

## Immunizing against the American Other

Racism, Nationalism, and Gender in U.S.-Icelandic  
Military Relations during the Cold War

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Iceland's strategic importance during the Cold War had a strong effect on its relations with the United States and on its domestic political system. Pro-Western Icelandic politicians ensured the country's integration into the Western alliance after World War II in the face of vocal opposition. But as a non-armed state with strong nationalistic/neutralist tendencies and considerable socialist influence, Iceland was low-key, at best, and highly critical, at worst, in its support for Western military policies. Memories of World War II—of the social and cultural disruptions from the presence of some 60,000 foreign soldiers, mostly Americans, when the Icelandic population was no more than 130,000—and a nationalistic revival spurred by the founding of the Icelandic Republic in 1944 made it impossible to agree to a U.S. request in 1945 for long-term military base rights on the island. Even the granting of far more modest temporary landing rights for U.S. military aircraft in 1946 led to the downfall of a left-right unity government and created deep domestic political divisions. When Iceland joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a founding member in 1949, the country experienced the most serious riots in its history. Consequently, it was no surprise that the U.S.-Icelandic Defense Agreement, concluded in 1951 on the basis of the North Atlantic Treaty and providing for the stationing of American soldiers on the island, proved to be controversial on ideological, nationalistic, and cultural grounds. During the Cold War, two left-wing governments sought—unsuccessfully, it turned out—to abrogate the agreement.<sup>1</sup>

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1. On Iceland's foreign policy relations with the United States see, Valur Ingimundarson, *Í eldlinu kalda stríðsins: Samskipti Íslands og Bandaríkjanna 1945–1960* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 1996); Valur Ingimundarson, *Uppgjör við umheiminn: Samskipti Íslands, Bandaríkjanna og NATO*

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The United States made important concessions on a number of sensitive and controversial matters to make the American military presence more palatable to the Icelanders. It condoned the openly exclusionary policies of the Icelandic government toward off-base movements of U.S. soldiers. In no other European country hosting U.S. military facilities did the Americans face harsher restrictions. The United States also reluctantly went along with a secret demand by the Icelandic government to ban the stationing of black soldiers in Iceland—a policy that contravened President Harry S. Truman's 1948 desegregation order in the U.S. military. After World War II, Greenland (under Danish jurisdiction), Canada, Newfoundland, Bermuda, and the British possessions in the Caribbean were also on a U.S. list of overseas basing areas in which black soldiers were deemed not to be welcome. But all these places except Iceland were removed from the list in the 1950s, although assignments of black troops were sporadically cancelled to countries such as Turkey because of domestic political considerations.<sup>2</sup>

This article explores these two closely related aspects of the U.S.-Icelandic political and military relationship. It recounts how elite perceptions of nationalism, race, and gender affected traditional military and alliance concerns during the Cold War. Many feminist scholars, such as Cynthia Enloe, have rightly criticized mainstream realist accounts of international affairs for ignoring the role of gender.<sup>3</sup> The same criticism applies, in many ways, to studies of

1960–1974 (Reykjavik: Vaka-Helgafell, 2001); Valur Ingimundarson, “A Western Cold War: The Crisis in Iceland's Relations with Britain, the United States, and NATO, 1971–74,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (December 2003), pp. 94–136; Valur Ingimundarson, *The Struggle for Western Integration: Iceland, the United States, and NATO during the First Cold War* (Oslo: Institutt for Forsvarsstudier, 1999); Valur Ingimundarson, “Buttressing the West in the North: The Atlantic Alliance, Economic Warfare, and the Soviet Challenge in Iceland, 1956–1959,” *International History Review*, Vol. 21 (March 1999), pp. 80–103; Valur Ingimundarson, “Between Solidarity and Neutrality: The Nordic Countries and the Cold War,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11 (Winter 1998), pp. 269–274; Valur Ingimundarson, “Icelandic Domestic Politics and Popular Perceptions of NATO, 1949–1999,” in Gustav Schmidt, ed., *NATO: The First Fifty Years* (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 285–302; Valur Ingimundarson, “Fighting the Cold Wars in the Cold War: Iceland's Challenge to the Western Alliance in the 1970s,” *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 148, No. 3 (October 2003), pp. 88–95; Thor Whitehead, “Lýðveldi og herstöðvar 1941–1946,” *Skírnis*, Vol. 150 (1976), pp. 126–172; Thor Whitehead, “Leidin frá hlutleysi,” *Saga*, Vol. 29 (1991), pp. 63–121; Thor Whitehead, *The Ally Who Came In from the Cold: A Survey of Icelandic Foreign Policy, 1946–1956* (Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press, 1998); Elfar Loftsson, *Island í NATO: Partniera og försvarsfrågan* (Ph.D. diss., University of Gothenburg, 1980); and Elfar Loftsson, “The Disguised Threat: Iceland during the Cold War,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1985), pp. 225–238.

2. See Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940–1965* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 1986), ch. 15, pp. 5–6. See also the internet edition, available from: (<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/integration/IAF-15.htm>), as well as “My Perspective of Racism,” from *The Diary of a U.S. Unnamed Soldier*, 17 June 2001; available from (<http://www.cvalink.com/dwilz/racial.htm>).

3. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora Press, 1989); Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's*

nationalism. The nation, as feminist scholars have pointed out, has often been interpreted—especially in nationalist political propaganda—as a family or a defenseless woman who needs protection.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, as Katherine H. S. Moon has argued in her study of the U.S. military presence in South Korea, there is a tendency in some feminist analyses, including Enloe's, to oversimplify interstate relationships by taking a one-dimensional view of power disparities. The weakness of a small state does not automatically leave its women unprotected and vulnerable to the violence, abuse, and exploitation by the strong state and its agents.<sup>5</sup> As in South Korea, the forces contesting Iceland's military relationship with the United States sought to argue that imperialism and militarism were responsible for the sexual exploitation of Icelandic women. But this argument was belied by the lack of opportunities for widespread fraternization between Icelandic women and American troops. As will be shown here, the United States never achieved sexual domination and control of Icelandic women in spite of Iceland's weakness as a small state. Indeed, the U.S.-Icelandic relationship never involved a bargaining dichotomy based on hegemony and exploitation, on the one hand, and submission and victimization, on the other.

Given Iceland's strategic importance, the bargaining position of the Icelandic political elite vis-à-vis the United States was exceptionally strong in all areas affecting the base. It was no coincidence that Iceland was dubbed a "reluctant ally" during the Cold War—a phrase coined by a U.S. diplomat stationed in Iceland in the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> The Americans knew that apart from intense nationalism, domestic political reconfigurations, coalition governments, and

*Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Sandra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus, eds., *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (New York: The New Press, 1993); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Katherine H. S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Aurora Camacho de Schmidt, "Voices of Hope and Anger: Women Resisting Militarization," in Joseph Gerson and Bruce Birchard, *The Sun Never Set: Confronting the Network of U.S. Military Bases* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), pp. 107–119; Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Rebecca Grant and Kathleen Newland, eds., *Gender and International Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Jeanne Vickers, *Women and War* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Zed Books, 1992); and Beth Bailey and David Farber, *The Alchemy of Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

4. See Nira Yuval-Davis and Pnina Werbner, *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Sylvia Walby, "Woman and Nation," in Gopal Balakrishnan, ed., *Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 235–254; Sylvia Walby, "Is Citizenship Gendered?" *Sociology*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1994), pp. 379–395; and Kathleen Canning and Sonya Rose, eds., *Gender, Citizenship, and Subjectivities* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 2002).

