totally irrelevant ethnic connection. But also just was a very warm, gentle man who dealt with Icelanders very well. Shortly before I left, he was replaced by Luther Replogle, which was an unfortunate assignment, but those things happen. And I left shortly after Mr. Replogle got there.

**FREDERICK IRVING**  
**Ambassador**  
**Iceland (1972-1976)**

*Ambassador Irving was born and raised in Rhode Island and educated at Brown University and Tufts University. After service in World War II, he worked in the Bureau of the Budget in Washington, DC before joining the State Department in 1951. In the course of his career with the State Department he served in several regional and other bureaus in senior level positions. In 1972 Mr. Irving was named United States Ambassador to Iceland, where he served until 1976. From 1977 to 1978 he served as US Ambassador to Jamaica. His other foreign posts were Vienna and Wellington. The Ambassador was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2013.*

*Q: Well, what was the situation in Iceland when you went there?*



IRVING: A new government had come into existence made up of a communist affiliated party and two other parties that were also sitting on the fence on retention of the base. Now, the Soviets of course wanted us to be kicked out because the purpose of the base was to monitor Soviet nuclear subs coming out of the Kola Peninsula. In order to roam around in the Atlantic Ocean they had to pass within 200 miles of Iceland. So we had nuclear testing devices near Iceland that could track these nuclear subs once they came near Iceland.

When I arrived in Iceland it looked as if the base was going to be kicked out. One thing Iceland valued was its membership on NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). But they didn't like any foreign troops on its soil. And they thought that Americans were stealing their culture by marrying their girls and taking them to the United States. When I looked at the base I saw that there was a big sign there that said "U.S. naval station". So I changed the name to the NATO Base; the name stuck for the rest of the time. That gained some believers because they believed in NATO. So that was one hurdle that I managed to eliminate. And then things got a little rough in that of the seven-person government members, three I could count on to save the base, three did not like the base, and one was sitting on the fence. So I had to target that one member. My wife played a major role there. We had no one who could speak Icelandic. So she learned Icelandic and became the translator for the embassy.

*Q: How did she learn Icelandic?*

IRVING: She hired an Icelandic teacher and some Icelandic children who lived across the street of the Embassy taught her phrases, etc. I insisted that any person the department send out go through language school at the Foreign Service Institute. Icelandic is a very difficult language.

*Q: Oh yes, very ancient.*

IRVING: The Old Norse. And my wife wrote a book. You should read it. I think it's some place in the State Department library. It's called This Too Is Diplomacy: Stories of a Partnership. Because she and I were partners in everything. You know, State Department said that you're not supposed to mention spouses in reports, etc. And I know what they're talking about because I was DCM to Douglas MacArthur II. He was a tyrant and his wife was an alcoholic, so I know why that was initiated, but they went too far.

My wife really moved in to Icelandic society joining this and joining that and getting to know the prime minister's wife, getting to know the members of the opposition as well as their spouses. One of the members she had connections with was a communist member of the government who was an expert on a certain kind of poetry called "remur poetry," R-E-M-U-R. It's where the last word of one sentence becomes the first word of the next sentence. It had to have a certain balance. And my wife, who wrote poetry at the drop of a hat managed to see him at a cocktail party and said she would like to learn remur poetry. So he said fine, he'll teach her. And they got to know each other very well. Let me tell you how that paid off.

When Nixon was coming to Iceland for the meeting with Pompidou, the President of France, the communist student body at the university called for protests along the route of President Nixon from the airport to the residence, where the President would be staying. I went to see this

communist Member of Parliament. He and I had big arguments throughout the year. I asked him to use his influence with the Communist students to call of the protest. He was really the mentor of those students and they would listen to him. He said no. He claimed that the student Communist group was independent and he had nothing to do with it. I failed. Well, when Nixon came there wasn't a single protest along the route. When Nixon left Iceland I contacted the Communist member of Parliament and thanked him because I knew that he had something to do with it. He admitted that he did not do it for me. He did it for Dorothy, my wife. That's the kind of influence.

*Q: And we'll come back and talk some more. And we'll talk some more about, you know, think of anything you want to put in because I do want to get more out of you.*

*I would like to talk to you again about Iceland again, if we may.*

IRVING: OK, go ahead.

*Q: How, outside of the problem with the plane, the airplanes and all, did you get much in the way of attention in Iceland during the period that you were there from Washington?*

IRVING: I got to Iceland in September 1972. And I was immediately immersed in the negotiations for retention of our naval station there, which the new government of Iceland's platform was to throw the base out. The new government included the communist backed political party. I was advised that my chief job would be to negotiate retention of the bases. I managed to do that successfully.

*Q: Well --*

IRVING: I started a negotiation when the foreign minister and I came to Washington in January of '73. Then the volcanic eruption in Westman Island happened. We returned to Reykjavik immediately. I got personally involved in the volcanic eruption. I had convinced the prime minister over the objection of his coalition partners to let the U.S. get involved. Our involvement would benefit Iceland and NATO. Let me back up a bit. Iceland is a member of NATO and they pride themselves on having the base there without any cost to the United States government. Their attitude was that if NATO needed the base, then they would provide the property for the base at no cost to the U.S. Iceland was the only NATO member to ever do that. Iceland does not like to have foreign troops on their soil. A condition of establishing a military base was that only American military personnel be stationed there. I ascertained that culture would play a strong role in the retention of that base, so I immediately renamed the base the NATO Base. It had formally been known as the "U.S. Naval Submarine Surveillance Station". As soon as I renamed the base, tempers calmed down among the population and they said, "Well, for the time now we'll leave the NATO base there."

OK, let me then move forward to the volcano and then I'll move to the negotiations, because the volcano eruption played a role in my negotiations for the retentions of the base. I mentioned to the prime minister that there was a young Icelandic scientist who feels that he could stem the flow of the volcano with the use of special pipes and pumps that the U.S. used to use, but are

now in various military establishments in U.S. warehouses. When the Communist Party members of the government heard of my involvements, told the prime minister, said that if the United States plays any role whatsoever in the volcanic eruption in stemming the eruption, they would leave the government and have the government fall. In my wife's book, *This Too is Diplomacy*, there are six pages describing what was involved in the pipes and the pumps and my personal role in it. In my conversations with the prime minister I was, in effect, interfering in their internal affairs by telling him that if he didn't let us play a role, the word will come out that he didn't give a damn about the Westman Islanders which happened to be the most important fishing area for the whole country. It provided 25% of their income on fish. I suggested to the prime minister that he should call the bluff of the communist members of his government because the two out-of-government parties were pro-base and would never invite the communist parties into a new government, should a new government be elected. The communists wanted to be part of the government; so they wouldn't leave the present coalition. The prime minister, whom I considered a patriot and had great love for his country, said that he was way ahead of me and spoke for the conscience of his country. "If there is a chance we can save Heimaey, we must do it." We agreed to work together to convince our government to cooperate. He said that he would commit the Icelandic government to do what this young scientist proposed. I, on my part would seek out the pipes and the pumps. We had an understanding that my role in this would be hidden. The solution to stemming the flow of the lava, was called "the pipes and the pumps". I generated a search in the United States for these pipes and pumps and had them flown to Iceland. The upshot was that these pipes and pumps stopped the flow at the water's edge. My role was hidden. And as a matter fact, I understand that in July is the 40th anniversary of that event. I received a call from the present ambassador, whom I do not know personally, saying that my role has finally become public and they want me to come to Iceland in July to be part of a group to be honored for saving that island. So that's one involvement that I had.

The other involvement was the actual negotiations. I would deal with one political party after another. My wife played a tremendous role. The admiral at the base when I got there, Admiral Beling, was wonderful. But like in the Foreign Service, time and grade, he was retired and a new admiral came in who was unsuitable as I mentioned earlier. In the meantime I dealt with Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, who was chief of naval operations.

*Q: Elmo Zumwalt.*

IRVING: Yes. Bud Zumwalt. Have you not heard of him?

*Q: I knew Bud Zumwalt when I was in Vietnam.*

IRVING: Yes, well that's the same Zumwalt. Well, his son was in Vietnam. But Admiral Zumwalt was the chief of naval operations at that time of Vietnam as well. He and I had a close association. The original admiral, when I came to Iceland, Admiral Beling, was a wonderful person. He was replaced by an obviously unsuitable admiral. Every time I would make, say, a foot forward in progress with negotiation, this replacement admiral would say something or do something which set me back at least a half a foot. And this became apparent to the friendly base members of the government. Now, when the Nixon-Pompidou summit took place in Reykjavik on May 31, 1973, the pro-base members of the government contacted President Nixon and told

him that if we want that base saved, he'd better give Ambassador Irving 100% complete authority over the base. And any agency of the U.S. government that has any interest whatsoever in Iceland. President Nixon then contacted me and said he is giving me 100% authority. Every day the admiral had to report to me on any activity short of preparation for war that could affect my negotiations, as I determined, personally. So the admiral did indeed report to me every day. Zumwalt, on my request, moved out the replacement admiral. I was invited to Washington by the Secretary of the Navy and Zumwalt to go over the resumes of every rear admiral in the Navy to select a new admiral. I refused to do that and I left it up to Zumwalt.

*Q: Well, when you say unsuitable, how did this reflect -- what was he doing that was causing problems for you?*

IRVING: He would talk about -- well, let me give you an example that actually got him kicked out. At a dinner at the Officer's Club one day he announced that there was enough money in the recreation department of the base to buy new dishes for the Officer's Club, so that would let the club then use the old dishes for skeet shooting. He made this announcement the very day the Icelandic Red Cross had a drive for used dishes. You can imagine the public reaction.

*Q: Oh yes, oh.*

IRVING: That was just one example. Another example is he would invite some Icelanders to the base. He would then talk about what the base mission was, telling them that in case there's another war, we would be in the forefront to fight. Whereas all along we've been telling the Icelanders that we're here to provide surveillance of the Soviet nuclear subs coming out of the Kola Peninsula. What he was doing was turning the target around, calling their presence an offensive force for NATO. Iceland would never buy that. These are the examples I'm giving you.

*Q: Yes.*

IRVING: He was an embarrassment. I invited Zumwalt to come to Iceland to hold some talks along with me. The foreign minister said, "Don't let Zumwalt or the base admiral wear their uniforms. They should come in civilian clothes." It was getting close to Icelandic Independence Day, February 17th. This would just create anti-base reactions if they saw naval uniforms in Reykjavik anywhere near that day. Zumwalt came in civilian clothes. We were in the midst of the meeting with the foreign minister, and who should show up? This base admiral in full dress uniform, including a sword on his side. The foreign minister hit the ceiling. I can give you a dozen more examples (laughs).

*Q: Well, that's enough. You've given me excellent --*

IRVING: (laughs) I really thought we had to get rid of him. And it's interesting, Nixon also directed all the agencies in Washington (State Department, Defense Department, etc.) that they could not take any action that affected Iceland without my personal OK. When I say my personal OK, he said "Ambassador Frederick Irving". Give you an example, the base had on the table of organization a certain number of fighters. We had the fighter planes there because the Soviet Union every now and then would test the base and they would suddenly invade Iceland's ADIZ

(air defense identification zone). This was pretty stupid of them. We would then send up three of our fighters and chase them out of the Icelandic air space. Then one day I received a call from General Johnny Jones who happened to be a classmate of mine at the National War College. He was also Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He called me and said look, could he borrow some of our aircraft because he needs them in Vietnam. And I said, "I'm going to send you a telegram, but the short answer is not at this time." I asked him why he called me. He said the Secretary of Defense told him he cannot borrow any planes from Iceland unless he had my personal approval. I don't believe I should mention in this unclassified interview the reasons that I turned down General Jones.

*Q: How did this connection with his young scientist on diverting lava flow come about?*

IRVING: He contacted the Icelandic chief of the base fire department and asked whether he could get the United States ambassador to get the Icelandic government to listen to him. So Sven Erickson, that was the fireman's name, came to see me at 10:00 one evening and asked that I listed to this young scientist's proposal. He explained he has this idea that the cold water around Iceland, which is frigid of course, is cold enough to stop the flow of the lava. The government official, with whom he spoke, contacted UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). The UNESCO member sought the advice of a scientist by the name of Kazarov, who was a world-renowned volcanologist. The later pooh-poohed the idea. He said they tried it in Hawaii and it didn't work. But this young scientist said that's because the waters around Hawaii are warm. You need this cold water and it has to be a certain flow per second, and only this type of pipe and pump can produce it. UNESCO said that's nonsense, you're just going to have to realize that the island is lost. The young scientist told the fireman he can't, he's got to try, that his last hope was the American ambassador because he understood the American ambassador was highly sought of by the government. I promised I would do what I could. That's when I got a hold of the foreign minister. I had gotten no place with him. I then approached the prime minister. I told him that I will see to it that the United States will help out. I never checked with the United States government, I just made that statement because I know if we saved the island it will sway a lot of public opinion toward us. But I put it on the basis, also, of humanitarianism. I told the prime minister I'll see if the U.S. government will pay for the search and the transportation of the pipes and the pumps. But I said Iceland will have to pay for all local costs, assembly, and all that. I then put the young scientist in touch with the prime minister. And everything worked fine. After the flow was checked, the island was saved. To my surprise, I personally received a bill from the Defense Department for \$200,000 saying, "We don't have that kind of money."

And I laughed my head off, "You got to be kidding." They maintained I have to pay personally because that money was in the "wrong pocket". So I told the Defense Department, "I accept the bill; charge my salary \$5 a week until it's paid off."

The State Department heard about this. They said, "That's the most stupid thing that's ever come out of the Defense Department, and State Department got AID to reimburse the Defense Department the \$200,000."

*Q: Oh God.*

IRVING: Isn't that ridiculous? Defense Department as part of the negotiation, which Iceland would not accept, offered to build a new commercial airport for Iceland to the tune of 25 million dollars, but they couldn't find \$200,000 to pay for something that played a major role in saving the base. All of this has now come to light, apparently, according to our present ambassador. And this is why I was invited to come there in July.

*Q: Well now, you mentioned that there was a strong communist representation in the government of Iceland when you were there.*

IRVING: That's right.

*Q: How subservient were communist members to the dictates of the Soviet Union?*

IRVING: Well, they took advice from the communist Member of Parliament. I would say there was an indirect line. If you looked into the bidding of the communist party, you could find it. You could not find a direct line, but you could find sort of a broken line. For instance, I had many, many, many discussions with the, the communist -- the name was the People's Alliance. The People's Alliance representative in government -- they were three out of seven members of Parliament. To hear them talk, hear them on the stump, you couldn't tell the difference between the Communist Party and the People's Alliance. Now, my wife played a big role in the community. My wife is an outstanding writer. She wrote poetry, she gets along with a lot of Icelanders. Now, the People's Alliance representative also was the tutor for the youth party in Iceland. There was a strong communist element in the University of Iceland. Now, this member of government of the People's Alliance was noted for his cultural activities. I think I mentioned all of this previously in this interview.

*Q: Hm.*

IRVING: He taught a certain kind of poetry called remur, R-E-M-U-R. It's where the last word of one sentence becomes the first word of the next sentence. So my wife went to him and said would he mind teaching her this new type of poetry. He was delighted for the attention. So he invited my wife to learn remur poetry. Now, let me give you the influence that that had on the Nixon-Pompidou Summit Meeting. The Icelandic Communist Student Party called for protests along the road from the airport, which was 30 miles from Reykjavik. And I said to myself, "Oh great, that's all I need." So I went to see this member of Parliament, will he please use his influence with the university students and get them to call of the protest.

And he said, "Oh no, they're independent, sir," he can't call it off.

Well, when the Nixon group came along the route that we mentioned, there wasn't a single protest. So the next day I went to see that communist and said, "I know you said you had nothing to do with it, but thank you anyway." And he said he didn't do it for me, he did it for Dorothy because she's learning remur poetry.

*Q: (laughs) How wonderful.*

IRVING: Yes.

*Q: What did you think of the staff of the embassy?*

IRVING: Outstanding, absolutely outstanding. It was a small embassy, it was the second smallest of our embassies. We had only one of each category, except two younger FSO's as consular officers. Oh, and let me tell you about them too. They were wonderful. Let me back up a bit and first mention my predecessor, Mr. Replogle, he's the manufacturer of these Replogle Globes that every school system has. One day he had to make a call on the foreign minister, so he went to the Foreign Ministry and, according to someone who was with him, a so-called young man comes into the room. Replogle has a short conversation with him, then says, "Oh by the way, young man," -- and this is supposedly a quote, -- "I can't spend any time with you because I'm waiting for the foreign minister." Well, the young man happened to be the foreign minister.

*Q: (laughs)*

IRVING: Well, he was the one who, when the new government came in, and when he heard the base was going to be thrown out, wrote a letter to President Nixon saying in all honesty he could not handle the negotiations and recommended that he be replaced by a Career Foreign Service Officer. First time I've ever heard of any non-FSO saying that.

I was going to tell you about the two young vice consuls. The Communist Party at the university were always asking for certain things, like when I first got there I hadn't been at the embassy oh maybe six hours when I received a call from the communist students saying they assumed that I would not talk to them. I said, "Why won't I talk to you? Sure, come on up." And they said, "You can't, because we already published the article. It's appearing in the next day's paper."

I said, "Well, I'll just issue a press release saying you're a bunch of liars."

So they came up and they said, "Well, you don't talk Icelandic."

So I said, "I'll just call in an interpreter."

Well, about these young vice consuls. I received a call from the communist students -- and this was after I'd been here a year -- saying, "We're holding a symposium and we've invited two officers from the Soviet embassy and we'd like you to send two, but of course you will refuse," they said.

I said, "Of course I will send a couple of my officers." And so they had to accept that. And these two young FSO's -- they hadn't been on -- more than -- well, one I think was in the embassy seven weeks and the other one maybe 10 weeks. They came to me and said, "You've got to brief us. I mean we're going to confront experienced officers from the Soviet embassy."

And I said, "That's all right, I'm not going to brief you. You passed the FSO exam. You're Americans. So, go handle yourself. Take my word for it, you will do fine."

So when the symposium was held and they came back proud as could be, they said -- they answered all the questions and the Soviet officers, when certain questions came their way, kept saying, "We cannot reply because we haven't been briefed on that." And apparently that's how the symposium went. And our two officers were heroes. That increased the morale a thousand percent.

Now, let me tell you also what the embassy looked like before. Replogle was a Lutheran. That's the established religion of Iceland. Now, the chaplain on the base was a Lutheran and he invited him every Sunday to come to the embassy to preach, which he's really not allowed to do. He then assigned one member of the embassy to have the chaplain for dinner every Sunday. The embassy was made up of one of the Jewish religion, two Catholics, and I don't know what the other one was. But it wasn't Lutheran. During my first week as ambassador they all came to me en masse and complained that the ambassador is not supposed to do this.

I said, "Oh yes!" They said that they were afraid not to attend and participate in the religious ceremonies. I immediately cancelled all that. And then the chaplain the next Sunday came to me and said he didn't receive any invitation to preach. I said, "You're absolutely right." I said, "You know that's against the law and I've canceled all of that. And my staff will no longer invite you for dinner, unless they want to on a personal basis." That raised morale a thousand percent. We had a wonderful working embassy, absolutely top notch.

*Q: What was the media like? I assume there's newspapers, broadcast, and that sort of thing.*

IRVING: Oh yes.

*Q: You were there during the time of -- well, when we were pulling out of Vietnam. How was --*

IRVING: Yes, one of the things, I received a message from the department saying that Scandinavian countries have gotten together and plan to issue a joint release condemning the United States on the bombing of Cambodia and I am to see if I can get Iceland to not sign that joint community. That was next to impossible. But I got a hold of the foreign minister and then the prime minister and I came up with some wording that really was double talk on my part. I wish I could remember what it was. But the Icelandic government bought it as a compromise. And Sweden took that statement that I had prepared for the Icelandic government as contrary to the joint declarations they wanted to make. State Department gave me wholly hell for not following my instructions. But it's interesting. I received a message from President Nixon congratulating me for that statement because he took it as breaking up 100% of the proposed Scandinavian declaration.

**RICHARD A. ERICSON JR.**  
**Ambassador**  
**Iceland (1978-1981)**



*Ambassador Richard A. Ericson, Jr. was born in 1923. He enrolled in Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service in 1941, but did not graduate until 1945, due in part to being drafted in the U.S. Army in 1945. In addition to his service in Japan, Ambassador Ericson also served in England, Iceland, and Korea. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on March 27, 1995.*

*Q: I'm sure your name had something to do with it. If you don't have anyone else in mind you see "Ericson" and think great name for Iceland.*

ERICSON: Well, as a matter of fact I am racially absolutely in tune with the Icelandic population because I am Norwegian and Irish and the Icelanders are 65 percent Norwegian and 35 percent Irish by extraction. That probably did have something to do with it.

