Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”
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Series 3: “The Four Freedoms” and FDR in World War II

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1944 August 24

Toast to President Bjornsson of Ireland
Only four members of my Cabinet are here tonight, the others are off on holiday or for some other reason, but I am glad to say that half of them have been in Iceland. The Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Treasury have been there, so they know more personally about Iceland than I do, in having been there.

However, as I said to the President, I have always been a student of Iceland. And there was put up to me about two years ago the great question as to where Iceland was. Was it in the European hemisphere, or the American hemisphere? And I used the judgment of Solomon, I said it was in both hemispheres, which is true. Chiefly for practical reasons (to be quite frank) in this new world of ours—not disparaging (?)—although we have a great many very fine citizens have come from Iceland. But it belongs in both hemispheres, it belongs to the life of both hemispheres. And in the future, I think this country—this is a prediction—I think that Iceland will always be considered for certain practical reasons, a part of the Americas, and a part of Europe. Still, Iceland is necessary. We all know for practical reasons to our defense, which is illustrated some nearly three years ago when there was a real danger when Germany was not only on the offensive but every day was over-running a greater part of the world. And there was the danger in those days when all of us were on the defensive, I am speaking from the American point of view—that Iceland would be occupied by the Germans. And on that particular occasion, whether it was constitutional or not, the historians will determine a hundred years from now. We took up with the State Department took up with the Icelandic government, which was then closely associated with Denmark, the possibility of our making sure, by sending troops to Iceland, that Germany could not use it as a fait accompli against this continent. We were selfish, we couldn't afford to let Germany use Iceland as a base from which to bomb or send
expeditions against the American continent. And therefore, because of the cordial relations that existed, we were able to make a perfectly legal agreement with the government of Iceland by which we sent our troops. We said quite frankly, and we meant it as the President knows, that when this danger of German occupation of Iceland over and the world will return to peace, we not only would recognize but we would work for the complete independence of what is the Iceland, not of today but of a thousand years back, the Iceland that essentially has always been independent, a nation that goes back -- and this is something that perhaps some people could use to some advantage -- Irish in origin. I was asking the President, who incidentally is the first President of their Republic -- we haven't had many, thirty-two, that's all -- who the first people in Iceland, were they Eskimos? No, there. And we said the first people in Iceland were the Irish, which is extremely interesting. Not only the Irish, by the founding of a monastery in Iceland, but the first white people, as we call them, in Iceland were the Irish, followed after that, after the Norsemen had come -- the Vikings had come -- by another influx of Irish, including the President said, an Irish princess. So there you are. And from that time on, more than a thousand years, we celebrated their thousandth anniversary a short time ago, we have had an independent nation in Iceland, the oldest of our civilization in all the world, with a parliamentary government, with complete independence in the best sense of the word, always not only making their own laws but living their own lives, not only their own government but a people's government, who said what they wanted, and who always had their way, including the right to elect the present President, who incidentally -- probably a good thought, which I won't press -- was elected unanimously.
(laughter) I catch the eyes of Senator Vandenberg. (more laughter)

But that is the way they elected their first President. And, of course, we did, too, in 1788–9. We elected George Washington unanimously, and he was the first and the last that was thus elected. So I warn my colleagues for you -- (laughter) -- if he should run for a second or a third or a fourth term, he mustn't expect to be elected unanimously. (more laughter)

And so Iceland is a great deal more than a name in mythology. In the last few years, Iceland was a name to us. One and eight-tenths percent of our trade to Iceland went that way. Things differ from time to time. Today it is 58 percent, something like that, due primarily to the war -- we might just as well admit that. But at the same time, and thinking of the future, we want to keep Iceland on the map, that is the great point, always.

The whole of civilization wants Iceland as the cradle of the oldest republic that has ever happened. Something to teach the world a lesson. You run your own university, you are friends with all the Scandinavians, who are in Iceland too. But you run into the curious fact that last year or the year before a few years ago, Sweden issued an issue of stamps to celebrate the freedom of the Swedes from Danish control. Remember that. The Norwegians have insisted on their independence from Sweden. The Norwegians and the Danes are first cousins. You have Scandinavian blood, with a very good Irish admixture. And, on the whole, in the family of nations, the American people have a great deal of Scandinavian blood, a lot of them, a great many Swedes, and Norwegians, and some Danish and a few Icelanders. But we want the future to look at it from the point of view that we are all of the same basic stock, fundamentally. And we want inter-marriage.

