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### The Pen and the Borrowed Sword

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# Þorsteinn Helgason

## THE PEN AND THE BORROWED SWORD

### 500 years of Icelandic defense policy

*In this article the defining outlines of Icelandic defense policy are examined, initially by drawing parallels between requests in 1663 and 2003 for Icelandic participation in military measures, having as their source a supposed threat from the Middle East. In this synthetic approach, five pillars of Icelandic defense policy are suggested, among them protection from a greater power, i.e. the 'borrowed sword'. The article concludes with a fictitious response from the 17th century Icelandic Church Synod to a request by President Bush for Icelandic support of the invasion of Iraq in 2003.*

**Keywords** Corsairs, defense, Iceland

On the morning of Tuesday, 18 March 2003, the government of Iceland, or at least some of its members, and rather abruptly, took the decision to support the US led invasion of Iraq as a 'willing nation'. This was an action taken in the international arena and a milestone in the history of Icelandic defense. This incident will be our guiding light, chosen to illuminate the past, present and future of Icelandic defense policy. The central issue is whether this decision was in accordance with Iceland's national security policy over the last 500 years and indeed if there had always been a consistent policy over that period.

Three hundred and forty years previously, Iceland faced a similar dilemma, posed by a request from the mother country, Denmark, to participate in what might be termed a bilateral defense campaign. Both then and in 2003, the incentive was an apparent imminent danger originating in the Middle East. In the present case an evil tyrant, supposedly armed with weapons of mass destruction, was threatening the world at large, including Iceland; while in the 17th century the threat stemmed from newly signed treaties between the Turkish Ottoman Empire and the main powers of Northern Europe, i.e. England and the United Provinces of the Netherlands. The Turkish monster was off the leash. This warning of a Turkish danger to remote Iceland was not as far-fetched as it might seem. In 1627 Moslem corsairs from Algiers and Morocco had made a concerted attack on the island, killing some 50 inhabitants and abducting close to 400 others who would be sold into slavery. In Icelandic collective memory this event is referred to as the 'Turkish Raid'.

In 1663 the request of the Danish authorities was for a certain contribution from the islanders for *their own* defense in the form of a man-of-war which would protect the coasts of Iceland. Might it be possible that the government of Iceland in 2003 had a similar understanding of the request made to them, i.e. they would jeopardize Icelandic defense by refusing to meet it? After all the government had been opposing the continuing reduction of defense measures at the US military base in Keflavik which had been whittled down to four fighter planes. Should these be removed, so the government argued, the defense agreement between Iceland and the USA would be null and void.<sup>1</sup>

The warnings of impending disasters in 1663 and in 2003 were, arguably, a false alarm. The weapons of mass destruction in Iraq were conspicuous by their absence and the treaties of European states with the Ottoman Empire in 1663 had little to do with the pirates' havens of North Africa. Formally, Algiers was answerable to the Ottoman sultans of Istanbul, but in reality the pirates conducted their raids without Ottoman permission. Istanbul did not even have this kind of formal hold on Morocco, even less on the semi-independent corsair nest of Salé which operated for the most part as it wished. Agreed, the North African Corsairs were called Turks, but one should remember that this was for centuries a commonly used generic term for any Moslem. When one converted to Islam you 'turned Turk' and became a renegade in Christian eyes.

Even though alarms can be false in a certain sense, they can also be politically and culturally real and worthy of being taken seriously. This is the case in both instances, in 1663 and 2003. Taken at face value, the requests had their roots in the Middle East. Certainly, Saddam Hussein in 2003 would have wished to harm a Western world dominated by the USA and, certainly, the 'Turks' in 1627 had wreaked great havoc in Iceland and would possibly try to do so again. This was made clear in the requests, and the Icelandic responses were all within the discourse established in the requests. These discourses, however, can be deconstructed and different motives can be discerned behind the explicit texts. As a result, two discourses can be seen to run simultaneously, both of which need to be acknowledged.

### **The cost of protection**

In midsummer of 1663, the synod of Skálholt diocese of Iceland was in session at Thingvellir pondering over a letter recently received from the Danish Governor to the country. His message warned of an impending danger to the islanders, i.e. the governments of England and the Netherlands have signed a peace treaty with the Turkish Sultan. Beware of a repeated Turkish Raid! Our recommendation, the letter stated, is that you shoulder the burden of obtaining and maintaining a warship to cruise the shores of Iceland for purposes of local protection.

