

# Staging the Nation: Performing Icelandic Nationality during the 1986 Reykjavík Summit

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**Abstract** – The 1986 Reykjavík Summit, where U.S. president Ronald Reagan and Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev held an impromptu meeting to discuss nuclear disarmament, suddenly thrust Iceland, a small marginalized island nation, into the world media spotlight. This article examines the way in which the summit as a global media event became a platform for a tremendous promotional effort where Icelanders, determined to make optimal use of this unique opportunity, performed and staged a variety of national narratives, emphasizing images linked to their heritage, their perceived exoticism, and uniquely Nordic and Northern traits. The article furthermore reviews the opportunistic mode and commercial imperative of the summit as a media event and analyzes a number of the conceptual configurations that the foreign press employed to encapsulate and represent Iceland as a symbolic host country for the peace negotiations of the summit.

**Keywords** – Reykjavík Summit, images of Iceland, nationalism, media representations, geopolitical worldview

Setting the 2008 banking and economic collapse aside as an unexpected negative manifestation of a nation's aspiration towards international media exposure, few moments in Icelandic history have produced such a sudden, unprecedented, and welcome opportunity for national promotion as the Reagan–Gorbachev nuclear arms control summit, which was held on less than two weeks' notice in Reykjavík in the autumn of 1986. While the event proved to be an important steppingstone in the history of Cold War superpower relations, its implications for Icelandic history were of an entirely different order, involving signification associated with national promotion.

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After the announcement of the summit, Iceland was thrown overnight into the centre of the world stage, where the attention of the international media was to remain fixed on the nation and its inhabitants during the summit, as well as the days leading up to it. News organizations from around the world covered the event, with close to 3,000 media personnel arriving in Iceland as the summit approached.<sup>1</sup> In terms of media exposure, global political importance, and complexity of preparation, the summit was unmatched by anything else taking place in Icelandic politics and culture at that time. The problems involved in hosting the event on such short notice were considerable, but the opportunity to present the nation to a world audience presumably curious to know more about the place chosen by the United States and Soviet leaders for their unexpected additional round of discussions also provided unmistakable advantages.

A brief recount of the historical context that preceded the decision to organize a summit in Iceland is called for here. When Gorbachev came to power as general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union was marked by a deep rift and mutual suspicion. His first meeting with Reagan on arms control in Geneva in November of 1985 turned out to be inconclusive, and Reagan's subsequent threat to withdraw from the SALT II treaty, which placed limits on strategic arsenals, was seen as a provocative gesture by European states. The ensuing geopolitical situation, with the Soviets still in Afghanistan and the two superpowers hardly on speaking terms concerning the nuclear threat, was regarded as having reached an extremely dangerous point.<sup>2</sup> Gorbachev, who had initiated the disarmament talks, saw the growing European anxiety over nuclear arms as an opportunity to mend relations with the continent. He thus began to give talks where he openly spoke of the impossibility of defending against nuclear arms. He insisted that the only security lay in political settlements. Partly due to the success of Gorbachev's publicity push, Reagan agreed to the Reykjavík Summit, while also believing that flaws in their economy rendered Soviet power tenuous and their ambitions less than global. Reagan's tendency to personalize politics, and the fact

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<sup>1</sup> Magnússon 1986: 17.

<sup>2</sup> Graebner, Burns, & Siracusa 2008: 91.

that he found Gorbachev personally likeable, lent a friendly and informal tone to the talks. In Reykjavík, the two leaders came close to an agreement to completely abolish nuclear weapons. That Reagan walked away from such an opportunity, on account of the Soviet demand that Strategic Defence Initiative development (also referred to as the “Star Wars” plan) be confined to laboratories for five more years, has been viewed as one of the great failures of statesmanship in recent decades.<sup>3</sup>

Occurring at time when it can be argued that Icelanders were entering a new phase of self-confidence as a fully modernized participant in a globalized world, economically prosperous and ready to make their mark, the summit event provides an important opportunity to explore the way in which Iceland and Icelandic nationality were staged in the media spotlight. In what follows, I will look closely at what sort of national images were projected and promoted through the event, and how Iceland was situated within the North–South geopolitical framework, as well as an East–West paradigm that had become central in the material as well as cognitive mapping of the world during the Cold War. The 1986 Reykjavík Summit will thus be the focus of this paper, although not in the traditional way of assessing the political significance of the arms control negotiations. Rather, I will explore the media attention directed at the host country of the summit; how its peculiarities and characteristics were highlighted, manipulated, and presented to an international audience; and what all this meant for the international promotion and image construction of Iceland as a nation and Reykjavík as a place.

### The Reykjavík Summit as Media Event

“Reykjavík?—what a surprise!”, “Iceland?”, “Iceland!” were the exclamations that could be heard from all over the room during the White House press meeting called on 30 September 1986 to announce the decision to hold a nuclear arms control summit between Ronald Reagan, the president of the United States, and

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<sup>3</sup> Matlock 2004: 215–251; Graebner, Burns, & Siracusa 2008: 89–113.