I am alluding now to a number of people under the jurisdiction of...
Secretary Stimson who are related by marriage with Icelandic girls, and who are going to stay in Iceland, if you let them, after the war. It's all right. Now, I don't protest against that one bit. We like it, and we hope that some of their children will come over here and become a part of the American family.

Now on the other things that are more practical, like trade, I was saying to his Minister a very few minutes ago there is an American habit of cocktails, but we haven't yet acquired the Scandinavian habit of the things that go before cocktails. Don't sell us cod liver oil, I don't like cod liver oil -- (laughter) -- but go into the things that pay more money. Send us some smoked salmon, and things of that kind that go well before the cocktails. In that way you can help, and we can help another way by general trade between Iceland and the United States. After all, things are going to go by trade a great deal in the future. It has been easier, because of the shorter distance, to send your hors d'oeuvres to England, but they don't know good hors d'oeuvres when they see them. Much easier because of the shorter distance. Please send us some, for we are very fond of them. And specialize in them, not the vulgar stuff, but the specials. You can send us wool, for there is a special kind of wool we don't have here. And so the trade, if we go at it from the point of view of building it up on special lines -- Iceland is small and therefore you have to specialize -- I think it can be done. And in the days to come -- I am not speaking about this treaty or that treaty or the other treaty they are talking about now, but it depends very largely on the spirit, very much on the spirit. If the spirit is all right behind the objective, greater friendship and greater trade, we can get somewhere. You have your politics, Mr. President, you have a legislature, the
oldest legislature in the world, incidentally. I have great hopes that when this thing comes up, the Senate of the United States, which has a great deal to do with foreign policy, will accept a treaty of trade and friendship, inclusive -- all-inclusive -- with the Republic of Iceland, without saying No just because they don't like the President of the United States. Now that's an ideal, and perhaps my hope will be justified, and Time alone will tell. But, at least, in welcoming you to Washington, you know that the present President has his heart in the right place.

And so I drink to the first President of Iceland.

(the Toast was drunk)

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: (in English)

Mr. President, I thank you very much for the kind words about my country and my visit here. My people in Iceland are very glad to realize the fact that the United States wants Iceland to be on the map. You have shown it this year, by the way you took the proclamation of the Republic and the inauguration of myself as first President, and sent a special Ambassador. It has been of great value to Iceland, and I am glad to be here today. It is my first visit outside of my country since I came into office. I am very glad this first visit is here in Washington, and that I have the opportunity to bring thanks from the Icelandic people to the
present government and Congress, and the people of the United States, for their attitude in this question.

The President mentioned a problem which is very difficult to climb out of, but this, in Iceland belongs to the question, whether Europe or the Western Hemisphere. And the President thought that the solution was that it belonged to both of them. Then the question only will be, well, the biggest half-past by-pass will be as they used to say some time ago. You know that I must confess that all in our history, Irish-- Excuse me, I must make a by-pass there. The President mentioned that the first settlers of Iceland were Irish, but they left Iceland.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. (laughter)

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: You know, perhaps, that the first settlers of America and the United States were Icelanders.

THE PRESIDENT: That's right. That's right.