I found I couldn't get out of it. Holbrooke sent an emissary to me about this time to offer me Port Moresby. I reacted as you might have expected. I have no doubt he already knew I was going to Iceland. I thought that was kind of amusing.

*Q: How did Iceland sit with the family?*

ERICSON: By that time there was only one child who would go with us, out of five. The others were either in or out of college and those in college were going to be able to come for vacation, so it was going to be a great adventure for them. My wife was very unhappy about it. Betty had had her fill of life overseas in Korea, I think, our last overseas tour and she wasn't very happy, but she was a good sport and aware it was probably the culmination of my career and was willing to go along. The one child who was going with us, Charlotte, was very unhappy at the prospect of missing out on her junior and senior year here--the usual Foreign Service child's problem. They were not overjoyed, no. We knew nothing about the place, of course, and just the sound of it was somewhat daunting, terribly isolated and that sort of thing. And in truth, that is pretty much the way it turned out. It was isolated.

I said I would go, consoling myself with the thought that after all Iceland is a European NATO capital. So I went through my hearings, which consisted of...I can give you the whole thing verbatim right now. There were only two Senators present. One of them asked what my background was briefly and I told him briefly. He said, "Have you ever been to Iceland, Mr. Ericson?" And I said, "No sir." He said, "Oh, hell, you are a professional - I'll vote for you." There was no objection from any member of the committee and I went to Iceland.

There was another FSO at that session - a specialist in European affairs - who was approved in similar fashion for an African country. The New Yorker magazine wrote that the State Department had sent over two interesting nominations... a European specialist to go some place in the wilds of Africa and a Japan specialist to go to Iceland...this is remarkable personnel policy. Other than that we didn't make any headlines with this nomination and the Senate hearings were perfunctory and we went on to Iceland.

*Q: In getting ready to go to Iceland, did you set yourself up an agenda after talking to the Desk that these were the things I should do?*

ERICSON: Not really. I called on the Icelandic Ambassador. Iceland is a country of 125,000 people and its interests internationally are about in proportion to its population. I did read up on the history and present politics of Iceland. I visited the significant investment that Iceland has in this country, a fish processing plant down in Salisbury on the Eastern Shore. Betty and I went over there and ate more varieties of fried fish than any human being should have to endure in one day. We learned a lot about how frozen fish is processed in the United States for distribution to hospitals, schools, Arthur Treacher's and other fast food places of that kind. It is a fascinating process indeed. But then when you have to sample every type, you can come out with a very greasy feeling. But the major export of Iceland to the United States has been frozen fish - primarily cod.. They freeze it in Iceland, compressing seven or eight fish into a single frozen block, and then they ship it to two plants in the United States, one near Boston and the one down here near Salisbury, where the blocks are cut by band saws into the desired shapes. If they want flakes for fishcakes, they take the saw dust, so to speak, from cutting the blocks. If you want a fish fillet, why they cut it into a vague fish form.. If you want fish balls they cut it differently. And on and on and on. Basically what you are getting is a segment of compressed fish which may include parts from three or four different fish. The process is kind of interesting though. The stuff is breaded, if it is going to be breaded, and fried and refrozen all in the space of 30 seconds. It is not terribly appetizing, however. Anyway, Charlotte rounded out our education on the Icelandic fish processing business by working one summer in a freezing plant in Reykjavik, where she picked worms out of cod. Our family doesn't eat cod any more..

*Q: When did you serve in Iceland?*

ERICSON: I got to Iceland in the middle of November, 1978 and I left in August, 1981.

You asked about preparing myself. I got what material there was to read, spoke to the Pentagon people. There was one job to be done in Iceland and that was to keep Iceland in NATO and thus to insure the continued availability to NATO and the United States of the air base at Keflavik. Keflavik, the Pentagon people assured me, was one of the five or six most indispensable bases worldwide and we had to keep it. Without it some of our major functions just could not be performed. In time of war, of course, we had to have Iceland to help control the North Atlantic. In peace time it had an indispensable function, the surveillance of Soviet submarines. They could not get out into the North Atlantic without passing through either the Denmark Strait or the UK/Iceland gap. The commander who sat in Soviet Headquarters on the Kola Peninsula directed the most powerful fighting force in the world at that time. He had all kinds of air forces at his disposal and virtually the entire Soviet naval capability. Most of that was in submarines of all sorts, including nuclear missile and hunter-killer types. North of Iceland, the sea. Sound carries best in deep water, But in the Iceland/UK gap there is very shallow water and a sub is forced to come close to the surface in order to get through the gap. If you know it is coming you can plot its speed and have a pretty good idea of its course. Then, you can pick it up with the kind of sensors that aircraft - anti-submarine P-3's - are equipped with and destroy it..

*Q: The P-3 was an Orion aircraft or something.*

ERICSON: Yes, made by Lockheed. Its early versions had a dismal record as a commercial airplane but I would rather fly in a P-3 than practically anything. It is virtually indestructible. It is a marvelous airplane and has lasted a long time.

At this time the Soviets did not have intercontinental missiles that could be launched by submarines. After I left Iceland the Soviets got them and now their missile subs need not come through the gap. But in order to threaten the United States in the 70's a Soviet boomer had to go down into the North Atlantic. This bottle neck - the gap - was of vast importance to NATO and if we lost use of the Iceland side of it, we would be very, very hard put to keep track of Soviet subs. It couldn't be done from Scotland or anyplace else that was available.

One of my predecessors, the son of the founder of a company that specialized in the manufacture of globes, was appointed as ambassador to Iceland somewhere in the middle '50s. He was a wealthy man and was surprised when he and his wife learned they were supposed to live in Iceland. His wife, as a matter of fact, is said to have been absent most of the time. He did stay, though, and left behind two things. One was a fountain in the Tjorn - the big pond that sits in the center of Reykjavik and is a haven for all of the world's species of arctic water fowl. A marvelous place. He gave the fountain to the city of Reykjavik over the violent objection of the communists, but while I was there it was broken and they were screaming that the government should repair the damn thing so that the people could enjoy the beauties of it. He also left behind for the office an enormous globe, four feet in diameter in a huge walnut stand. It was lighted from the interior - a marvelous thing. It was helpful to me whenever I had to brief a newspaperman or Congressional delegation because it was large enough that you could turn it so that the Kola Peninsula up in the Murmansk area faced the person being briefed. You tell him that this was the way you would look at the world if you were the commander of these Russian forces. When you look out from your headquarters, down into the north Atlantic, which is your area of operations, what do you see? Well, you see nothing but water past the North Cape of Norway and then you see the gaps between the UK and Iceland and Iceland and Greenland. Iceland smack in the middle. Your forces, whether air, surface or submarine, have to penetrate those gaps in order to operate in the North Atlantic.. That is why we are here. These little briefings were generally inspired by a visitor saying, "Why the hell are we here in this god forgotten place anyway?" This briefing, using the globe, was very effective in answering the question.

In 1976, the Icelanders had gotten into great difficulty with other fishing nations over the question of fishing rights. Now the Icelanders were never sea-going people. Once the Vikings got there and once the wood disappeared and they couldn't make new boats, the Icelanders became an isolated people, tied to their land. This is reflected in their attitude of really total insularity. And their distrust of foreigners. Historically, they didn't travel much and were only occasionally visited by foreigners other than Danes, who administered the island for about eight hundred years.. And they came to believe that every foreign ship that came over the horizon was bound on exploiting them in some way. And with good reason. They are the most insular people that you could imagine. I used to remark on how much the Icelanders resemble the Japanese in terms of feeling special as a people - their attitude towards their unique language, their culture, their suspicion of foreigners, their racism. All of these things the Icelanders have in spades, where the Japanese may have them in clubs or diamonds. .

But back to fish. In the '60s and '70s, there were two major disputes with the British over fishing rights - known in that part of the world as the Cod Wars. The Icelanders, after centuries of not venturing much beyond the reach of a row boat, had in post-World War II suddenly become interested in exporting fish. They had exported fish for many centuries, but all only air dried or salted cod taken just off-shore. Once they developed the freezing technique, they suddenly became able to export to the world. With the North Atlantic teeming with cod, here was a bonanza. Fish exports basically made the Icelandic economy. It always amazes Americans to find out that the Icelanders passed our per capital gross national income a long time ago and in their way are quite a wealthy little country.

In order to ensure access to this great wealth, they began vociferously to extend their claims to fishing rights offshore. First a 3 mile limit, then it jumped to 6, 12, 50 and then to 200 miles. Each stage brought them into conflict with...of course the rest of the world was also moving in these directions for much the same reasons...but at each stage they came into conflict with the British and the Belgians, the Germans, Norwegians, all of the other fishing countries in that area. But particularly with the British. They fought a couple of what they call the Cod Wars in which Iceland's three or four little coast guard vessels behaved with such skill, courage and daring as to drive the British Navy nuts. The British Navy was sent up there to protect their fishing fleet from being arrested and towed into port by the Icelandic coast guard and the Icelandic coast guard would have none of that. There were any number of incidents on record where little Icelandic vessels would ram British destroyers and made them look very bad. The British couldn't retaliate and their crews resented the fact that every night the Icelanders could go home and sleep with their wives, while they were left tossing around on the turbulent North Sea.

Around 1975-76 the Icelanders went all the way to 200 miles. The irate British refused to recognize this claim and their fishing ships remained active in the area. The Icelanders, claimed that the British presence was illegal and a threat to their survival. Tempers ran high in Reykjavik and one evening the Icelanders staged a demonstration before the British Embassy....the only time when physical damage has ever been done to a foreign embassy in Reykjavik. They threw stones at the windows of the ambassador's residence. The ambassador happened to be the same Gilchrist who was ambassador to Indonesia when Sukarno's people sacked the British Embassy there.

At this point they attempted to invoke the US-Iceland Defense Agreement - against the UK, a fellow NATO member. They asked the US to force the British to withdraw their naval units and their fishing boats from Iceland's 200 mile fishing zone. We demurred, suggesting they negotiate their differences. Whatever we did or said, it turned their wrath on us. Their coalition government of the time was headed by their Progressive Party, which had always opposed the presence of US forces in Iceland and even Iceland's NATO membership. Iceland was not a charter member of NATO but was persuaded to join after Russia's moves against Czechoslovakia and the Berlin airlift had convinced them that the Soviets really were bloody - minded. We, of course, were instrumental in bringing them in, so they believed they had a special relationship with us within NATO, witness the bilateral Defense Agreement we had negotiated with them to permit us to station troops on their soil and to guarantee their security. They saw us as their guardian and upholder of their rights. So our inability to enter their fray with the British made

them question the utility of NATO membership and especially the Defense Agreement. They invoked the termination clause of the Defense Agreement, which said the agreement could be abrogated and American forces removed at the request of either party on one year's notice. They actually informed us that the clock was ticking and we were to evacuate the base within one year. This caused us considerable pain and anguish.

In the meantime the government fell, partly because of the cod war, partly because of the strain on relations with the United States, and a new government was formed led by the conservative Independent Party, which agreed that the forces could stay, that the clock would stop ticking. In turn, we agreed to provide pay for certain economic projects only vaguely related to defense. These were to prove very, very, costly. Not in terms of some of the large programs we had elsewhere in the world, but in proportion to Iceland's economy and population they were astronomically expensive. They were related to improvements at the airfield and to heating all the towns on the entire peninsula around Keflavik from a geothermal source. We wanted to heat the base that way, because heating our facilities by individual oil burners and stoves, which is what we had been doing since the first American forces arrived in 1940, was inefficient and costly. They said, "Okay, you can heat the base but you also have to heat all the towns. You must finance it and we will run it." They also demanded that we pay for a new passenger terminal for civilian operations at the airfield, which was shared by US Navy and Air Force units with Icelandic Airlines and such other civilian carriers as occasionally used it - it was Iceland's international gateway. The terminal they were using was a rickety old wooden building. It was totally inadequate, but their idea of a new one was definitely on the luxurious side and we would have to pay dearly to build it. We also wanted to build a new NATO oil storage facility in the base area, and they extracted a considerable price for that.

Anyway, we the fact that we had once been told to get out - and the high cost of having the order rescinded - brought the sober realization that our position there was not as firm as we had believed. I was told that my job as ambassador to Iceland was to see that conditions did not arise again under which Iceland would leave NATO or invite us to leave Iceland.. As it turned out such a condition almost arose.

That gave me something to look out for, in what was otherwise a very small community where not too many things of excitement happened.

*Q: Just a little bit about the size of the embassy and how you dealt with the foreign ministry and then on to developments.*

ERICSON: The embassy too was small. It had a DCM, one political officer, one economic officer, one administrative officer, one consular officer, three or four secretaries, a USIA mission with two officers, about fifteen Icelandic employees, and that was just about it. There was no CIA presence in Iceland and as a matter of fact the base had only a rudimentary intelligence operation. They had a huge intelligence operation, of course, vis-a-vis Soviet submarine and aircraft operations. In terms of work we were probably over-staffed, as 125,000 people do not generate that much economic, consular or even political activity. For example, on the economic side, the question of Icelanders wanting to carry cargo for the base in Icelandic ships arose. They had developed a small fleet of reefers and a dry cargo vessel or two to carry primarily frozen fish

to their processing plants in the United States and that was virtually their merchant marine. They had excess capacity both ways and they wanted to carry goods for the base, largely household goods for personnel coming and going. Of course the military resisted, quite properly, because US law requires that government-funded cargo be carried in American bottoms wherever available, and there was an occasional American freighter willing to divert from some European run to put in at Reykjavik. Even on the economic side, such was the stuff of life.....little efforts of the Icelanders to improve their economic position vis-a-vis the United States at the expense of the military, basically. In this case their demands would have made sense if their freight rates had been competitive, but they weren't.

My contacts with the foreign ministry were very close. They had a very small ministry of foreign affairs, probably no more than 10 or 12 officers covering the entire world. I always envied the roving ambassador who was accredited to every country east of Suez that they had relations with. He took a lengthy trip twice each year, touching base with all those posts with his wife along as his secretary. Iceland had close relations with the Nordic countries, of course, and tended in foreign affairs to identify with the Nordics, who have their own Nordic Council and cooperate very closely in international affairs, coordinating policy and if possible developing a common policy. Iceland could almost always be counted on follow suit with their Nordic cousins.... and even to hide behind this relationship when we wanted them to do something they were inclined to resist. They hid behind the collective Nordic policy when they refused to agree to our request that they boycott the Moscow Olympic games in 1980. They went and I got a few Olympic souvenirs from their participants - but a cold shoulder from the government. They also had relations with most of the major European countries. And they had very definite relations with China and the Soviet Union.

The two largest embassies in Reykjavik, as a matter of fact, were first the Soviets and second the Chinese. The American embassy was a poor and quite distant third. There was a French ambassador, who was very pleasant, but who didn't have very much to do at all. We had a British ambassador who told me when I arrived, "Dick there are no stars here in Reykjavik." speaking of his associates in the diplomatic community. He was right. Norway had an ambassador who had been Minister of Labor at home until falling out of favor. She was a very intense woman, very active in the cultural field. Given the standard of Icelandic art - every other citizen was a painter or collector it seemed - her work in bringing French impressionists to Reykjavik from the Sonja Henie collection in Oslo was by far the outstanding cultural event of my tour. . And then there was the Dane, the Dean of the Corps..He was married to a woman with far left political inclinations, an American citizen from Chicago. He had been ambassador to Peking , accredited also to Hanoi, and was in Hanoi when the bombings occurred. He lost no opportunity publicly to recount the horrors of what he called indiscriminate American bombing of hospitals, churches, schools and other non-military targets in Hanoi, especially when I was present or within hearing. I found him to be a very painful associate. His wife came in one time, she was a scientist of some sort and about to give a lecture in New York which required use of a lot of glass slides. For some reason they had to get to the States beforehand and she asked me, as a favor to a fellow American and a diplomatic courtesy, to send them by pouch to ensure their safe arrival. I refused.

In other words, even US friends among the diplomatic corps were not terribly interesting or even such good friends. Except for the second Brit - six feet six of ebullient Scotsman. He arrived about three months before I left. I wish he had been there all the time. I educated him on Iceland and he educated me on the more obscure and I hope unpublished works of Robert Burns - the real Robert Burns, he said, the one known to every Scottish schoolboy. His lectures were by far the more titillating.

My bloc colleagues were a mixed bag. I have a hilarious story about my mandatory courtesy call on the Soviet, but I can't tell it here. Afterwards I saw him only at functions that included the entire corps. When we recognized China, the first person I saw the following morning was the Chinese Ambassador, who came to call on me. He was all over me, obviously under orders to really get close. He made every social effort you can imagine and we were hard put to reciprocate. And we did not, by any means; his dinners were stupendous. These two embassies had huge staffs. The Soviets had a good deal of trade with Iceland. They had 34 or 35 people accredited, and we never did figure out exactly what they all did, but they never relied on the Icelanders for anything. Not automotive repairs, not roof fixing, not boiler maintenance, not cutting grass. Everything was done inside the walls of their embassy. They did, of course, conduct intelligence activities against the base which we had good reason to see and know about. I hope they enjoyed themselves, I don't think they ever got anything of real value. The Chinese operated in similar fashion, but on a smaller scale. Their main purpose appeared to be watching the Soviets and taking in each others laundry. The Chinese ambassador was the most ardent supporter in town of Icelandic membership in NATO, to the irritation of the Soviet, and his mission in Reykjavik may have been the same as mine - to keep Iceland in NATO. But his major cultural event was a flop. They took over a large hall for an exhibit of many huge and lurid paintings, mostly industrial or patriotic themes in the style of social realism. I asked the curator how the one attractive traditional landscape - mountains and rivers in the mist - had qualified politically for inclusion, and he showed me that high up on a road on the side of one mountain was a tiny guard post manned by miniature guards in the uniform of the peoples army. The most attractive couple of them all were the Poles, who departed sadly to a dismal retirement in Warsaw in the middle of my tour. Intelligent and friendly, they clearly showed that their hearts were in the West.

As far as the Foreign Ministry was concerned, I dealt primarily with the Permanent Under Secretary of the Foreign Office who became a very close friend. His name was Hordur Helgasson. Born and raised in a remote area of Northwest Iceland, he had been at Duke during World War II and when the war was over had married a girl he had met there and transported this southern belle to Iceland where she had pined for the South ever after. But they were great people.

There were two Foreign Ministers during my period there, one from the Social Democrats and one from the Progressive Party. All Icelandic governments are coalitions, because there are always four -or five or six - parties represented in the Althing and no one of them can ever muster more than a plurality. So traditionally governments are formed by the two or three who can form a majority, although this means that policies tend to be lukewarm and the coalition itself is seldom stable. When the coalition was headed by the Independent party, Americans could breath more easily because this meant that the leadership, including the foreign minister

even though he would probably be from the number two party in the coalition, would be as friendly to American interests as you could get. However, when the Progressive Party headed the coalition there was a chance that the cabinet would include one or more communists. Herder swore up and down that unfriendly members of the government, no matter what their position, had access to sensitive NATO or US-Icelandic communications. Still one had to wonder - those bloc embassies were huge.

The Defense Division of the Foreign Ministry - strange for a country with no military forces - was directed by Helgi Agustsson - who ran the Icelandic side of the joint Defense Council and dealt with the base officials on day to day matters. A great guy and a superb salmon fisherman. In conducting our defense relations I was very fortunate in that during the entire period I was there Rear Admiral Richard Martini commanded the base and his attitude...I had seen in Korea a great deal of difficulty between the embassy and the military commander who thought they were something more than military commanders. In Iceland this did not happen. Martini's attitude, expressed to me when I first arrived was, "Hey Dick, I am new to this kind of thing.. I'm a P-3 jockey. My interest in life is maintaining this base and its effectiveness and keeping my relationship with the government good. But the political aspects of everything that goes on here are your business. We'll handle everything we can at the Defense Council level. If we can't settle something there and it has to go to the political level, its your baby. We come to you" We had a very fine working relationship and became good friends. His staff was good and cooperative, too, as a consequence of this attitude.

So, the days passed. The fact that we were a NATO embassy put us on the NATO loop for important messages and I waited eagerly the coming of the Herald Tribune with the afternoon mail so I could do the crossword puzzle. And what with reading traffic and taking care of such business as there was, it wasn't all that dull a place for me. But for my officers it must have been very deadly. And it was deadly for Betty too and miserable for Charlotte.

