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Remarks at a Shamrock Presentation Ceremony With Prime Minister Micheál Martin of Ireland

March 17, 2022

President Biden. Well, Happy Saint Patrick's Day, everyone. It's great to see you all here. And last year, because of the pandemic, the Taoiseach and I had to hold our meeting virtually.

How you doing, pal? We've got all the Irish here today. [*Laughter*]

And this is the first year we've had to make some last-minute adjustments as well. Sadly, the Taoiseach and Ms. Martin are not able to join us today, but they both sent their love and their message for this occasion.

And I spoke with the Taoiseach at length this morning, and we had a virtual meeting, bilateral meeting. He is feeling well. And I share his disappointment that we weren't able to have our meetings in person as we had planned.

This year marks the 70th year of Ireland sending shamrocks to the White House and—to celebrate the friendship between our nations and the bond—the bond—that has been strengthened by generations of Irish Americans.

Apparently, President Truman was away when the Irish Ambassador dropped off the first bowl of shamrocks in—[*laughter*]—and that's why I just removed his bust from my office. [*Laughter*] That's a joke. That's a joke. That's a joke. [*Laughter*] I didn't do that. I didn't do that. [*Laughter*] I'm sure he would have been there had he known. [*Laughter*]

A virtual meeting back then was sort of out of the question. But by the next year, President Eisenhower was able to accept in person. A joyful tradition was born at that moment when he accepted that.

So, to everyone here today, welcome back to the White House. It's so nice to be able to have you all back inside the White House. There are so many friends here—so many friends here—Irish, Irish Americans, Americans who wish they were Irish. [*Laughter*]

As my grandfather used to say—our grandfather—my sister Valerie is here, my daughter Ashley is here, my brother-in-law, my brother and my other sister-in-law, my niece. We're all here. But I'm probably the only one old enough to remember my grandfather, Ambrose Finnegan, as well you might expect someone when they were that age.

And he used to have an expression. He'd say, "If you're lucky enough to be Irish, you're lucky enough." And so—[*laughter*]. There's a lot of proud Irish American members in my administration. But there's one person here I want to recognize in particular in my administration: my Secretary of Labor. I'd understand him if he spoke better—if he spoke Gaelic instead of Boston. [*Laughter*] Where are you, Marty Walsh?

Secretary of Labor Martin J. Walsh. Right here.

President Biden. There you are, Marty. Marty Walsh.

Secretary Walsh. From Galway.

President Biden. From Galway—his parents are from Galway. I tell you what, I don't know. Like I said, if you spoke Gaelic, I'd understand it better than, you know, the "car barn" and all of that.

Look, a proud son of two Irish immigrants to this country who found their way in America and to America, and dream through their union membership, and all the work that this man did to promote the union movement.

And to all the Members of the House and Senate that are here—you have to hear me again, a lot of you. I apologize. [*Laughter*] And I look at one Irishman, Bobby Casey, over here. He's from—we're from the same hometown: Scranton, Pennsylvania. Right, Bobby?

And I knew Bobby's dad well. He was a hell of a guy. And we lived literally four, five city blocks apart from one another. The problem is that I'm older than Bobby as his father was than me, so we're right in the middle there. [*Laughter*]

But the best thing Bobby has going for him is a magnificent wife and his mother is a saint, God love her. And tell Mom I said hi, will you? For real.

Look, our new Ambassador to Ireland can't be with us today, but I'm very pleased that Claire Cronin from Boston has officially begun her work in Dublin. I just got off a video with her on the phone, and she was mildly tearful. She wanted to be here with everyone, but—and I wish you all are going to get to meet her. She's really quite a person.

And usually, in Washington, as—I'm usually referred to as Jill Biden's husband, which I'm proud of. But today, I'm Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden's son. That's who I am. And Jimmy, Val, and I—we come by our love for Ireland honestly. It's been more than 165 years since our great-great-grandparents left County Mayo and County Louth aboard a coffin ship to cross the Atlantic.

Now, I want to ask my relatives from County Louth to stand up, the three of them. Come on. Stand up, guys. Now, you see this guy here on the end? He's probably the single most famous rugby played in all of Ireland. And he scored the winning goal against the All Blacks when he beat them in Chicago. And he's my cousin. Good to have you, man. Good to have you.