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: But they left. (more laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: It is a curious thing how things can happen like that, but it seems to me that as naval people we are proud to have our historical connections there, and many other things. We have during this war got to know more and more of America than ever before. And may I say that three years ago, when this situation was there, it was to be feared that the Germans would occupy Iceland if there were not made some other precautions. And, therefore, the Icelandic government and the Icelandic parliament asked the United States to take over their defense of America. Then it was because the Icelandic people and the Icelandic political leaders had a real confidence in the people and government of the United States, a confidence that they would see to it that their
risk we will run with this small population that they would see to it that this risk would not be to any detriment for the Icelandic people, and at the same time a confidence that you were standing for the same ideals as we are so glad to have, that we used to call in the democratic ideals, but it is my conception something more than according to Demos and the present conception of that: it is human—thoroughly human. That is why we have been so glad for this friendship shown to us from the United States. And I will take the opportunity, when I spoke about confidence in this connection, there was the question of how there were a great number of soldiers—foreign soldiers—and how they would conduct themselves and their country, and a small population. And after an experience of three years, I am glad to be able to say here that the general feeling of the Icelandic people is that they have conducted themselves so well under the circumstances that we cannot but have still more respect for the American people. But those reasons, and many others, it is up to the future to say how that connection will be, but I have felt that the people in the United States who have seen something of our production, they believe in a real trade—exchange of trade between Iceland and the United States. And we should be very glad to have that in any case, and because we need so much just from the United States, we need all sorts of materials and machinery for developing our agricultural and other things. And how it will be after the war, which you are considering now how to arrange that exchange between our people would always be very good, if we would be able to sell much more than we have done until now. I shall not use more words, but you will understand by what I have said that fortunately this problem might be, from the point of view of many people, a dangerous thing—this is a great power like the United States to defend a country by its
soldiers without any invitation. I think it has worked, from our point of view, in such a way that we have nothing to be disappointed about, and of the friendship shown to Iceland. And last, not least, your wish about when we founded this great Republic makes us very thankful to the present government and Congress of the United States.

And may I -- by my leave -- drink to the health of our host, the President of the United States.

(the Toast was drunk)

THE PRESIDENT: As the head of one of the younger nations, may I add this toast to the head of one of the oldest nations in the world, and to our eternal friendship may increase. To the President of Iceland.

(the Toast was drunk)
Toast Of The President
For The President Of Iceland, Sveinn Bjornsson
State Dining Room Of The White House
August 24, 1944, 9:30 p.m., e.w.t.
(With The Latter's Reply)

Only four members of my Cabinet are here tonight, the others are off on holiday or for some other reason, but I am glad to say that half of them have been in Iceland. The Secretary of War and the Secretary of the Treasury have been there, so in having been there they know more about Iceland personally than I do. However, as I said to the President, I have always been a student of Iceland.

About two years ago there was put up to me the great question as to where Iceland was. Was it in the European hemisphere or the American hemisphere? And I used the judgment of Solomon, I said it was in both hemispheres -- which is true. To be quite frank, chiefly for practical reasons. But it belongs in both hemispheres, it belongs to the life of both hemispheres. And in the future -- this is a prediction -- I think that Iceland will always be considered, for certain practical reasons, a part of the Americas, and a part of Europe.

For practical reasons we all know Iceland is necessary to our defense, illustrated some three years ago when there was real danger, when Germany was not only on the offensive but was over-running a greater part of the world every day. And there was the danger in those days -- when all of us were on the defensive, and I am speaking from the American point of view --
that Iceland would be occupied by the Germans.

And on that particular occasion, whether it was constitutional or not the historians will determine a hundred years from now, the State Department took up with the Icelandic government -- which was then closely associated with Denmark -- the possibility of our making sure, by sending troops to Iceland, that Germany could not use it as a "fait accompli" against this continent. We were selfish. We couldn't afford to let Germany use Iceland as a base from which to bomb or send expeditions against the American continent.

And therefore, because of the cordial relations that existed, we were able to make a perfectly legal agreement with the government of Iceland by which we sent in our troops. We said quite frankly, and we meant it as the President knows, that when this danger of a German occupation of Iceland was over and the world returns to peace, we not only would recognize but we would work for the complete independence of what is the Iceland, not of today but of a thousand years back, the Iceland that essentially has always been independent, a nation -- and this is something that perhaps some people could use to some advantage -- Irish in its origin.

I was asking the President, who incidentally is the first President of their Republic -- we haven't had many, thirty-two, that's all -- who were the first people in Iceland, were they Esquimaux? No, an Esquimaux was never there. He said the first people in Iceland were the Irish, which is extremely interesting. Not only the Irish, by the founding of a
monastery in Iceland, but the first white people -- as we call them -- in Iceland were the Irish, followed after that, after the Norsemen had come -- the Vikings had come -- by another influx of Irish, including an Irish princess, the President said. So there you are.