Soviet general secretary Michael Gorbachev in Reykjavík, Iceland.<sup>4</sup> While the press likes to think of itself as being rarely caught off guard, this spontaneous outburst of surprise provides a wonderfully unguarded indication of the way in which the unconventional location of the meeting appealed to the media, a fact which subsequently shaped the coverage of the event. The announcement of the Reykjavík Summit was a catch for the media, not only in the primary sense that the leaders of the two world superpowers were to meet unexpectedly, adding an extra round of talks to the already scheduled summits in Washington and Moscow in 1987 and 1988, but also that they were meeting in a highly unusual place, which in its obscurity and remove from the centres of political power countered and even renewed the standard image and protocols of international diplomacy.

During the summit, a system of exchange came into being where the performance of national characteristics went hand in hand with enormous media attention, each seeming to influence and magnify the other. The intensity of the foreign media's gaze, and the enthusiastic national response, can be seen to have blurred the lines between what Joep Leerssen, in his discussion of national images, calls the auto image, namely national self-perception and group identity, and the hetero image, the opinion of others. In order to articulate the dynamics of national identity, performance, media saturation, and geopolitics that proved instrumental in creating the meaning of the summit, and constructing the image of the host country, it is necessary to look more closely at the logics of the media event itself.

The Reykjavík Summit can be explored in general terms as a media event, employing Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz's conceptualization of the phenomenon. Dayan and Katz focus on the ceremonial aspects of moments of mass communication, particularly those that are broadcast live. They suggest a three-part model for interpretation where the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of televised media events are examined. The first part of the model, the syntactic aspect, invokes the structural conventions as well as the technical realities of producing coverage of media events. Media events are announced beforehand in a manner that allows the media

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<sup>4</sup> A clip from the White House press meeting is featured, for example, in the programmes *Dagsljós: Leiðtogafundurinn á Höfða* [Dagsljós: Reykjavík Summit at Höfði], RÚV, 1996, and *Leiðtogafundurinn* [Reykjavík Summit], RÚV, 2006.

time for preparation, and its backers time for promotion and publicity, while still keeping the schedule tight enough for the event to occur before excitement starts to wane. The coverage of a media event involves an interplay between the familiar studio setting and the remote site of occurrence, which again involves spatial/technical considerations and frequently highlights the “live”-ness of the broadcast, its immediacy that is then usually presented with considerable reverence and ceremony. The semantic aspect of the media event involves its immanent meaning and the manner in which organizer and media agents frequently arrive at a joint consensus about how the event should be communicated, a meaning which is usually proposed in some fashion by the organizer and then shared by the media (that a royal wedding should be treated, for example, as a “Cinderella story,” or that a presidential election is really about “race”). A media event is thus assumed to have a set of core meanings, which it is the responsibility of the media to communicate in a sufficiently coherent fashion. The third element of their model, the pragmatic part, deals with the various economic and business-related issues that influence decisions about what to cover and the calculations involved in the process of “marketing” media events, as well as the criteria for success and failure.<sup>5</sup>

While the Reykjavík Summit was essentially a step in the ongoing nuclear disarmament process that called for negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was structured in a way which facilitated a full-scale media event. The summit was, for example, set up as a round of one-on-one talks at a specific time and place, fostering a sense of spontaneity and intimacy that ran counter to the fact that most of the decisions made and the things said at the summit were prepared in advance in consultancy with various governmental agencies.<sup>6</sup> In important ways, the summit was an event governed by the laws of political image-play and manipulation on behalf of the organizers, no less than the media. The timing and short notice of the Reykjavík meeting had puzzled political analysts just as much as the location. While a variety of issues influenced Reagan’s acceptance of Gorbachev’s proposal, the decisive factor for Reagan’s immediate political interests lay in the upcoming mid-term congressional

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<sup>5</sup> Dayan & Katz 1994: 25–53.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Gorbachev 2007; Reagan 1991. See also Hollyway 2007; Matlock 2004.

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elections for which the Republican Party was fighting to retain key seats. The meeting provided Reagan with an opportunity to focus attention away from domestic problems to the broader, more popular issues of peace and the curbing of international fear of the threat of nuclear war, thus working on the “new Reagan” image of the peacemaker.<sup>7</sup> Gorbachev also seemed quite intent on exploiting the summit for maximum media attention, in spite of advance announcements on both sides that the summit was to be an informal preparatory meeting for Washington. The Soviets surprised the Americans on a number of occasions with bold media statements during the meeting of their intention of achieving significant and unprecedented results in nuclear disarmament.<sup>8</sup> The previously unannounced appearance of the dazzling Raisa Gorbachova in the company of her husband, and her subsequent high-profile public appearances and tours to sites of interest in Iceland—which the *New York Times* referred to as a “public relations coup”—furthermore demonstrated the way in which the Soviets were intent on catching the eye of the world media.<sup>9</sup>