Though at the time a subject of the Danish crown, Iceland still enjoyed a considerable degree of self-government. Each summer its leading members gathered as an Althing at Thingvellir for legislative and judicial matters. Now, the two bishops of the country and its clergy, whom you might call a foreign office, carefully deliberated over the royal letter. They then composed and signed a formal reply as a token of their gratitude to the Governor for his concern, wishing him and his family

good health and prosperity. At the same time they declared themselves to be incapable of buying 'even the smallest and tiniest of warships'. In this context they used financial and cultural arguments, listing only 10 or 12 individuals in the country as affluent, or with an income amounting to five or six thousand rigsdaler. From this amount the cost of maintaining their families should be subtracted, which included educating their offspring and sending them 'abroad for cultural elevation if everything is not to fall into a state of barbarism'. Even though these few wealthy individuals would do everything possible, they could never afford such a ship, far from it. In addition, the letter went on to state that they would not have the conscience to impose this extra burden on the poor common folk of the country who might be so reduced to a state of poverty as to 'be tempted to accept their capture for the sake of expectations and adventure'.

After these initial lamentations, the clergy next went on to express their reservations as to the usefulness of 'a single man-of-war anchored in harbour... Therefore, we appeal to the mercy of God Almighty for defense and protection against the evildoers of this world'. Finally, the clergy of Iceland agreed to pay the Governor as much money as they could dispense with, which was obviously quite limited, 'humbly wishing that he should prevent all unbearable novelties and inventions' which unwise and malicious people might want to concoct in the future.<sup>2</sup> The collected assembly of the Althing joined in the resolution and measures were carried out to fulfill its stipulations. In actual fact, not only did the wealthy donate money to placate the Royal Governor, the common folk even offered a pair of knitted socks, some two, three, four or even five pairs; several pastors donated half a rigsdaler, some a whole thaler, in accordance with the income of their parish. The bishop was said to have donated 12 thaler.<sup>3</sup> The bribes to the Governor could possibly have been intended as a reminder of the promise made by him the year before when he intimated that no new obligations and burdens would be placed upon Icelandic subjects.<sup>4</sup>

The plea of the Icelandic clergy, dated summer 1663, is a curious document, even somewhat comic at first sight, not least when we discover that one of its signatories was Pastor Hallgrímur Petursson. Pastor Petursson is one of Iceland's most beloved and revered poets, his *chef-d'oeuvre* being a collection of 50 hymns on the passion of Christ<sup>5</sup>, he was also married to one of those abducted in the Turkish Raid. She was a returnee from the Barbary and a well-known figure in Icelandic collective memory called Guðríður Símonardóttir.<sup>6</sup> Was it possible for this servant of God to interpret his wife's sufferings 'under the Turkish yoke' as a tempting adventure?

At closer scrutiny, the reasons behind the Icelandic reply turn out to be more sophisticated and more pragmatic than they appear at first sight. Firstly, the country's extensive coastline could not be effectively defended with a single man-of-war (along with whatever ship the King might send and any other armed merchant vessels) and the cost was certainly way too high for a small population. Besides, the Danes normally would have to man and maintain the ship, so it was really a matter of Icelanders paying more taxes.

But what of the suggestion that the impoverished common folk of Iceland might well be tempted to have themselves captured rather than be taxed for the maintenance of an Icelandic navy? Maybe there was some element of truth in this strange suggestion. News had arrived from Barbary and it was not only a tale of hardship and suffering. One female neighbour of Pastor Petursson's wife had converted to the Islamic faith and

married a fellow convert, a wealthy Moor from Spain. She now strolled the streets of the corsair capital attired in fur and purple. Other fellow-countrymen had advanced to be captains or officials on the Barbary coast where there was no winter but a harvest to be reaped twice a year. The lure of Barbary was a factor to be reckoned with in continental Europe<sup>7</sup> and now its flavour was being savoured in far-away Iceland.

Some scholars<sup>8</sup> have proffered a different interpretation of the 1663 request, maintaining that it really was not a question of defense against a potential Turkish corsair attack at all. What in fact was at stake, so the argument runs, was the cost of protecting the Danish monopoly trade against foreign merchants sneaking into Icelandic waters. Since 1602, trade with Iceland was monopolized by Denmark arousing ambivalent feelings among the Icelanders. The Danish monopoly gave Iceland a certain security and without it foreign traders very likely would have selected the most lucrative trading posts each time and ignored the remote ones.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Icelanders tried to reinterpret and amend the monopoly trade by complaining to the King, passing resolutions at the Althing etc. They often engaged in trade with other foreigners despite the ban on such. Defense of the Icelandic coastline meant defense against pirates and illegal foreign trade. Basically, defense was the King's duty, at considerable cost and inconvenience in times of war when resources were needed elsewhere, as was the case in 1663. This is where the Icelandic clergy comes in, appealing for further royal defense of the realm and suggesting that the merchants 'attend better to those harbours they have leased with good seaworthy merchant vessels that are capable of defense. All of this would benefit themselves and their trade...'<sup>10</sup> Obviously the clergy were not opposed to coastal defense.