*Q: You said there was one problem that came up when you were there.*

ERICSON: Yes. The one big problem that arose during my tenure was when we came very close to an interruption, not in relations necessarily, but a serious questioning by the government about the defense relationship. It arose over incidents in Japan, interestingly enough, and how they were reflected by reports of certain defense analysis organizations in the United States. The Japanese crisis was one of those recurring things over whether there were nuclear weapons on board American ships which periodically cause Japanese demonstrators to hit the streets.. And whenever that happened in Japan, it was reflected - faintly - in Iceland because the Icelanders are very pacifistic people. They are totally unarmed. The coast guard possesses the only four or five guns that belong to the Icelandic government. The police are not armed . Nobody carries fire arms. They don't even have hunting weapons in Iceland because there is nothing to hunt. These are an intensely pacifistic people and are restless within NATO because their membership puts alien troops on their soil and exposes them - even as it protects them - to the risk of involvement in war. They recognize the economic and political benefits of this relationship, and reluctantly accept its defense premises But this is a country that was administered by aliens - the Danes for eight hundred years and has been occupied by alien troops - us and the British almost continuously since 1940. In that year, the British sent forces to prevent German-occupied



Denmark from helping the Germans to establish themselves in Iceland and US troops - led by the aforementioned General Bonesteel - relieved the British in 1941, before our entry into World War II. During the war we had more young men in Iceland than there were young Icelandic men and that had a very interesting affect on their attitude towards us. Young men seek recreation usually with young ladies. And this race-conscious people with their homogeneous make up were - and remain - very leery of the blacks among our forces.

Anyway we have a pacifistic, anti-military nation here and one that is particularly sensitive to nuclear things. Why, I don't know because they have never been exposed to anything nuclear, but their general pacifism gets magnified when it comes to nuclear weapons. Anyway, anti-nuclear demonstrations in Japan are reported in the press, and Iceland's one correspondent in the US picks up an "analysis" from the think tank run by Admiral La Roche...

*Q: He was a retired admiral who took a more progressive view of military matters.*

ERICSON: Yes, a retired Rear Admiral who had had high level access intelligence material, where he developed a severe case of nuclear allergy...and left the service to campaign for abolition of all nuclear weapons. His attitude was doubtless sincere but his methods were underhand.

Anyway, when this nuclear fuss erupted in Japan, his organization published and distributed a list of US bases worldwide where nuclear weapons just must be stored, allegedly based on the kinds of delivery systems known to be at or near such bases and the nature of their missions. And site number three was Keflavik, cited because of its anti-nuclear submarine mission and the presence of P-3's which are capable, of delivering nuclear anti-submarine weapons. The analysis argued that because the P-3's mission would almost certainly require the use of nuclear weapons, there had to be nuclear weapons on the base because there wouldn't be time to deliver them after the outbreak of hostilities.. Ergo, there are nuclear weapons at the base.

The Icelandic correspondent in Washington, who is a stringer, sent this report I and, as allegations of their kind usually do, it huge newspaper publicity in Iceland. And it inspired the first demonstration against a friendly embassy since the cod war when hundreds of people assembled. Well, we had people marching by too. Two or three hundred people, some of them women with baby carriages and with toddlers in hand. It was a sort of sad parade but they were protesting American nuclear policy and the stationing of weapons at the base. The foreign minister at the time was Olafur Johansson, President of the Progressive Party, the socialist-leaning party. Basically a good guy to work with within the limitations of his party's policies and no fool... But he was responsive to his constituency and he called me in and said in effect that things were so difficult and that pressure from within his party and from the public was threatening the life of the government that unless I could authorize him to tell the Icelanders publicly that we had assured him there were no weapons at the base..... Well, you know...

*Q: You are an old Japan hand so you knew.*

ERICSON: I rejoined, "Well, I am sorry Mr. Minister but I do not have the authority to do that. As you know the policy of the United States government is and always will be neither to

acknowledge or deny the existence of nuclear weapons anywhere on American bases. The reason for that is surely obvious: that to do so in one instance means we have to do it in every instance. There can be no exceptions for the sake of all." I said, "May I do remind you, Mr. Minister, that the base is a joint use base and you control the access to that base. Your police guard the perimeter, your police control everything that comes in and out of the place on the ground. Your people have free access to the base. There is that one ammunition dump and if you look at that ammunition dump you would realize that it is just that, an ammunition dump. But I cannot say whether or not there are nuclear weapons on the base." "Oh, you must, you must." He said he could not accept a turndown from me and demanded that I get authority from Washington. So, I went to Washington and Washington came back and said that they must stand by their policy. I relayed this to the foreign minister and he said, "That is not satisfactory."

Meanwhile the demonstrations had gotten a little bit worse and one night the embassy suffered a rocket attack. We were attacked by rockets fired by Icelanders. In the middle of the night, two of them climbed up on the flat tarpaper roof of the garage across the street from the residence. They carried with them two skyrockets and a large cardboard box, in one end of which about halfway up they had cut two three-inch holes, so that when the rockets were inserted nose up in the holes, the rear end of the rockets would hit the garage roof. They put these things in position, aimed them at the residence, across the street, lit the fuses and scrambled. The rockets, of course, went "wham" across the street and hit the residence wall, then fell to the sidewalk, burned and sputtered out.

The marine guard who was on duty that night saw the rockets cross the street. By the time he got to the door and found out what it was, he saw that the garage and saw that the garage was on fire because the exhaust from the rockets had ignited the tar paper roof. So he called the fire department and other marines - their house was in the chancery-residence compound - helped put out the fire. Anyway, that is the first time an American embassy has ever been rocketed from such close range. An example of what life was really like in Iceland!

Olafur - in Iceland you are called by your first name, not your patronymic - said the Department's response was not satisfactory. Iceland was a special case. We should be able to give him assurances. He could not understand why we couldn't. The State Department actually authorized me, as they had a predecessor years before, to brief the Foreign Minister on the facts of the situation but only in absolute confidence with ironclad assurances that he would divulge the information to no one, literally to no one.

Olafur could not accept this condition and he was mad -----after all that Iceland had done for the United States in providing this land and submitting itself to this occupation for all these many years. He wanted to speak personally to the Secretary of State. So I arranged in another exchange of immediates to have him speak to Secretary Muskie at a NATO meeting in Turkey scheduled for the upcoming week.

This took some doing. Muskie really didn't want to meet with this guy on this subject and asked for a corridor chat. So, it was arranged that they would meet in the corridor for a little chat and Olafur would have his chance to state his piece and get the word directly from the Secretary. The Secretary was well briefed on everything involved and he met Olafur in the corridor and they had

their little chat. Instead of following the script, though, Muskie chose to say, "I will think about it." This, of course, inspired hope in Olafur's heart. The Secretary said, "I will let you know before I leave here." What he had planned to do I don't know, but in the end he sent George Vest, then Assistant Secretary for European Affairs, to tell Olafur that our policy was immutable and to regret that we could not accede to his request.

Knowing Vest, I am sure he put it in the very best way possible. But Olafur just blew his stack, not so much because the answer was no, because he after all had had his day in court, but to raise his hopes and then send a messenger to dash them - too much! The smaller a country is the greater its pride and sensitivity to slights. Here you had a man who was the head of a minority party who felt that he was running against his party's interests in conducting this relationship with us, and he felt really slighted, demeaned insulted.. Anyway, he came back with steam almost literally coming out of his ears and there was serious talk that since the United States was unable to help the Icelandic government do what was necessary to calm the unrest, then the United States should be told to pack up and go. The talk got to be pretty serious.

The other negotiations about the terminal and other places...their demands financially were exorbitant. They wanted to build a palace. Their labor costs were just out of this world and they wanted to do it all on overtime. Everything was at a standstill and the situation looked pretty black..

I cabled Washington that we now had an even worse problem with a major Icelandic politician and that we had a critical job of feather soothing to do. I said I didn't know how to do it except on a personal basis from high levels in the United States government. We had to get Olafur down to Washington and get him a very high level massage to calm him down..

It so happened that a United Nations meeting was about to convene and I strongly recommended the treatment start there...Washington came through in great style, and I credit Vest and Dennis Goodman, our junior but very capable desk officer, plus the Defense Department and CINCLANT, who had quickly developed a proper concern about the fate of Keflavik. The Department suggested he meet Muskie in New York in a formal setting to discuss Olafur's problem and he get his explanation from Muskie. Then we fly him to Washington in a special mission aircraft. He has a meeting with the Vice President, who had visited Iceland, and ..this is a foreign minister, mind you, of a country of 125,000 people. He gets the Presidential box at the Kennedy Center for a performance in the evening, and the next morning he calls on the Secretary of Defense, who entertains him at lunch. Then CINCLANT takes him to Norfolk on a naval aircraft for an honor guard ceremony and a tour of the base, followed by dinner on board the Admiral's barge while cruising the harbor . And then by naval aircraft back to New York and reality.

That is what we did in effect and it was all superlative, except for his meeting with Muskie. Really nothing much was said or settled and he came out still feeling a little unhappy, but Vice President Mondale received us the next morning in Washington and made the gesture that turned everything around... President Carter was supposed to be out on a political campaign trip, this was in the middle of 1980, I guess, so Mondale was going to receive Olafur. The President wouldn't have received the foreign minister anyway, I don't believe. But Mondale had us over to

his office and we were five or six in our party including Olafur, Icelandic Ambassador, Johannesson, Hordur Helgasson me, and several others I can't remember. . During the conversation, which was going very well, Mondale stood up and said, "Just a minute I have to go do something." He left the office and came back in a few moments and said, "Come with me," and we all traipsed down through the Rose Garden into the Oval Office and there was the President of the United States with photographers at the ready. Jimmy Carter shook hands with Olafur and it made the front page of all the newspapers in Iceland the next day. The glow on Olafur's face was blinding.

I might say, that in introducing us to Carter, Mondale put on a real tour de force. He had been to Reykjavik and had met me and Olafur and the Icelandic Ambassador, but not the other people in this group. But he accompanied each introduction to the President with some personal remarks.. He pronounced every name properly - no mean feat - Hordur is pronounced herther - and showed an intimate knowledge of everyone. For instance, when he introduced me he said, "Here is Dick Ericson. He is a good Norwegian like me from Minnesota, yet. He has been our ambassador there for two years and he and his wife get along very well with the Icelandic people and have a great liking and affection for them." He told who Olaf was, what his party was and stood for, how difficult it must be for him to be foreign minister and to support our base presence when his party was opposed. He did an absolutely masterly job which must have impressed Olaf greatly.

We had a good evening at the Kennedy Center, although I had a hell of a time getting into the locked refrigerator. We went on to Norfolk and here I was worried because I knew they were going to have an honor guard as we got off the airplane and I didn't know how this little pacifist - he looked a little like Khrushchev, incidentally, being short, round and ruddy, with Khrushchev's sense of style in clothing - would react to a display of military pomp.. Well, it went beautifully. At the bottom of the steps he was greeted by CINCLANT himself who, assisted by two of the most attractive female naval officers I have ever seen, led him to a waiting jeep with a stand and hold bar in the back. This little civilian, flapping pants and all, and the tall admiral in full regalia inspected what seemed like 10,000 naval personal assembled there for the ceremony. . They gave him the gun salute as befitting foreign minister. He was helped out of the jeep by these two pretty women who accompanied him from then on as his official aides. The rest of us sort of dragged along behind. I have never seen anybody so buttered up in all my life. And then, of course, there was a trip through a fantasy world on the boat that night. It was all very, very successful. Olaf felt like he had been treated as befitting the foreign minister of a NATO European country and he went back to New York and then on to Iceland. And that was the last we heard from him about nuclear weapons on the base.

He was never told that there were no nuclear weapons on the base, which is what he wanted to be told. He went back and made a statement the exact nature of which I don't remember but he said something to the effect that we have nothing to worry about there is no cause to be concerned here, we are in control. And that is the way it ended.

That was the major event of my tenure in Iceland. We had occasional visitors, not very many. Rarely a newspaperman. Mondale did visit us, a totally disastrous visit from my point of view, although he seemed to enjoy it. Mondale had his own agenda. He wanted to get back to Norway - it was the time of "Roots." He wanted to see the town of Mundahl from which his people had

sprung and was apparently his family's original name. Officially it was billed as a Nordic swing, but Mondale's real objective was to visit Mundahl. Somewhere in the archives there is an exchange of telegrams in which Washington asks Oslo if the citizens of Mundahl would resent it if this large party - I recall it was a full airplane of 50 or 60 people - monopolized what must be all available hotel rooms in the place at the Easter season. Oslo replies to the effect that Mrs. Olson had two rooms in her boarding house, but beyond that there are no accommodations. In the end they had to put up people in ships provided for the occasion and a few of them in other little townships.

The proposal was that they make this Nordic swing during the Easter recess in the United States. This is rather typical of the way Americans plan overseas visits - to ignore what goes on in the countries receiving them. Their first stop, of course, was going to be Iceland and Easter in Iceland is celebrated much more widely than Christmas. Easter is the time when the weather and light situations have improved to the point that Icelanders can finally stir out of town. So the whole country shuts down for the Easter weekend, which officially lasts four days. During this holiday, there is no activity in Iceland of any kind. Easter week is sacrosanct. There are no newspapers published. The TV doesn't broadcast. Stores are closed. The government goes on leave. There was nothing, the place just shut down.. Everybody went out into the country for their first expedition to their country homes and that sort of thing, or they just took things easy.

I tried to point out to the planners back home that this is the worst possible time for the the Vice President to come. The government's ministers were probably among those planning to hop over to some sunny isle in the Mediterranean and get some sun shine, or go out to the countryside. This is just not the time to do it. I said that there was another little problem and that is if you do come and they do have to provide the security, entertainment and all, you are going to eat up three quarters of their representation budget for the year. And this is serious.

Well, it went unheeded and the party came at Easter. Mondale remarked to me that he was so disappointed at the total lack of interest in the terminal , on the way to the Saga Hotel and in the hotel lobby. There was no vice presidential attention. I explained to him again, apparently it hadn't gotten through to him, what Easter weekend meant. In the end it did cost three quarters of the Icelandic government's representational budget and emergency budget for that year to provide the police escorts and security and the entertainment they did for Mondale and his party. They had to pay double and triple overtime because of the holiday. Other than that, he was a great guest.

*Q: He's a very nice man.*

ERICSON: Yes, he is a very nice man. His wife was fine. She, of course, is deeply interested in art and has written a book called "Art in Politics" of which she gave an inscribed copy to Betty. Betty took her all around looking for a noteworthy Icelandic artist. Everybody in Iceland is either an artist or poet or something like that because the long winter nights are conducive to poetry and paintings. I have been invited to galleries owned by artists to come in and see their 448 latest paintings. Iceland is a determined cultural center. They will have everything that any European capital has. They have a ballet and the chorus is clumsy. They have a symphony orchestra and Askenazyi, who married an Icelander, spent several seasons up there, as I was told, trying to

make something of it and finally said, "I am never coming back to Iceland." They have libraries, theaters, museums, etc. But they don't have the talent pool, and so the quality of whatever they do is not what you might hope for..

Anyway, Mrs. Mondale enjoyed herself for two days looking at Icelandic art. As far as they were concerned it was a successful trip and they were welcomed warmly by a lot of officials who made themselves available, but not by as much of the public as would have turned out if it had been any time but Easter. Since then, of course, we have held presidential summit meetings in Iceland. I don't know what kind of strains the Icelandic government was under that time.

*Q: This was when Ronald Reagan and Gorbachev met in Reykjavik.*

ERICSON: That Mondale visit was the major operation of that type that occurred while I was there. We did have some visits by various Senators. Senator Baker of Tennessee (R) was one of them. Whenever he went to Europe, he had the plane refuel in Iceland no matter how far out of the way it might be. He came by three times while I was there. He was a photographer. He always got off the airplane with one or two cameras around his neck and, of course, Iceland is a tremendous photographic territory. Senator Tower came with him twice on these things. Senator Hiramakawa from California..... who interestingly enough was probably the most knowledgeable senator about Iceland because he had been raised in Winnipeg, his parents were Canadian Nisei, which is where many of the Icelanders who migrated went. He lived in the same area of the city they did and knew many of their leaders.

*Q: He was a linguist who got involved with the Icelandic tongue.*

ERICSON: He had written a very famous text on linguistics that he wanted to get translated into Icelandic. He was looking for Icelandic financing to do it, but never found it. In terms of knowledge he knew about Iceland and the Icelanders because he had read the sagas, talked to Icelanders and grown up with them.

Other than that, we aroused very little public interest in the United States during the whole period I was there.

Politically, there was one interesting development while I was there. The government headed by the Independent Party was defeated in an election and a coalition headed by what we regarded as leftist elements took over. But that proved manageable. One of the things about Iceland is that it has proportional representation system.. There are two elements in the voting for the Althing.. One is for candidates in ones individual district and the other for candidates in a national constituency. Thus the Althing, which is the oldest continuing sitting parliament in the world, contains a very broad spectrum of representatives and virtually any political party that can qualify can get some representation. But it also means political parties proliferate and no one party will probably ever garner a majority and the right to form a government by itself. There always has to be a coalition. Whoever leads the coalition always has a brake on him of some kind from some group that can break away if it is unhappy with the policy, which tends to push things always towards the middle. Maybe that is good - I don't know.

The most interesting political development that occurred while I was there was the election of a woman president. The president when I arrived was an archeologist, sort of a frustrating profession in Iceland because there is little to study. There was no one before the Vikings and they constructed virtually everything of wood, and the traces are long gone. But apparently there was some archeological work to make him one of the country's most distinguished citizens before he became president. He served as president for a couple of years and then the election for his replacement came up. For an American this is a strange process to observe because the Icelanders are much more low key about this kind of thing. The presidency is a ceremonial post, by and large. He or she is the embodiment of the spirit of the Icelandic people. The president is the only Icelandic citizen who has any servants, which sort of sets him or her apart, and lives in a very large house out on a point on the other side of the bay from Reykjavik, which makes for sort of conspicuous living, if somewhat isolated.

Candidates for the election were announced. They were four or five well-known, relatively distinguished, fairly dull Icelandic male citizens. Some fellow on a fishing boat wrote to a lady named Vigdis Finnbogadottir, director of the largest private theater in Iceland. Vigdis was a very handsome blonde, probably at that time around 45 years old. She had been a television instructor of French. Her father was professor of mathematics at the University of Iceland. A distinguished woman in many respects, a good actress and quite attractive. She had had quite a notorious love affair with a man of Icelandic descent named Magnus Magnusson, who was the BBC's authority on all things Nordic. He used to fly back and forth from Iceland from time to time. Anyway, Vigdis had married, had a child and divorced, but she was theatrical Iceland in many senses of the word. The man on the fishing boat got an inspiration one day after he had looked at the male candidates, I guess, and wrote to her and said, "Why don't you run? You could beat these guys. I dare you." She had been to our house a number of times and we knew her fairly well. She said, "I took the dare and entered the campaign."

Well, the presidential campaign in Iceland is small coffee parties. Candidates do not represent parties, they are just individuals. Then there is the television campaign. Television reaches most of Iceland, but there are severe restrictions on campaign appearances. There is one television appearance per candidate. Of course, it is national television without commercials, so this can be controlled. Not only is there only one appearance per candidate, they all appear together seated behind a table and are asked questions in turn by a group of two or three newspaper reporters. I watched it on television, of course. That evening the men were all dressed in grey suits with dark ties, and looking very sober and then there was this vivid blonde dressed in white. Every time one of the others was asked a question, Vigdis would examine her fingers or pull at her earlobe or toss her hair. She did a marvelous job of stealing the scene with little pieces of acting technique. Of course she stood out anyway - she could have sat there like a mummy and she would have stood out. And she made sense when she talked. So, lo and behold, we woke up and found most of the women in Iceland had voted for Vigdis and certainly a good part of the men, because she won a very large victory. She has been President of Iceland ever since. This interestingly enough makes her the first popularly elected woman chief of state in history. There is no other woman who has been elected by the population in a direct election to be the chief of state. There have been female prime ministers, but they were either heads of government and not chiefs of state, and elected by parties or legislatures, not by the public directly..

Anyway, Vigdis is still the president of Iceland and some time after my departure the women of Iceland formed their own Women's Party, which may also be unique in the history of parliaments. I am told it is now the party that holds the casting votes when governments are formed.

Incidentally, I took Tony Kochanek there as my DCM. This meant if I wanted to work, I could and if I didn't want to work, Tony was certainly capable of doing it. I had a DCM in whom I had considerable faith and trust.

As time went on some things got a little bit wearing, particularly on my family. We arrived in November. Charlotte said she never saw the road to the base at Keflavik until March because she would get up in the pitch dark and leave at 7:00 in the morning on a school bus that took three or four embassy kids out to the base school 28 miles away and it was again pitch dark by the time school let out in the afternoon. She graduated from the high school there and was only too glad to come back to the United States to college for the third year. It was a small school and not the best. There is no American community in Iceland, incidentally. There are a few Americans who are married to Icelanders, who do not transplant very easily. There is no American business community. There is no missionary community. We had an occasional Mormon missionary come on their two year missions. But other than that there is no American presence other than the embassy in town. There is the base, of course. But there are very severe restrictions on what can be taken off and Reykjavik has few temptations - for one thing entertainment is very expensive. The Icelanders would isolate it totally if they could because they do not want American goods made available. They don't want too much contact with Americans. There is the racial problem. So the restrictions put on the base, and Icelanders do control entry and egress, is largely in the form of what kind of things you can take on and off, particularly off. The base people for example cannot take food off the base. You can't go off into the lava fields and have a picnic unless you have taken a bite out of your hamburger or opened your coke before you leave. Petty little things like that. Military people coming off the base are subject to search by the guards at the entrance. So, by and large, they confine themselves to the base and the base is a very, very sad place indeed.

