

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks at a Saint Patrick's Day Reception

March 17, 2009

The President. Well, good evening, everybody.

Audience members. Good evening!

The President. And welcome to St. Patrick's Day at the White House. I notice that the Boston crowd is a little rambunctious tonight. How about Chicago? That's what I'm talking about. [*Laughter*] It seems particularly fitting that we gather tonight in a house that was, after all, designed and built by an Irish architect.

And we've had a wonderful day that began by meeting with a strong friend of the United States, *Taoiseach* Brian Cowen, who presented us with a gift of shamrocks from the people of Ireland, a symbol of the enduring ties between our nations and a reminder of the everlasting promise of spring. And I'm so glad that we've gotten a chance to know him and his lovely wife Mary, who've just been entirely gracious today. And we're very grateful to them. As it turns out, the *Taoiseach* and I have something in common—I've mentioned this in previous speeches—both he and my great-great-great grandfather on my mother's side hail from County Offaly.

And I've also had the pleasure of meeting First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness of Northern Ireland, two men who have stood together to chart a historic path towards peace. They are with us tonight and deserve an extraordinary round of applause.

And I've just met with Sir Hugh Orde, the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland's Police Service, who is leading the efforts to bring those responsible for the recent violence to justice. And we are grateful for him.

All of us have watched this week as the people of Northern Ireland and their leaders have responded, nothing short of heroically, to those who would challenge a hard-earned peace, and the thoughts and prayers of Americans everywhere are—go out to the families of the fallen. And I want everyone listening to know this: The United States of America will always stand with those who are working towards peace, and after seeing former adversaries mourning and praying and working together, I have never been more confident that this peace will prevail.

Today served as a solid reminder of just how deeply woven the ties between our two nations are. Irish signatures are on the founding documents; Irish blood has been spilled on our battlefields; Irish sweat went into the building of our greatest cities. Tens of millions of Americans now trace their roots back to that little island that has made such a large impact on America and on the world.

For generations, the Irish, along with so many other immigrant and ethnic groups, came to America equipped often with nothing but their faith and an unbending belief that success was possible for all who were willing to work for it. That, after all, may be the reason that Americans identify so strongly with the story of St. Patrick. It's the story of believing in the unseen and of making that belief a reality.

That's what the Irish did. They struggled to create a place for themselves in a distant land, and with a commitment to faith and family and hard work, they transformed that land in the

process. And even after all the generations of becoming and being Americans, their descendants have never lost that enduring spirit that insists they proclaim themselves Irish still. That same pride was embodied by a man who once occupied this very house, a man who was only three generations removed from Ireland.

In the third year of his Presidency, John F. Kennedy decided to make a trip to his ancestral home. One of his aides advised against it, telling the President, "You've got all the Irish votes in the country that you'll ever get." [Laughter] "If you go to Ireland, people will say it's just a pleasure trip." [Laughter] And President Kennedy replied, "That's exactly what I want"—[laughter]—"a pleasure trip to Ireland." [Laughter]

And while there, he visited the port from which his great-grandfather embarked for America. And in an address to the Irish Parliament and Ireland's American-born President, he reflected, as we all have from time to time, on the role chance plays over the generations in determining who we become.

I want to read a quote from him. He said, "If this nation had achieved its present political and economic stature a century ago, my great-grandfather might never have left New Ross, and I might, if fortunate, be sitting down there with you," Kennedy said. "Of course, if your own President had never left Brooklyn, he might be standing up here instead of me." [Laughter]

It bears saying that if Patrick Kennedy hadn't left County Wexford, or if Thomas Fitzgerald hadn't left County Limerick, the American people might also have been denied one of the finest public servants of this or any age, Sir Edward M. Kennedy. Teddy Kennedy wishes he could be here tonight, but I guarantee this much: The very thought of all of you gathered here has his eyes smiling, and he expects you to party. [Laughter]

He has, as much as anyone, reminded us of what it means to be Irish: that no matter what hardships may come, there is always joy to be found in this life; and that through hard work, tomorrow can be better than any day; that comfort is found amidst faith and family, love and laughter, poetry and song.

And tonight, in this room with all of you, I'm reminded of the words of my favorite poet, Yeats: "There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't met yet."

Happy St. Patrick's Day, everybody. God bless you.

And with that, I would like to bring to the podium our honored guest for the evening, the *Taoiseach*, our outstanding Prime Minister of Ireland, Brian Cowen.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:34 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Joe Biden.

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