### **The Turkish Raid and its aftermath**

The resolution of the synod in 1663 was made in the aftermath of the Turkish Raid in 1627, the first and only military invasion of the country. This was a real experience and serious food for thought, different from the petty annoyances caused now and then by sailors and privateers, mostly English and some Dunkirkian. While the Turkish Raid was not the kind of war which was fought for the conquest of land, it certainly involved well-planned attacks on three trading stations, one of which might be termed a village, on the Westman Islands, and a second was the seat of government in the country, Bessastaðir.

A discussion of the causes and effects of the Turkish Raid began immediately after it had occurred and lasted many years. We have only tiny fragments of this debate of which the best known is a statement by a farmer-historian, Björn Jónsson. Jónsson was commissioned by the bishop of the northern districts of Iceland to write an official, comprehensive account of the raid based on the written records. In his introduction, he speaks of the need of arming the population:

...for it is a reminder that people should own weapons and tools of protection around the country the way it is in every country and nation; they steel the mind of those who possess them... Truly, the lords and rulers of this country should take this into consideration.<sup>11</sup>

Jónsson's militant, strident tone can be explained and could be defined as quixotic. He had simply read too much of the heroic Old Norse sagas where manhood and weapons were interwoven and where shields and swords were a favored subject of poets. There were a few who supported his viewpoint but most of those who left any written records behind felt differently. The religious arguments stated that fear of God and prayer were the best forms of weaponry to defend the land. The voice of *realpolitik* was also heard, e.g. in a missive from interim Bishop Arngrímur Jónsson the Learned to the clergy in his bishopric:

You can not lay your trust on the protection and defense of the secular power... Our gracious King is fully engaged in withstanding and fighting the Roman power. Nothing human can break the heathen forces. They are numerous as midges. They have an open and wide sea hither from Africa and never need to touch any land. Against this acute danger there is no hope for shelter or shield except with the one and only who never fails his flock, God Almighty, Lord of the World. He is both able and willing.<sup>12</sup>

In short, in Bishop Jónsson's view the country was indefensible against attacks from Africa. In the present situation, the spring and summer of 1627, no support was to be expected from Denmark because the royal army was busily engaged in a military campaign in northern Germany and later would be forced to retreat to Jutland and the Danish islands. This information was correct, and news of the Danish crown's predicament may also have reached the raiders' havens in Algiers and Salée and encouraged them to take advantage of the situation.

In sum, the lesson of the Turkish Raid resulted in no drastic changes being made. Lookouts were put on the highest peak of the Westman Islands, the small defense fort was repaired and a single sentry was hired. True, he was already partially handicapped after military service for the King and his wife would become depressed on the Islands, thus forcing him to leave after only one year's service. Escape routes were planned and provisions kept in caves and lava holes. The Danish navy also took to patrolling the straits between Iceland, the Faroe Islands and Norway more regularly, now that they had given up their military ambitions in Germany.

The lesson drawn from the Turkish Raid and used to mould a national defense policy received its final input in the resolutions passed by the Icelandic clergy at its synod in 1663 and has been valid ever since and even had been in existence prior to this date. Is it academically acceptable for one to outline such a policy for the span of half a millenium? Here the debatable issue of historical synthesis raises its head. In my view synthesis is as useful and necessary as the diligent collection of data, their scrupulous investigation and specialized studies on both the macro and micro levels.<sup>13</sup> Of course, each case of historical synthesis has to be judged and valued, and sometimes it will be found futile and new ones must be proposed. A recognizable policy extending over 500 years was not necessarily a conscious one and not even voluntary, but nevertheless it can be detected.

In my opinion it is fivefold:

- (1) Remaining an unarmed nation;
- (2) Implementing various civil defense provisions;

- (3) Accepting protection from an international power;
- (4) Minimizing military expenditure;
- (5) Gaining recognition of the nation's special status.

Let us consider each of these five themes in more detail and see their development over time.

### *An unarmed nation*

There is sometimes disagreement as to what is exactly meant by the term that Iceland is an unarmed nation, though there is agreement that such is the case and has been so over a long period of time. For some reason there is a popular myth that the country became unarmed as a result of the Reformation or shortly thereafter. A recent edition of this viewpoint can be seen in a report issued in 1993 on behalf of the Dept. of Foreign Affairs: 'In the 16th century the Danish crown took the decision to disarm the Icelandic nation'.<sup>14</sup> Very likely this is an overly dramatized interpretation of an event that has only one source to support it, i.e. the sentence handed down by the district magistrate Magnús the Gentile in a case regarding weapons in 1581. In this instance the matter should be seen as not representing official policy but rather being the unscrupulous actions of several district magistrates who had the weapons of some local people confiscated. Clearly this is in no way represented Danish crown policy.