5. Moon, *Sex among Allies*, pp. 49–52.

6. See Donald Nuechterlein, *Iceland: Reluctant Ally* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961).

international Cold War developments deeply affected Icelandic attitudes toward the West. For this reason, they had to treat Iceland with utmost political sensitivity. The United States, for example, was forced to stay on the sidelines when Iceland extended its fishery limits unilaterally—a move that provoked “Cod Wars” with the British in the 1950s and 1970s—because of the potential spillover effect on the base issue. The U.S. government also was prepared to prop up Iceland’s economy (something that was done frequently in the 1950s and, to a lesser extent, 1960s) to safeguard U.S. military interests. In 1953, when U.S. largesse was at its peak, 20 percent of Iceland’s currency receipts came from the Keflavik military base. Although the percentage declined substantially in the 1960s and 1970s, the important economic value of the base as a job provider for Icelanders in the area surrounding Keflavik did not prevent Iceland from taking legal steps in 1956 to sever the military relationship with the United States on political and nationalistic grounds. A center-left government decided to evoke Article 7 of the Defense Agreement, which stipulated that the treaty could be abrogated after a six-month negotiating process followed by a twelve-month phasing-out period. The Icelandic government took this step in the wake of a nationalistic backlash against the U.S. military presence, primarily on the grounds that it threatened Icelandic culture. According to a Norwegian Gallup poll, secretly commissioned by the U.S. government in 1955, less than a third of the Icelandic population supported the Defense Agreement.<sup>7</sup> Although the Icelandic government backed away from its promise to close down the base after the Hungarian revolution in November 1956, the United States and NATO provided Iceland with direct economic assistance over the next two years to ensure the continued military presence.<sup>8</sup>

The second attempt to abrogate the Defense Agreement, in 1971, had less public backing, probably because few specific local grievances were directed at the U.S. base at that time and because the social and cultural impact of the base by then was minimal. But it was rooted in nationalistic and socialist domestic party politics—the need of the center-left coalition to agree on a common foreign policy agenda—and international developments, notably the Vietnam War. The government fell in 1974 before anything was done about the base, and the effort to close it stopped there. Nonetheless, these abortive efforts to remove the U.S. forces showed that center-left Icelandic officials were willing to put the base issue at the top of the agenda when they were in power.

7. See Report, “Icelandic Reactions to NATO and the Presence of the Keflavik Base,” 14 December 1955, in National Archives, College Park, Maryland (NA), Record Group (RG) 341, Air Force, Plans Project Decimal File, Folder OPD 091 Iceland, Section 13, Box 836.

8. On this episode, see Ingimundarson, “Buttressing the West in the North,” pp. 80–103.

Within the context of a perceived need by the Icelandic political elite to defuse domestic political tensions over Iceland's pro-Western course, this article will focus on the neglected field of troops-community relations. The article shows that gender was at the heart of Iceland's exclusionary practices against U.S. soldiers—that the underlying reason for sealing off the Keflavik military base was a patriarchal need to protect Icelandic women from having sexual relations with foreigners. Women's organizations generally supported this policy. What is more, the Icelandic government was able to dictate the terms of its relationship with the United States throughout the Cold War. The U.S. government had practically no say in the matter. Although some fraternization occurred between Icelandic women and American soldiers—especially during the 1950s and early 1960s when U.S. soldiers had a good deal of money to spend—it was kept to a minimum because of Iceland's severe restrictions on off-base movements. Thus, in contrast to what took place around U.S. bases in Okinawa, the Philippines, and South Korea (to name a few well-publicized examples), there was never any question of institutionalizing prostitution as part of the U.S. military presence in Iceland.<sup>9</sup>

Despite sharp differences over Iceland's foreign policy, the supporters and opponents of the base on both the right and the left saw eye-to-eye on the fraternization issue, albeit for different reasons. The center-right "internationalists," who usually were in control of Icelandic foreign policy and adopted an anti-Communist, pro-Western agenda, saw that they had to make concessions to Icelandic nationalism to counter the widespread opposition to the militarization of Iceland's foreign policy. Mindful of the controversy surrounding sexual relationships between Icelandic women and U.S. soldiers during World War II, they sought not only to limit opportunities for contact with U.S. soldiers but also to control the social behavior of Icelandic women. For much the same reason, Icelandic leaders were willing to adopt segregationist policies vis-à-vis the U.S. military, specifically the policy of excluding black soldiers. The presence of blacks was seen as posing a direct threat to Icelandic women and, by extension, to the Icelandic nation. Icelandic nationalists and other groups who fought Iceland's close military alignment with the United States tried to minimize the impact of the U.S. presence by stressing the need to maintain Iceland's political, socioeconomic, and cultural traditions and to resist what they saw as U.S. imperial domination.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Icelandic writers who opposed the U.S. military presence often used sexual imagery when speaking out against the military re-

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9. See, for example, Moon, *Sex among Allies*, p. 30; Sandra Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus, "Disparate Threads of the Whole: An Interpretative Essay," in Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, eds., *Let the Good Times Roll*, p. 304; and Bruce Cumings, "Silent but Deadly: Sexual Subordination in the U.S.-Korean Relationship," in Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, eds., *Let the Good Times Roll*, pp. 169–174.

lationship. They likened Icelandic politicians to whores for providing the United States with a military base. As one writer put it: “This nation has allowed a foreign army to trample on its history; it has nothing to contribute to the world except for stateless fish and international sex offered by its daughters, a nation without self-respect, which has accepted money and television, for its exploitation—a whore among nations.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, not only were politicians feminized and accused of corrupting Icelandic national values; Icelandic women were seen as failing in their roles as national protectors and betraying their country. Although the left in Iceland did not uniformly take such a misogynist stance—the few women who consorted with soldiers were, as noted, often portrayed as victims of American predators—women had no agency in Icelandic nationalistic discourse on the base issue.

The U.S. government reluctantly accepted social and racial restrictions imposed on its military forces. Iceland was considered one of the most important outposts for U.S. continental defense and for potential offensive military operations against the Soviet Union, in addition to being a vital sea link to Western Europe. The United States repeatedly asked the Icelandic government on “humanitarian grounds” to remove the limits on U.S. troops, but it did not try to force a change in the Icelandic position. Indeed, the U.S. government exerted relatively little pressure on the Icelandic government to change its policies vis-à-vis black troops until black civil-rights organizations began to take an active and critical interest in the issue in the late 1950s. Even then, however, U.S. officials often raised the issue only half-heartedly. The real motive was not to end discrimination per se—after all, the United States had agreed to limit the number of blacks stationed in Iceland purely to satisfy Icelandic sensibilities—but to avoid negative publicity about the ban at home. Cold War strategic interests always overrode concerns about human rights.