The unexpected scheduling and short, although not too short, notice, as well as the unusual location, were aspects of the summit preparation that can be attributed to the syntactic construction of a media event. Iceland was something of a curiosity and an unwritten page in the international community, and the press welcomed the opportunity of exploring new grounds and having a fresh backdrop for the perennial stalemate in the relations between the two nuclear arms superpowers. One might even argue that these factors revitalized the media attention granted to the arms negotiations and their previously somewhat disheartening pace and tone. In terms of what Dayan and Katz refer to as the pragmatic side of media events, the summit enjoyed undisputed priority in the international media. Most importantly, however, the choice of location appealed to the semantic construction inherent in the media event, which proved a particularly rich site for symbolic connotations and the creation of a core meaning or “concept” for the Reykjavík Summit as the event that broke the ice in the Cold War stalemate.

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<sup>7</sup> Graebner, Burns, & Siracusa 2008: 144.

<sup>8</sup> Magnússon 1986: 43, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Dowd 1986: 12.

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The organizers named various practical reasons for choosing Iceland for the summit. Factors such as manageable border control, due to geographic and population factors, and possibilities of securing the meeting and dwelling places of the leaders within the short timeframe given for preparations were factors that made Iceland's capital suitable for the summit.<sup>10</sup> However, the symbolic connotations of the choice of location must not be underestimated. The geographical location and qualities of the Arctic island did not only signal remoteness and natural isolation (and thus protection from intruders), but also, and on a different level, strategic centrality on a world stage marked by the warring military empires in the East and West.<sup>11</sup> In its pre-summit speculation on the choice of Reykjavík as a meeting place, the BBC news program *Panorama* cited Soviet foreign minister Shevardnadze's description of Reykjavík as "small, quiet and favourable for results," in contrast with the meeting in Geneva the year before where the "media circus" surrounding the summit had infuriated the general secretary.<sup>12</sup> The remoteness of Iceland, and the challenges it would face in accommodating between two and three thousand media and press members expected to fly in for such an event, would presumably prevent another full-scale media circus or at least tone down the interference inherent in public exposure.<sup>13</sup> Such explanations, however, are hardly plausible, as the location was unlikely to deter the international media from arriving in Iceland and covering the event, especially given the fact that Iceland's stakes in making arrangements to facilitate a large-scale media event were high. However, statements such as the ones cited above did reflect the overall attitude towards the meeting, as signalled by both leaders, which was that of a small-scale preparation for the more formal Washington summit and an opportunity for the leaders to test the waters and find, as well as express a will for, a common communicative ground before entering into dialogue in Washington where pressures for substantial agreements and treaties on arms reductions would be too high to allow for failure.<sup>14</sup> In this light, the

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<sup>10</sup> Holloway 2007: 80–81; Magnússon 1986: 10–11; Hermannsson 2000: 136.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of how the Cold War worldview marked by the parameters of East vs. West, see for example Arndt 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Bennett et al. (Producers) 1986.

<sup>13</sup> See also Magnússon 1986: 11.

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selection of Iceland as a meeting place can be regarded not only as an attempt to minimize distractions and formalities, but also as a figurative construction and articulation of an image where U.S. and Soviet leaders demonstrated a willingness to counter and reverse the hostile stance of non-communication that had given rise to the deadlock in the nuclear arms race in the past. As such, Iceland was symbolically positioned midway between the United States and the Soviet Union, indicating an openness on behalf of the superpowers to “meet midway,” or as Gorbachev was later reported to have explained to his aids: “It’s a good idea. Halfway between us and them, and none of the great powers will be offended.”<sup>15</sup>



Figure 1. Soviet general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. president Ronald Reagan pose for the camera in front of a scenic window in Höfði House, with the symbol of Reykjavík neatly positioned between them. Photographer: Rax / Ragnar Axelsson. Copyright: Morgunblaðið / Rax.

This was in fact not the first time that Iceland’s symbolic centrality in the Cold War–determined global map had been exploited. A similar use of Iceland as a host nation to communicative and peaceful gestures between the East and West had occurred when grand master Bobby Fischer played the reigning world champion Boris Spassky in a world championship chess match in Reykjavík in 1972. The intense

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<sup>14</sup> Matlock 2004: 176.

<sup>15</sup> Matlock 2004: 207.