The belief that the Icelandic nation had been disarmed in the wake of the Reformation goes back 200 years and the notion would be first challenged by the historian Jón Espólin in the 19th century:

It seems very strange that there are no records to be found relating to disarmament; also how swiftly these weapons were all retrieved, if indeed the public had such. Though there were some men who had some weapons and still do...<sup>15</sup>

In my understanding, an armed nation is one having an army for defense of the nation. If we were to regard the armed supporters of the last catholic bishop Jón Arason and other chieftains to have been military forces, then by definition we can say that Icelanders were an armed nation. However these military forces were not intended for the purpose of national defense. What actually occurred in Iceland in the 16th and 17th centuries was in line with developments elsewhere in Europe, i.e. national armies were growing and smaller armed forces were fast on the decline.

The defending army of Iceland was Danish, though there were weapons in the country for defensive purposes, in particular against pirates who were regarded as the main external threat in the 17th and 18th centuries. And even though some magistrates would temporarily confiscate weapons from citizens in the aftermath of the Reformation, the Danish authorities were ready to provide weapons if requested, as for instance in the case of the kidnapping of the attorney Eggert Hannesson in 1579. This particular case came up again for debate by the national council in 1770 when the problem of keeping gunpowder dry in Icelandic households was discussed and the recommendation was made that it would be more effective to use spears or other hand weapons. However, the problem was that the royal directive on how to use these

weapons, issued two centuries previously, was no longer available.<sup>16</sup> The chieftains no longer were allowed to keep armed forces (not even rusty guns), acts of armed revenge were forbidden and the mentality was in a state of transition from the traditional admiration of the sturdy armed male to respect for the peaceful yeoman. This is a hypothesis and much more research on all aspects of this matter would be welcomed.

While there were light cannons at Bessastaðir, on the Westman Islands and some other locations, in addition to guns and weapons here and there, Icelanders essentially regarded themselves as an unarmed nation for centuries. This was the premise of Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson's approach when formulating Iceland's defense policy after the Second World War:

Remaining a non-armed and peace-loving people is what is foremost when formulating a foreign policy for an independent nation striving to live in its country free of interference from others.<sup>17</sup>

Is being unarmed a weakness or something of value? Both viewpoints have been argued throughout the ages. As yet Iceland has produced no Gandhi-like figure, though there has emerged what could be described as a theory of non-armament. In *The Description of Iceland*, supposedly written by Bishop Oddur Einarsson around 1600, the state of being unarmed is described as follows:

In the same way we need to fervently implore the great and almighty Lord, through the intercession of his divine Son, to protect and keep us safe at all times and maintain that blessed and holy peace that we have enjoyed now for many centuries. And despite the division and hate witnessed amongst so many other nations under the sun, we do not even dream of discord, if one may express it so.

And while we possess no army or city walls or fortresses for our protection, only instead crude shelters and modest houses..., we have through the Lord's goodness, despite being an unarmed and helpless nation, been protected in a state of blessed freedom and harmony so that every man can live and flourish unharmed without resorting to arms either by day and night wheresoever he may be. And we Icelanders have not been the victim of military attack from external enemies, except on rare occasions, and that only when some pirate bands raided our coasts and then departed, leaving us for the most part unharmed.<sup>18</sup>

The Turkish Raid does not seem to have changed this perspective in any basic way. A moving example of this viewpoint from the 17th century is the following poem by Bjarni Gissurarsson from Þingmúli:

In foreign lands, the ravages of war  
 Whole towns lay waste  
 And deliver up good Christian folk  
 To Death's cold grip  
 So it is the world over,  
 Yet we here are blessed with a better state;  
*Summer bids farewell, the sun sets.*



Not one among us Icelanders  
 Beats the drums of war.  
 For which we thank the Lord's mercy.<sup>19</sup>

What is implied in this poem can be identified elsewhere throughout the ages. For example, one could mention the work of Magnús Stephensen, the voice of the 18th century's Age of Enlightenment, where he lauds 'the eternal and unwavering fatherly government... crowned with the benefits of peace which are constant and unequalled and which have never been the source of the slightest discord'.<sup>20</sup> In the 20th century a good selection of work in a similar vein is to be found.