### **Protecting the Icelandic Nation from Foreign Protectors**

When a center-right Icelandic government concluded the Defense Agreement with the United States in 1951 after the outbreak of the Korean War, mixed memories of the British and U.S. military presence during World War II were still fresh among Icelanders. Britain had occupied Iceland in 1940, and although this was officially deemed a “friendly occupation,” the Icelandic government refused a U.S. request to “invite” American troops to Iceland to re-

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10. Ingimar Erlendur Sigurdsson, *Borgarlif* (Reykjavik: Helgafell, 1965), p. 280.

place the British forces in 1941. Although the Icelandic government did give its consent to a U.S. military presence on the island, the presence was tolerated mainly because of the wartime emergency. The Icelandic government had no desire to extend the stay of U.S. soldiers beyond the end of hostilities in Europe, and the last American soldiers left Iceland in 1946. American civilians continued to run the Keflavik airport, which the U.S. military had constructed in 1942 roughly thirty miles outside the capital, Reykjavik. When the Icelandic government invited the Americans to return in 1951, it initially could count on more cross-party political backing for its action than for the decision two years earlier to join NATO. But the government took pains to minimize the social impact of the U.S. troops—soon to be euphemistically renamed the Iceland Defense Force—especially in the sensitive area of fraternization between soldiers and Icelandic women. The number of troops permitted was far lower than the number stationed in Iceland during World War II. The Icelandic government demanded a ceiling of less than 5,000, but “precautionary measures” had to be taken to forestall a public backlash and to head off political opposition, notably by the pro-Soviet Socialist Party, which enjoyed the backing of 20 percent of the electorate and lost no opportunity to criticize Iceland’s political and military affiliation with the United States. Thus, in May 1951, when the first contingent of U.S. soldiers came to Iceland, they were not allowed to travel to Reykjavik for the first month and were confined to their base at Keflavik airport.

In light of the political turmoil caused by Iceland’s membership in NATO, the reaction to the arrival of U.S. troops was surprisingly mild. The Socialists were the only ones who cried foul, reminding the government of Iceland’s precondition for NATO membership—that no foreign troops be stationed in Iceland in peacetime. But the war scare triggered by the outbreak of the Korean War led many Icelanders to conclude that a foreign military presence was needed. Under these circumstances, the Icelandic government, in a surprising move, abolished most restrictions on off-base movement soon after the U.S. troops arrived.

The premature nature of the government’s decision, from a domestic point of view, was unquestionable. What the government did not anticipate was that U.S. soldiers, who were mostly single and far better paid than the average Icelander at the outset, flocked to Reykjavik and smaller towns in the vicinity of the Keflavik base to get a taste of Iceland’s admittedly barren nightlife. This development triggered an immediate response. Apart from the Socialists, who reacted with outrage, nationalistic politicians, especially those active in the so-called National Defense Society—which had fought against U.S. attempts to gain a military foothold in Iceland after the war—sought to

deny soldiers admission to Reykjavik's few restaurants and clubs. They were determined to do whatever was necessary to prevent a recurrence of the wartime fraternization between Icelandic women and American soldiers.<sup>11</sup> Although some of the nationalist politicians regarded the U.S. military presence as a necessary evil, they believed the government had been derelict by failing to insist on the exclusion of single men from the Iceland Defense Force. Many of them warned against the "danger" of letting U.S. soldiers, most of whom were in their early twenties, seduce Icelandic women by inviting them to cinemas and clubs. This sort of fraternization, they argued, would only strengthen the opposition to the military base, especially within the Socialist Party.<sup>12</sup> Several Icelandic women's organizations echoed the nationalists' concerns and called for U.S. soldiers to be prohibited from leaving the Keflavik base.

These warnings were by no means ill-founded. In 1952, opposition to the U.S. military presence was steadily increasing. It was not only the off-base movements of American troops that troubled many Icelanders. U.S. requests for additional military facilities in Iceland, including a new air base for the Strategic Air Command, the branch of the U.S. military responsible for strategic nuclear bombers, fueled fears that the country would become little more than a bastion for U.S. military interests. Just before the 1953 elections, a new National Defense Party (NDP) was set up to resist the U.S. presence. The NDP was a successor organization to the National Defense Society, which had become dormant after Iceland's entry into NATO. Dominated by non-Socialist nationalist intellectuals, the NDP did surprisingly well in the elections, capturing two seats.

The success of the new party had a huge impact on the domestic political scene in Iceland. Having underestimated the opposition, the government responded by demanding the closing-off of the base to minimize fraternization between Icelanders and the troops. Admittedly, the larger of the two parties in the new coalition government, the Independence Party, which received some 40 percent of the vote, was reluctant to take this step. But the junior coalition partner, the rural Progressive Party, which was supported by about 25 percent of the electorate and was far more skeptical of the U.S. presence, insisted on it. The government used familiar patriarchal arguments to support its case. The Progressive Party foreign minister, Kristinn Gudmundsson, recalled in his memoirs that the "Americans simply swamped the place, . . . played with

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11. See Ingimundarson, *Í eldlínu kalda stridsins*, pp. 225–226.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 226.



Icelandic girls, and left many of them heartbroken.”<sup>13</sup> Gudmundsson’s depiction harkened back to memories of what was dubbed the “situation” during World War II—sexual relations between Icelandic women and foreign troops—but in view of the much smaller number of soldiers stationed in Iceland in the early 1950s, it was an exaggerated account.

To the U.S. military, Keflavik was considered a hardship post in the 1950s, with its harsh climate and the paucity of recreational facilities at the base. Reykjavik was the only thing that provided an outlet—if only a modest one—for U.S. troops and helped to alleviate morale problems. Even so, U.S. officials in the end felt obliged to meet the Icelandic demands and to accept strict rules on off-base movements—rules that were, in essence, enforced until the end of the Cold War. In 1954 the Americans, ironically, began erecting fences around the base to “protect” the host nation from coming into contact with the troops.

### “Good Fences Make Good Neighbors”

The timing of the Icelandic action was determined by the mounting opposition to the U.S. military presence, but patriarchal ideas—the desire to protect Icelandic women from foreigners—provided the rationale. During World War II, the Icelandic government imposed tight controls on fraternization and even incarcerated dozens of young girls for having relations with U.S. soldiers.<sup>14</sup> The Icelandic government never contemplated such drastic moves during the Cold War, but some nationalist opponents of the base believed that the only way to preserve the purity of the Icelandic nation and Icelandic manhood was by preventing intermarriage between Icelandic women and

13. Kristinn Gudmundsson, *Fr Raudasandi til Rússí* (Reykjavik: Setberg, 1974), p. 136.

14. See Bára Baldursdóttir, “Thær myndu fegnar skifta um thjóðerni: Ríkisafskipti af samböndun unglingsstúlkna og setulidsmanna,” in Anna Agnarsdóttir et al., eds., *Kvennaslódir* (Reykjavik: Kvennasögusafn Íslands, 2001), pp. 301–317; Bára Baldursdóttir, “‘This Rot Spreads Like an Epidemic’: Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in Iceland during World War II” (Master’s thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2000); Katherine Connor Martin, “The Role of Nationalism, Internationalism, and Gender in the Icelandic Anti-Base Movement, 1945–1956” (Master’s thesis, University of Iceland, 2003); Herdís Helgadóttir, *Úr fjötrum: Íslenskar konur og erlendir ber* (Reykjavik: Mál og menning, 2001); Herdís Helgadóttir, “Konur í herasetnu landi: Ísland á árunum 1940–1947” (Master’s thesis, University of Iceland, 2000); Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, “Public View and Private Voices,” in E. Paul Durrenberger and Gísli Plsson, eds., *The Anthropology of Iceland* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), pp. 98–118; Eggert Thor Bernhardsson, “Blóraböggjar og olnbogabörn,” *Sagnir*, Vol. 19 (1996), pp. 12–23; Bjarni Gudmarsson and Hrafn Jökulsson, *Astandid: Mannlíf á hernámsárunum* (Reykjavik: Tákni, 1989); Steindór Sigurdsson, *Setulidid og kvenfólkid* (Reykjavik: published by author, 1940); and Gunnar M. Magnúss, *Virkid í nordri: Hernmsrin*, 3rd ed. (Reykjavik: Bókauitgáfan Virkid, 1984), Vol. 1.