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media exposure of the match, and Fischer's victory, which in the West was widely interpreted as the symbolic triumph of the "free world" over communist totalitarianism, put Reykjavík's name on the media world map, possibly for the first time.<sup>16</sup> Icelanders certainly hoped for a repetition of such a success, albeit on a grander scale, in relation to the Reykjavík Summit, and it can be stated that the initial perception of the summit as a failure devastated the heavily invested Icelanders, who were hoping to become associated with a historical event ending the Cold War.<sup>17</sup>

The notion of Iceland as a nation of peace based on its history of military impartiality was furthermore emphasized in various ways in relation to the summit. Given the fact that the Iceland, a NATO member state, played host to the United States' important military base in Keflavík, such a construction was not without its problems. Nevertheless, in a press appearance upon his departure to Iceland, Reagan expressed his gratitude to Icelanders for consenting to host the event and for working so hard to prepare for it, thus demonstrating their "genuine peace interest."<sup>18</sup> The fact that Iceland had no military and insufficient police manpower to ensure the security of the two leaders, three hundred volunteers, trained for sea and land rescue missions, were stationed around Höfði, the meeting centre for the summit, which became a gesture of quite theatrical dimensions, naturally catching the attention of the media. This is evident in a summit report on London Weekend Television in which the lack of reportable news during the highly secretive talks leads the reporter to supplement his reportage segment by offering a pictorial view of the rescue squad volunteers, wearing their bright orange seafarer's outfits, stoically guarding the most powerful men on the planet.<sup>19</sup> While the British reporter commented on the scale of the event in relation to Iceland's small police force, it was the Icelandic media that provided the desired interpretation of the full symbolic meaning of the volunteers' presence. In a commentary column, Björn Bjarnason, assistant editor of *Morgunblaðið* newspaper, reflected on the "impressive sight" of members of rescue squads taking on a role that

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<sup>16</sup> On the associations between the Fischer–Spassky chess match and the Cold War, see Edmonds 2004 and Johnson 2007.

<sup>17</sup> See for example Valsson 2009: 361.

<sup>18</sup> Magnússon 1986: 42.

<sup>19</sup> Frost (Presenter) 1986.

would otherwise and in other (presumably less “peace-loving”) countries be filled by armed soldiers.<sup>20</sup> Icelandic officials also stressed the peace aspect in their comments to the media. When asked by the BBC why he thought Iceland had been chosen for the summit, Icelandic prime minister Steingrímur Hermannsson described Iceland as a “peaceful country” that had not “had any problems with terrorism”, adding that by hosting the meeting Iceland hoped to be able to contribute to world peace.<sup>21</sup>

The image of Iceland as a neutral and thus fertile ground for peace negotiations was somewhat challenged by the BBC *Panorama* report, which highlighted the significance of the Keflavík NATO base for American military interests in the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Some commentators in fact named Iceland’s strategic position in the North Atlantic as a contributing reason for the interest on behalf of not only the U.S., but also the Soviets in strengthening diplomatic relations with Iceland via the summit.<sup>23</sup> Such underlying interests and complexities regarding Iceland’s relations with the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were downplayed if not obscured in the general image of the event in the global media, in which the remoteness and diplomatic “innocence” of Iceland was emphasized. As will be demonstrated in greater detail below, the story of the isolated, informal, and peaceful nation, flattered at suddenly being able to play a role in the development of world peace, became the dominant one in media representations of the summit. Thus what had previously been seen by the superpowers as the strategic geographical position of Iceland was transformed, through the work of figuration and image construction, into a symbolic location of peace, communicative possibilities, and openness to a new era in relations between the East and West.

### Staging a Nation, or, the Doorknob Dilemma

The media event has become a central concept in a critical tradition within media and cultural studies where the influences of spectacular

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<sup>20</sup> Bjarnason 1986: 32.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett et al. (Producers) 1986.

<sup>22</sup> Bennett et al. (Producers) 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Magnússon 1986: 15.

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media on the political landscape of contemporary society are assessed, focusing among other things on the staging and representation of “reality” in media as well as the way in which the medium itself alters and shapes the events being mediated.<sup>24</sup> Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image*, originally published in 1961, is an early and now classic statement on the various levels of manipulation involved in the staging of events that are intended for mass mediation and how the demands of programming lead to the institutional creation of what he terms the “pseudo-event.” A pseudo-event identifies the communicated “version” of an event—that is, reality in its mediated form, subtly divorced from the “real” contours of the actual occurrence—and how the fact of its mediation may change the meaning of what takes place and can also change the way events take place, turning them into performance and spectacularizing them, which for Boorstin threatens to empty them of content. One way this happens is through the movement away from “hard” facts and the truly “news-worthy” to secondary or inconsequential issues highlighted in order to produce content.<sup>25</sup>

Boorstin’s theory of the pseudo-event offers a particularly rich perspective on the media coverage of the Reagan–Gorbachev meeting in Reykjavík because, while the meeting of the two leaders was set up as a media event, the progress of the actual talks was kept secret. For Boorstin the categorical imperative of news organizations is that content must continually be produced for distribution among the growing number of dissemination vehicles, and the pressure to continually produce content, meet deadlines, and have an interesting “angle” influences and shapes the news commodity to an extensive degree. In the face of what was declared by the summit organizers as a news blackout, media personnel were frequently left to their own devices in terms of coming up with “reportage” from Iceland. Margrét Árnadóttir, who was a reporter for the Icelandic State Television at the time of the summit, recalls the situation in which the foreign reporters and journalists found themselves, most of them

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<sup>24</sup> The literature on this subject is vast. Among scholars who have explored how the mediation of the image supersedes the real itself are historians and media scholars such as Dan Nimmo and Douglas Kellner, cultural critics Susan Sontag and Neal Gabler, and poststructuralists such as Marshall McLuhan and Jean Baudrillard.