And the Blewitts and Finnegans eventually settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where my grandparents—where my parents met and married. And that's where my mom, Catherine Eugenia Finnegan, was born and later, as I said, met Joseph Robinette Biden, the Senior. His saving grace was his mother was a Hanafee—his mother's side, they had a Hanafee from Galway. That saved him in the family. [*Laughter*] That saved him up in Scranton.

Being Irish, as my mother always told me, is about family, it's about faith, and it's about courage. Mom used to have an expression. My brother and sister will remember. She'd say, "Courage is the greatest of all virtues, because without it, you could not love with abandon." Courage is the greatest of all virtues, because without it, you could not love with abandon.

Growing up an Irish American gave me a pride that spoke both—to both continents. The heart and soul that drew it from old and new. And the conviction that everyone—everyone—is deserving of being treated with dignity.

I was mentioning today, I think it's fair to say—I can't prove this, but I think it's fair to say I've never heard the word "dignity" used as much as I have among the Irish. Because the deprivation of the—being treated with dignity is understood. Dignity.

One of my great-uncles wrote from Ireland—wrote from the United States, after he made it to America, one of those letters they used to call "Amerikay" letters back to his loved ones in Ireland, yearning for home. He wrote, "If there was a road made of furze"—furze is a yellow flower with thorns in it. "If there was a road"—he said, "If there was a road made of furze in America—from America to Ireland, I'd walk it in my bare feet." I'd walk it in my bare feet.

Our great-grandfather, Edward Francis Blewitt, was only the second Catholic ever elected to the State senate—we talked about this, Gov—in the State of Pennsylvania. The first one was in the early 1880s, and—but I think he was—he was the second.

And he was elected—when he was elected office, he had a—my great-grandfather was—had an engineering degree from Lafayette College and he had the heart of an Irish poet. He wrote over 200 poems. And fortunately, our Uncle Ed left the poems. I have them all. I've had them bound.

And he wrote a poem about "his Ireland." I want to read one of his stanzas of the poem. He said: "From the fairest land, except my own"—nor sun—'neath these—excuse me—"'Neath Sun or star or Moon, the citadel of Liberty, My mother's land, *a rún*."

Of course, I am not the first Irish American descendent to—not by a long shot—to be in this—in the White House. Fully half of American Presidents can claim some ancestral connection to Ireland, including the man who held this job when I was Vice President, Barack Obama.

But it was John F. Kennedy, our—and his—would you stand up, Ambassador? Come on—our first Irish Catholic President who visited Ireland in 1963 and said, quote, "Our two nations, divided by distance, have been united by history." Well, that's as true today as it was then. Today, those words feel particularly poignant as Ireland and the United States stand united at this momentous point of history.

Vladimir Putin—Vladimir Putin—has launched an unconscionable war against Ukraine, against the very pillars of international peace and stability. And as two nations that have fought for freedom, we recognize the courage and determination of the Ukrainian people who defend their liberty now. And they do.

The Republic of Ireland and our Nation have lived through war. We're determined, though, to help the Ukrainian people, bring an end to Putin's brutal assault, and restore peace to the Ukrainian people.

As nations that have been marked by emigrants who departed Ireland in coffin ships and the immigrants who sought the safety of new beginnings in the United States, we are open—and our hearts are open and our arms are open—to help the more than 3 million Ukrainian refugees who have already fled Putin's onslaught.

And today, as the Taoiseach and I affirmed earlier today, Ireland and the United States are going to stay united together with our partners around the world to keep the pressure on Putin and to strengthen our support for Ukraine.

And by the way, Ireland is supporting the economic sanctions—taking a gigantic hit, a gigantic hit—proportionally, more than we have. It took a hell of a lot of courage for the Taoiseach and the Dáil to stand up and do what they did. And I really mean it. You know that, Mr. Ambassador. You know what it's like.

We've also discussed how the United States and Ireland will take on all the challenges we face together. We're working together to fight COVID–19 and to save lives around the world, to tackle the climate crisis, and to boost global economic recovery. And we're working—for real—side-by-side in the United Nations Security Council, which they're now members of, to address the humanitarian crisis not only in Ukraine but around the world.

And our nations both are deeply committed to protecting the hard-won gains of peace in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement has been the foundation of peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland for nearly 25 years, and it cannot change. Cannot change.