U.S. servicemen. As one opponent of the base later put it: “There have been 570 marriages between Icelandic women and Americans from 1946 to 1960. Our young men are too precious to have to watch while—with indifference and in cold blood—young girls are becoming an export item as a result of the foreign military presence.”<sup>15</sup> Although only a small number of marriages had occurred since 1951 (most stemmed from World War II), this attitude was only a stepping-stone away from harsher eugenic demands made by xenophobic nationalists during World War II. Some had even gone so far as to demand, unsuccessfully, the sterilization of women, who were considered “susceptible” to having children with foreign soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

After the Keflavik military base was sealed off in 1954, U.S. soldiers seldom ventured out to make the tightly regulated trip to Reykjavik in their leisure time. The U.S. military had access to other facilities in Iceland such as radar complexes, but they were manned by Icelanders (apart from a small contingent of U.S. military guards who were stationed until 1967 in Hvalfjörður, where there was a naval fuel depot). Most of the soldiers, amounting to 93 percent of the Iceland Defense Force, were not allowed to leave the base from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. every day except Wednesdays, when the curfew started much earlier, at 12:00 p.m. (Wednesday was the only day of the week when Icelandic restaurants were banned from selling alcohol.) The Icelandic government made only one exception for enlisted personnel: Married soldiers whose families lived with them at Keflavik did not have to abide by the restrictions, provided that they were accompanied by at least one family member when they went out. The ban on off-base movement also did not apply to senior officers at the Keflavik base, betraying an additional class motive behind the restrictions. At the outset, all soldiers had to wear uniforms to distinguish themselves from Icelanders. In 1960 the government modified this policy, albeit slightly, by requiring only the 740 lowest-ranking soldiers—roughly 25 percent of the total number of troops—to wear uniforms outside the base.

In 1964, Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson, who as foreign minister in 1951 had negotiated the bilateral Defense Agreement, acknowledged that U.S. soldiers undoubtedly found it absurd to be subjected to these harsh rules. But Benediktsson believed that the restrictions served both Icelandic and U.S. interests by preventing conflicts between troops and the commu-

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15. Björn Gudmundsson, “Útflutningur íslenzkra stúlkna,” *Dagfari* (Reykjavik), Vol 3, No. 2 (July/August 1962), p. 6.

16. See Unnur Birna Karlsdóttir, *Mannkynbætur: Hugmyndir um bæta kynstofna hælendis og erlendis á 19. og 20. öld* (Reykjavik: Sagnfræðistofnun, 1998), p. 111. See also Baldursdóttir, “Thær myndu fegnar skifta um thjóðerni,” p. 306.

nity.<sup>17</sup> The president of Iceland, Ásgeir Ásgeirsson, also showed sympathy for the troops who, he said, were in Iceland under difficult circumstances in the “service of freedom so far away from their homeland.”<sup>18</sup> But his sentiments did nothing to change the official Icelandic policy. Not surprisingly, the rules were deeply resented by the troops, particularly after the best restaurants in Reykjavik began to deny access to uniformed soldiers in the early 1970s. The restaurants’ action had obvious class implications: The lowest-paid soldiers, who had to wear uniforms, were unable to dine at the best restaurants, whereas their superiors, who were under no such obligation, were allowed to do so.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) repeatedly urged the Icelandic government to abandon its policy. U.S. officials were angered that soldiers would be excluded from restaurants, whereas “hippies dressed in rags”—as one U.S. official put it—were served without any restrictions.<sup>19</sup> At a minimum, they argued, the rules requiring the lowest-ranking personnel to wear uniforms should be abolished. In addition to highlighting the discriminatory nature of the policy, U.S. officials emphasized that it would spoil Iceland’s image abroad. Many U.S. servicemen, who were forced to abide by the rules while on duty in Iceland, felt deep resentment toward the country. Some complained about their treatment in letters to their congressional representatives or to newspapers. Moreover, DoD officials reminded their Icelandic counterparts that the United States had kept the number of black troops to an absolute minimum on Iceland’s insistence. It was only a matter of time, they argued, before a U.S. congressional committee would take up the issue of Icelandic discrimination, including racism, in a public forum.<sup>20</sup>

In March 1971 the Nixon administration formally handed the Icelandic government a memorandum detailing its complaints and asking for changes. The document noted that “nowhere in the world [were] U.S. troops subjected to such stringent restrictions as in Iceland, neither in democratic nor [in] authoritarian states.”<sup>21</sup> The memorandum stressed that the presence of U.S. soldiers was far less conspicuous than in the 1950s, when there was only one good restaurant to be found in Reykjavik. Finally, the memorandum pointed

17. Quoted in *Morgunbladid* (Reykjavik), 30 September 1964, p. 3.

18. “Memorandum of Conversation between Robert Dennison and Ásgeir Ásgeirsson,” 17 May 1961, NA, RG 59, 740B.58/5–1761, Box 1655.

19. Report, “Takmarkanir á frelsi varnarlíðsmanna,” 8 March 1971, Thjóskjalasafn Íslands (ThÍ), in Icelandic National Archives, Reykjavik, Sögusafn utanríkisráðuneytis, 77, 3, Varnarmál 1974–1975.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Aide-Mémoire, 1 March 1971, ThÍ, Icelandic National Archives, Sögusafn utanríkisráðuneytis, 77, 3, Varnarmál 1974–1975.

out that U.S. servicemen were much less keen on going to Reykjavik in their leisure time now that facilities for social and recreational activities had been constructed at the Keflavik base.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. government portrayed the discriminatory practices of the Icelandic government as a human-rights issue. But it is worth asking whether there were any valid reasons for adopting such a restrictive policy. Some Icelandic base opponents argued that efforts to minimize contacts between soldiers and civilians made the foreign presence more bearable. Because the ban was so “successful,” the fraternization issue never became a domestic political problem after the base was sealed off. Earlier, many U.S.-Icelandic marriages had ended in divorce, and soldiers frequently had refused to pay alimony or denied ever having had sexual relations with women who bore their children.<sup>23</sup> It often had proven difficult for the Icelandic authorities to track down former American husbands who failed to pay child support, not to mention the Americans who had fathered children out of wedlock.