<sup>25</sup> Boorstin 1992: 3–44.

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having arrived in Iceland at least three days in advance to cover the big event:

The foreign reporters [...] had already mopped up every bit of news-worthiness one could possibly find in the days before the meetings even began. They had deadlines to meet and they simply had to come up with some material.<sup>26</sup>

The situation faced by the reporters during the summit would, in Boorstin's terms, present a particularly clear example of the contradictions inherent to the media event as such. The political importance of the arms negotiations taking place, and the hopes they evoked for the solution of the nuclear war threat, could by no means be reflected in a mediated form by simply focusing on the two leaders and the meeting venue during two long days of intense meetings in Höfði. While Reagan and Gorbachev, as well as their aides and security, were occasionally seen entering or emerging from the meeting venue, the media personnel stationed outside would find themselves mostly focusing on the doorknob of the closed doors of the Höfði house, from which the leaders, it was hoped, would emerge with some positive news, perhaps announcing the end of the Cold War. This "empty" space of designated prime-time news coverage had to be creatively and spontaneously filled by the reporters stationed in Iceland. This, in a sense, led to the construction of the summit as a "pseudo-event"—a televised and mediated version of the summit that existed in only a tangential relationship with reality.

The demand for interesting visual material and images to provide content created a unique space for the promotion of Icelandic history and culture, since the somewhat symbolic host nation of the summit became the most obvious subject to turn to. Former CNN reporter Ralph Begleiter recalls producing news material on as diverse subjects as the weather in Iceland and the wrestling career of the Icelandic prime minister's father. "We had a lot of trivia," Begleiter remembers, adding on a more reflective note that the media did in fact, in his view, serve an active and important role during the summit, since the ability to uphold a mediated "image" of an exciting event had the effect of soliciting and sustaining the attention of media audiences:

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<sup>26</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

“We in the media helped to build up expectations about the outcome of the summit.”<sup>27</sup> Begleiter’s remark provides an insight into the workings of the principles of the media event that reporters must adhere to, that is, in ensuring a diligent provision of content, whether with trivia or not, thus substituting the uneventful reality of the event with the representation of “eventfulness.”

In the abundant space of airtime and newspaper columns to be filled, various national narratives were constructed. An interaction between the external and local perspective appeared in the constructions of the foreign media on the one hand and the promotional efforts of Icelanders themselves on the other. As far as the international media were concerned, the conceptual framework, or what Dayan and Katz would refer to as the semantic aspect, of the event undoubtedly produced an imperative to draw upon the notion of the remoteness of the summit host country. Here the Arctic geographical location of Iceland was emphasized, even if such standard constructions would be combined with more diverse or critical perspectives. A feature article on Iceland that appeared in the *New York Times* on 1 October, the day after the announcement of the summit, followed the above-mentioned structure of framing its profile of the country in terms of remoteness and isolation. Setting the tone in a headline which read, “Iceland, Proud, Isolated,” the article began by sketching a narrative of a country almost untouched by civilization until suddenly looked upon favourably by the mighty world leaders.

Iceland, which is being thrust into the global spotlight as the venue for the Reagan-Gorbachev meeting next month, is among the world’s most isolated nations, and proudly so. President Vigdis Finnbogadottir once attributed Iceland’s rich cultural life and the preservation of its language Old Norse, the vernacular of the Viking sagas, to “this luck that for centuries we were so forgotten.” In less than two weeks, however, this isolation will be briefly shattered when Ronald Reagan, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, their delegations and a press brigade of a perhaps a couple thousand people descend on Reykjavik, Iceland’s capital 175 miles south of the Arctic

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<sup>27</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

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Circle. For Iceland, the meeting between the two world leaders will present a formidable challenge.<sup>28</sup>

The article goes on to touch upon diverse aspects of Icelandic culture and nature, as well as discussing the challenges and attention that the summit is likely to bring to “small Reykjavik.” Moving from the mapping of Iceland as northerly and remote, the article pictures Iceland’s central position in the Cold War worldview, mentioning its strategic position, its NATO alliance, and the Fischer–Spassky chess match, as well as providing a map that displays Iceland as a centre point between the U.S. to the left and the Soviet Union to the right, thus positioning Iceland in the East–West worldview paradigm. The article demonstrates the competing constellations of national narratives and spatial contexts that are inevitably at play in national cultural representation. ABC correspondent Peter Jennings followed the same line of reasoning when he began his broadcast from in front of the Icelandic parliament with the following greeting:

Good morning from this ancient and isolated island in the North Atlantic. It’s quite late in the evening here and life is so placid and calm that even the international press corps are obliged to calm down.<sup>29</sup>

An article in *Time Magazine* concluded its discussion of Iceland, which touched upon Soviet–U.S. relations as well as its medieval literary heritage, by reiterating the narrative of Iceland’s retrieval from oblivion, pointing out that “its very remoteness” had thrust it “into center stage” in an ironic twist of fate: “In attracting the two leaders, Iceland’s Spartan isolation may have been its major selling point.”<sup>30</sup>

The nordicity and remoteness that frequently framed the media representation of Iceland as the summit host country draws upon exotic notions of the North. As Peter Stadius points out in his mapping of various conceptions of the North throughout the ages, Iceland has traditionally been included in the imaginative paradigm of the Arctic *far North*. This notion of the North, which has existed in

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<sup>28</sup> Lohr 1986: 10.

<sup>29</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Millington & Wilentz 1986: 36.

Western mental mapping since classical times, has predominantly been perceived “through a semi-mythological *imaginatio borealis*, subsisting perhaps largely as the idea of something extremely cold, exotic and remote.”<sup>31</sup> The removal of the far North from central and later more northerly European centres of power would imbue civilizations of the North with something of an unspoiled innocence, a notion that carries in various ways into the popular summit media narrative of “the world” suddenly “descend[ing] on Iceland.”<sup>32</sup> The notion of Iceland as an “exotic” and mythological place was further highlighted by the many articles and reports that touched upon the Icelandic folk tradition of belief in ghosts, elves, and hidden folk (*álfar og huldufólk*), with the headline of a *Vancouver Sun* report on the Reykjavík Summit, “Land of Hidden Folk Welcomes the Role of Summit Host,” providing the most concise example.<sup>33</sup> Steingrímur Hermannsson recalls in an interview that the most common inquiry he received from reporters and journalists during the summit was whether he believed in the existence of elves as the majority of Icelanders did.<sup>34</sup> According to a NBC profile report on Hermannsson, the prime minister was quite diplomatic in his answers, and no more willing to disturb the delicate balance between the human and other-worldly in Iceland than he was to openly take sides in the Cold War strife, which cut across Iceland like a highway over an elf-inhabited rock: “Hermannsson says he’s never seen an Elf or a ghost but won’t deny their existence.”<sup>35</sup>

Rumours that the summit meeting place itself, Höfði, was in fact a haunted house hit a home run with the international media. Jón Hákon Magnússon, a media and public relations manager during the summit, remembers the sensation that the story about ghosts in Höfði caused in the press, earning the event the media nickname “summit of the haunted house.”<sup>36</sup> While most reports managed to

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<sup>31</sup> Stadius 2005: 14–15; Stadius 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Dowd 1986: 12.

<sup>33</sup> “Land of Hidden Folk Welcomes the Role of Summit Host” 1986.

<sup>34</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Brokaw (Reporter) 1986.

<sup>36</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006. Magnús Óskarsson, the city official in charge of selecting the meeting place for Reagan and Gorbachev, also recalls how the story of Höfði as a haunted house caught on among the international media; see Óskarsson 1997: 180.

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squeeze in a mention of the ghosts sharing the negotiation table with the world leaders, an article in the *Los Angeles Times* engaged Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the president of Iceland, in a detailed discussion about the ghost that haunted her official residence. The ghost, apparently an 18th-century broken-hearted sweetheart of the Governor of Iceland named Apollonia Schwartzkopf, would roam the house at night, sometimes keeping the president awake:

Sometimes she comes up the stairs and walks in the corridors outside my room. And I say to her: “Please, Apollonia dear, be very welcome.”<sup>37</sup>

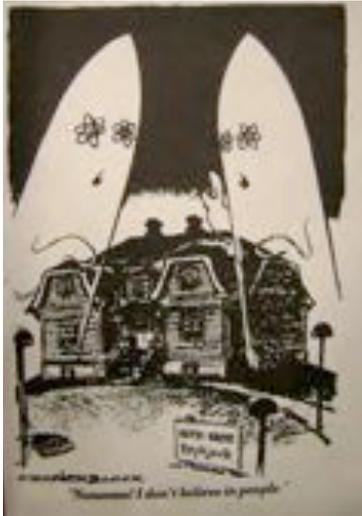


Figure 2. Höfði House, the meeting place of the summit, was rumoured to be haunted. A 1986 Herblock Cartoon, copyright by The Herb Block Foundation.

Here the president can be seen to express a similar diplomatic approach to her supernatural co-inhabitant as the prime minister upon being asked about ghosts and elves.

The above examples provide an opportunity to consider which national characteristics and narratives the media actively subscribed to in their construction of a national image, but also the role that

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<sup>37</sup> Wallis 1986: 18.