There are three things worthy of consideration regarding this supposed reign of peace enjoyed by the Icelandic nation. Firstly, peace could reign for other reasons than the absence of weapons, such as good fortune, the geographical location of the country or the mercy of God Almighty. Secondly, it is almost certainly the case that being unarmed influenced the nation's way of thinking, lessened its concern for things of a military nature and all that such entails. This is in fact similar to the experience of other nations, i.e. the common ownership of guns and a military tradition increase the risk of all forms of violence, including domestic violence.<sup>21</sup> Thirdly, Icelandic left wingers have not necessarily been staunch supporters of the country being unarmed. In actual fact the official tone of their language from the mid 20th century was quite strident and military in nature. It would seem that they were even willing to declare war on Germany and Japan, which in fact was a precondition set by Stalin in order to become a founding member of the United Nations. Members of other Icelandic political parties at the time considered this stance by the socialists to be quite absurd.<sup>22</sup>

The notion of being unarmed is deeply ingrained in the Icelandic mentality. This is reflected in the poor response there has been to the notion of an Icelandic army any time that such an idea has been aired. A well known politician, Björn Bjarnason, put forward such a suggestion in 1995, though he did not go so far as to advocate the establishment of an army:

I put forward an idea and offered arguments in its favour. It is, for example, possible to logically support the notion of Icelanders maintaining a home guard defense force of 500 to 1000 soldiers. However this is not to say that a defense force of between 500 and 1000 soldiers should be established.<sup>23</sup>

The minister also acknowledged that he was aware that his idea would meet opposition stemming from the traditional Icelandic way of thinking:

On the whole I am satisfied with the response to my proposal. I knew it would fall on barren soil. On the other hand, it could be that the seed may at some later point in time find a hidden patch of fertile ground and flourish.<sup>24</sup>

### *Civil defense provisions*

Let us now look at another aspect of defense in Iceland, namely civil defense. Civil defense provisions have always existed to various degrees in Iceland. It could be in the

form of having weapons for defense, as mentioned earlier, or having a prepared plan for escape. Throughout the country there are caves that indicate from their appearance, names or associated stories that they were used for such purposes. Under the heading civil defense I also include trauma counselling and in that context I would consider curses, magical incantations, prayers, place names, folktales describing both heroic deeds and escapes, as well as those historical records on events that have occurred. All of these elements would have formed part of the nation's psychological defense mechanism, something that is essential in order that a people be capable of living with those threats it is faced with. In this context of a psychological defense mechanism, I would like to mention one visual example, i.e. the altarpiece in the church in the District of Austur-Landeyjar which I have recently been studying.<sup>25</sup>

### *Shelter*

The third theme mentioned was protection by a foreign power. Iceland has always been in such a situation, sometimes through a formal agreement sometimes not. The countries offering protection have been few over the past thousand years, i.e. Norway, Denmark, England and the US. I have dealt at length with the protection provided by Denmark, mentioning that it had been available and that Icelanders had taken advantage of it.

Danish and American protection was a formal bilateral agreement, however Iceland's relationship with the English crown throughout the centuries was a more complicated issue. The English coming to Iceland were at times guilty of carrying out various acts of vandalism, pirateering and on occasion they even went so far as to usurp power. England had been a guarantor of Icelandic neutrality during the Napoleonic Wars and again during the period between the two world wars in the 20th century. The British authorities intimidated the national legislature during the First World War, British troops occupied Iceland during the Second World War and the Royal Navy would be sent to deliberately disrupt Icelandic fishing boats and coast guard vessels several years later. The relationship between the two countries was a stormy one, close but nevertheless complex. One can talk about British protection in the sense that other countries that might have contemplated involvement in Iceland were aware that they would have had to reckon with a response from the British.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the ages Iceland has had the military protection of international powers and few Icelanders have considered it possible for the nation to stand alone and independent of this kind of shelter, though it is debatable as to how far Iceland went its own way in the period between the two world wars. In the case however of Iceland needing military protection, the all important question was finding a power willing to shoulder the responsibility under the best possible terms for Iceland.

### *Defense costs*

Now to the fourth theme, namely that of keeping the cost of defense to a minimum. In my opinion the conditions offered by the Danish to the Icelanders were considerably better than those enjoyed by the Norwegians, who were also under Danish rule. For example, Icelanders escaped almost entirely from contributing to the

cost of Danish military campaigns in the 17th century, while the Norwegians were heavily burdened with the obligation. We could of course classify the sweeteners paid to Governor Bjelke as being a form of military expenditure, as well as war taxes imposed in the latter half of the 17th century in accordance with a royal decree dated May 1679. In fact collecting the tax turned out to be a slow and difficult task that in the end yielded very little.<sup>27</sup> Two decades later young Icelandic men having no fixed abode were conscripted into the Danish army. The Danish king was in need of between 30 to 40 men and had the intention of having them serve in the navy. In all only 18 individuals would go to Denmark. The following year they were all discharged and sent home on the grounds that they were 'udygtige' (unfit).<sup>28</sup>

The conclusion of a prominent expert on 17th century Iceland is that 'the Crown found it fit to request special contributions for defense and the waging of war; however Icelandic subjects more often than not succeeded in having these fiscal contributions lowered or simply managed to turn a blind eye to them'.<sup>29</sup>