And from that time on, for more than a thousand years -- we celebrated their thousandth anniversary a short time ago -- we have had an independent nation in Iceland, the oldest of our civilization in all the world, with a parliamentary government, with complete independence in the best sense of the word, not only making their own laws but living their own lives, not only their own government but a people's government, who said what they wanted, and who always had their way, including the right to elect the present President, who incidentally -- probably a good thought, which I won't press -- was elected unanimously. (laughter) I catch the eyes of Senator Vandenberg. (more laughter) But that is the way they elected their first President.

And, of course, we did, too, in 1788-9. We elected George Washington unanimously, and he was the first and the last that was thus elected. So I warn my colleagues for you -- (laughter) -- if he should run for a second or a third or a fourth term, he mustn't expect to be elected unanimously. (more laughter) And so Iceland is a great deal more than a name in mythology.

In the last few years, Iceland was a name to us. One and eight-tenths percent of our trade to Iceland went
that way. Things differ from time to time. Today it is 58 per-
cent, something like that, due primarily to the war -- we might
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And we want inter-marriage. I am alluding now to a
number of people -- several thousand have already -- who are
now under the jurisdiction of Secretary Stimson, who are related
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And in the days to come -- I am not speaking about this treaty, or that treaty or the other treaty they are talking about now, but it depends very largely on the spirit, very much on the spirit. If the spirit is all right behind the objective, greater friendship and greater trade, we can get
somewhere.

You have your politics, Mr. President, and you have a legislature, the oldest legislature in the world, incidentally. Over here I have my politics -- I am not taking a very great part in them -- and I have a legislature, a very young legislature, it's only 150 -- 160 years old. They learn with age.

(laughter) And so I have great hopes that when this thing comes up, the Senate of the United States which has a great deal to do with foreign policy will accept a treaty of trade and friendship, inclusive -- all-inclusive -- with the Republic of Iceland, without saying No just because they don't like the President of the United States.

Now that's an ideal, and perhaps my hope will be justified. Time alone will tell.

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THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: (in English)

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the way you took the proclamation of the Republic and the
inauguration of myself as first President, and sent a special
Ambassador. It has been of great value to Iceland.

I am glad to be here today. It is my first visit out-
side my country since I came into office. I am very glad that
this first visit is here in Washington, and that I have the op-
portunity to bring thanks from the Icelandic people to the pre-
sent government and Congress, and the people of the United
States, for their attitude in this question.

The President mentioned a problem which is very diffi-
cult to climb out of, whether Iceland belongs to the European or
Western hemispheres. And the President thought the solution was
it belonged to both. Excuse me, I must make a by-pass there.

The President then mentioned that the first settlers
of Iceland were Irish, but they left Ireland.

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THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: It is a curious thing how
things can happen like that, but it seems to me that as naval
people we are proud to have our historical connections there,
and many other things. During this war we have got to know more
and more of America than ever before.
And may I say that three years ago, when this situation was there, it was to be feared the Germans would occupy Iceland if there were not made some other precautions. And, therefore, the Icelandic government and the Icelandic parliament asked the United States to take over their defense of America.

Then it was because the Icelandic people and the Icelandic political leaders had a real confidence in the people and government of the United States, a confidence that they would see to it that with this small population they would see to it that this risk would not be to any detriment for the Icelandic people, and at the same time a confidence that you were standing for the same ideals we are so glad to have, that we used to call the democratic ideals, but it is in my conception something more than according to Demos and the present conception of that: it is human — thoroughly human. That is why we have been so glad for this friendship shown to us from the United States.

And I will take the opportunity, when I spoke about confidence in this connection, there was the question of a great number of foreign soldiers and how they would conduct themselves in a country of so small a population. And after an experience of three years, I am glad to be able to say here that the general feeling of the Icelandic people is that they conducted themselves so well under the circumstances that we cannot but have still more respect for the American people.

For those reasons, and many others, it is up to the future to say how that connection will be, but I have felt
that the people in the United States who have seen something of our production, they believe in a real exchange of trade between Iceland and the United States. And we should be very glad to have that in any case, because we need so much just from the United States, we need all sorts of materials and machinery for developing our agricultural and other things. And how it will be after the war, which you are considering now how to arrange that exchange between our peoples, would always be very good, if we would be able to sell much more than we have done until now.