I have made that point—and he's a friend—to the Prime Minister of England and others: It cannot change. To preserve and extend those gains for all the people in Northern Ireland, and the

European Union to make [and]* the United Kingdom must continue to resolve challenges over the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocols.

The United States stands ready to work with all the communities of Northern Ireland to ensure—to ensure—its extraordinary economic potential and ensure that it's realized. And we look forward to supporting the next Northern Ireland executive after the upcoming Assembly elections, which are on their way.

History has proven that—what the people of Northern Ireland and their leaders can accomplish when they work together. Yeats wrote—can I quote an Irish poet? [*Laughter*] He wrote the line in one of his poems, "Hope that you may understand." Hope that you may understand. Because for the Irish and for all us Irish Americans, the hoping is essential to understanding and to life, from our perspective.

Hope is what brought forth on the Emerald Isle a nation of poets and patriots, saints, scholars, artists, and engineers. Hope kept us looking toward the far horizon. It urges us to—over every obstacle. It tells us to try again when we fall short, to rise each time we fall. Our mom used to have an expression: "As long as you're alive, you have an obligation to strive. And you're not dead until you've seen the face of God." And she meant it. She meant it.

Well, in my view, that's the Irish of it. And hope is what brought us—the Irish American kid all the way from Scranton to the White House. And with a lifetime of history of hoping comes the deep understanding of what our nations and our people can accomplish. Hope was what brought us here.

And around the same time my great-great-grandfather Owen Finnegan, a shoemaker, boarded a coffin ship in 1844 in the Irish Sea with another—near—5 weeks after another shoemaker named Joseph Kearny from Moneygall arrived on another ship in America just 5 weeks earlier. That was President Obama's great-great-grandfather.

They were both shoemakers not far from one another. When we were here—when I first got that—the genealogy done by the LDS—by the Mormon's Church—they have the most extensive biological—archaeologic—most extensive records on genealogy. [*Laughter*] I'm getting into biology here.

And they said it was not sure they'd be able to see one another. But when I went over to Ireland, quote, with my family to go home to meet some of my relatives that I didn't know—our relatives we didn't know—they indicated the likelihood they were both shoemakers, both not far from one another, both leaving for America 5 weeks apart—it is not improbable that they would have known one another.

They left everything behind, like all of your relatives, for an uncertain future. But I wonder, in all of their dreams, whether they could have ever dreamt that their two great-great-grandsons of shoemakers from Ireland would be sworn in as Presidents of the United States of America. I wonder.

It's not about me. It's not about Barack. It's about hope. Think about it. But again, as my grandpop would say, "That's the Irish of it."

So I want to again thank the Taoiseach for making the trip to Washington, even though he cannot be with us today, and for continuing to strengthen the relationship between our two great nations. And now we have a special message from the Taoiseach.

[*At this point, a video message from Prime Minister Martin was played.*]

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* White House correction.

Prime Minister Martin. Mr. President and First Lady, Senators, Representatives, ladies and gentlemen: As we gather this year to mark St. Patrick's Day, an annual occasion that means so much to so many Americans and to Irish people everywhere, we do so in the consciousness that these are not normal times.

We are reminded by the appalling events in Ukraine that freedom and democracy can never be taken for granted. Each generation must be ready to stand up and defend them. We are reminded also of the lengths that those who oppose democracy are prepared to go to stop others enjoying its benefits.

In the people of Ukraine, we are reminded of the boundless bravery and resolve of those who love their country and who value its freedom. And importantly, we are reminded of the importance of the shared values and principles which are the bedrock of the enduring friendship between our countries.

As we confront this crisis, I am reminded of the words of James Joyce, put into the mouth of his 20th century everyman, Leopold Bloom, in "Ulysses," published a century ago this year by an American woman in Paris, Sylvia Beach. Joyce wrote: "Force, hatred, history, all that. That's not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it's the very opposite of that that is really life." And that is why we stand together to ensure that what Joyce described as "perpetuating national hatred among nations" shall not prevail in our time.

This ceremony has a long history. And yet it has perhaps never meant as much to us as it does this year. And that is because, more than any other President of our times, your family's story captures the overlapping stories of Ireland and America. The shamrock presented to you today recalls the lives of the Blewitts of County Mayo and the Finnegans from County Louth. I took the opportunity to have the bowl inscribed especially for you in the Irish language, knowing how you would value that.