The Danish crown incurred considerable cost in its defense of Iceland, a cost which to my knowledge has never been calculated. War ships were sent every summer to keep the sea routes clear, especially of marauding pirates. While most attention was focused on Norway, the Faroe Islands and Iceland would also be patrolled to deter pirateering. No doubt if there was sufficient interest, it would be possible to study the archives of the Danish navy, the treasury, etc. and in that way calculate the number of voyages and the cost of provisions and that of maintaining these vessels and their crews.<sup>30</sup>

As far as I know, no one has reckoned the financial outlay involved for the defense of Iceland when the Cold War was at its most intense and when Iceland was a costly place to be. I am certain it would be possible to calculate the figure and it may well be that the Americans have the figures in some report now filed away somewhere. It is fairly safe to say that that Iceland could never have afforded to pay the cost involved. And should a similar political climate repeat itself the country could still not do so, even though in the intervening period the gross national income has dramatically increased.

### *Special status*

Now to the fifth and final theme, i.e. the special circumstances pertaining to Iceland. Iceland has always received special treatment; they did not have to pay war taxes in previous centuries and an exception was made when they became a member of NATO. Its membership of EFTA was also particularly favourable and possible membership of the European Union will no doubt only be sought having the country's special status in mind.

On occasion Icelanders have felt a sense of embarrassment as to the exceptions being made in their favour. But why are they granted preferential treatment? In many areas, including defense, Iceland *must* be accorded special status. The mere fact that so few live in such a large country makes national defense impossible without outside assistance, in proportion to its needs:

The geographic location of this island in the North Atlantic offers no better immunity from potential attacks now than it did in the [early] 1600s when pirates from Algeirs wrought havoc here...

We should mention here that this same attack is the only one suffered in the country's history. And even today the threat of attack is essentially non-existent. According to a London based centre for research on international terrorism, Iceland ranked as being the second safest country in the world in mid 2003.<sup>31</sup>

If we take it that Iceland is indeed in danger and needs defending, similar to other nations throughout the world, then we also have to accept the fact that Iceland is not capable of financing it. Neither can Iceland afford to purchase its defense elsewhere. The country must then trust that its international involvement and its special status in the eyes of the international community will be sufficient reasons to have someone else take on that responsibility. But if that interest is not forthcoming, then there is a serious problem. The former Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs, Halldór Ásgrímsson, described the situation as follows in the opening lecture of a series organized by the Society of Icelandic Historians: 'After the Cold War ended, it has cost... more work, more initiative and money to protect Iceland's interests'.<sup>32</sup>

Just what makes Iceland so important that some other nation would be willing to take on the cost of defending it? Most people would explain US willingness to do so as stemming solely from the strategic advantages it offered. At least that would seem to have been sufficient motivation, though other factors were mentioned. In 1940, before Iceland had become a matter of political interest in Washington, the Icelandic emissary Vilhjámur Þór would personally present the US President with a photo-copy of several pages from the ancient Icelandic manuscript *Flateyrbók* (Book of Flatey).<sup>33</sup> This cultural reference clearly made an impression on further occasions, judging from the remarks made by Secretary of State, George P. Schultz, upon his arrival in Reykjavik for the historic summit meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev:

The past is a living presence for Icelanders: the Sagas of the Medieval settlers of the island comprise almost a bible, constitution, literary masterpiece, and cultural icon woven together. When I visited the Iceland Museum and viewed the ancient bundles of brown sealskin pages curled in a black roll under the glass I felt a certain awe at the hardness of both the mind and body of those who settled this rugged land.<sup>34</sup>

It would appear that Icelandic culture was a valuable entity in the eyes of officials in Washington, though this would sometimes get in the way of official policy, at least when it involved the top-brass military and the Department for Defense. The conclusion reached by the academic and former serviceman on the US base at Keflavík, Michael T. Corgan, is that what moulded Icelandic defense policy was fourfold:

- (1) A need for security due to the country's geographic location and isolation;
- (2) Suspicion of all foreign involvement in Icelandic society;
- (3) The preservation of a unique cultural heritage;
- (4) Concern regarding the susceptibility of the Icelandic economy.<sup>35</sup>

The conclusion reached by the historian Valur Ingimundarson after detailed research on the relationship between Iceland and America in the period 1945–1960 goes as follows: 'In accordance with the concept of an unarmed nation, it was the accepted opinion that it was of no less importance to stand guard over the country's nationality and cultural heritage as it was to defend it militarily'.<sup>36</sup>

At this point it could be argued that Icelanders are a completely different nation to what they were half a century ago. But that is not to say that concern regarding the protection of the country, its culture and language has waned over the decades. Worth noting in this context are the results of the study carried out by the educationalist Guðný Guðbjörnsdóttir and entitled 'A debate on self image, Icelandic culture and globalization':

The findings show that Icelandic culture is an important element in the self image of young Icelanders. They feel there is little need to change teaching material relating to Icelandic culture in the light of increasing multiculturalism, which in itself is viewed as positive so long as foreigners adjust to Icelandic culture.<sup>37</sup>

If this is really the case then we can expect that Icelanders will continue to incorporate these concerns into their defense policy.