I shall not use more words, but you will understand by what I have said that this problem might be, from the point of view of many people, a dangerous thing -- a great power like the United States to defend a country by its soldiers without any invitation. I think it has worked, from our point of view, in a way that we have nothing to be disappointed about, and of the friendship shown to Iceland.

And last but not least, your wish about when we founded this great Republic makes us very thankful to the present government and Congress of the United States.

And may I -- by my leave -- drink to the health of our host, the President of the United States.

(the Toast was drunk)

THE PRESIDENT: As the head of one of the younger nations, may I add this Toast to the head of one of the oldest
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For practical reasons we all know Iceland is necessary to our defense, illustrated some three years ago when there was real danger, when Germany was not only on the offensive but was over-running a greater part of the world. And there was the danger in those days -- when all of us were on the defensive, and I am speaking from the American point of view --
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the way you took the proclamation of the Republic and the
inauguration of myself as first President, and sent a special
Ambassador. It has been of great value to Iceland.

I am glad to be here today. It is my first visit out-
side my country since I came into office. I am very glad that
this first visit is here in Washington, and that I have the op-
portunity to bring thanks from the Icelandic people to the pre-
sent government and Congress, and the people of the United
States, for their attitude in this question.

The President mentioned a problem which is very diffi-
cult to climb out of, whether Iceland belongs to the European or
Western hemispheres. And the President thought the solution was
it belonged to both. Excuse me, I must make a by-pass there.

The President then mentioned that the first settlers
of Iceland were Irish, but they left Ireland.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. (laughter)

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: You know, perhaps, that the
first settlers of America and the United States were Icelanders.

THE PRESIDENT: That's right. That's right.

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: But they left. (more
laughter)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

THE PRESIDENT OF ICELAND: It is a curious thing how
things can happen like that, but it seems to me that as naval
people we are proud to have our historical connections there,
and many other things. During this war we have got to know more
and more of America than ever before.
And may I say that three years ago, when this situation was there, it was to be feared the Germans would occupy Iceland if there were not made some other precautions. And, therefore, the Icelandic government and the Icelandic parliament asked the United States to take over their defense of America.

Then it was because the Icelandic people and the Icelandic political leaders had a real confidence in the people and government of the United States, a confidence that they would see to it that with this small population they would see to it that this risk would not be to any detriment for the Icelandic people, and at the same time a confidence that you were standing for the same ideals we are so glad to have, that we used to call the democratic ideals, but it is in my conception something more than according to Demos and the present conception of that: it is human -- thoroughly human. That is why we have been so glad for this friendship shown to us from the United States.

And I will take the opportunity, when I spoke about confidence in this connection, there was the question of a great number of foreign soldiers and how they would conduct themselves in a country of so small a population. And after an experience of three years, I am glad to be able to say here that the general feeling of the Icelandic people is that they conducted themselves so well under the circumstances that we cannot but have still more respect for the American people.

For those reasons, and many others, it is up to the future to say how that connection will be, but I have felt
that the people in the United States who have seen something of our production, they believe in a real exchange of trade between Iceland and the United States. And we should be very glad to have that in any case, because we need so much just from the United States, we need all sorts of materials and machinery for developing our agricultural and other things. And how it will be after the war, which you are considering now how to arrange that exchange between our peoples, would always be very good, if we would be able to sell much more than we have done until now.

I shall not use more words, but you will understand by what I have said that this problem might be, from the point of view of many people, a dangerous thing -- a great power like the United States to defend a country by its soldiers without any invitation. I think it has worked, from our point of view, in a way that we have nothing to be disappointed about, and of the friendship shown to Iceland.

And last but not least, your wish about when we founded this great Republic makes us very thankful to the present government and Congress of the United States.

And may I -- by my leave -- drink to the health of our host, the President of the United States.

(the Toast was drunk)

THE PRESIDENT: As the head of one of the younger nations, may I add this Toast to the head of one of the oldest
nations in the world, and that our eternal friendship may increase. To the President of Iceland.

(the Toast was drunk)

(the changes in ink were made by the President)