One thing that gets to people is the light situation. After passed a couple of years in the latitudes, you sit back and realize it isn't one long winter night or one long summer day. It is a constantly changing situation where the days grow shorter, shorter and shorter and rather rapidly until you have pitch dark except for three or four hours of kind of a murky dusk, when the sun if it can be said to rise, just barely comes above the horizon and sort of skitters around it for a while and then goes down. Then it steadily changes until you have twenty hours of daylight and four hours of a kind of twilight. But when you are going through it you think, "Gee, I am in the middle of this bloody tunnel and when is it ever going to get light again?" Or you say, "When the hell is it ever going to get dark again so I can get some sleep?" Either way it is not conducive to sleeping because when it is dark, you stay up too long because there doesn't seem to be any night, it is always night. And in the summertime for the same reason you stay up late because it is light and there is really nothing but the clock to mark the beginning of night. This light and dark situation can effect some people rather adversely. And Betty, my wife, got so it bugged her terribly.



The Icelanders are warm and friendly enough, but they are an insular people and have spent their whole history with their elbows out in the knowledge that any foreigner coming over the horizon has come to do them in the eye. They are very slow to accept foreigners and mistrust most of them. They do like Americans best of all and if that is the case then they really don't have much love for anybody else. The Norwegians, of course, they look to as their source of their culture and for that reason their attitude towards Norwegians is relatively friendly. The Danes were their masters for 800 years and they do not like the Danes. The Brits are an economic threat and they are not very happy about them. They really don't like anybody terribly, except for Icelanders. I have seen a member of a distinguished Reykjavik family, one of the few people who keeps a family name, arguing with some other Icelander at a dinner party, and the other Icelander is pounding the table and saying "You damned Germans!" There is nothing German, except his distant origins, about this guy - his family has been Icelandic for 400 years, but it illustrates this insular, xenophobic streak.

*Q: So, you left there....?*

ERICSON: Well, I retired in 1980. There were certain financial advantages to my doing it at that time. But they asked me to stay on for a year as a political appointee. Betty had said also that she would make just one more move, she had had it with the Foreign Service. One of the problems for her was that she had to do almost everything herself in terms of representation.

*Q: We left at a certain point, I think you reach...*

ERICSON: We had worked with a number of senior wives who, to say the least, were among the more difficult -- Wahwee MacArthur, Pat Johnson, Alice Meyer, Eleanor Porter. Some of these made things difficult by their presence and there were a few others their lack of interest. Whatever it was, Betty always seemed to think she got more than her share, but she always pitched in and did what she thought was expected of a good Foreign Service wife. But when we got to Iceland there was nobody there to help her. Tony didn't bring his wife. We had one wife that we wished we hadn't had and the others were just not that interested, and a couple of the officers were bachelors. So, here she was faced with the burden of running the residence with a minimum of help. Icelanders don't do household work, so we had a Danish woman married to an Icelander as our housekeeper, who browbeat her daughter into helping her half time. That was the residence staff. Betty made a mistake perhaps in firing the cook right away, an English woman who drank too much, and we were never able to replace her. Now, we could have brought somebody from the United States in theory, but we looked around and saw people doing that from other countries and it never worked. They all lost them after six or eight months. So, we never made the effort.

What you did in Iceland to entertain, was to engage the troop of Danish women, most of whom had married Icelanders, who were willing to do this kind of work. We called them the Danish Mafia. Whenever an embassy party or official government party was given, the doyen of this group and her ten or twelve cohorts put it all together, served it and cleaned up - literally and figuratively. They were expensive. When you went to the French embassy for cocktails on Tuesday, there were the Danish Mafia. If you went to the British embassy on Friday, there were the Danish Mafia. You went to the president's house for dinner and there were the Danish Mafia.

So we passed them from one to another. The fact that the Icelanders wouldn't permit the importation of any foreign meats or vegetables, made it very difficult for others to entertain. We had the commissary stuff, so of course we were fortunate.. The other embassies were hard put to serve anything special unless they had it shipped by diplomatic pouch. You couldn't go to the market, for example, and buy a turkey or a ham. You could buy mutton, you could buy lamb, you could buy fish.

Anyway, Betty was very unhappy with this situation and she was essentially lonely, because although she had some Icelandic friends, that never works out terribly well and there were no American women around except at the base. She and Mrs. Martini were very good friends but they lived 30 miles apart. She said to me, "I will make one more move with you Richard and that is back to Washington, DC After that if you want to go somewhere, you may, but I am not coming with you." She also missed the kids being that far away.

So I resigned from the Foreign Service in 1980 but stayed on as a political appointee. They said I could stay until November, which was when the lease on this house expired. In the event, my successor got into difficulties at his assignment which necessitated a quick posting for him. They decided to bounce me, since I was so vulnerable, being a political appointee and obviously intending to leave the service, so in August, 1981, three months ahead of time, we left Reykjavik and the Foreign Service.

**KENNETH YATES**  
**Public Affairs Officer, USIS**  
**Reykjavik (1982-1985)**

*Kenneth Yates was born in Connecticut in 1940. He served overseas in the U.S. Army from 1969-1962 and received a BA from the University of Pennsylvania in 1967. After entering USIA in 1967, he was posted abroad in Seoul, Kabul, Tokyo, Reykjavik and Beijing. Mr. Yates was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1997.*

*Q: Today is April 11, 1997. Ken, we are in Iceland. Is this a normal assignment or one requested?*

YATES: This was sort of an odd situation. I was getting ready to move on to another assignment from Tokyo when I got a call asking if I would be willing to go to Iceland as Public Affairs Officer. Being a PAO in my business is something you very much want to become. It gives you the opportunity to design your own program, to struggle with the many details of communicating with your audience, and to get a seat in the discussions of policy. I had no previous wish or thought of ever going to Iceland on assignment. I didn't know much about it. The situation was that my predecessor there had evidently run into some rough waters with the ambassador and was coming out rather quickly. They needed someone to go in right away who they thought could put some oil on the troubled waters.

*Q: I might add that often diplomacy is more within an embassy or a consulate or in the Department of State.*

YATES: That is certainly true. The case in point was the ambassador at the time.

*Q: Who was that?*

YATES: It was Marshall Bremont, who had previously had experience with USIA. He had been a PAO in Indonesia many years before, so he knew USIA work and had some very clearly defined ideas of what a Public Affairs Officer should do for him. His concepts and expectations obviously were not being met by my predecessor.

The embassy in Iceland was in a unique position, although this is not unusual, but for a European country perhaps it is. Much of the embassy's work was public affairs. The reason was that our major connection with Iceland was political and related to our image rather than the more tangible issues typical of most embassies. Certainly among the major factors was not bilateral trade, because Iceland was too small to be a significant trading partner. Its principal export, salted fish, had no market in the US, and its resources were mainly in hydro and thermal power, something that does not transport easily. One of its most famous exports, natural wool sweaters, proved too warm for much of the climate in the US. Tourism had leap-frogged over Iceland with the advent of long range jets which allowed non-stop travel between the U.S. and European capitals. Iceland had been a major stopover on the trans-Atlantic routes in the days of the propeller airplanes which could not carry enough fuel to make the leap in one hop.

In fact, our automobile companies had sort of abandoned Iceland. Whereas they had sold virtually every car on the road in Iceland up to a few years previously, at the time I served there, the Japanese had taken over the automobile business. The Icelandic market was just too small to bother with. GM, for instance, covered Iceland from its sales office in Greece. Iceland didn't export much to the U.S. except sweaters and some artifacts.

Iceland is an unusual country. Icelanders claim to have the oldest, continuous parliament in the world. The Danes invaded and took control in the 1400s and for a while there, it was a breach in the Icelandic democracy. But in spirit, they have a pretty good claim to being one of the record holders. There is still very deep seated resentment, I think, toward the Danes because of their occupation. Danish used to be their official language, but they scotched that very quickly. In some curious way, the Icelandic experience parallels that of Korea where the Japanese took over and changed things like language, the economy, and the educational system.

*Q: Just as an historical note, the Danes came in when and why?*

YATES: I'm not certain of the exact date. They came in as part of their empire building. Iceland is a northern European society. Their roots are old Norse. Without much argument, it is the oldest language in continual use in Europe. A modern Icelander can pick up the sagas, which are some of Europe's oldest recorded history. The Icelandic "skalds" (loosely translated as poets) wrote some of the earliest history preserved in Europe. They had nothing else to do up there, I guess, except to learn to read and write. And they did that. Most Icelanders consider themselves to be at least amateur poets, authors, artists, or having some other skill concerned with the arts. They have a very strong affinity for the arts.

They have a parliament called the Althing which is very old. It goes way, way back to when the chiefs of the different tribes on the islands would get together and have what was essentially a parliament to make provisions for the governance of the entire community. Icelanders feel very strongly that theirs is an important contribution to the democratic tradition. It is a fascinating place to be. The more I studied it, the more profound the history became. Then again, perhaps something similar can be said about most cultures.

*Q: You were there from 1982 until when?*

YATES: Until 1985: three years. Iceland is technically in Europe but is positioned about half way across the North Atlantic—a very critical place and why public relations are so important there. During the Cold War, much of the Soviet strength was in the Kola Peninsula which sticks up north of Europe. The only outlets from the peninsula without crossing other national boundaries are either by air or by sea, right past Iceland. That meant if we wanted to keep track of Soviet surface, air, and sub-surface activity in the whole Atlantic region, Iceland was the right place to do it. The U.S. military felt that it probably was the single most important military outpost outside the continental US, except, of course, for Hawaii. It was the base they valued the most outside the United States, because it controlled the whole access to the North Atlantic. The Soviets could come out via the Mediterranean, of course, but it was harder because they had to go past all those countries and get through the Straits of Bosphorus and Gibraltar.

A special problem for them was their very large nuclear fleet. Virtually all the Atlantic Soviet nuclear submarine force was based on the Kola Peninsula. It was from there that they could threaten the entire eastern seaboard of the US. When their air flights would go to Cuba, for example, the bombers flying on missions for armament supply or communications, they had to fly right by Iceland because they couldn't overfly Norway or other parts of northern Europe. They had to fly over international waters which meant past Iceland. When they came around the top of the Kola Peninsula, the Norwegians would pick them up on their radar and scramble interceptors to escort them, and then they would pass them off to the U.S. Navy in Keflavik, a base outside of Reykjavik. Keflavik would watch until they, in turn, passed them off to the Brits who would then carry on the monitoring of the flights until they were well along into the Atlantic. U.S. commands would pick them up again when they got closer to Cuba. By then, they were well identified, and we knew exactly who they were and where they were going.

The submarine activity was the most important part, because they were missile boats which would be stationed off the east coast of the United States and a direct threat to our society. They had to pass by Iceland through a rather narrow channel. They were watched by U.S. technical means.

Another aspect of the security situation was that Iceland was also one of our most important points of contact with the Soviets during the Cold War, because of the large Russian fishing fleet that was out there. They were always getting themselves into trouble. The North Atlantic is treacherous water and difficulties for fishing fleets are not uncommon. If you are bent on finding difficulty, that is probably where you will find it.

The U.S. Navy had based an air and sea rescue unit with the “Jolly Green Giant” helicopters at Keflavik. In 20-30 minutes, they could be over almost any spot in the region. They were always rescuing Icelandic fishermen who fell overboard or were injured on a boat. They would go out and pick them up and bring them back to a hospital. We lived in a house in a valley just south of Reykjavik, and just up the hill was the main hospital where the helicopters would take people. At all hours of the day and night, you could hear the chop, chop, chop of the incoming helicopters. Because it was a service that was used often, for Icelandic fishermen the base at Keflavik was a very important benefit. Others in the society found the Keflavik Search and Rescue Teams a great comfort as well, since many of them were related to fishermen. They had sons, husbands, whatever, out on the water and in constant danger out there because of freak storms. You couldn’t survive very long out there in the cold North Atlantic water. You had to get out quickly. You can’t do that by boat, you have to do it by air.

We had incidents where Russian submarines ran into trouble under water and had to surface. At those times, people may have been injured, or there was a fire on the boat, or something happened to cause casualties. The U.S. Navy would go out, pick them up, and bring them to the hospital. Usually, the Russian ambassador would then come over and present his appreciation to our ambassador for the act of assistance. It actually made for quite a happy relationship there between the Russians and the Americans in Iceland.

One of the more curious aspects of the security situation in Iceland was the position of the Chinese Embassy accredited to Reykjavik. The Chinese Embassy in Iceland was one of their largest, and the Chinese ambassador never failed to get any American he could find in a corner and lecture him or her on the importance of NATO. It was a strange phenomenon, to have one of the major communist powers in the world lecturing the head of the democratic bloc that they had to maintain strong defenses in the North Atlantic. But our presence in Keflavik and effectiveness in keeping an eye on possible Soviet adventures in the North Atlantic was important to the Chinese, because it bottled up a major portion of the Soviet forces that might otherwise be positioned against the Chinese.

So Iceland was a very important place in terms of security concerns. On the other hand, Icelanders are very independent. They are an island people, and fishing is a tough and often solitary occupation. In this country if you know New England well, you will understand the breed of independent and tough-minded people. If you are a foreigner in Iceland, you are not considered very desirable, you are an interloper who is often left alone unless there is specific business to be dealt with. Therefore, the presence of about 5,000 Americans just outside of the capital was irksome to many. One said to me once that, in terms of proportions, it was as if a quarter million Germans or others were to be quartered just outside of Washington DC. How would we Americans feel in such a situation?

So they sometimes were uncomfortable with the American base at Keflavik. There was a strong communist movement in the country. Physically, Iceland is quite large. If you look at it on the map and locate the major population centers, it is very much like Afghanistan in some ways. There is a mountainous range in the middle and around the edge along the coast is where everybody lives, whereas in Afghanistan they would be arrayed along their landlocked borders.

Reykjavik had a population of about 860,000 people when we were there; not a very big city, but it contained more than half of the country's population.

Of course, there were small towns and villages scattered along the coast line. These generally isolated communities were a hot bed of communist activity, particularly within the trade union movement. It is a little hard to measure Icelandic political involvement; because the country is so small, it has more of the characteristics of a village or small city than it does of a major power.

However, this small country is a member of NATO and the UN. Its voice is important in world affairs. But the Foreign Ministry is very, very small. All of the government staff could probably fit into a not-so-large auditorium. This intimacy can lead to surprising situations. When we first arrived, for example, we were in town for two or three days when one of my staff came to me and asked if I would mind going over and having a session with the president. I said that it was unusual for a Public Affairs Officer to be invited by the president of the country to have a chat, one on one. "Oh, yes," was the reply, "please bring your wife."

Vigdís Finnbogadóttir was president and probably still is. We replied, of course, we would go whenever she wanted us to appear. We went to her modest office and spent about 45 minutes in her office, chatting about where we had been, what we had done, what our plans were in Reykjavik, and about ourselves. She is a very engaging woman who was a French teacher, yet spoke very fluent English, like 99 percent of her countrymen, it seemed. Their intonation is strangely American, which is odd, since they have such a strong influence from the continent. Television, for example, is virtually all BBC.

The president's office shares a house with the prime minister's. You walk into the center corridor of the house, and on one side is the president's office and on the other, the prime minister's. Literally, you could walk along the outside of the building, tap on the window and wave to the president as she worked at her desk. More than likely, she would wave back and return to her duties without another thought. There was absolutely no security. By law, no guns are allowed in Iceland except a few hunting rifles which were very carefully controlled. So there was a very low physical threat, although we did have a bomb threat at my center.

That incident was rather strange and came at a time when we were preparing for the visit of then-Vice President Bush. Although he was stopping only as a courtesy and for a brief rest after an official visit to Moscow, the Icelanders were excited and our small staff were working flat out in support of the incoming mission. One afternoon just after the visit began, we were all working in the third floor offices of the American Center building when someone discovered a suspicious package on the stair landing. No one had been seen coming in or leaving the building, and no one could account for the package. It was innocuous enough, but had a message scribbled on the top of it saying something like "for Israel." Well, that was enough for me; we evacuated the building and called embassy security to deal with our problem.

That was not a welcome notice. Our American Center was across town from where the Vice President was housed, and even the press center at the hotel was several blocks away. The Vice President's security did not want to deal with the situation, since there was evidently no direct threat to the Vice President and his party. Of course, we could not resume work and had to find a

way to remove the offending package so that we could get back to work. I could not allow the staff, or anyone for that matter, to re-enter the building. We went back to the phones to insist someone take some action. Finally the Icelandic police were called in and embassy security showed up.

Although Iceland has no military, it does have a police force, and there is a special unit in the police that is formed to deal with emergencies. With their jaunty berets and special equipment, that force would, from time to time, practice emergency storming of our building as a part of their emergency training. They were always fun to watch during their drills, but most usually did so with a sense of humor since no one really believed that they would ever be called upon. Yet there we were standing outside of our Center building when the Icelandic version of a Swat Team arrived. All agreed that it probably was a fake, but no one could be sure. That meant that they could not just go in and pick it up, and there were none of the special devices available to go and fetch bombs that you see on TV. The fire department, which had also arrived to our growing scene of excitement, suggested that they take a hose and use it like a water cannon to blow it down the stairs. With visions in my head of the general destruction of our library from a high pressure water stream destroying much of what we had built in a plain but very attractive American library, we tried a bit of negotiation to find a less violent way.

Ultimately, we decided on a fishing technique. With a large fishhook and some strong line, we snagged the package and with the line running down two floors of stairs and out into the parking lot dragged the hooked package outside. Bouncing down the stairs shredded it fairly well without the feared explosion, and it was discovered to contain only animal feces. A bit of a smelly let down after all the excitement, but still a relief and the limp conclusion allowed us to get back to work in support of the visit.

Iceland is a fascinating place with a complicated set of political and national allegiances. If I remember correctly, three times in recent history, the Althing, their parliament, passed a resolution dis-inviting the U.S. from Keflavik. The American Naval Air Station there was noisy, and the local folk did not appreciate it any more when jets took off at 3 in the morning. So there were some base-community relations problems. The communists each year staged a march over the approximately 30 kilometers from Keflavik to downtown Reykjavik. They would drive or be bussed out to the base and then march back to Reykjavik with banners flying as a show of solidarity that the base should go. That was an annual, nettlesome problem for us. The communist movement, however, didn't have much else to talk about. That was essentially their issue around which to rally their supporters and demonstrate to others in Iceland their relevance to an issue that most people harbored some degree of frustration.

At the time, the country had very high inflation. It was so bad that they even despatched a team to Israel to see what could be done. Israel had a very successful program in controlling inflation, and it was thought that they might be able to provide answers for the Icelandic problem. To those of us who lived there, the problem was seemingly less complex than it was being made out. Iceland had a socialized system where there was free medical care, free education including university, and so on. The problem was that all those free items were very expensive. I would have debates over this with my staff. For example, I would come in at the start of business and one of my staff people wouldn't be there. I would ask where she was. "She isn't coming in today,

she has gone to the hospital.” That worried me. “The hospital, that’s terrible,” I fretted, “what’s wrong?” “She has a headache,” was the response. That puzzled me. “Why go to the hospital for a headache?” “Why not just take some aspirin and come to work?” With a wave of the hand my concerns were dismissed, “No, she will get something from the hospital.”

Sure enough, a couple of hours later she came in. She had been to the hospital, and they gave her aspirin. I asked why she went to the hospital when all it took was a couple of aspirin to solve the not very complicated problem. Her response was, “because it is free.” “But,” I protested, “it is not free, it costs money.” She took time away from the office, she had taken her own and the doctor’s time, time consuming paperwork was done, and there always was the “free” aspirin. My point was that somebody, somewhere has to pay for it.

And pay they did. Taxes were outrageously high, as they are in most socialized countries. It was very difficult to get them to understand that it wasn’t free and that they paid for it through their high taxes which they didn’t like and went to great lengths to get around. So there was a constant state of tension between the people and the government on paying taxes, but the people liked the idea of free schools, free college, and free medical treatment.

*Q: When you arrived there in 1982, I assume you sat down with the ambassador and he, having had problems with his former PAO there, must have been sort of the equivalent of a contract about what you were going to do. Could you talk about that?*

YATES: There was no contract. What I was supposed to do was in my marching orders from my agency. I didn’t work directly for the State Department, although every official American in the country has to account for the wishes of the ambassador. He is the man in charge, the personal representative of the President. I had to use the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) and the USIA Manual of Operations (MOA) as guides for what I did legally. There were some questions there about what was being done. An example was the USIA international visitors program, which the Ambassador considered his personal program. He would select the people to go, make the announcement, wish them well, and welcome them back. It was his direct connection. He saw it as a good tool through which to build contacts in Icelandic society and, of course, that is the program’s purpose.