And just who is willing to shoulder the responsibility of defending the culture of this small nation? The British and the Americans are, when it directly serves their own interests; or perhaps when we have the goodwill of certain heads of state moved upon seeing some ancient sealskin manuscript; or indeed it may be simply thanks to cronyism.

The only nations having a really deep-rooted interest in Iceland, and in fact who regard themselves as sharing a common heritage, are the Nordic countries. On that basis the future of Iceland's defense would seem to be best served through a closer relationship with these countries, with mainland Europe being a further source of defense in the background.

The following attitude has been expressed as a consequence of the dwindling interest of America. 'If America does not review its decision [regarding the withdrawal of its forces], then it may well be that Icelanders will be forced to look to other European countries for protection', said Valur Ingimundarson in the *International Herald Tribune* in July 2003.<sup>38</sup>

### **How would Bishop Brynjólfur or Pastor Hallgrímur have responded?**

To conclude, let us return to the US government's request that Iceland support the invasion of Iraq.

Considering the circumstances, the positive response of the Icelandic government can be explained. The international power having responsibility for the defense of the country, i.e. the US, was the driving force behind the invasion, and at this particular moment it was also seriously reappraising its obligation to finance the defense of Iceland. The other two nations who historically had defended Iceland, i.e. Denmark and England, were also supporters of and participants in the invasion. In my opinion the question as to whether the invasion was justified or not was of minor importance. Political expediency simply did not allow the Icelandic government to give this aspect serious consideration. The Minister for Foreign Affairs did what he could once the nation's support for the invasion had been officially agreed upon. He interpreted the invasion as being fully in accordance with UN policy, an organization that Iceland wholeheartedly supports. He also interpreted Iceland's support as in no way

representing a declaration of war and neither was Iceland a member of the coalition forces at war and would, he said, in no way be involved in the military expenditure required. The country's sole role would be its involvement in the rebuilding of post-war Iraq. While these provisions seem weak, they were not without a basis. What the ministers hoped to attain through their support, at least as a side benefit, was to counterbalance the threatened withdrawal of their great ally in the West. In the opinion of leading historian and defense analyst, Valur Ingimundarson, Iceland's support had no effect whatsoever when it came to the decision to withdraw the fighter jets in May 2003.<sup>39</sup>

Just how would Bishop Brynjólfur and Pastor Hallgrímur have responded to that request to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003? I have of course no mandate to speak on their behalf but will make so bold as to do so by the conscious use of an anachronistic and contrafactual game which, if properly played, can be illuminating and revealing:

We humbly thank his Excellency for his fatherly concern and the most wise intervention taken on our behalf and that of the entire world. At the same time that we beseech the Lord Almighty to keep safe his Excellency and his family in the presidential residence, we also implore that his Excellency, in his benevolence towards us islanders, see it fitting to maintain the four fighter jets, whose presence here is our single source of protection. And what is more, we islanders are so few and of such poor circumstance that we could but ill afford the cost or purchase of even the smallest and most rudimentary make of tank or guided missile without burdening unbearably the islanders who must as it is support the most various of obligations, including the sending of our children to school and to foreign places for reasons of culture so that we as a nation may not be reduced to a level of utter barbarism. And in our humble opinion tanks in themselves can contribute but little to the elimination of evil in the world. As a token of our humble and deepfelt appreciation, it is our agreed wish to present his Excellency with our most prized possession, the ancient and hallowed manuscript known as the *Book of Flatey*. In former times we bore this jewel yonder across the northern seas to our sovereign king in Copenhagen and as a nation we would later request its return.

We beseech his Excellency that this well-intentioned gift be accepted into his care and protection and we humbly request that when his Excellency and his family and household have perused what is writ therein, that it may be returned to us poor islanders so that our emissaries may have it, should need be, when in dialogue with the powers that be in Brussels.

## Epilogue

The American army with its four empty fighter jets has left the base in Iceland. The bilateral defense agreement with the USA is still valid but several European countries are willing to take on the burden of a visible air defense and surveillance, at least in times of peace. Iceland will cover some part of the defense cost, possibly a proportionally greater part than before. In addition, the coast guard and the police

force have been strengthened. The country is gradually replacing her guardian power. Iceland's American Age concluded in 2006, said Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, 'and maybe the 21st century is the European Age'.<sup>40</sup> The government has declared its willingness to play a more active role in its own defense policy. Raising an army of its own is not on the agenda, however. The five pillars of Icelandic defense still seem to hold firm.