Others who supported the restrictions on U.S. troops argued that they were a necessary means of protecting public morality. This view was not shared by U.S. military commanders, who usually discounted negative reports of fraternization between Icelandic women and U.S. soldiers in social clubs in Iceland. In one case, U.S. officers even argued that the soldiers were the innocent victims of female aggression. U.S. commanders were wont to blame the families of young girls for not taking adequate care of them and the Icelandic authorities for not “controlling” them.<sup>24</sup> These sentiments were fairly characteristic of the U.S. military, which in other contexts had also blamed women for the “sexual entrapment” of troops. For example, at bases within the United States, women often were depicted as seducers or in extreme cases as “ravening wolves at the gates of our camps and posts.”<sup>25</sup> In Iceland, a few instances of rape and of underage girls attending social clubs frequented by soldiers were reported. The reaction of the Icelandic government and press to these incidents usually depended on the social background of the women. One woman who filed a rape charge against four U.S. servicemen received no public sympathy, because she was later arrested while trying to enter the Keflavik base illegally.<sup>26</sup> As it turned out, the four soldiers were found guilty of

22. Ibid.

23. Report, “Störf sendiráðsins árid 1962,” 29 January 1963, ThÍ, Icelandic National Archives, Sögusafn utanríkisráðuneytis, 40, 5, sendiráð Íslands í Washington.

24. U.S. Embassy (Reykjavik) to Department of State, 15 December 1966, NA, RG 59, General Foreign Policy Papers, 1964–1966, Politics & Defense, Box 2280.

25. Sturdevant and Stoltzfuz, “Disparate Threads of the Whole,” p. 309.

26. U.S. Embassy (Reykjavik) to Department of State, 15 December 1966, NA, RG 59, General Foreign Policy Files, 1964–1966, Politics & Defense, Box 2280.

the crime and sentenced by an Icelandic court, but their jail sentences ranged from only three to fifteen months.<sup>27</sup>

U.S. requests to abolish or modify the curfew rules made no impression on the Icelandic government and met with no success. Fearing a domestic backlash, the pro-American Icelandic government, which was in power from 1959 to 1971, did not want to raise the issue at all. The government was prepared to make only one minor concession: Soldiers were permitted to go to Reykjavik without family members when the curfew did not apply.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, off-base hours were extended a bit, but only on weekends. Icelandic officials were unwilling to go further than this because they sensed that opposition to the base was growing, a suspicion that was borne out in 1971 when a new left-wing government came to power on a platform of revising the U.S.-Icelandic Defense Agreement. Ultimately, as noted earlier, the agreement was not annulled, but the restrictions on U.S. soldiers were kept in place. Although a Social Democratic foreign minister, Benedikt Gröndal, tried to suspend the restrictive off-base rules for a trial period of four months in 1979, his decision, which he justified on human rights grounds, was met with such hostility by a left-wing coalition partner that he was immediately forced to rescind it.<sup>29</sup> The curfew was not abolished until the end of the Cold War in 1989.

### **The Politics of Race and Gender: Excluding Black Soldiers from Iceland**

The perceived need to uphold the social and racial homogeneity of the Icelandic nation not only led to the restrictions on fraternization but also spurred the Icelandic government to seek to prevent black soldiers from serving at Keflavik. This move had a historical precedent. In 1941, when U.S. troops replaced the British, Icelandic Prime Minister Hermann Jónasson insisted that only “elite forces,” an unmistakable euphemism for white soldiers, should be sent to Iceland.<sup>30</sup> The Icelandic government was not the only foreign govern-

27. See “Fundnir sekir um naudgun,” *Morgunbladid* (Reykjavik), 22 August 1967.

28. Aide-Memoire, 14 April 1971, ThÍ, Icelandic National Archives, Sögusafn utanríkisráðuneytis, 77, 3, Varnarmál 1974–1975.

29. “Takmarkanir á ferðafrelsi varnarliðsmanna afnumdar,” *Morgunbladid* (Reykjavik), 4 July 1979, p. 1. See also “Ráðherra afturkallar rýmkun á ferðafrelsi varnarliðsmanna,” *Morgunbladid* (Reykjavik), 7 July 1979, p. 1.

30. See *Althingistíðindi, 1941* (Reykjavik: Government Printing Office, 1942), p. 24. See also Thor Whitehead, “Kyntháttastefna Íslands,” *Lesbók Morgunbladsins* (Reykjavik), 13 January 1972, p. 7; and Karlsdóttir, *Mannkynbetur*, pp. 105–106.

ment hosting U.S. military forces that played the racial card in the 1950s and 1960s, but it certainly was one of the most zealous.

During World War II the U.S. military was still segregated, but some influential military officials who favored racial integration tried to resist foreign requests for whites-only deployments. U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson rejected such demands by the Australian government and several Central and South American governments. But in the case of Iceland, Stimson, perhaps betraying his ambivalence about race, was far less principled. He claimed that blacks would find it “a bit cold” to stay in Iceland and expressed no qualms about the Icelandic demand to exclude blacks from serving on the island. The U.S. government, it turned out, strictly enforced the ban throughout World War II. In one instance, a plan to send black soldiers to Iceland for a special technical mission was scuttled at the last minute.<sup>31</sup> By mistake, several black troops were briefly sent to Iceland to work in kitchens of the U.S. Navy, but they were withdrawn as soon as the Department of War realized that their presence violated the Icelandic government’s racial policy. Icelandic women who had relationships with white soldiers were ostracized and branded as whores, but when it was revealed that some of the black soldiers had attempted to fraternize with Icelandic women, this was deemed an unpardonable offense.<sup>32</sup>

The taboo on interracial fraternization was not confined to Icelandic society. Similar attitudes were prevalent within the U.S. armed forces, which were segregated and plagued by racial tension. During World War II, many violent disputes broke out between black and white Navy personnel.<sup>33</sup> British soldiers in some instances were shocked to witness the extent of institutionalized racism practiced by U.S. military forces in Britain, notably with the exclusion of blacks from social clubs. To be sure, racial and patriarchal ideas of “keeping the blood pure” and “protecting” white women were also widespread in Britain. British officials at one point even contemplated bringing a group of black women from the United States to Britain to prevent fraternization between black U.S. soldiers and white British women. Nothing came of the plan, but black soldiers were allowed to marry white British women only if the soldiers obtained approval from their superiors, who regularly turned down such requests. British women who defied social mores and had intimate relations with black soldiers were regularly castigated as whores by white U.S.

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31. Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 429.

32. See Whitehead, “Kynháttastefna Íslands.”

33. Ibid.

soldiers.<sup>34</sup> Despite these problems, the British government never went as far as the Icelandic authorities in banning the presence of black troops or having them expelled on racial grounds.