But in terms of the strict legal aspects of the program, it should have been administered through a committee, not including the ambassador, that was to be formed within the embassy to review the people suggested for the international visitors program. That wasn’t operating at all in Iceland. I told the ambassador that it had to be done, but he did not want things done that way. He didn’t think it was efficient. He felt that the program would be most effective in the manner he preferred. My first reaction was that, by regulation, he could not manage things that way, but on the basis of the argument that it would be more effective in Iceland if he were to continue in that somewhat different approach, I agreed to give it a shot and see how things worked out.

Sure enough, we ran into some trouble very quickly. The trouble came when the ambassador felt the editor-in-chief for *Helgaposterin*, a communist tabloid, would be a good candidate to go to the United States. I agreed that he would make a good candidate. As the first step, the ambassador asked me to get the editor to come to his office to extend a formal invitation. The



catch was the ambassador wished that meeting to be the first news of the invitation. I was asked to bring the editor in without any particular pretext. Since the paper had strong communist leanings, that meant that the editor would be particularly queasy about simply walking into the American ambassador's office. I inquired what the ambassador expected me to give as the reason to the editor and got the response that he did not care, as long as I did not reveal the possibility of a grant.

So I called and asked if he would be willing to come to the embassy and pay a call on the ambassador. He naturally asked, "why?" I finally convinced him to make the call, and he grudgingly agreed to come. I met him at the front door of the embassy and escorted him to the ambassador's office where he sat on the sofa, still wearing a suspicious look. Ambassador Brement greeted him and said, "Well, thank you very much. I want to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime, to go and have a 30-day expenses paid visit to the United States. Isn't that wonderful? When can you leave?" The editor responded immediately, "No."

The ambassador was clearly taken aback; this probably had not happened to him before. There was an embarrassed and pregnant silence. The next words out of the ambassador's mouth were "Well, how is your family?" The conversation sort of dragged down from there. After about ten minutes more of embarrassed foot shuffling, I finally took the editor down stairs to put him in a cab. He was fuming. He said, "How can you people do this to me? What do you think I am? Is this a game?" Far from pleased with the prospect, he was explosively angry.

I attempted to put as good a face on the situation as I could and said, "Look, I will put you into a cab and get you back to your office; then in about a week I will come talk to you." That gave the editor a bit of time to reflect, and when I next got in touch with him, he had cooled to the point of seeing the benefit of such a month-long trip to the U.S.. When the trip was completed, the ambassador's instincts were confirmed. It was a good and constructive grant. For the editor of an important opinion-shaping weekly, it was an important trip. Following his almost uniformly positive travels in the U.S., the editor came to see the country as a more complex and attractive society than he had believed before. He was, therefore, an important and successful international visitor who finally realized what the program was. It was not an exercise in propaganda, but a first-person, direct exposure to the U.S. and its people and culture. The program was highly successful.

However, the painful beginnings had a salutary effect on the ambassador. After putting the editor in the cab, I had gone back up to the ambassador's office and said, "Look, this is the kind of reaction you risk. If I had informed the editor beforehand what was going to happen, none of this would have occurred. If he had been violently against the possibility of travel to the U.S., then we would have shut it off in the beginning, and you would never have had that embarrassing encounter. With the chance to ease the thought to him carefully, explaining the purposes and scope of the international visitor program, I probably could have talked him into seeing the good in the offer. By the time he arrived at the ambassador's office, he would have been able to graciously accept.

Ambassador Brement realized that was probably the case. So from there on out, we convened a committee as required by the USIA Manual of Operations and selected people from a group

nominated by those in the embassy who found candidates that would be suitable. The ambassador still made the official announcement to the selected individual. He would welcome them and give the official laying on of the hands. But we began the practice of telling people in advance that they had been nominated as an international visitor and that the ambassador would like to make the official announcement directly. In all subsequent nominations, they proved delighted to come. The process was thereby made whole and in compliance with the spirit and letter of the regulations. Yet that episode was an example of a difficult situation where the Ambassador was not comfortable with the way things were running, and there were some personality conflicts. The nominations he provided were almost always good, for he had close contact with a broad spectrum of Icelandic society. The international visitor committee at post, thereafter, usually approved those the ambassador nominated, but we did have a broader range of candidates to choose from and not infrequently found others who were equally deserving. The process became more solid.

There were other problems at the post. After my arrival, I found that the Fulbright Commission was almost entirely dysfunctional. There were too many egos involved in the management of the program, and the effort suffered as a result. The Fulbright Commission is the one that chooses Fulbright grantees to go to the U.S. for academic study. It is an important use of resources. In order to select the best candidates, you must examine a large number of applications and then have to make hard decisions on who is most qualified. The process is laborious and often tedious. Examining and comparing research fields and work proposals for what sometimes are arcane or radically different subjects makes for quick frustration and not always soundly developed conclusions.

The commission was not working in selecting candidates and had to be restructured. The ambassador knew it wasn't working but didn't feel that the post had previously failed to do the appropriate things to make it go. It was a tough situation. It took me about a year to rewrite the bylaws and get some rotation of those serving on the commission. What had happened was a group of fairly senior and well-respected people had been serving on the commission for a very long period of time. This had led to a gradual ossification in thought and policy. Nothing much moved. They regularly failed to come to any sort of consensus on program direction and this led to a slowing of initiatives. Each was stubborn and unwilling to yield on what they saw as matters of either principle or individual conviction. The Commission was having financial problems and difficulties holding on to the director and other staff.

I sat down with a young lawyer, a returned Fulbrighter, and, since I also served as chairman of the commission as a consequence of my duties as PAO, I could maneuver things to the point where we were able to rewrite the bylaws, get some of the older members to agree to yield their seats on the commission, and get some of the younger returning Fulbrighters as new members. After very gently massaging the egos of the long-standing members of the board and a gradual push to reform, things began to move. I hired a new director for the Fulbright Commission and things began to perk up a bit. The newly constituted board moved more quickly on nominations and agreement was obtained to keep business moving.

*Q: How did the library work there?*

YATES: We had a very good advantage in Iceland, because our USIS physical location was separate from the embassy. That was important for a variety of reasons, not least because there were a number of people in the embassy who were unhappy with their situation in Iceland. Ambassador Bremont was a very hard taskmaster, and some in the embassy did not appreciate his way of managing the staff. I quickly learned you never objected to anything in a staff meeting. It was possible to raise differing opinions at a later time, when he was willing to listen and was convincible. Holding a reasonable discussion on a pending decision at a staff meeting was impossible. Ambassador Bremont evidently felt that those meetings were primarily to disseminate his directives, rather than for obtaining the views or thoughts of the staff.

So if you felt strongly enough about things or had a different opinion, it was a tactical error to table it during a meeting. It was better to wait until the meeting was over, hold back a bit, and be the last one out the door. After all others had left the room, one could mention an idea as an afterthought, or shut the door and come back and say, "How about this?" Nine times out of ten, he was happy to listen and almost as many times would agree to what might be out of phase with what he had said in the meeting. I found him to be a nice person and very thoughtful - as long as there was not a meeting in progress. There were people who had really strong feelings against him at the embassy and that caused a bad atmosphere. There were occasions when someone would speak up at a meeting and be summarily cut to pieces by the ambassador. That was one of the primary causes of the hard feelings. Personally, Ambassador Bremont was a very shy person who evidently saw group discussions as adversarial or at least was uncomfortable enough to feel defensive about anyone who might raise a question or consider an alternative.

Since I was "across the lake," as it were, on the other side of the lake in the middle of town, I had the luxury, if I didn't get what I wanted, of putting my tale between my legs and going home. It was a small embassy, so interpersonal relationships of people working side by side all day long in very small quarters made for frayed personal relationships, and that exacerbated the personal relationships with the ambassador. Perhaps because of my distance and unwillingness to challenge any point made in a meeting, I never had significant difficulties with Ambassador Bremont. Rather, I came to respect his solid intellect and special, perhaps audacious, confidence in his own ability to set an objective and follow it through despite the reluctance of his staff. At times, I felt that he had little respect for the experience and capacities of those who worked for him and relied too much on his own. Consequently, many felt that any successes of the mission were assumed by the ambassador as his own, and any failings were seen as lapses by his staff. That, of course, led to hard feelings.

Yet when something spectacular was done, the ambassador usually had a direct hand in it. One example was "Crafts USA," an exhibition of American folk craft artists we staged in Iceland. As I noted, all Icelanders think of themselves as being artists. There was a large art museum called Kjarvalsstadur in Iceland's national museum and the largest available in the country. It is named after Kjarval, Iceland's most famous sculptor, who did an enormous amount of work. We got one half of the museum gratis for a major show. The concept came out of the thoughts of Ambassador Bremont and his wife, Pamela, who had connections at the Corcoran and other museums in the U.S. that had specialized in American craft art.

USIA had no interest in it whatsoever. It sounded expensive, difficult, unwieldy, and a one-country effort, which meant it wouldn't be worth the money because it could not be spread across several country post budgets. As it ended up, we got no money from USIA. All the money for the support of the show had to be raised among the American community or businesses that had ties with the U.S.. The embassy's economic officer at the time, Al Rimas, and I went around and visited all the people and businesses we could think of, asking for either cash or kind.

For example, we arranged to get shipping of the artifacts from the largest shipping company in Iceland. Getting insurance money was difficult, but we were able to get it out of the largess of the Icelanders and the American community. Iceland Air donated tickets, so we could get people to fly over. We brought over 14 American craft artists to demonstrate their work during the exhibition. It ended up as a major exhibition of craft art, including furniture, textile, glass, ceramics - the full panoply of American crafts. The people at Keflavik from the U.S. Navy contributed an amateur Country & Western band. California wine growers contributed champagne. From all the cooperation and help we received from Icelandic artists, the business community, and the unstinting support from the museum and other professionals in town, we had a black tie opening with square dancing and constant demonstrations by the visiting American craft artists.

The 300 works went on display. A thick catalogue was printed with an introduction by Joan Mondale, wife of the vice president. It was a splashy event, the invitation was the biggest social event in Reykjavik that year. Anybody who was anybody would kill to get one of these invitations. It was black tie and free. The whole town turned out. We got a double page spread in the largest newspaper in town. It was a very major show and had a significant impact on the Icelandic view of American art.

At the end of the show, of course, we sold off all the art. To ship it back to the U.S. would have been prohibitively expensive. After we covered the cost to the artists and paid off the few expenses that we had, the rest went into a scholarship fund to finance the travel, room, and board for one or two Icelandic craft artists each year to travel to Deer Island, Maine for a summer workshop in craft art. Contributions in local labor made a big difference in keeping the costs down. For example, the display itself was all set up by a local artist and some of his helpers, voluntarily. On his own initiative, he got a construction company to loan glass blocks, the kind you use to build walls, and made circular walls with them inside the exhibit space. That same crew of artists built and painted risers to support the art closer to eye level. The national theater loaned lights to provide illumination for the exhibition. It was quite a show, a true international effort.

Such a happening was not a matter of placing a lot of shipped-in art in a large room. It took a lot of dedication and effort of dozens of Americans and Icelanders. The result was a professional show that was, at the time, the largest exhibition of American craft art ever mounted outside of the US. It looked like a show and was something for all to take pride in.

At the end of the show, as I said, we sold the works and realized a total surplus after all expenses of about \$35,000. At the time in Icelandic banks, the rate of return was about 10 percent. So we put the money in an account, and the interest was used to pay for those summer sessions for

Icelandic craft artists. It was not a lot of money, but about \$3,500 got them air fare on Iceland Air which gave them a discount or free ticket to Deer Island, Maine. Their expenses at the school would be paid. So from the show, there emerged an on-going exchange of craft artists with the U.S.

The bookkeeping process was not easy, because any time anything like profit emerges from direct or indirect activity of the American government, the situation can become tricky. You have to be very careful making sure there are no impropriety, because there are funds involved. We had very strict controls, and it worked out pretty well, so well that when we later had a team of inspectors at Post, they looked at this real hard and couldn't find anything wrong with it. We were very pleased with that.

Right after I arrived in Iceland, we had gotten our feet wet with another effort at an exhibition. We called it "Scandinavia Today." Scandinavian countries had identified the same problem with us as we had with them. They wanted their image to be put across. They formed a consortium of Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Finland, and Sweden and decided to go to the U.S. and make a presentation of their cultures jointly. The problem was, they didn't know who to pick. There were inter-Scandinavian rivalries among them, so they decided to pick the little guy, Iceland, because it had no royalty and precedence would not be seen as favoring one over the other. The leader of the delegation was the President of Iceland, Vigdis Finnbogadottir.

In Icelandic culture, the practice in naming children is that their "last" name becomes the "first" name of the father followed by "dottir" or "son," depending on the gender of the child. Consequently, President Vigdis, as she was known, was the daughter of Finnbogir. Therefore, since there is no consistent patronymic, in Iceland, the names in the telephone book are by first names. For example, in the Icelandic fashion I would be listed under Ken in the telephone book. If I were an Icelander, my name would be Ken Ernestson, because my father's given name was Ernest. The "last" name does not indicate family lineage and changes from generation to generation. Because there is no other way, lists of people are given by their first names.

As head of the Scandinavian delegation, President Vigdis swept the U.S. and received a very strong reception. She is a very personable lady and accordingly, appeared as a real celebrity. Despite the planning of the other Scandinavian countries to select Iceland so that all would receive relatively equal treatment, she stole the show. The entire event became a romp for Iceland across the U.S.. At least as the Icelanders told it, the other participating nations were a bit miffed that Iceland was able to hold center stage at their expense.

At my USIS center, we scraped together as much of the press reaction as we could from Washington and other sources, built a small exhibition with "foamcore" and "Abstracta" framing, and planned individual shows around Iceland. The exhibit had a reverse twist. We were showing Icelanders what Americans were seeing of Iceland and other Scandinavian countries. In doing so, we made a statement about American interest in Iceland and built interest in that nation of things American. The "Abstracta" structure we used is a favorite USIS tool. It consists of a collection of chrome plated rods like an erector set with plug-in connectors. You can make big squares and mount foam core panels in a very flexible arrangement. On the foam core, pictures or other items can be mounted for exhibition. Since it all can be assembled and disassembled quickly, it

provides a relatively simple means of constructing a movable exhibit that can be mounted in a variety of venues and then easily shipped among them.

With the “Abstracta,” we had lights that clip on and other items that allowed the set to be constructed almost anywhere and be presentable. We could move into a bare room and mount an incredible exhibition with lights and everything else. There were about 15 panels plus a collection of loose leaf notebooks with plastic sleeves in which we put press notices. Icelanders like to look at things in print, so they were well used.

After we got this whole thing together, we had an opening in Reykjavik, showed it there for a short period, and then took it around the country. This was a good opportunity for me to meet a lot of people and make contacts in places we rarely had the occasion to visit. We had fairly good success. However, the show directly led to a very dangerous situation for my wife and me.

One of the exhibition sites was in Akureyri, which is the so-called northern capital of Iceland. The Arctic Circle almost touches Akureyri and sweeps by only a short distance to the north. My wife and I decided we would drive up to Akureyri for the opening of this show. We decided to do a bit of touring and familiarization on the way, so we drove east along the southern coast to the eastern town of Egilsstader. It was during the spring period in April and the weather was getting warmer. It was a delightful time in Iceland. There is much to see as you drive along the southern coast of Iceland. At one point, there is a small lake and a minor glacier on its northern shore where large chunks of ice break off to float in the middle as icebergs. In the same vicinity, there is a stretch of black lava sand. We stayed overnight at Egilsstader and had a chance to meet a few contacts at the school while in town.

The next morning we were preparing to leave for the next leg on the trip, Myvatyn, a notable tourist stop in northern Iceland, but a bit out of the way. It was the prime reason to travel on the eastern route on the way to Akureyri. That morning as we were leaving the hotel, I asked the desk clerk how the weather was expected to be on the road to Akureyri. She asked what I was driving. I said that I had a 4-wheel drive AMC Eagle. She dismissed my possible concern, saying that we certainly would have no problem. So with a stop to top off the gas tank, we were off. After about an hour of driving, it began to snow. This was sort of unusual because it was April and spring was well under way. Despite its name, Iceland is not a cold country. It ranges between 30 and 50 degrees all year long. But it is windy, and it can be unpredictable. The uncertain weather is the result of arctic lows which come off the cold mass of Greenland, another mis-named bit of geography just to the west of Iceland. The Gulfstream waters come up the east coast of the U.S., cross the northern Atlantic and split around Iceland, keeping Iceland not toasty, but warmer than you would otherwise expect. Greenland does not benefit from the warmth of the Gulfstream and therefore remains frigid. The prevailing west winds blowing across Greenland are very cold and dry. But when those winds encounter the warm Gulf waters on the sides of Iceland, a dangerous mix is created. Out of this unstable situation come small but violent storms. These mini-cyclones, intense little storms, often slam right into Reykjavik or somewhere else in Iceland.

On that balmy spring morning, we encountered one of the fiercest. The storm began with a light blowing snow. We had no way of knowing what to expect. At least, this was true for us tourists,

unfamiliar with the hazards of the northern coast. As we drove along, another car, an ambulance of all things, passed us traveling toward Egilsstader. That I knew was not common, for very little traffic uses that road and there are few stops between Egilsstader and Myvatyn Lake. There were a few houses along the road, but the scenery was mostly bleak lava fields, the kind that brought U.S. astronauts to Iceland to train in terrain that is among the places on earth most similar to the surface of the moon.

Although the light blowing snow continued, I was not particularly concerned since I had seen traffic moving in the other direction. We kept on, although I slowed a bit in the snow. As usual in Iceland, not much accumulates, because the wind keeps anything falling moving along generally horizontally. The snow that does reach the ground is soon lifted again in a swirling mass. If the snow gets heavy enough, the swirling mix becomes very thick and results in a white-out where nothing can be seen. Because much of this white-out is simply blowing snow, it usually does not extend much more than a dozen feet or so directly up and often disappears as quickly as it comes, swept away by the marauding wind.

I wasn't going much more than 35-40 miles per hour, but the road was reasonably clear and there was no evidence of a heavy storm. In this situation, I was still confident that we would soon pass through this aberration. Coming up a slight rise and rounding a corner to the left, I suddenly came upon an eddy of packed snow across the road where the shape of the hill had resulted in a drift. Suddenly I had all four wheels off the road, as I pancaked up on the hard-packed snow. We slid to a stop. Now, I was in real trouble. We were in the middle of nowhere. Nobody knew where we were. What had seemed to be a mild annoyance had suddenly become a real threat. The storm showed no signs of abating, and things clearly were becoming worse very quickly.

My wife and I had no way out. We were ten or fifteen miles away from the closest house and the wind chill factor of the storm made any thought of walking back impossible. Since this was spring, we had no really warm clothing with us and certainly no survival gear. So there we sat, hoping vainly for the storm to end. It did not, and the snow kept deepening around the car, slowly burying us and the engine that just kept running.

We sat there for a very long time with nothing but our thoughts and fears. The storm continued to build, and it became quite a bit darker as the white-out took over our diminishing world. The temperature was obviously dropping quickly, but the engine kept idling and provided the warmth of the heater. Luckily, when we hit the pack, I was facing almost directly into the wind which meant that the exhaust from the car was being sucked out through an open eddy formed at the back of the car. With the exhaust went the carbon monoxide that certainly would have killed us in almost any other circumstance. As a precaution, I left the window on the driver's side open a crack, but the snow kept blowing in and we were losing heat.

Gradually the snow built up around the car. The blowing snow got so intense that at times I had trouble making out the hood ornament in front. It got up to the rails on the roof of the car. We were literally being buried alive. As the snow built up, the engine was obviously straining to keep running. As the minutes turned into hours, I could see that I was gradually losing control of our lifeline to heat. Eventually, even though the engine was running, I could no longer control it,

because the linkages were gradually freezing up. We had no blankets, no extra food; we were in deep trouble.

After what we later found out was about four and a half hours of sinking deeper and deeper into what appeared to be a cold tomb, I heard a snuffling sound at the small space at the top of my window. The snow had reached almost to the cracked-open window, but this was different. It was the very welcome black nose of a dog. There was life outside in the darkness. We knew that if there was a dog out there, there had to be someone with it. Sure enough, we soon heard the sound of digging and not long after, the man with a shovel had made a dent in the drift sufficient for us to open the door and climb out. We scrambled through the blowing snow into the cab of his pickup truck, the dog bounded into the rear, and he drove across the dark lava fields back to the small group of farmhouses we had passed so many hours before.

The farmer turned out to be an occasional hand working in the area. He did not speak much English, nor did the kindly people of the farmhouse where he took us. As we were chilled completely through, the wife of the house prepared tea, while her daughter who had studied English at school helped us get a call through to Reykjavik, letting people know of our predicament and reporting that we were cold but miraculously safe. Our rescuer had found us through the efforts of the desk clerk back at the hotel we had left earlier that day. The girl at the hotel had heard the radio reporting that a vicious storm had struck along the north coast and had affected the whole area. She had the presence of mind to recall our departing questions about the condition of the road and became alarmed.