Your family's perilous journey across the Atlantic, and those of the other Irish names that adorn your family tree, reflect the experience of the millions of Irish people who left their homeland in the 19th century to seek better lives for themselves. The departure of so many people from our shores, many at a very young age, left a huge gap in our society and deposited oceans of pain in the hearts of those they left behind, longing for departed family members they never saw again.

In more recent times, our diaspora has been an inestimable source of strength to us in the search and achievement of peace and political progress in Northern Ireland. Mr. President, I salute the immense contribution made by the Congressional Friends of Ireland, of which you were a founding member back in 1981. Their efforts were instrumental in securing indispensable American support for the peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement, an achievement in which I know that you and many other Americans take justifiable pride.

Your support, Mr. President, and that of our friends in Congress continues to be of vital importance as we seek to protect the Good Friday Agreement from the complications created by the British decision to leave the European Union. The United States will always be an influential source of support for the cause of peace and reconciliation in Ireland, something for which we are deeply appreciative.

Mr. President, your family's experience is not just woven into the story of Ireland its immigrants, it is also an integral part of the American story. Your Irish ancestors and millions of others from Ireland and around the world strove in their lives to make America the country it is today.

Their labor, in many cases, literally built America. Theirs was no easy street. As the Irish poet Eavan Boland once wrote: "They would have thrived on our necessities. What they survived we could not even live. . . . Their hardships parceled in them. Patience. Fortitude. . . . And all the old songs. And nothing to lose."

Irish Americans rose to occupy prominent positions in every walk of American life, including today in this White House, designed by an Irish architect, James Hoban.

Your country was transformed in the 50 years after the Civil War, at a time when immigration, including from Ireland, was at its peak. For them and countless others like them, America became what Seamus Heaney calls "the further shore" where "the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up, and hope and history rhyme."

Happy St. Patrick's Day, and have a great evening.

President Biden. Mr. Ambassador, you've got to tell him how much he's appreciated. Genuinely. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Folks, now we have—I don't know who's going to do the introducing, but now we're going to have entertainment that is all Irish. And so you'll get me to sit down—I sit down. [*Laughter*] And they're going to clear the stage.

And as my father said—my father—our father used to have a band when he was a kid. He played the saxophone and the clarinet, and he could dance, and he could sing. And he used to say: "Joey, I don't know where the hell you came from. You have no lip"—[*laughter*]—"you have two left feet, and you can't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow." So I'm getting the hell off the stage. [*Laughter*]

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:47 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Mary O'Shea, wife of Prime Minister Martin; Mary Walsh, mother of Secretary Walsh; Sen. Robert P. Casey, Jr., and his wife Terese and mother Ellen; former Irish union rugby player Rob Kearney; Gov. Thomas W. Wolf of Pennsylvania; former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Caroline B. Kennedy; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; Ireland's Ambassador to the U.S. Daniel Mulhall; and Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens, her husband John, and her daughter Missy; and his brother James and his wife Sarah.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Shamrock presentation ceremony; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Ireland, Prime Minister Martin.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Ashley; Biden, James B.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Sarah; Casey, Ellen Harding; Casey, Robert P., Jr.; Casey, Terese Foppiano; Cronin, Claire D.; Johnson, Boris; Kearney, Rob; Kennedy, Caroline B.; Martin, Micheál; Mulhall, Daniel; Obama, Barack; O'Shea, Mary; Owens, John T.; Owens, Missy; Owens, Valerie Biden; Putin, Vladimir Vladimirovich; Walsh, Martin J.; Walsh, Mary; Wolf, Thomas W.

Subjects: Coronavirus pandemic, international cooperation efforts; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; Foreign policy, U.S. : Humanitarian assistance programs; Ireland : Ambassador to U.S.; Ireland : Prime Minister; Ireland : Relations with U.S.; Ireland : U.S. Ambassador; Labor issues : Unions :: Labor movement and organized labor; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Pennsylvania : Governor; Russia : international and U.S. sanctions; Russia : President; Russia : Ukraine, airstrikes and invasion; Ukraine : Refugees, humanitarian situation;

Ukraine : Russian airstrikes and invasion; United Kingdom : Northern Ireland :: Elections; United Kingdom : Northern Ireland :: Peace and reconciliation efforts; United Kingdom : Prime Minister; United Nations : Security Council.

DCPD Number: DCPD202200184.