After World War II, and particularly after Truman's desegregation order in 1948, the U.S. military encountered far greater difficulty in acceding to foreign demands for the exclusion of black troops. But when the United States and Iceland negotiated the 1951 Defense Agreement, Icelandic officials used the same arguments they had cited a decade earlier. Icelandic Foreign Minister Bjarni Benediktsson wanted to make sure that "none of our black friends" would be part of the U.S. troops stationed in Iceland, at least not among the first contingent.<sup>35</sup> The Truman administration reluctantly agreed to this demand, and throughout the 1950s U.S. military officers and diplomats were convinced that it would be impossible to force the Icelandic government to change its stance. Hence, the U.S. government deemed it "extremely important," as one official put it, to send only white troops to Iceland. The Keflavik base, which from 1952 to 1961 was under U.S. Air Force command, was the only foreign site at which this discriminatory policy was enforced.<sup>36</sup> Although this policy was officially secret, white troops who came to Iceland in the 1950s were informed of it. The explanation offered to them was that it was the only way to keep the strategically important base in U.S. hands.<sup>37</sup>

### **Appearances and Pandering: Enforcing Racial Discrimination**

In 1957 the Eisenhower administration formally requested the lifting of the ban on black troops in Iceland, fearing that the policy, if it became public, would cause a furor in the United States. At the time, a left-wing government was in power in Iceland, and it, as noted earlier, had initially intended to seek the removal of all U.S. troops. When U.S. officials raised the matter of black soldiers with the Icelandic government, they argued that it would look far better if at least a few black soldiers were sent to Iceland. A token

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34. See Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, pp. 67–71.

35. Edward B. Lawson to Secretary of State, 2 May 1951, Naval Historical Center (NHC), Washington, D.C., Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209. See also, "Background Briefing Memorandum: Stationing of Non-Caucasian Servicemen in Iceland," 31 January 1961, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

36. James M. Reid to Dean Acheson, 21 October 1952, NA, RG 59, 740B.5/10–2152, Box 3504.

37. "My Perspective of Racism," 17 June 2001.

presence, they said, would essentially do the trick. Thus it was not so much a question of ending racial prohibitions as appearing to do so. Even this modest request was too much for the Icelandic foreign minister, Gudmundur Gudmundsson, who rejected it on the grounds that it would cause a domestic uproar.<sup>38</sup> Gudmundsson was pro-American and was opposed to the abrogation of the Defense Agreement. He did not, however, want to reopen the base issue, probably because one of his coalition partners, the Socialists, remained firmly opposed to the U.S. military presence. Gudmundsson realized that if he agreed to lift the racial ban, he would hand the Socialists an issue they could exploit. As a result, the U.S. administration abandoned its efforts to have the policy reversed.

Two years later, the worst fears of U.S. officials came to pass. After the Harlem-based newspaper *Amsterdam News* broke the news about the ban on the stationing of black troops in Iceland, *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine picked up the story. They quoted a statement by a Pentagon spokesman who claimed that the discriminatory practice was condoned in deference to the expressed wishes of the Icelandic government. A diplomat at the Icelandic embassy in Washington publicly denied that the Icelandic government had excluded blacks from serving in Iceland, and he pointed out that the Defense Agreement contained no such clause.<sup>39</sup> Although it was true that the ban had never been put in writing, it had of course been conveyed orally by the Icelandic foreign minister. Under Article 6 of the Defense Agreement, the Icelandic government had the ultimate say over the size and composition of the military force. Icelandic officials insisted that this clause was intended not as a discriminatory tool but as a way to limit the number of U.S. troops in Iceland. Icelandic newspapers, which at the time were strictly controlled by political parties, responded in a similar way. Even the Socialist Party's newspaper, *Thjóðviljinn*, had difficulty grappling with the issue, despite having spearheaded the campaign against the U.S. military presence. Under normal circumstances, anything that reflected badly on Iceland's pro-Western foreign policy would have been welcomed by the newspaper. But the Socialist Party's bid to eliminate the U.S. presence in Iceland placed the party in an ironic position. Socialist leaders were reluctant to show solidarity with black soldiers or to condemn racism because those soldiers were, after all, simply part of the hated U.S. military.<sup>40</sup>

38. "Background Briefing Memorandum: Stationing of Non-Caucasian Servicemen in Iceland," 31 January 1961.

39. See "Íslenskt kynháttahatur?" *Alhýðubladid* (Reykjavik), 11 December 1959, p. 1.

40. "Sagt fyrir vestan að stjórn Íslands vilji ekki að faekkad sé í hernum," *Thjóðviljinn* (Reykjavik), 9 December 1959, p. 4.



The press organs of the center-right government headed by the Social Democrats and the Independence Party were clearly embarrassed by the revelations, but they tried to extricate themselves by using diversionary tactics. The main Social Democratic newspaper, *Alþýðubladid*, quoted a Pentagon official who said that restrictions on the presence of Jews at U.S. military bases in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, were more restrictive.<sup>41</sup> But upon realizing that it served little purpose to justify one type of discrimination with another, the paper changed course and repeated the false information put out by the Icelandic embassy:

It is good that the embassy spokesman in Washington has declared that he was not aware of any ban on the presence of Icelandic troops here. This must be a misunderstanding. Nothing has been produced to indicate to the Icelandic public that any Icelandic government had taken the absurd decision to demand the exclusion of black troops from this country. Icelanders want, of course, those serving in the Defense Force to be selected on the basis of certain criteria—namely, that they will behave in a correct manner and cause as little trouble as possible in their contacts with the population. But it is totally antithetical to the Icelandic mind to judge people on the basis of their skin color. Hopefully, government officials will understand that the publication of the statement of the Pentagon has done serious damage to the image Icelanders want to project of themselves abroad. This case must be clarified in a way that will absolve Icelanders of any wrongdoing. This nation does not tolerate being ranked with Saudi Arabia in the world press when it comes to racial tolerance.<sup>42</sup>

That this was a smokescreen to hide the paper's knowledge of the facts is all but certain. *Alþýðubladid* usually echoed the views of the foreign minister, who had explicitly rejected any change in the racial policy two years earlier. The largest newspaper in Iceland, *Morgunbladid*, which was controlled by the center-right Independence Party, toed a similar line.<sup>43</sup> In government circles in Reykjavik, the revelations in the U.S. press were seen as an unfriendly act on the part of Americans, especially the allegation in *Time* magazine that the real motive behind the ban was to protect Icelandic blood.<sup>44</sup>

After this controversy, one would have thought that something would have been done to end the restrictions. Yet, despite the negative publicity, it took two years before the issue was addressed seriously. After the military command of the Keflavik base was transferred from the U.S. Air Force to the

41. "Engir blökkumenn í ameríska varnarlidinu. Samkvæmt ósk íslenskra yfirvalda segir Washington," *Alþýðubladid* (Reykjavik), 10 December 1959, p. 5.

42. "Íslenskt kynháttahatur?" *Alþýðubladid* (Reykjavik), 11 December 1959, p. 3.

43. "Andúd á blökkumönnum," *Morgunbladid* (Reykjavik), 12 December 1959, p. 4.

44. "Andar köldu ad vestan," *Alþýðubladid* (Reykjavik), 20 December 1959, p. 8.