She called the farm houses along the road sequentially to see if anyone had seen a car pass in the morning. There was so little traffic in that area, a passing car was something to notice. With so few houses, there were not too many calls to make, but when she reached someone who said that no car had passed that morning, she was able to guess approximately where we were stuck. She then called the first farm back to relay the information. The wife there told her she had no car, because her husband had gone to the hospital in Egilsstader with a perforated ulcer that same morning - that explained the misleading presence of the ambulance - but she said that the hired man up the hill probably was there and had an all-wheel drive truck. However he had no phone. Somehow they reached him, and he thought he might know where we were, since there had been trouble on that highway before at the same place. He took his dog and tried to reach us. As it turned out, the storm was so severe that he was forced to detour over the lava fields, off the road, in order to reach us. We had to take that same track across the lava on the way from the buried car to the farmhouse.

We unquestionably owe our lives to him, because we could not have lasted much longer. The engine was pretty much done by the time he reached us. Later, when the storm cleared and the man and I drove back to the AMC Eagle to attempt to dig it out, I found in the four and a half hours we spent marooned in the car, I had burned less than a quarter of a tank of gas. We were very, very lucky. I never had the chance to meet the girl at the hotel again, but we sent her a gold chain necklace as a token of our sincere appreciation. I hope she still has it. The storm taught us never to take Icelandic weather lightly, no matter what the apparent circumstances. The episode also demonstrated the care and thought that all in that storm ravaged nation take to insure lives are not lost. We will be everlastingly grateful.



*Q: During this time, did you work with people at the naval station? It seems to me if you have 5,000 troops there, it is quite a difficult mass to deal with in a small country.*

YATES: Yes, it was, and that is what caused most of the friction. Community-base relations was an important part of the bilateral political relationship. There was a U.S. Navy Base Public Affairs Officer who was charged with trying to strengthen ties, but my office held responsibility to monitor the situation for the embassy. One of the major problems for the base was the annual march the anti-base groups in Iceland would mount as a demonstration of their desire to have the base removed. They would march from Keflavik back to Reykjavik, about 30 kilometers.

At times, the political forces in Iceland would make a bold statement and vote to dis-invite the Americans at Keflavik. In each instance, the internationalists would jump into the fray and raise popular sentiment to keep the status quo. It was the effect of public affairs relations that would come to our rescue and protect an important defensive outpost and a multi-billion dollar U.S. taxpayer investment. It was a petition drive, not done by us but by Icelanders who felt strongly that we shouldn't go. We were not only important in the defense of Iceland, which has no army or other defensive means, but we were also important to the people who live in Iceland for rescue and other things.

There is a famous story that illustrates this special relationship. One of the volcanoes off the southern coast of Iceland erupted, I believe in the '60s. At that time, the lava flow threatened a fishing village on an island in the Westmanjar group off the southern coast of Iceland. At that time, the U.S. Navy brought in tug boats and pumped salt water up on the lava, cooling it enough to slow it down and form a natural dam north of the village. There was some controversy whether this was the initiative of the U.S. Navy or whether an Icelander actually thought of the idea, but it was effective.

Anyway, the Westmanjar people, who were fishermen and exposed to the dangers of the North Atlantic, felt very strongly that the American Navy was a very positive thing to have around and any time the question of dis-invitation was raised, they lobbied strongly for us to stay. Consequently, when the Althing passed the resolution to ask the American Navy to leave, a petition drive would start around the country, and a lot of people would sign, putting pressure on the Althing to reverse itself.

In this environment, public affairs played a critical part in maintaining the base's presence. It wasn't a Marine base, like we have in Okinawa, it was a technical base, Naval Air. You did not have ships pulling in, with crews coming ashore on liberty. These were pretty settled people, with families resident at Keflavik. They were pilots and technical people. The educational level of the average U.S. military person at the base was much higher than would be expected at other military installations. Keflavik also benefitted from its status as a remote tour, an assignment that all careerists had to accept at one time or another. Yet, although it was technically remote, families could be brought along. At most other remote sites, you had to be apart from your family for a long period. That meant, despite the weather, Keflavik was a relatively attractive posting for career Navy people. This also meant that the relative stability of the base was higher than other locations.

It also meant that entertainment was more contained on the base than it was at other places with a lot of unattached young males who had off-duty time on their hands. For example, it meant that there was no street of bars immediately on the periphery of the base. Many of the personnel went home from work, had dinner with the family, and spent the evening at school functions or watching videos. Iceland was a relatively liberal country, with less rigid mores about co-habitation among those who were not married. While this attitude in other locations would lead to an explosion of U.S. military setting up house with local women, there was not much fraternization in Iceland. The Icelanders preferred it that way. The base at Keflavik was very much an island apart from the rest of the society. The capital of Reykjavik was only about 30 miles to the north, but the quirky weather and the stand-offish nature of the Icelanders conspired to keep most of the roving lovers on-base.

Still, there was friction. Unavoidably, there were younger people that had the normally active hormones of youth, and since the Icelandic view of sex was relaxed and Icelandic women tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, the attractions were still strong. Icelanders were famous for enjoying a drink or two, and alcoholism was a national disease. Reputedly, the largest nightclub in Europe, the Broadway, was located to the southeast of Reykjavik, and partying was constant.

The noise of military jets and the usual activity of a major military installation was the source of other strains. There were fishing villages near the base, and the sudden scrambling of fighter jets in the middle of the night to intercept one or another Soviet appearance from the north got many from their beds. These negatives made base-community relations a bit prickly at times. Of course, there was the usual exercise of base tours and Fourth of July celebrations to which the locals were invited, but the strains persisted.

We had to devise programs that siphoned off as much of the resentment as possible. One of those devices was the NATO tours that we ran from the USIS Post in Reykjavik. Usually reserved for more senior members of the government who were part of the decision making process in the capital, the tours were a staple in our programming. The NATO tours consisted of an occasional program of sending Icelanders to other NATO members in the region to receive briefings on the reasons for NATO and how the base at Keflavik fit into the mix of defenses that protected Europe as well as the US.

We especially liked to send the Icelandic NATO tours to Norway. There, the Norwegians, the linguistic cousins of Icelanders and their closest cultural relatives in Europe, did not do any verbal sparring on the subject of defense and gave the rationale for the U.S. naval base at Keflavik in the bluntest terms. In the northern reaches of their country, the Norwegians had a border with the Soviet Union and had nasty memories of the Second World War to encourage them as strong proponents of NATO. There remained Norwegian animosity toward the Soviet Union, and it was not leavened by the even closer geography that Finland had, despite a similarly bad wartime experience. The Finns have a longer, more southern land border with the Soviet Union and face them directly across open water.

So we could always send a NATO tour to the Norwegians, just drop them off, and let the Norwegians take over and give the Icelanders the straight story with much more credibility than

we were able to muster. This was especially good, since it showed them that the base was not “American imperialism at work,” as it was characterized by some of the local opponents, but something that others all over Europe had a common interest in.

One of the key elements at Keflavik, and one of the major noise-making offenders at the base were the P3s, the picket aircraft. They would go out and sit on station for a long time, looking for naval or air activity in the defense sector surrounding Iceland, such as Soviet bombers and the surface and subsurface fleets. These aircraft had to fly all hours. Although they were not too noisy, if they found something, they were the trip-wire alarms that would cause fighter aircraft to scramble for an interception.

This sudden blast in the middle of the night would wake everybody up in the villages surrounding the base. Therefore, there was a lot of animosity toward the base, not only because of the presence of the Americans and the beastly noise that stirred their sleep, but also, the main airport for Iceland was co-located on the base. If an Icelander wished to travel to Europe or the US, he or she would have to pass through U.S. base security posts to get to their own airport. For the fiercely independent Icelanders, this was particularly galling. A new airport separate from base security was being built while I was serving there, but this expensive work went slowly and every Icelander who used the airport to travel in and out of the country was pointedly reminded of the American presence.

Naturally, the Americans also were uncomfortable with admitting the general population onto one of the most sensitive intelligence-gathering bases in the world. The situation was made even more stressful by the fact that members of the Russian, Chinese, and other eastern bloc nations would also have to use the airport/base to move in and out of their assigned country. There were numerous occasions when traveling to the base I could see Russian, East German, and even Cuban transport aircraft lined up on the tarmac only steps away from one of the most sophisticated U.S. military intelligence outposts in the world. For all, it was a most uncomfortable relationship.

It was therefore incumbent on the USIS operation in Iceland to take on the public relations difficulties at the base and come up with innovative ways to take some of the pressure off. Icelanders have a very traditional social structure. For example, the elders of the village had a lot to say about what people think in the town and how they consider outsiders. Their opinions were more important than most. So using this social characteristic as a stepping off point, we organized a special NATO tour for the elders around the base. This would involve the most significant opinion makers in directly experiencing why their discomfort was for an important cause. Although we could do little to relieve the occasional roar of aircraft, we could bring them to understand why that was necessary in the larger scheme of the defense of Iceland and her neighbors.

Unlike the usual NATO tours, we flew them on P-3s, one of the aircraft that were often flying over their heads. To get permission for civilians to fly in military aircraft, we had to go to great lengths to convince the legal minds at the Pentagon that it was necessary for the success of the program. We had to go all the way up the line as far as Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger for approval to carry civilians. We were in a period in which the civilian use of military aircraft was

being severely criticized, so we had to get approval from the highest level. Yet it was considered important enough, because we were having serious troubles around the base.

Selecting a number of the most senior officials from the villages surrounding the base, we put them on the P-3, took off, and let them experience what the P-3 does. They were taken on an unclassified mission, flying low over the water and learning how those planes intercepted surface activity. The detection of sub-surface activity was classified, and they had to settle for tracking Soviet warships on the surface. Then they flew them to England and Scotland and let them talk to people.

It worked magic. It took much of the steam out of the complaints from the communities surrounding the base. These respected elders could go back home and tell their families and neighbors what was happening when those noisy machines took off in the middle of the night. They could re-live for others their first-person experience of what it was like and relate why it was so important to keep track of the military activity that threatened them, as well as the rest of Europe and North America. They were still wakened but now had a more visceral and intellectual understanding of why. That program was very successful in taking a special problem and taking much of the sting out of it, even though the basic cause of the difficulty could not be removed.

I had other duties to manage in regard to the base, but mostly they involved staying in touch with the base information officers and monitoring their programs to insure that they were fully consistent with overall policy and offered no unintended damage to the delicate balance of the larger Icelandic public opinion. The base information program was perhaps more intensely aimed at troop morale than it was at off-base problems, and I had nothing to do with the base newspaper or the other morale and recreation activities conducted there. The only time I was brought into the picture was when their activities moved outside the base and affected Icelanders.

It was not only the problems of the base that bothered the Icelanders. U.S. policy in other parts of the world often intruded into the Icelandic consciousness, many times with negative results. Iceland was upset, at the time, with American policy in Latin America. This was the time of conflict in Nicaragua and Guatemala, and things were not going very well for us in Central America. We were getting hit domestically on our policy in that region, and many Icelanders were really upset, particularly Iceland's university students who identified with small nations evidently being pushed around by a superpower. There was a special nest of post-sixties radical students on the University of Iceland campus, and they were hitting us hard on Latin America. We were getting much bad press, and a barrage of critical articles appeared. Even the newspaper that was most often supportive of U.S. policy was giving us a hard time. Of course, the American press itself was highly critical, and the Icelandic press was simply picking up much of their copy from their usual sources. The result was an alarmed and antagonistic people, upset with our policy.

At that time, we also invaded Grenada, and that simply added heat to an already hot issue. One of my most difficult times in Iceland was to go on Icelandic state television for a half-hour interview about Grenada and getting hardball questions thrown at me. What was the purpose of our presence there? What does all this mean? Is this an example of continuing American

imperialism? Is this “manifest destiny” in operation? Such questions were of the “have you stopped beating your wife” kind. I am not sure I convinced a lot of Icelanders, but I think the program helped to pour a bit of oil on the roiling waters.

More effective was a program we brought in from the US. A woman, a former nun who had married the Nicaraguan minister of labor after leaving her order, had very strong feelings about what was going on in Nicaragua at the time. She came to Iceland under our auspices, to bring a first person account of the Central American problem to Icelanders. She was not a strong fan of American policy and found much to prompt criticism. Yet she wasn’t terribly bitter about it and knew from her own direct experience what was going on there. She understood that the fundamental problem was locally generated and did not have a great deal to do with the Americans. We just got caught in this web.

Her husband had been incarcerated, and she had had a very bad time of it. The first person account and her church training in presenting a story in the most human terms made everyone who heard her come to a new, more complex, understanding of the virtually unsolvable problem of Central America. We brought together many of the people from the university, our strongest critics, younger people, and some of the older radicals in town. Most of the people who came to the meeting were communists or inspired leftists. They were a group who were not among our usual crowd at the USIS Center programs and library. Many were highly suspicious of our motives and came to scoff.

Yet the topic had enormous drawing power. They had such deeply held feelings, they had to be present for the discussion. The program had a stunning effect on them. There were people in tears during the meeting. The empathy that the former nun was able to develop with these people was just incredible. She reduced all the coolly distant press coverage down to the most human terms. Her credibility was high and her presentation effective. Almost overnight, the drumbeat of criticism of our Central American policy stopped in Iceland. Icelanders still did not agree with us on the principles and remained suspicious of our big-power motives, but they began to become more sophisticated in their thinking and more aware of the real situation.

A student leader from the university, the one who was the spearhead of this whole effort on campus, was at the program. After the program was over, he walked into my office alone, sat quietly on the couch, and said, “I want to make sure you understand. I am not a supporter of American policy in Latin America, but I didn’t realize how much I didn’t know. I am going to have to go back and study more.” That was a great victory. What it meant was that, for the first time among the left in Iceland, reason and intelligence was being applied to the problem. It essentially knocked the stuffing out of support for radical opinions on the motives for US’ Central American policy. It is rather unusual for a USIS programmer to see the direct results of a specific program so starkly. It also was one of the times that confirmed an emotional commitment to the work and offset all the times that “evidence of effectiveness” hadn’t seemed to surface. So much is usually taken on faith when a particular grantee returns from a month’s international visitor program in the U.S. or a visiting lecturer comes and goes, seemingly without a ripple, yet the cumulative effect builds unseen and unsung. This experience, however, was different and most satisfying.

*Q: You say there was a communist party in Iceland. Was this a Soviet controlled party?*

YATES: The Soviets didn't control it, although I think they would have liked to. I think they were smart enough not to try. My USIS Center was in a separate building in Reykjavik. The only other thing that was in the building with us was a post office downstairs. Once every month, the Russians would mail out their propaganda. They outproduced us by a wide margin. It was clear that our budget for direct mail materials came nowhere close to what they were spending. We could always tell when the Russians were mailing, because downstairs the trash cans would get filled to overflowing. The reason for this was that, since Iceland was very small, a lot of the residents of the west end of Reykjavik had post office boxes in the small unit downstairs. People would stop into get their mail and find their box stuffed with the Russian product. Like junk mail everywhere, it was immediately tossed aside, unread. Much of this offal ended up in the trash bins in the Post Office, so they did not have to carry it home.

The Icelanders must have done marvelously well with their recycle of paper. We were delighted to see all this trash, since it represented a failure of the competition and made our relative dearth of similar materials easier to bear. Nonetheless, the Soviets persisted in their big effort. Part of their lack of success probably came from the fact that Icelanders are very independent. They are feisty people. "Don't tread on me" is something that could be used in Iceland, as well as for our "in your face" forebears. The communism we saw in Iceland was not the communism that we would see in China or the Soviet Union. The Icelandic communists were "social" communists, a wish for a utopian communalism rather than the Moscow tied communism we were combating in Europe.

It was awfully hard to get people to understand this distinction. The awareness of a difference was particularly a product of having to work with those who would probably define themselves as "communists" but who would be hard pressed to explain their beliefs in the manner Americans would find convincing. I served in China, Iceland, Afghanistan, and Japan, and all had communist parties, but they were all distinctly different. While there was a worldwide movement (there was no question about that), and a worldwide threat from the Soviets and from the Chinese to some extent, it never caught fire. Even then, it was clear that their economic system was not working in any one of those societies that professed to be the "wave of the future." Other nations, as they became more sophisticated, began to realize the thing called communism sounded good to some of their people but did not work in practice. It caused severe economic problems.

I think the Icelanders recognized that. During the time I was there, they began to get a handle on the tax problem. They began to make noises about charging people tuition at colleges. They were openly worried about students who would attend school but not study. Why should they? It was "free." There was nothing there of value for them to learn. So as the realization that the "free" aspects of society the communists offered were not really "free," as someone in the society would have to pay the taxes to support those "free" activities, public attitudes drifted away from communist dogma.

Still, the communists in Iceland were able to maintain a semblance of influence through the strong ties they maintained with several labor organizations and other public groups. In particular,

the labor movement in Iceland was a strong part of the communist movement. For a USIS program in Iceland to be effective, it had to address the very labor groups that were the backbone of the remaining communist effort.

One of the successes of the USIS program in Iceland was the invitation to the head of the carpenter/plumbers union to go on a special program that was run by the AFL/CIO here in the US. The plan was to talk about what the American labor movement is, what its themes, goals and practices were. This was a man who was at the forefront of the anti-base movement, or at least his organization was one of the major funding supporters. Needless to say, he was highly suspicious of the United States. I remember when I invited him to come into the office and talk about his visitor grant. He initially said that he did not want to go and would not have gone except that the AFL/CIO was a labor movement and he was a strong unionist. He just could not resist getting together with other labor union types and was curious. Yet he was really suspicious. He returned to my office to pick up his tickets and was very uncomfortable. Although he was a highly intelligent person, he simply picked up the tickets and left without saying much.

About a month and a half later, he returned. He had on a necktie and white shirt, had lost the Leninist cap, and appeared full of cheer. I asked how things went on his trip. Now talkative, he responded, "Very interesting." I pressed for more details. He said, "Well, I didn't realize that the AFL/CIO is a real union." He had thought that the AFL-CIO was just a puppet organization. But he was really surprised when he discovered that it was a genuine, and very feisty organization. That recognition turned his concepts upside down and resulted in a re-evaluation of his own priorities. One month of traveling around the U.S. looking at different union activities expanded his horizons greatly. As I noted, he was very intelligent and had clearly been misinformed.

After this experience in the US, he gave a lot of thought to the direction and emphasis of his own organization. Whether it was a direct result or not, is not really clear, but not long after his visit, his union pulled out of the consortia of unions that were the financial underpinning for the communist movement in Iceland, including the anti-base march. His union was the most affluent of the unions, so when it pulled out, they lost a major portion of their financial backing. Subsequently, the communists lost their office that had been located in the Carpenter/Plumbers Union building and were unable to muster enough financial or popular support to sustain the large anti-base marches that had for so long bedeviled bilateral relations. While it would be an over-simplification to credit all of the change to a simple international visitor experience in the US, it would be equally unrealistic to ignore the obvious effect on the union and its leader.

Another aspect of the gradual loss of influence of communism in Iceland can be found in the activities of our ambassador. Marshall Bremant was one of the best US experts on Russia. He spoke Russian and was very familiar with the communist movement and its efforts, having served in Moscow. As U.S. ambassador to Iceland, he began a program of social interaction with the communists that was very controversial among those who considered themselves our traditional friends. Conservative Icelanders felt that the ambassador had gone too far in coddling the communists and their leftist sympathizers. That really rankled them. They expected the U.S. ambassador to take his usual role of strong anti-communism and not have anything to do with the group they despised.

Those who considered themselves generally conservative would attend embassy functions and would be elbow-to-elbow with communists. The political divisions in Iceland at the time were so severe that if two opposites were walking down the same side of the street, one or the other would cross the street rather than pass by his or her opponent on the street. I had people come to my office and say, “What is the ambassador doing? These are communists at his party. Doesn’t he know that?”

We even had a case where one of the communists I knew came to a reception at the embassy and during the conversation said, “Will you excuse me a moment please?” Clutching the drink he was socially nursing, he walked down the stairs from the ambassador’s residence, went out the front door, crossed the street, and joined the crowd where his band of fellow communists with anti-American signs were. He kept the drink in his hand, while participating in the cheering against the US. When the cheering was over, and the small crowd disbanded, he walked back up the stairs and into the reception with his drink still in his hand and full of his usual good cheer. Evidently he did not see any particular contradiction in his conduct.

What prompted his demonstration of a split personality was the efforts of the ambassador to incorporate these antagonists into a reasonable dialog. That relationship gradually expanded, with leftists and those who might be considered “social” communists, slowly drawn into what would have been condemned by their peers as a compromising situation not many years before. This effort, coupled with more formal programs such as the NATO tours, the international visitor program, and the constant visits of speakers in USIS programs, all added to the gradual weakening of the intellectual commitment of many to leftist opposition to U.S. policy. It contributed greatly to their gradual diminution as a serious force, either against the base at Keflavik or against America as a nation.