**Translation:** Neil McMahon.

## Notes

- 1 A year later, President Bush, in telephone talks with the Icelandic Prime Minister, uttered some positive messages in regard to the defense agreement. We are thankful for your support and our cooperation the last few months, he said, meaning the support for the invasion of Iraq. "Bush vildi að skilaboðin til okkar væru jákvæð." *Morgunblaðið* (16 April 2004), 1.
- 2 Helgason, Jón, *Úr bréfabókum Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar*, 155–8. The resolution exists in a few versions, a somewhat different one is printed in Már Jónsson, *Guðs dýrð og sálnanna velferð*, 242–6. In the present article, the first version is used unless otherwise stated.
- 3 Þorsteinsson, *Annálar 1400–1800*, 362.
- 4 Þorláksson, *Saga Íslands VII*. Reykjavík, 150–68.
- 5 His *chef d'oeuvre*, Passiusálmarnir, have been translated into several languages, including English. Pétursson. *Hymns of the Passion: Meditations on the Passion of Christ*.
- 6 Those who have mastered the German language now have the opportunity to read a 478 page long, well-researched novel about this person, translated from Icelandic: Jóhannesdóttir, *Das sechste Siegel*.
- 7 Turbet-Delof, *L'Afrique Barbaresque dans la Littérature Française aux XVI et XVII siècles*.
- 8 Aðils, *Einokunarverzlun Dana á Íslandi 1602–1787*, 595–7. Þorkelsson, *Ríkisréttindi Íslands*, 123. Þorláksson, *Saga Íslands VII*, 140–1.
- 9 Aðils, *Einokunarverzlun Dana*, 629–30.
- 10 "...betur besigla þær hafnir sem þeim eru léntar með góðum, velskreiðum varnarkaupskipum, sjálfum sér og sinni höndlan til góða..." Jónsson, *Guðs dýrð og sálnanna velferð*, 244.
- 11 Þorsteinsson, *Annálar 1400–1800*, 48.
- 12 Þorkelsson, *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, 368–9.
- 13 Jarrick, "Bara mánniskan har en vörldshistoria."
- 14 *Öryggis- og varnarmál Íslands*, 7.
- 15 Sigurðsson, *Upplýsing og saga*, 133.
- 16 *Landsnefndin 1770–1771*, 93–6.
- 17 Benediktsson, *Utánríkismál Íslands*, 17.
- 18 Einarsson, *Íslandslýsing*, 143.
- 19 Gissurarson, *Sólarsýn*, 20.
- 20 Stephensen, Magnús, *Eftirmæli átjándu aldar*. Leirárgörðum vid Leirá: Forlag Íslands opinberu Vísinda-Stiptunar, 1806), 828.
- 21 *The impact of guns on women's lives*.
- 22 Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins*, 37–8.
- 23 Bjarnason, "Varnarhugmynd í grýtta jörð." Bjarnason's idea was proposed at a security conference: "Icelandic Security and Transatlantic Affairs."

- 24 Bjarnason, “Varnarhugmynd í grýtta jörð.”
- 25 Helgason, Þorsteinn, “Sværdet der står ud af munden. En dansk-islandsk altertavle fra 1650”, 29–45.
- 26 Agnarsdóttir, “Ísland á bresku áhrifasvæði fram að síðari heimsstyrjöld”, 162–78.
- 27 Stephensen, *Lovsamling for Island*, 370–3.
- 28 Stephensen, *Lovsamling for Island*, 542.
- 29 “...konungsvaldi fannst tilhlýðilegt að æskja sérstakra framlaga vegna varnarmála og stríðsrekstrar en að landsmönnum hafi oftár en ekki lánast að fá slík gjöld lækkuð eða hreinlega tekist að humma þau fram af sér.” Þorláksson, “Forysta Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar í landsmálum”, 158.
- 30 Niels M. Probst has collected information on the Danish navy during Christian IV’s reign where it is obvious that the “cleansing” of pirates and privateers was one of its main occupations. Probst, *Christian 4.s flåde*.
- 31 *Morgunblaðið* (18 August 2003), 1.
- 32 *Morgunblaðið* (21 September 2003), 25.
- 33 Corgan, “Aðdragandinn vestanhafs að hvernd Bandaríkjamanna á Íslandi 1941”, 134.
- 34 Schultz, *Turmoil and Triumph. My Years as Secretary of State*, 755.
- 35 Corgan, *Iceland and Its Alliances*, 7.
- 36 Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stríðsins*, 408.
- 37 Guðbjörnsdóttir, “Orðræða um sjálfsmyndir, íslenska menningu og hnattvæðingu.”
- 38 Ingimundarson, “Iceland vs. U.S.: Relations on ice over U.S. jets.”
- 39 Ingimundarson, “In memoriam: Orðræða um orustuþotur 1961–2006”, 57.
- 40 Gísladóttir, “Minn staður er hér þar sem Evrópa endar.”

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