U.S. Navy in 1961, increased pressure was brought to bear on the Icelandic government. The Kennedy administration even contemplated making a public announcement that the Icelandic government was fully responsible for the policy.<sup>45</sup> Only under this pressure did the Icelandic government agree to a new informal policy, which was conveyed to the U.S. government as follows:

The Icelandic government will not oppose the inclusion of three or four colored soldiers in the Defense Force, but hopes that they will be carefully selected in light of the special circumstances prevailing in Iceland. If the State Department needs to respond to questions from Congressmen or others on the issue, it can—with no Icelandic government opposition—make a public statement saying that Iceland Defense Force personnel are selected in light of special circumstances, such as small population, which apply to Iceland. On the other hand, it should be stated that there are no racial restrictions or any other restrictions. And, in fact, Americans of all races work for the military command [in Keflavik].<sup>46</sup>

This statement essentially reaffirmed the previous policy without acknowledging it publicly. It gave the erroneous impression that no racial discrimination was practiced in Iceland. For this reason, the Kennedy administration was unwilling to accept the policy at face value, not least because the premises of the recommended statement were patently false. At the time, the only black serviceman stationed at Keflavik (he worked as a special servant for the military commander) was described by an Icelandic official as “blacker than the king of spades.”<sup>47</sup> The Icelandic government wanted to distance itself from racist allegations by referring to the presence of this soldier, but U.S. Defense Department officials were unwilling to go on record as saying that U.S. soldiers “of all races” were working in Iceland—a statement that not only would have falsified the past but would also have been at odds with the new Icelandic position that only “three or four colored soldiers” were to be permitted in Iceland. DoD officials indicated that if they needed to issue a statement on the issue, they planned to say that “until recently” it was the policy of the Icelandic government to have no “colored personnel” in Iceland.<sup>48</sup>

A stalemate ensued, and no black soldiers were sent to Iceland for the

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45. Foy D. Kohler to Tyler Thompson, 23 February 1961, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

46. William C. Burdett to William P. Bundy, 11 August 1961, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

47. Memorandum, 7 November 1969, ThÍ, Icelandic National Archives, Skjalasafn sendiráðsins í Washington, B/300.

48. Draft Letter, William P. Bundy to William C. Burdett, 25 August 1961, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

next two years. In 1963 the Kennedy administration made a further attempt to persuade the Icelandic government to abandon the policy, but the overture once again was met with skepticism and resistance by officials in Reykjavik. This time, Icelandic leaders acknowledged the real reason for their unwillingness to permit black military personnel in Iceland. They said it would create a domestic backlash because of the “threat” of intimate relations between black soldiers and Icelandic women. Returning to arguments made during World War II about the need to protect Icelandic blood and manhood, the government insisted that the reaction of Icelandic men also would be harsh. But the government said it was prepared to make the same concession it offered two years earlier: “to allow three or four carefully selected married blacks” to be stationed at Keflavik, provided that their arrival would be arranged without much fanfare. The U.S. ambassador to Iceland, James Penfield, believed that this solution would eliminate the main opposition to the presence of blacks—namely, the “boy/girl problem.” But the U.S. commander of the Iceland Defense Force, Paul Buie, was less keen on the idea. After conferring with Icelandic government officials, he concluded that in light of the strong feelings on the issue, it would take at least three to four years before the Icelandic public was deemed ready for the arrival of blacks in Iceland.<sup>49</sup>

To be sure, the mainstream Icelandic press—the newspapers dominated by political parties—usually did not display racist tendencies. But the marginal yellow press in Iceland was vehemently against the presence of non-white soldiers on the island. One paper complained about the “problems” with “mulattoes”—some forty Filipinos who worked for the Defense Force—because of their alleged fraternization with Icelandic women:

So far, Icelanders have not been faced with the so-called Negro problem or people of color. But it is unnecessary to go into much detail about what terrible conditions this problem has created wherever it has taken root. For this reason, the government supposedly asked the United States government—as part of the Defense Agreement—to make sure that no colored troops would be sent here. Nonetheless, there are plenty of them here, to the joy of many young girls who are totally unable to understand the real danger of reproducing with their help. It is not that these men are worse than other people. On the contrary—but the facts tell us that a color other than white in societies such as ours will always cause friction, hate, and murders. It is not necessary to introduce us Icelanders to the race problem, even if the Americans have to cope with it.<sup>50</sup>

49. Navy Chief of Staff to Chief of Naval Operations, 7 May 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

50. “Negrar í varnarlidinu. Gífurleg sókn stúlkna í félagsskap við hörundsdökka menn,” *Ný vikutíðindi* (Reykjavik), 4 January 1963, p. 3.

In view of the previous unsuccessful attempts to have the ban lifted, one would have expected that the commander's assessment of Icelanders as not being "ready" for the arrival of black troops would have buried the issue. But with increased domestic political attention focused on the civil rights movement and a surge of protests against the segregationist policies enforced in the American South, it was impossible to continue pretending that the problem did not exist in the armed forces. Indeed, by this point a commission set up by President John F. Kennedy to examine racial equality in the U.S. military had begun showing interest in the "Iceland case,"<sup>51</sup> as it was dubbed. U.S. officials feared that if the commission reported on the true situation in Iceland, it not only would result in bad publicity but would also seriously damage U.S.-Icelandic relations.<sup>52</sup> This did not prevent Secretary of the Navy Fred Korth from postponing a decision to send a "few blacks" to Iceland until a further clarification of the Icelandic position was obtained.<sup>53</sup> In the meantime, however, a black U.S. member of Congress, Charles Diggs, decided to put pressure on the Defense Department. In a letter to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, he quoted the statement of the Icelandic embassy official in 1959 who denied that there was a ban on the stationing of blacks in Iceland. Diggs wanted a clear explanation of why nothing was done about the situation if the Icelanders had nothing to hide.<sup>54</sup>

The letter caused an immediate change of heart at DoD, which prepared to send "three or four" black soldiers to Iceland.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, this plan corresponded fully to the Icelandic government's wish that the number of blacks be kept to an absolute minimum and that only "family men" be included. It was at this stage that President Kennedy took a personal interest in the case. He wanted to know what kind of "gentleman's agreement" existed between the U.S. and Icelandic governments on racial matters, when the agreement was made, and who was responsible for it.<sup>56</sup> He ordered DoD to begin imme-

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51. "Memorandum of Conversation with the U.S. Ambassador in Iceland on Colored Troops in Iceland," 17 May 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

52. William E. Lang to Keld Christiansen, 12 April 1963, NA, RG 59, Correspondence Concerning the Establishment and Defense of U.S. Military Bases and Naval Bases Overseas, 1957-1963, Box 1.

53. Memorandum (W. R. Smedberg), 28 May 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

54. Dean Rusk to James Penfield, 14 June 1963, NA, RG 59, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1960-1963, Box 3725.

55. Memorandum, "Staff Problems in Iceland," 20 June 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

56. Memorandum (Norman S. Paul), n.d., NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

diate talks with the Icelandic government about the dispatch of “a few blacks” to Iceland.<sup>57</sup> But again, as in 1957, the question was only about a token force, not a genuine end to racial discrimination.

In June 1963 a black U.S. Navy official arrived in Iceland to assess the racial situation. He did not encounter any overt hostility on the streets of Reykjavik during his stay, even if his skin color aroused a good deal of curiosity among passers-by. He concluded that there was no reason to believe that black U.S. soldiers would face problems in Iceland. If black troops were subjected to public insults from Icelanders, this would more likely be because of their nationality than their race.<sup>58</sup>

The Craighill report proved to be the first step toward ending the ban.<sup>59</sup> At the outset, only a few black soldiers were chosen to serve in Iceland—consistent with the Icelandic government’s wishes. Their number increased slowly, and in the 1970s and 1980s all restrictions apparently were removed, probably unofficially. No instances arose of racial tensions between black U.S. servicemen and Icelanders. But when black civil rights organizations in the United States decided in the early 1970s to publish declassified correspondence between U.S. and Icelandic officials on the political semantics of permitting “three or four” carefully chosen black “family men” to be stationed in Iceland, it sparked extensive commentary in the U.S. press. Less attention was devoted to these revelations in Iceland, a country that prided itself on social tolerance and respect for human rights and that tried to play down any notion of official or public racism.<sup>60</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the deep division in Iceland over the stationing of U.S. troops during the Cold War, the supporters and opponents could agree on one thing: that fraternization between foreign soldiers and Icelandic women should be prevented. This attitude was partly motivated by the historical memory of sexual

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57. W. A. Platte to Wallace M. Beakley, 25 June 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

58. Memorandum from Richard S. Craighill, 18 July 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

59. James Penfield to Secretary of State (Washington, D.C.), 12 June 1963, NHC, Operational Archives, Politico-Military Policy Division, Box 209.