Icelandic representatives came to play in the process of negotiating those images. In this context Icelandic representatives were generally more eager to uphold a de-marginalized image of their nationality, and here again the notions of “northernness” came to the forefront, although in a different conceptual context. The somewhat marginalizing and fantastic notion of the far North in European mental mapping can be contrasted with more recent 19th-century conceptions of the North, in which neo-Romantic and racial theories contributed to the project of shifting the core of European power from the southern Greco-Roman region to the rapidly industrializing countries of northern Europe.<sup>38</sup> Here the North, with its harsh forces of nature and wilderness, is associated with strength, purity, and freedom, and its culture is associated with a revival of the classicism of the Hellenic Greeks.<sup>39</sup> The national promotional efforts organized by Icelandic authorities would stress such a positive image of Iceland, in which the following aspects would be particularly promoted: the Viking and medieval literary heritage, the “purity” of the language and of Icelandic natural food products, and the inherent strength and beauty of the Icelandic people, the former often explained as a result of surviving the harsh northern climate and the latter with the unspoiled countryside and fresh air, as well as the Nordic Viking racial lineage.<sup>40</sup> A revealing example of efforts on behalf of Icelandic officials to promote certain aspects of its culture and heritage can be found in a bold attempt that seems to have been made to provide the media with “story suggestions” for their coverage. A leaflet prepared for foreign journalists by the Icelandic government with suggestions of “story ideas” caught the attention of a *Los Angeles Times* journalist, who cited some of the suggestions made in the leaflet, perhaps on account of its presumptuousness:

an interview with Halldor Laxness, the Icelandic winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature; an article on Snorri Sturlason, the medieval author of some of Iceland’s famous sagas, and an interview with Holmfridur Karlsdottir, the 22-year-old reigning Miss World.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See for example Ísleifsson 2002, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Ísleifsson 2002: 121.

<sup>40</sup> Þorvaldsdóttir 2001; Jóhannsdóttir 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Meisler 1986: 15.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

The attempt made here to influence the image construction of Iceland reveals an interesting act of making connections between past and present, where on the one hand the medieval cultural heritage of the “Golden Age” is emphasized and on the other hand a splendid “embodiment” of Icelandic Viking heritage, the blond Icelandic beauty queen, is presented to the media.

An international media centre set up in Melaskóli elementary school in connection with the summit became the base for promotional campaigns for Icelandic nature and culture. The Trade Council of Iceland arranged for the promotion of Icelandic food and produce, and various attractions were brought in. Hólmfríður Karlsdóttir made herself available for interviews at the centre, after being urgently summoned back to Iceland from her Miss World tour abroad to contribute to the promotion of Iceland at the summit. According to Guðmundur Magnússon’s account, Hólmfríður was among the three Icelanders who enjoyed most attention by the foreign media, the others being Prime Minister Steingrímur Hermannsson and President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, the world’s first democratically elected female president.<sup>42</sup> Jón Páll Sigmarsson, the Icelandic 1985 champion of the World’s Strongest Man Competition, was also called upon to participate in promotional events. According to the *Los Angeles Times* journalist, press members were invited to enter their business cards in a lucky draw, from which the Icelandic strongman was to draw lucky winners of prizes that included salmon products, Icelandic wool sweaters, and a trip to Iceland in the summer.<sup>43</sup> The above-mentioned Icelandic heads of state furthermore came to embody the strength and beauty of their people. The photos taken during a photo-op of the elegant and blond Vigdís Finnbogadóttir in a becoming red coat, taking a friendly stroll outside the presidential residency with the tall and broad-shouldered President Reagan, were among the most iconic images of the entire summit. The prime minister furthermore came to both perform and accentuate the image of inherent national strength (as well as casualness) during one of his many moments of media exposure, as he was filmed and interviewed during his daily swim in one of

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<sup>42</sup> In their biographies, Steingrímur Hermannsson and Vigdís Finnbogadóttir describe their encounters with an enthusiastic media at the summit. See Eggertsson 2000; Valsson 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Meisler 1986: 15.

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Iceland's geothermal public swimming pools. A segment introducing Hermannsson, who is shown in his bathing suit diving into and swimming across the pool, opens with the reporter's voiceover: "We are right on the edge of the Arctic circle and it can be a tough place to live—it helps to be strong..."<sup>44</sup> In a cut to the now fully dressed prime minister standing at the poolside, a brief interview follows, in which Hermannsson explains the possible reasons for his nation's inherent strength. Drawing upon a social-Darwinist climate theory, he points out that Icelanders through the centuries have been faced with extremely "harsh weather and climate," which may have caused only "the strong ones" to survive.<sup>45</sup>



Figure 3. The photo taken of Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and Ronald Reagan became one of the most iconic images of the Reykjavík Summit. Photographer: Rax / Ragnar Axelsson. Copyright: Morgunblaðið / Rax.