The ambassador did a marvelous job of accelerating that process, but I do not think he ever got full credit for that from State or from the conservatives in Iceland who constantly grumbled over his unusual practices. Because of his controversial personnel policies that affected all within the embassy community, he later suffered a loss of confidence that never was repaired. While he almost singlehandedly disemboweled the communist movement in Iceland, he was not to enjoy the fruits of his victory with the accolades of the bureaucracy. Instead, he came to be roundly criticized and eventually hounded out of the service.

The conservative Icelanders harbored very strong opinions about dealing in a civil manner with leftists or communists. In USIS, we sponsored periodic delegations of Icelanders on the NATO tours I already discussed in relation to the problems of the base. There was a particular correspondent on Icelandic state television who the conservatives in Reykjavik thought was a closet communist or at least a strong leftist. They didn’t like him and resented his growing prominence on Icelandic state television. One of these tours came up, and I selected him to join it. He was smart, affable, young and probably had a good future ahead of him in the Icelandic electronic media. So I picked him and he readily accepted.

I got a stiff call from some conservative Icelanders, saying I couldn’t do this and they would not cooperate with us if he were to go on the trip. They argued that he would not be suitable for a



NATO briefing and tour. In fact, the Icelandic ambassador to NATO in Brussels said he would not have this man in his room, never mind allow him to visit NATO headquarters as a guest.

This was quite a dilemma. The NATO tours were specifically aimed at demonstrating the value of NATO in protecting the security of Western Europe and the US. They were very effective, as I knew. But could we afford to antagonize our Icelandic allies in a confrontation over principles, even if we were convinced that we were right? There was nothing to be done except follow through with the trip, but the Icelandic ambassador at the NATO Headquarters in Brussels had refused to consider the possibility. After wrangling a bit, we decided to go forward with the trip, but skip the NATO Headquarters in Brussels. This time we would send the group to Berlin and see first hand what the confrontation was all about.

That change in plans neatly sidestepped the Icelandic ambassador's ability to interfere with the trip, since it was fully U.S. funded and we needed no blessing from Icelandic diplomats on what we could or could not do. We meant no confrontation but felt simply that the value of the NATO tours was that people like this television personality could experience a different point of view. We had to proceed without allowing anyone else's political agenda from restricting our judgement of what was best and in the U.S. interest.

So the trip went generally as planned, save for the visit to NATO headquarters. Some felt that was not much loss, since the briefing in Brussels was seen as very dry and uninspired. Some advice we received was that skipping Brussels was not much of a loss. The group went on to West Berlin instead. They visited the Wall, which was still in existence. The Wall was always a sobering experience. There was almost religious in actually confronting the police state across the small no-man's-land that divided the two halves of what had been the German capital. Something also happened to our special grantee upon witnessing the reality of the Wall. The watchtowers, the concertina wire, the Wall itself covered with the graffiti of hundreds of Germans who hated its reality and its symbolism.

He returned from the NATO travels a changed person. In no way could he be considered converted from his vague socialist or leftist beliefs, but he now more resembled a liberal American Democrat than a Russian communist. He had a sort of epiphany at the Wall. He just could not conceive of what he saw. The grimness of the Wall was beyond his wildest imagination. It communicated to him the communist style of oppression that so many people around the world had known and lived with for so many years. He had never viscerally felt that before. Iceland is an island, a nation apart. For a short period, the Danes had occupied Iceland, but there was never oppression of the Soviet brand. Icelanders prefer to ignore their colonial status as an aberration of history, something to be forgotten as a bad dream that has no relevance to life as it is lived. The visit to the Wall brought up short any illusions of the benefit of the Soviet system.

To some degree, the visit pulled away some of the dust of illusion from around his eyes. I can't say he turned into a new conservative, uncritical of U.S. policy and accepting all that we offered, but he certainly became a very important contact for me at Icelandic state television. In fact, he was my interviewer at the time of my Grenada interview, which was from my point of view a very positive thing, because it allowed me about half an hour of Icelandic state television air-

time to explain the U.S. point of view to everyone in Iceland. No amount of other effort could duplicate that opportunity. I never again had any contact with the Icelandic ambassador to Brussels, but we resumed our NATO tours, including the normal stop at the Brussels headquarters. Perhaps the briefings continued to be dull, but it was important to have people see the headquarters and get a sense of the cooperation which was at the root of the NATO organization. I wished that all could visit the Wall in Berlin, but it was slightly off the main topic of the tours, and I had to satisfy myself that, at least in one instance, it did make a difference.

*Q: When you left in 1985, the Cold War was still going. How did you see Icelandic-American relations at that time?*

YATES: I think we had pretty strong relations at that time. Of course, it was not too much longer thereafter that the summit was held in Reykjavik, mainly because it was a secure place to go. There were few guns in the country, save for a small number of strongly controlled hunting rifles, and there were very strict controls on who came and went. There was virtually no possibility of a terrorist attempt there. Yet we had the incident I previously described of the package that was left in our offices on the occasion of the visit of Vice President Bush.

That same visit of the vice president also illustrated how relaxed the Secret Service could become when in as safe an environment as Iceland. One of the usual duties of a public affairs officer is handling local press on American issues as well as the American press when it visits. We rarely got any attention from the U.S. press except when a VIP (very important person) visit occurred or an occasional correspondent dropped in to interview the ambassador.

Since the vice president was there essentially on a rest stop following a tiring Moscow funeral, there were no plans to make any press statements or expand the purpose of the visit. Of course, he would pay a courtesy call on the prime minister and stay in the guest house. There was no time for him to stand up and take questions from the press.

This presented a complex problem. The Iceland press was beside themselves with a desire for some sort of contact with the vice president. In the presence of Vice President Bush, they had the highest American ever to visit Iceland, and they were not going to be able to get any pictures, not to mention interviews. There was no time in the schedule at all for contact with the press. He was going to go salmon fishing, see the president and prime minister, and pay a call at the foreign ministry. The U.S. Secret Service, in particular, was adamant about there be no access. I finally cornered one of them and said, "Look, I am besieged by justifiable requests from the Icelandic press. It is important to them and U.S. government that we have at least something the Icelandic television can film for showing tonight because this is a big event for them."

They were firm, "No, you can't do it." I had to come up with some sort of reason for at least limited contact, and suggested, "Look, what would happen if you were ambushed?" "What do you mean, ambushed," they challenged. I elaborated, "Maybe on the sidewalk after the call at the president's office." "He has to walk from the president's office to the car, right?" "If we happen to have a crew on the sidewalk at that time, would they be pushed away?" I worked other arguments to bolster my logic. "Everybody agrees there is no security risk here; what if you guys looked the other way?" Well, the whole party was tired, as it had been a long and tense security

situation in Moscow. And perhaps so tired that they had enough of the persistent public affairs officer. Finally, they relented, “Okay, but not for long.”

With that bit of opportunity and a word of caution, I set up my friends from Icelandic state television on the sidewalk outside the president’s office. As soon as the prime minister and the vice president came out of the building, the Secret Service looked the other way and the Icelandic press “ambushed” them on the sidewalk. From that brief encounter, there resulted a show of about half an hour that night featuring a joint sidewalk interview with Vice President Bush and the prime minister. In terms of content, they obviously were very much in agreement on most issues and the evident cordial harmony was a clear feature of the show. While the Icelandic public got a very positive view of the state of bilateral relations between the U.S. and Iceland, I got a few points in my working relations with the press at Icelandic state television. The most instructive part of the exercise was the fact that the Secret Service was flexible enough to understand the need and look the other way. It was really a nice event. That was one of the most constructive and enjoyable projects I had the chance to work on while in Iceland.

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**Washington, DC (1984-1986)**

*Mrs. Horsey-Barr was born in Maryland into a Foreign Service family. She was raised in the Washington DC area and abroad and was educated at Georgetown University; and Loyola University in Rome, Italy. Her service with the State Department took her to several posts in Latin America dealing with both consular and political/management affairs. Her last assignments were with the Organization of American States, where she served in various senior capacities with the U.S. Mission. Mrs. Horsey-Barr was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2000.*

HORSEY-BARR: There was always a lot of explaining, there was a lot of correspondence explaining to people just what it was we were doing or not doing or what was really going on over there or not. And then we can’t forget that, you know, there was also Iceland in my portfolio, and we had a number of issues with Iceland, first of all the base and probably even more important at that time was a huge shipping dispute. Iceland, perhaps still today - I don’t know - controlled all the shipping in and out of the country. I can’t remember the details of this case, but it was Rainbow Navigation. It was this little upstart company, US company, called Rainbow, and Rainbow somehow found some loophole in the Icelandic law and started shipping to Iceland at much reduced rates. I can’t remember the details now, but it rapidly became a major issue to the point where it was, in their case, at the prime minister level and went on easily for a year or year and a half. It pitted the unions on this side and so on, and that consumed a lot of time because it also had ramifications for the base and all the surveillance that we were doing on that base. So that took up a lot of time. So the days were not quiet by any means.

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*Q: With Iceland, were we concerned about Iceland moving out of NATO? Iceland was sort of the cork in the bottle as far as...*

HORSEY-BARR: Not while I was involved. They were still very proud of their involvement. They were very worried about getting too close to Europe and too close to the United States, but that was more in an economic and cultural sense than a political/military kind of approach. When they would rattle our cage about the base, it was generally on cultural or economic basis, if you will.

*Q: We were doing lots, radio, TV...*

HORSEY-BARR: Precisely, yes, we were bombing, and we needed to help them figure out a way to cut off the airways so that the screen culture wouldn't become part of, this worldwide American culture. So they'd rattle our cage about the base, but the prime motivator was not get out of NATO.

*Q: I may be wrong, but I think the Reykjavik conference took place after you left.*

HORSEY-BARR: Yes.

*Q: How about cod wars or that sort of thing? Was fishing a thing, or was that between the Brits and...*

HORSEY-BARR: That was between the Brits and the Icelanders, exactly. We weren't dealing with that except to the extent that we were affecting these folks in their shipping and fishing industry, this Rainbow Navigation issue.

*Q: I guess you wish it had gone away.*

HORSEY-BARR: Yes, well, it did in the end. Somehow it got solved. I don't know what the solution was, because it was after my time.

**JON GUNDERSEN**  
**Chargé d'Affaires**  
**Reykjavik (1993)**

*Mr. Gundersen was born and raised in New York and educated at George Washington University, the University of Oslo International School, Stanford University and the National War College. Entering the State Department in 1973, he served abroad in Moscow, Stockholm and Frankfurt. At Reykjavik and Tallinn he was Chargé d'affaires, in Oslo, Deputy Chief of Mission, and in Kiev, Consul General. In assignments at the State Department in Washington, Mr. Gundersen*

*dealt with a variety of matters, including arms control, anti-terrorism and Balkan issues. Mr. Gundersen was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2012.*

GUNDERSEN: I left early '93 and I came back and I had a couple of job possibilities, but Tom Niles, who was the assistant secretary, asked me, after home leave, to go to Iceland as Chargé, because the ambassador, a political appointee, had left to help the Bush Sr. campaign.

So I went to Iceland as Chargé, I was there for six months and Eike and our young son Jan came out for part of that time.

*Q: What was the situation in Iceland when you were there?*

GUNDERSEN: Well, our main priority was our military base at Keflavik just outside of Reykjavik. Iceland is a member of NATO, but it does not have its own indigenous armed forces. So we have a bilateral treaty to provide security for Iceland.

The Keflavik base was important, particularly in the Cold War, because we had F-15s there. We also had navy patrol planes – P-2s - that looked for Soviet subs. The base was also was an important way station to the rest of Europe and the Middle East.

So our interest was to maintain good relations and keep that base. It's located where the international airport is, we shared that facility and we actually paid for a lot of the costs of maintaining the airport.

So during the Cold War we were the main drivers in keeping the base active and available. The Icelanders had mixed feelings about keeping it open, because they're proudly independent. But as the Cold War ended, we started to think, "This is a very costly place," so we wanted to downsize the base. The tables had turned. Now, the Icelanders didn't want us to downsize, because they realized that the base provided employment and infrastructure as well as security.

In fact, the Foreign Minister, Hannibalsson, the Icelandic official I spoke to most often, had been a radical who demonstrated at the embassy as a youth to get the base out. Now he was pleading with us to keep it open and keep it at full strength, because it supported the local economy and there was a since that it tied the U.S. to guaranteeing Icelandic independence.

So that was one the main things I did there. We have since closed the base, well after my tenure.

And the other issue was whaling, because Iceland is a whaling nation and, of course, we have a big movement within the United States to ban whaling. So one of my first days there I had to deliver a demarche requesting the Icelanders join the International Whaling Commission, stop whaling and, of course, that didn't make the U.S. very popular.

*Q: Do we have anything in Iceland now?*

GUNDERSEN: In terms of bases? No, we don't. We closed that down four or five years ago. We have good relations with Iceland, they're members of NATO.

The biggest, most sensitive and sensational issue while I was there was an attempted kidnapping by two Americans who had children with an Icelandic girl who had lived in the United States. She married one, had a baby, divorced, married another American, had a baby. They were both Special Forces guys.

She was an alcoholic, so a U.S. judge awarded the children to the American fathers. Then she absconded with the two children to Iceland. And then these two Special Ops guys got together and worked out a plot to kidnap their two kids in Iceland.

They set up a phony company that was supposed to be handling the logistics for filming a Sylvester Stallone picture and their front man hired the Icelandic mother to work for the dummy film company. It was a very elaborate plot. In the meantime, while she was at work, they kidnapped the two kids with the intention of flying back to the States. They even had false papers for the kids..

And they got to the airport with the kids. Unbeknownst to them, the girl's father worked at the airport and saw them leaving on a flight, called the police, who stopped the kids and Special Ops guys just as they were boarding the plane. What were the chances?

So I was summoned by the Foreign Minister, who protested this breach of Icelandic sovereignty.. Of course, this was the headline in the Icelandic media. The story had it all: Hollywood, Sylvester Stallone, kidnapping, Special Forces, sex, a young, innocent Icelandic girl.

So I spent a lot of time on this, including visiting these guys in jail.

*Q: How'd it come out?*

GUNDERSEN: One guy was arrested, the other guy got away. The one in custody was charged, but was given a short sentence, ten years, with time off for good behavior. He got out well after I left, but he eventually did get out.

But the foreign ministry didn't want to make a big deal of it, because it was a little awkward, she was not a good mother, but there's nothing more sensitive in terms of nationality and sovereignty than a kidnapping, child custody case. The default position of most countries in this type of case is: "Our country is right, our people are right and the other ones are bad."

I was allowed to visit her and I was allowed to see the children, to make sure everything was okay, so that's how we worked it out quietly.

*Q: We still had troops there. I assume the regulations were pretty much intended to keep the troops on the base, weren't they?*

GUNDERSEN: Yes, although not like Afghanistan or Cuba. They went out, they had relations with the locals, girlfriends. It's a fairly isolated place where they were located, but they had just built in the Eighties, before the end of the Cold War, a major facility, brand new high school,

new dormitories and new housing. So the USG basically built this beautiful facility that wasn't needed after the end of the Cold War. They had a nice commissary there and a nice gym, which the Embassy could use.

*Q: You were there, what, about six months?*

GUNDERSEN: Yes.

*Q: This is one of the plum jobs, isn't it?*

GUNDERSEN: I don't think it's as plum as Geneva or Paris.

*Q: No, but they're little plums.*

GUNDERSEN: Yeah, as you know, most European Posts go to political appointees, friends of the President and big party contributors. Eventually somebody did come out as ambassador. In fact, unusually it was a career Foreign Service Officer..

*Q: Did you get involved in NATO business while you were there, or not?*

GUNDERSEN: We had NATO meetings, once a month or so the NATO ambassadors there. The most important relationship was the U.S. bilateral relationship with Iceland, because Iceland does not have a standing army; the US provided for Icelandic defense.

Russia had a big embassy, a lot of spies. I talked to the Russian Embassy once in a while, but this was after the Cold War, so things were in flux and even Russian embassies were in flux, the old hard liners were being replaced and so you had mixed signals coming from the Russians.

*Q: How about the Canadians? I would have thought they'd be interested?*

GUNDERSEN: Not really. I don't even know if they had an embassy there.

*Q: You get many high level visits while you were there?*

GUNDERSEN: Basically the visits you have are like four hour stopovers, so they could say they visited Iceland, a NATO member. We had a couple CODELs. We had a number of under secretaries and flag rank officers.

*Q: Politically, what was going on there?*

GUNDERSEN: The prime minister was a conservative, David Oddsson, but all the governments there are coalitions. By the way, all Icelanders go by their first names, because the last names change with each generation. David was very friendly to the U.S. I would often meet with him at the prime minister's official residence. It was of modest size and not protected by security.

*Q: A relatively small cottage.*

GUNDERSEN: In fact, that's where Gorbachev and Reagan met in 1986, at the famous summit and maybe you'd have a guard walking around the open fence. You could see the people from the PMs' office and people would look in the window at the prime minister doing his work. It was probably tightened up since then, but it was a very open society at the time.

The President, who was the head of state, but didn't have real power, was a woman. She was very popular, one of the first female heads of state. She would have a big party once a year. I remember having to rent white tie dress for the big occasion, a Dinner-Dance and the Department refused to reimburse the expense. I attended, as head of the U.S. mission. The Admiral, who was the commanding officer at Keflavik, would always be invited as well. A lot of dancing and drinking which loosened up the typically reserved Icelanders..

*Q: Well, then, you left there when?*

GUNDERSEN: I left there in the summer of '93. One of the main reasons was to return to the States for the birth of our second son, Kai Nikolas, in September.

**PARKER W. BORG**  
**Ambassador**  
**Iceland (1993-1996)**

*Ambassador Borg was born and raised in Minnesota and educated at Dartmouth College and Cornell University. In 1965, after a tour with the Peace Corps in the Philippines, he joined the Foreign Service and was posted to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. .During his career he served in Vietnam and Zaire, and in the State Department in senior positions concerning Vietnam , West Africa and Counter Terrorism. He served as US Ambassador to Mali (1981-1984) and to Iceland from 1993 to 1996. Ambassador Borg was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in2002.*

*Q: You were in Iceland from when to when?*

BORG: From 1993 to 1996.

*Q: I just came back from Paris - this is in late October - and they had posters on the metro: "Visit the enchantment of Iceland for three days."*

BORG: To say I was less than enthusiastic would be an understatement.

*Q: I would have thought this was a prime candidate for a political appointee.*

BORG: Well, it generally had been. My predecessors, many of them, had been political appointees. I think that what had happened was that the State Department, the regional bureau,



had presumed that there would be a political appointee whom the White House would insist on for this country and so it hadn't decided who would be a good Foreign Service Officer to go there. So it was one of those places that had no names next to it. I think they felt sorry for me that, for no reason associated with me, I had just been sort of left hanging in the wind for an awfully long time, and the European embassies were the first ones they were looking at, so when they saw there was a blank space, they put my name next to it.

*Q: Yes, they can put your name after it, but it's usually the White House that comes up with...*

BORG: But the White House didn't have a candidate for it. I think what happens is that different White Houses operate in different ways, that in the Bush/Reagan years there would be a White House candidate and a State Department candidate and they'd duke it out. I think in the early Clinton years anyway they decided in advance, "Don't send us candidates for this, this and this. These are going to be political." So the State Department knew that, okay, we pick the people for these posts. Once I was the State Department candidate, I knew I was the candidate. So then it came about to study a whole new culture and a whole new set of issues, which I had never even thought about before.

*Q: When you were getting ready to go there, what were the issues?*

BORG: The two big issues at the time were the status of our base and international whaling. We have a curious history with Iceland in that we sent troops to Iceland in 1941, well before Pearl Harbor, because when Churchill met Roosevelt in one of the early conferences, he convinced Roosevelt that the British needed to bring their forces back from Iceland. When Germany invaded Denmark they were all set to pull a coup in Iceland, which was a Danish colony at the time, and the British preempted them by sending in the gunboats and taking over Iceland and placing British troops there. So after the conference - I think it was the Atlantic Conference - we decided that we would send troops to Iceland to replace the British so that they could return to Britain. So this was really our first venture into the war in Europe. It was ironic that my wife's father was in that contingent that went to Iceland in 1940 or '41. So after the war we had promised them that we'd pull our troops out, but the Cold War began and we had second thoughts.

When NATO was established, Iceland came in as a charter member of NATO despite the fact Iceland has never had a military force of its own. It's the only member of NATO that has no armed force. We worked out an agreement, I think, in 1953 that we would be responsible for the defense of Iceland. So the base has been there ever since. It's at a place called Keflavik. Iceland didn't have a major airport, and Keflavik was and remains the international airport for Iceland. It's about 20 miles from the capital city.