60. Department of State to U.S. Embassy (Reykjavik), 16 November 1971, NA, RG 59, General Records of the Department of State, Subject Numeric Files, 1970–1973, Box 1741.

relationships between foreign soldiers and Icelandic women during World War II.<sup>61</sup> Women's organizations actively sought to prevent social contacts with soldiers during the war and endorsed the severe restrictions on the Keflavik military base in the 1950s. The Icelandic government's position on the matter reflected commonly-held patriarchal and nationalistic conceptions of women as needing protection. That the Icelandic government was able to ensure that the U.S. government would send only married white men instead of single men, and no black soldiers, to Iceland was a sign of the strength of a strategically important small state in its dealings with a superpower. In contrast to South Korea, the Philippines, and other countries that hosted large deployments of U.S. military personnel during the Cold War, the Icelandic case shows that there is no easy correlation between political and economic power, on the one hand, and dominance, on the other.

Despite pressure from various U.S. administrations, the Icelandic government maintained severe restriction on the movements of U.S. troops. This was one of the factors that prevented the emergence of prostitution around the Keflavik base. Other factors, however, also were important. Saundra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus have argued that the potential sexual domination of a strong state over a weaker state hinges in part on economic factors. When the Americans arrived in Iceland in the 1950s, they were dealing with a country that had not experienced the ravages of war and that maintained one of the highest living standards in the world. Although U.S. soldiers initially tended to be more affluent than the average Icelander, the material disparities were by no means comparable to those in most other countries in which U.S. bases were established after World War II. Moreover, in the 1960s a reversal gradually took place, making Iceland an expensive location for U.S. troops. In Okinawa, where a similar change occurred later, Filipino women were brought in to provide sexual favors for U.S. soldiers in an effort to "protect" Okinawan women from foreigners. Such a course, however, was not an option in Iceland, where a military-oriented sex industry had never existed.<sup>62</sup>

Another variable that has to be considered is the marital status of U.S. troops abroad. In Asia, most U.S. soldiers were single and young and were therefore more inclined to frequent the local sex industry. In Europe, by contrast, most U.S. soldiers were married, a status that reduced the demand for non-prostituted or prostituted sexual services. A case in point is Germany, where this policy has been enforced since the 1980s, even though the country has not experienced a nationalistic backlash against the presence of U.S.

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61. Björnsdóttir, "Public View and Private Voices," p. 100.

62. Sturdevant and Stoltzfuz, "Disparate Threads of the Whole," pp. 307–308.

troops. The main reason for the Icelandic government's insistence that married men be deployed instead of single men was to prevent sexual relations between Icelandic women and American soldiers. Since the 1970s, most soldiers at the Keflavik base have been accompanied by their families.

Domestic political factors also were at stake. Those who supported the U.S.-Icelandic Defense Agreement wanted to ensure that it did not cause further polarization in Icelandic society, whereas the opponents of the U.S. military presence wanted to prevent any socializing with troops because they believed that the majority of Icelanders were against the military presence.<sup>63</sup> The opponents claimed that problems such as prostitution and rape had arisen in other countries hosting U.S. military bases.<sup>64</sup> Some soldiers did commit rape in Iceland, though there were not many such instances. Although it is hard to say whether, in the absence of the restrictions on U.S. troops, prostitution would have become a major problem around Keflavik, Iceland has long enforced strict laws against the trade (even if it is practiced subterraneously). In most East Asian countries, by contrast, prostitution around U.S. military bases has been effectively legalized regardless of the laws.

The Icelandic policy of preventing sexual relationships between Icelandic women and black soldiers did not change from World War II until the mid-1960s. Yet, interestingly enough, the ban did not apply to other "colored" people. Filipinos, for example, could stay in Iceland without restrictions. The fear of "brown babies" was definitely part of the motivation for the racial restrictions, but that fear never became an issue in Iceland after the ban was lifted, even though there were instances of interracial relationships. When the racial ban was enforced, it applied only to soldiers or others who planned to reside in Iceland, not to visitors. Black tourists had no problem coming to Iceland and were not subject to hostility. When famous black musicians, such as Louis Armstrong, came to Iceland, they were greeted with enthusiasm.

This does not, of course, diminish the culpability of Icelandic officials who repeatedly lied about the racist policy in order to minimize the damage to Iceland's image abroad. Nor does it absolve U.S. officials of all responsibility. Although the U.S. government did urge Icelandic leaders to modify their policy, U.S. officials usually indicated that they would be satisfied with cosmetic changes. Nothing really changed until black civil rights organizations and legislators in the United States began to press for an end to the discriminatory policy. When the Defense Agreement was modified in 1974 following

63. Gudmundsson, "Útflutningur íslenzkra stúlkna," p. 6.

64. See Enloe, *Maneuvers*; Moon, *Sex among Allies*; Ruth Ann Keyso, *Women of Okinawa: Nine Voices from the Garrison Island* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, eds., *Let the Good Times Roll*.

the collapse of the second center-left government, which had threatened to expel the Americans, race did not become an issue. Even though the number of black U.S. troops was proportionally smaller than that of whites in the early 1970s, this changed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By the time the Cold War ended, the racial balance at Keflavik did not differ from that of U.S. military bases elsewhere in the world. Of the 3,133 soldiers stationed in Iceland in 1989, 15.3 percent were black and 5 percent were classified as “other,” most likely Filipino or Hispanic.<sup>65</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, restrictions on off-base movements in Iceland were completely lifted, giving the U.S. troops freedom to go to Reykjavik and other places in their leisure time. This change has had no political repercussions and has not been met with resistance by Icelanders. It undoubtedly reflects the reduced force of nationalism—a trend confirmed in this article by the fading perception of women as national protectors—economic prosperity, and the removal of Cold War tensions. The situation now is in stark contrast to the many years during the Cold War when successive Icelandic governments “incarcerated” their “protectors” in order to shield Icelandic women against fraternization with foreigners (especially blacks), to lessen the impact of the military presence, and to forestall polarization over the country’s pro-Western foreign policy. The underlying source of this policy was patriarchal: the need to preserve a homogeneous “national body” in the face of a foreign “threat.” Paradoxically, the policy served international ends as well. It enabled the Icelandic political elite to maintain a defense relationship with the United States in the face of domestic opposition and to institutionalize Iceland’s pro-American foreign policy.

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65. Frithór Eydal, Press Officer for the Icelandic Defense Force, to Valur Ingimundarson, personal communication, 14 May 2003.