The active performance of a national identity aligned with Northern conceptions of strength, purity, and "Arian" beauty can be linked to the broader nationalistic mood that characterized the 1980s as a period of national self-discovery and aspirations to achieve a more central position in the world stage.<sup>46</sup> Here, the Icelandic Miss

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<sup>44</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>46</sup> The notion of the 1980s as an era of national confidence is discussed in Bernharðsson 1998 and Valsson 2009: 355.

World and the World's Strongest Man can be seen as central figures onto which the national imagination latched in the construction of a confident national identity. Jón Páll Sigmarsson had as an athlete developed a strong and popular media persona and was famous for his self-congratulating comments in moments of victory in the various weightlifting and strongman competitions in which he partook. One of his slogans was: "I am not an Eskimo—I am a Viking."<sup>47</sup> This concise declaration, performed for the media, reflects Icelanders' attempt to influence and "correct" an extremely unpopular hetero-image of Iceland as an Arctic Inuit culture, thus moving from the image of the "far North" to the more centralized and powerful "Hellenic North." A summit-related article in the *New York Times* addressed Icelanders' dilemma of "overcoming the Igloo Image" in relation to an interview with Steingrímur Hermannsson in which he recalls the frustrating misconceptions that he was faced with as an engineering student in the United States, where he was frequently asked whether Icelanders lived in igloos.<sup>48</sup> This symbolic expression of Icelanders' aspirations towards a more "favourable" national identity in terms of the "igloo dilemma" can perhaps be seen to map out the parameters of that process.

### Conclusion: Remembering Reykjavík

While the 1986 Reykjavík Summit has marked its place in political history as an important, if somewhat debated, moment in the development and eventual end of the Cold War, it lives in the Icelandic national consciousness as a moment of opportunity and success. The narrative of how Icelanders managed against all odds to provide the facilities and services necessary to successfully host both a political and media event on such a large scale has been incorporated into a national narrative of Iceland's process of becoming a visible and credible participant in the globalized international community.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Þórðarson 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Lohr 1986: 14.

<sup>49</sup> Interesting in this context is an account of the summit in a special supplement of *Iceland Review*, referred to by the editors as "a commemorative album." The publication date of the album is not specified, but it was issued in relation to the twenty-fifth publication year of the magazine, which was in 1988. The narrative of the edition tells the story of an unknown and peaceful country receiving the attention and opportunity

Institutional commemorations of the summit manifest themselves in the heritage site that Höfði now houses, while a more fluid and oral “writing” of the historical narrative of the “success” of the summit event in a national context can be discerned from commemorative efforts, such as television programmes about the summit, produced by the Icelandic State Television on the occasions of the ten- and twenty-year anniversaries of the Reykjavík Summit.<sup>50</sup>

However, national narratives and constructions of communal identities need to be kept under constant critical scrutiny, and as an unique event in the history of a small nation, the Reykjavík Summit provides us with an opportunity to examine the configurations of national images that came to light when the international spotlight was momentarily fixed on Iceland and to explore their meanings and connotations. Constructivist approaches to the concepts of nation and nationalism, established in recent writings of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, usefully remind us of the active processes required to maintain a nationalist discourse, in which we become both *subjects* and *objects* of various social narratives.<sup>51</sup> Rather than simply existing as a natural and causal lineage, the preferred link between a national past and its perceived present and future is drawn and cultivated and brought to bear upon the projected national image. Thus, although national identities may exist as a state of mind, those figments of imagination are frequently sustained with reference to essentialist nationalistic discourses.<sup>52</sup>

The opportunistic mode and commercial imperative of the “media event” furthermore reveals, perhaps more clearly than in other contexts, the instability and constructiveness of the national images that were performed and represented in relation to the Reykjavík Summit. Within the narrativization of Iceland as the summit host country, conflicting representations coexisted that related to the mental mappings of the political worldview at the time and to more complex parameters of the development of Icelandic national identity. The notion of Iceland as a remote, isolated, and exotic island

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of a lifetime and excelling in its role as summit host. *Iceland Review* 1988. See also Magnússon 1986: 21–22.

<sup>50</sup> Másson et al. (Writers) 1996; Sigfússon & Santos (Writers) 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Bhabha 1990: 292.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson 1991: 19.

community appealed to the media as a useful conceptual framework to present an uneventful diplomatic meeting as exiting news material. Similarly, the parties behind the summit interpreted the smallness and military impartiality of Iceland as an ideal backdrop for an event intended to signal a new will for peace negotiations. Here the remoteness of Iceland was construed as centrality in the sense that Iceland was geographically positioned “midway” between the warring empires. The external perspective, however, interacted with a local discourse in which various national stereotypes of the strong and purebred nation, the inherent link between nature and cultural heritage, and the exotic beliefs in supernatural beings were trotted onto the stage as constitutive elements of national identity. As most of the narratives which were performed and constructed have become familiar tropes in the representation of Iceland today, the summit is an interesting focal point to trace the way in which dominant national images have, at the conjunction of external and internal discourses, been formed, shaped, and imagined.

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