After the Cold War we were interested in reducing our presence at a lot of military facilities around the world, and the Icelanders, having pushed to get us out of Iceland through the 1960's and '70's when they had occasional leftist governments, suddenly realized that the goose that laid the golden egg might be going home. So suddenly positions had switched, and the US wanted to reduce its presence and the Icelanders wanted to maintain it. So when I first got into the issue, there were discussions that were ongoing about what was going to be the future

presence of Americans in Iceland. I began going to these meetings in Washington, and the meetings went nowhere. Every couple weeks there'd be a team that would come over, and since I wasn't confirmed, I just sat in the back of the room and watched how these meetings went. I learned that, while the Icelanders had a certain position that they stuck to, the Americans never could present the same team from one meeting to the next because it was always a different office or a different person from the Pentagon who would show up at the meetings and they would say, "Oh, no, we don't like that." So everybody would agree to something at one meeting, and then at the next meeting the Pentagon people say, "No, no, no, we can't accept any of that," so they had to go back to zero and start over again. This went back and forth, back and forth. There was no way that this thing was going to be easily resolved.

It was an important issue in that the Navy wanted to maintain a continuing presence at Keflavik because it had been an important intelligence-gathering site throughout the Cold War and it's the place where they monitor Russian submarines moving down into the North Atlantic. The Air Force, by contrast, which was the other main service that was there, didn't think that Iceland served any purpose at all and wanted to pull out its aircraft, its 14, or maybe 16 at the time, that were there. They wanted to pull them out. But the Icelanders said, "No, if you want to maintain the presence at the base, then there have to be aircraft. We cannot be the only NATO capital that doesn't have any jet planes, doesn't have any defense." The Air Force people would argue, "Look, you can't defend a place with the small number of aircraft that we have." They said, "We don't care. We want aircraft." So this went back and forth. We had the different American positions. The basic problem was that we couldn't sort out what was the American position to be. So the Icelanders, they're a very small nation but they are an incredibly stubborn nation, and they kept saying, "No, we insist." So this went on. I got out there in November of '93. We had a couple more meetings at our end, and I saw that absolutely nothing was going to happen. There would be a meeting, I guess, in December, a NATO meeting, and this would be Clinton's first meeting with all the different European prime ministers at the NATO meeting, and I picked up a rumor - I never had any confirmation of it - that the Icelandic prime minister was going to raise the issue with Clinton. I thought, ah, that sounds like a good way we can sort this out. So I sent a first-person cable back to the Secretary of Defense, not to the State Department, saying there is the NATO ministerial thing coming up and the prime minister here, we believe, is going to mention the base issue with the President, and "I think that it is in American interests if we can get this settled before the meeting so this will not be an agenda item for President Clinton." For some reason he bought onto that, and we had a delegation out within a week or two weeks, and it was headed by Deutsch, the Deputy Secretary of Defense at the time.

*Q: Later he became head of the CIA.*

BORG: That's right. He came out with an Air Force general, the CINC from Norfolk, and a Navy admiral. It was a high-powered delegation. We set up the meetings at a hotel, and he came into the meeting and he listened to what the Icelanders were saying, and he turned to the Air Force general and said, "Well, I think we're just going to have to do it that way." He gave them what they wanted. The way we had negotiated it was that the Air Force would withdraw all but four aircraft and they'd maintain a symbolic presence of four F16's on the ground plus the search-and-rescue operation.

*Q: Orion planes, I think.*

BORG: No, that was the Navy. The Navy had the Orion plane out there, but that wasn't an issue. The Navy would continue their Orion programs. We learned subsequently that the Deputy Secretary was all set to go with the Air Force position until he got there and he told the Navy that it was just going to have to live with the possibility of losing the base, but after he heard the Icelanders make their presentation, he switched sides. So we suddenly had an agreement - it was called it an agreed minute - for the continued use of the base for the next two years. We could only agree to it for two years. I spent almost the entire next year in battle with the Air Force over their interpretation of what had been agreed. Even though they had it written down, they said, "It doesn't really mean that, and we're going to pull our forces out anyway." They kept trying to think of reasons to pull the aircraft out of Iceland, and I kept thinking of reasons why they couldn't and why they shouldn't. This went back and forth, so this occupied my time. So here I am coming out of working on all these nonmilitary issues and I'm suddenly in the thick of these military discussions, and we were able to prevail by essentially outlasting the Air Force general, who eventually was transferred to another posting. His successor didn't have the same strong view. In addition, the Defense Reorganization Act of 1993 or '94 put the Air Force units that were located down at Langley Air Force Base under the authority of the CINC...

*Q: The CINC being an admiral in Norfolk.*

BORG: All these units suddenly reported to him, and they didn't have their independent chains of authority up to Air Force headquarters in Washington. So when he left and when there was the change in the legal structure, we were able to prevail, and the Air Force kept its units there. We kept it at four aircraft, and the Navy could do as it chose. That was chapter one. Chapter two was the agreement expired in two years, and so we began talking informally with the Icelanders about what are we going to do when this agreement expires. The secretary general of the foreign ministry and I agreed that the first round of discussions had been a disaster. They had no defense department in Iceland, so we dealt with the foreign ministry, which has a small defense office. We agreed that what we needed to do was to keep the discussions out of Washington, keep the Pentagon out of the discussions, and to the extent possible the two of us would try to manage the process. I worked very closely with the admiral and the new CINC in Norfolk to say, "Look, this last round was pretty much a disaster, and we've got to do it again." We said that, "Now under the new reorganization, you are clearly responsible for this. This is not a Washington issue. This is your issue. We're not changing the base agreement in any way. We are merely working on a status-of-forces arrangement." So he agreed that it was his responsibility, and he delegated that the base commander and I would be the interlocutors to sort out what would be in the base agreement. The new 'agreed minute' was what we called it. This was late '95. We were trying to work on it beforehand, but the Icelanders wouldn't be serious in their discussions until after the thing had expired, because they wanted to sort of prolong it to the extent that they could and just say, "It's in effect indefinitely." We said, "No, no, no, it expires, and we're free to do whatever we like at this point, and so we've got to renew it."

We began discussions, the admiral and the foreign ministry people and myself. The discussions, I think, began in earnest in early '96, and the Icelandic position was essentially what it had been before, that they wanted to keep the four aircraft on the ground. We had a different position at

the Air Force at this time. The Air Force was willing to keep its aircraft there as long as they weren't required to actually be physically present all the time, so they could fly off on missions to other places. The Icelanders were acceptable to this, but we thought, 'We've got to extract something or other from this. We can't just give them everything that they want. So what are the biggest problems that we face?' Well, there were some very messy issues. First, all commercial aircraft that land at the Keflavik airport pay their airport fees, none of which go to maintaining the airport at Keflavik because the Keflavik airport is the responsibility of the US Navy, so it's all out-of-country money that pays for the maintenance of the airport. There was just no way that the Icelanders were going to give any percentage of the resources to the US military, because this was essentially money that they used to support their aviation program in the rest of the country. They had these small airports all over the country that they paid for and funded through the fees from the international planes landing. So we decided not to pursue that one. But there was the issue of contracting. There was a monopoly company within Iceland that controlled all of the contracting at the base. Anytime the base wanted to do anything, they had only one company that they could go to, which could charge them just whatever they felt like charging. So we said, 'What we'll do is we'll break the monopoly'. So we negotiated mostly over the course of the next couple of weeks, months, what's the time frame for breaking the monopoly. "If we're going to provide these things which you like, you're going to have to make the base more something that we can afford. It can't be such a rip-off as it's been in the past." All the political parties shared in the resources that came in through what was called the Iceland prime contractor, but we eventually worked out a formula. The negotiations got very tense. On our side we had the admiral and myself. We didn't tell the State Department what we were doing, and nobody told Washington. The Pentagon didn't know what we were doing either.

On the Icelandic side you have a coalition government, and the prime minister was of one party and the minister of foreign affairs was from another party. We had a really tough time with the prime minister's office in that they didn't want to make any concession.

The foreign minister was more accommodating, and so he proposed to me - we were no longer working with the prime secretary; this was the foreign minister - he said, "Look, let's just the two of us do these negotiations. We'll cut the prime minister's office out. I only want one person." So I went to the people at the base and said, "Look, this is what he wants to do. He wants to do it one on one, so do I have your confidence," and they said, "Sure, you know what our positions are." We weren't really arguing any Defense Department issues; we were arguing financial issues and so forth. So in the end the prime minister and I worked out what would be the new agreed minute, and we signed it and we got the Assistant Secretary of Defense to come out and initial it.

Everybody was ecstatic on the American side that we had an agreement. The State Department people went absolute ballistic; they said, "Wow! This is terrific. We didn't have to send out a team. This is the best thing that's happened in months. This is the highlight of the first six months of the year for the European Bureau as well. We now have an agreement." To my surprise, the prime minister was pissed as hell about the agreement. I had worked it out with the foreign minister, and what we were doing was breaking the monopoly which had been a big source of revenue for the prime minister's party. At some National Day function - I think it was Icelandic independence day or something - we were at the president's palace. Actually it was the

president and the prime minister. The president is the equivalent of a queen. There was this very nice woman who was the president of Iceland. We were at her residence, and the prime minister came up to me. He'd had a couple drinks, and I've never had such a confrontation with anybody as that which he presented me with at this meeting. He told me how I was not a friend of Iceland and I had sabotaged the relations, and blah blah blah. I said, "Look, I'm here as your guest. If you don't like what we've done, then you can declare me PNG and I'll go home tomorrow." He went off. I never spoke to him again. The president had...

*Q: Was this the drink talking?*

BORG: I never knew. I think it was the way he felt, but I think it was the drink.

*Q: It was basically political patronage essentially.*

BORG: That's right. I never had another exchange of words with him. Again, this was in April, and my tour came to an end in June. I don't know if there were any visitors that came out. I declined to call on him before I left. I just thought it was unnecessary rudeness. We got an agreement, and one of the things in the end was we've got to be there for five years. We only had been working two years at a time. This was '96 and we had an agreement that lasted until 2001.

*Q: That's one of the real problems with some of these base agreements. The Azores agreement has been going on forever; you have permanent Azore negotiators on the Portuguese and American side, and it's a waste of time.*

BORG: We put the issue behind us for five years. They hadn't begun to figure out what they're going to do when it expired two years ago. They're living on old base arrangements, and the Icelanders are quite happy with that because we kept changing our presence. I've been consulted on a couple of occasions on what's going to happen and what should we be doing, and I said, "Well, you basically have too many players." They have a special base negotiator, a woman who works for PM (Political Military), whose primary function is negotiating this base and others as well. This issue took a big part of my time up there, because the base issues were sort of continuous for the time the negotiations going on. My successor didn't have to even think about it.

*Q: One of the things on the bases that I heard prior - this was when there was a left-leaning or even communist party in control - was they really didn't want the Americans there and the troops were restricted to the base, and I think one of the fears was that one of the pretty Icelandic girls would love to get the hell off the island and all these American males out there would love to take them with them. How did that play out while you were there?*

BORG: It had been a much more serious problem in the past. In the '60's and '70's there was great opposition to an American presence in Iceland, and there were restrictions on Americans going into town and so forth. That had pretty much passed, and I guess the size of our mission had declined and the number of single people had declined, so, yes, there were still marriages that took place but there were many more marriages 10 or 15 years earlier than marriages that were taking place. I think that Iceland had become a sufficiently prosperous welfare state that, if

somebody wanted to go to America, they went there and they didn't feel they had to marry somebody at the base, generally who had much less education than they had, in order to get away. I never heard of a single romance between people at the base and Icelanders. I'm sure there were some, but that was not an issue.

*Q: How about whales?*

BORG: Whaling, yes, this was our other big issue. There was a very small but noisy community in Iceland that wanted to resume whaling. Iceland had left the International Whaling Commission - I can't remember the year. Norway and Iceland both wanted to resume whaling after the ban at the International Whaling Commission, and we had put pressure on the Icelandic parliament to go along with the ban. Iceland left the Whaling Commission because they felt it was in the hands of the environmentalists and was no longer serving the original purpose, which was the conservation of the whale resources and protection of the whales. Once Iceland left, nobody wanted them back because they wanted to come back only if they could file an exception as the way Norway could file, but nobody appeared to give exceptions, so they were no longer part of the international community. There was a vocal community that kept pushing: "You've got to resume whaling." My strategy, which I wrote up and sent in to Washington, was: "I'm not going to say anything publicly about whaling because this is such an emotional issue. This is the equivalent of apple pie and motherhood, and for me to say anything in public is going to inflame the situation and make sure that whatever comes to pass comes to pass more quickly." I said, "My strategy is to talk with key exporters of goods to the United States and talk about the impact it could have on them if Americans decide that, after Iceland goes for the whales, they decide to boycott Icelandic products." We talked with the head of the airline, Iceland Air; we talked with the people who ran the two big fish packing companies, both of which export to the U.S. I said, "Look, if you resume whaling, I'm not sure what the official reaction is going to be and I don't know what the unofficial reaction is going to be, but anti-whaling is a very popular issue in the Iceland just as pro-whaling is a popular issue here. It could well be that Greenpeace or others will decide that, since Icelanders have done this, they're going to boycott Icelandic products. I'm not going to say anything about this, but I think it's in your interest to figure out if whaling is more important for you and for Iceland than the other products that you're producing and sending to the United States." This was the strategy I followed for the duration of my time there, and whaling never was a serious issue. I talked every couple months with them.

*Q: You talked about the end game of the prime minister. Up to that point, though, how had the relations been with the Icelandic government?*

BORG: Just fine. We had very good relations. We brought speakers in. Anybody that came to town could go in and see them. Iceland is basically a very close friend of the United States.

*Q: Were there any contentious issues that arose over NATO or...?*

BORG: Yes, NATO issues were central to base discussions and their concern was that we maintain a presence. The most contentious other issue which we dealt with was the question of EU standards. Iceland is not a member of the European Union, and because of the importance of fishing to its economy, it was not about to surrender its sovereignty over its territorial waters and

permit Spanish and Portuguese fishermen to come in and fish the waters clean the way they did in Canada and in other places. So Iceland had the unique situation that its 200-mile territorial waters was contingent with the bank around the country, so that the shallow water where the fish hung out was all within Iceland's territorial waters, as contrasted with the grand banks in Canada where the fishing waters extend 500, 600, 700 miles out into the sea. So Iceland was not about to join the European Union, but it was a member of EFTA, the European Free Trade Area, which meant that it fell under EU regulations, and it was constantly getting regulations from Brussels that it was supposed to implement and sign agreements with the European Union to do this and that in accordance with European Union regulations. Iceland, because of its location in the North Atlantic, and its ties with the United States over the years, purchased large quantities of American goods, but it didn't purchase them from European subsidiaries, it purchased them directly from the United States. The supermarket chain buys goods from Safeway or someone, the suppliers in the United States. Well, this meant that all of the cans and packages in Iceland had American labeling on them as to percentage of fat and salt and all these sorts of these things, and they didn't meet the European Union standards. So Iceland was supposed to switch its sources for these goods to companies that were in Europe that were providing the packages that had the right numbers on them. Well, most Icelanders didn't understand it, but the import community, the people who ran the various markets, the supermarkets, thought this was outrageous, that they didn't want to give up their traditional sources.

The foreign minister was putting pressure on them to switch wherever they were acquiring their goods. In addition, few goods that we produced in United States the Icelanders consumed in sufficient quantity to print the labels in Iceland to meet the European standards. I think the real exception to that was Cheerios. Icelanders are addicted to Cheerios, and there are manufactured in the United States Cheerios boxes in Icelandic with all the European standards. But they wanted frosted flakes and ketchup and all these other things. So I sent my economic team into the supermarkets throughout the city to find as many labeled goods from European sources that didn't have the correct labeling on them either, and so we were able to find things from Spain and Sweden and all these other places that were improperly labeled, that didn't meet the European labeling standards. So we made a presentation to the foreign minister and said, "Look, you should not discriminate against American products because they don't have the correct labeling. We know all of these European companies that don't meet the European labeling standards.

We also had displays: "Here are all the products which everybody in Iceland eats all the time." We set this up in hotels to demonstrate, "Now, here's what you're not going to be able to get any longer." It was a very effective campaign, and they backed off. I don't know what happened after I left. So trade promotion was a very important part of what we were doing also. We had annual trade fairs. We would take American goods to different parts of the country and try to introduce people to American wine, American beer. We had a Budweiser distributor in Iceland. And each year for the Fourth of July we would bring in American goods duty free, and each one of the importers would use the Fourth of July as a place where people could sample American wines and whiskey and other products. They thought it was wonderful to get all that stuff for free and take possession of the things afterwards that had come in duty free. We introduced Hummer vehicles, the Humvee, the military vehicle, and I went around the country at one point promoting the use of Humvees for the rescue societies, because Iceland has a huge arctic desert and the

Humvee is very well suited to the Icelandic environment. So it was, in summary, military issues, whaling, and trade promotion. Those were the key issues.

**DAVID M. SCHOONOVER**  
**Spouse of the American Ambassador**  
**Reykjavik (1999-2002)**

*Mr. Schoonover was born and raised in Illinois and educated at the University of Illinois and Stanford University. After service in the US Army, he joined the Foreign Agricultural Service and served in senior capacities in Washington and abroad, dealing with Agricultural and Trade matters. His Foreign Service took him to Moscow, Beijing and Seoul, where he served in senior level positions, including Agricultural Minister-Counselor. Mr. Schoonover was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.*

SCHOONOVER: As it happened, in the summer of 1999, Barbara was confirmed as Ambassador to Iceland. I was far enough along in my career after 38 years that I said, hmmm, I believe I will just retire and go along. So I did. We were there until the summer of 2002. So my last three years of overseas experience were not as an employee, but as a spouse, accompanying my wife in Iceland.

I really enjoyed my three years in Iceland. It has spectacular, but stark, nature, and the people are very friendly. We had a few incidents during our stay there, and over the years there have been demonstrations at the NATO base—there are always a few things like that. But on the whole, Icelanders are very friendly to Americans. Iceland is a very nice place to live and it has a very high and cultured standard of living. But Iceland is not a big country in terms of population. The Embassy was not very large, nor the staff. The residence certainly was not large. At the residence, we had a grand total of two employees: one housekeeper and one chef. And so, I would say my experience was delightful. I accompanied Barbara on many of her trips and attended many different sorts of diplomatic functions, which were not solely business, but included various cultural events. As the sole male among the spouses, I guess I caused the Iceland Foreign Ministry to change from events for wives to events for spouses. We also attended a lot of functions at the NATO base, which is operated primarily by the U.S. And so I enjoyed myself for about three years and enjoyed the opportunity to travel around Iceland and get acquainted with some of the people there.

*Q: Any agricultural interests there?*

SCHOONOVER: Not very many. Iceland has some agriculture, but in terms of field crop production, it has very little. It has some greenhouse agriculture, and most of the other branches of farming, such as dairying, sheep, and horses depend primarily on grasslands and hay production. Fishing is really the big thing. Iceland has a number of protectionist policies, and has tried to preserve some elements of agriculture, but the population was small, and it did import a lot of products, including quite a few products already from the United States. Consequently,



Iceland would hardly be a primary target in trade negotiations. We probably were more concerned about European Union efforts to persuade Icelanders to adopt their standards, rather than ones compatible with ours, which might have disrupted some of our trade. Anyway, I was no longer the person who was responsible for these things. That was the task of the Economic Officer at the Embassy. Iceland's standard of living had changed tremendously over the previous decade or so. It had gone from being a poor country to one that suddenly was on the same standard of living as we were.

*Q: What caused that jump?*

SCHOONOVER: Well, I guess they moved from a purely fishing and agrarian economy to a much greater involvement in technology. They have a very educated population. They had done away with illiteracy, advancing to a very high level of education and had moved into some high technology areas. I think they had done pretty well with their fish exports in the previous few years before that, and combined with high technology, medical research, high literacy, and a number of other things, they found themselves suddenly with a high standard of living, good incomes, good availability of products. Barbara could do a better job of explaining it than I could. They did import a number of food products. As I mentioned earlier, I think one of the main trade issues was to try and dissuade Icelanders from applying European Union standards, but instead apply standards that would be more conducive to imports of American food products. Even though Iceland was not part of the European Union, it had an economic relationship with the European Union, and the Europeans were trying to persuade the Icelanders to adopt their standards on most things. And in the case of food product imports, this could have meant that the American products would no longer have met that particular standard. And it might be something as simple as labeling. It might have something to do with a particular food additive or various other things. But one way or the other it might have kept American products out of the market. I think as far as agriculture and food were concerned, the number one task of the Embassy was to persuade the Icelanders to keep a more open mind on the standards of food imports coming into the country. Certainly, Icelanders basically wanted to continue to enjoy products from the United States as well as from Europe, so I think our efforts were fairly successful.

*End of Reader*