

Remarks at a Shamrock Presentation Ceremony With Prime Minister Leo Varadkar of Ireland

March 17, 2023

President Biden. Hello, hello! Happy St. Patrick's Day!

Take a seat if you have one, Gov.

I'm getting a little bit worried. We were in here watching you, and the Taoiseach, when we were in—you're on camera, the Taoiseach—"Isn't that Senator Coons?" What the hell you've been doing, Coons? I don't know, man. At any rate—he's the Senator from Delaware.

As the great-great-grandson of the Blewitts of County Mayo—and several are here today—and the Finnegans of County Louth, who boarded coffin ships to cross the Atlantic more than 165 years ago; as the proud son of Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden: I wish you all a very, very happy St. Patrick's Day.

This gathering is a cherished tradition, a celebration to honor where we all have come from and where we're heading. And it's a time for us to tell stories, maybe share a few Irish—bits of Irish poetry, and not to live in some romanticized version of the past, but to reminder—remember what's possible—what's possible—as we recommit ourselves to the unfinished work that lies ahead of all of us.

You know, I often say: We Irish are the only people in the world who are nostalgic for the future. *[Laughter]* I think that's true, by the way.

And—but now, the diplomat Leslie Shane [Shane Leslie; White House correction] once wrote: "Every St. Patrick's Day, every Irishman goes out to find another Irishman to make a speech to." *[Laughter]* I said that this morning, so I—that's why we asked you here, so we can make speeches. Luckily, we don't have to go too far today.

You know, Taoiseach, it's been wonderful to welcome you to the White House and spend some time with you and Matthew today. And it's always a moment of great unity here in Washington, and I mean that sincerely. I've been doing this for a few years, and it never ceases to please me how committed so many people are.

Democrats and Republicans alike share a deep respect and love of Ireland, as you saw this morning—actually, it was the early afternoon—up in Capitol Hill, this afternoon.

Many of my good friends in Congress on both sides of the aisle are here today, including the former Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. A good Irish lady. And, Taoiseach, I've said this before: I think she's the best Speaker in the history of the United States House of Representatives.

Members of my Cabinet are here. Our Ambassador to Ireland, Claire Cronin, from Boston, Massachusetts, is here. She's in Dublin. Claire. She's asked me, when the term is up, whether or not she can still stay in one of the rooms there. *[Laughter]* It's a hell of a place. Isn't it, Claire? *[Laughter]*

U.S. Ambassador to Ireland Claire D. Cronin. It's not bad.

President Biden. It's not bad.

I also want to welcome the Ambassador from Ireland and the United Kingdom as well as Members of the Irish and British Parliaments. Would you all stand up if you're here? Welcome, welcome, welcome.

We've even got a few of my distant Irish cousins here today, including the well-known Irish rugby player, Rob Kearney. Rob, stand up. I want to see you after this, pal. [Laughter]

You know, Rob, I expect we know—and this is no offense to anyone—but who in the room we're rooting for in the Grand Slam. [Laughter] That's between Ireland and England. Not—[laughter]—I'm looking forward to that.

At any rate—and one of the more special guests who's here today is Morris Barron. Morris grew up in—on the Emerald Isle, fell in love with his wife Kandice in New York City, and they got married in the same chapel that Jill and I got married in—my wife Jill and I—in New York.

Not long afterwards, their baby daughter Ava was born. She was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. And they were told the odds of her survival were only 5 percent. But as—it was a long, hard treatment, but Ava never quit fighting.

And, in those hardest days, Morris found comfort in reading a book my wife had written about our family's cancer journey with our son and others. And when Ava was finally declared cancer-free, Morris wrote me a letter that said, quote, "Your strength gave me strength." And he and his wife were Jill's guests at the State of the Union this year to share our message of faith and hope with the world.

And it's good to welcome him back to the White House. Where are you, pal? Thank you, pal. Thank you. Your strength gave me strength, pal. That's a fact.

New York City resident Morris Barron. I never left, sir. I just stayed. [Laughter]

The President. I didn't realize he'd been living on the third floor all this time. [Laughter] But—I wondered what that noise up there has been. [Laughter]

To me, that's what—that's what friendship between Ireland and the United States is all about.

We rise together in our joys and our triumphs. We persevere together in our sorrows and our setbacks. And we dream together over horizons we can't even see. And we build together a future that may be—that may be. And in this—these rooms, we see the dreams of one Irish builder made real.

When George Washington chose James Hoban to design the White House, the young architect had his credentials—had his credential—a silver medal from the Dublin Society. And around the outside of that medal, inscribed in Latin, was the phrase, "Our work bears fruit." It's a statement of faith. It's a statement of faith and a statement of determination. A statement of possibility and promise.

And, Taoiseach, standing with you today, it captures pretty well all—all of our nations—all that our Nation and our people have achieved. Together, Ireland and America have written ourselves a better future.

The United States has benefited greatly from waves of immigration from the Ireland—the island of Ireland, who helped shape this Nation: the Scottish-Irish of the 18th century; the Irish who came during the 19th century, like my ancestors, during the famine and beyond.

And through the bravery in their blood and the honest sweat of their brow and the steadfast hearts, their work has borne centuries of fruit. And their values have been passed down, generation to generation, around countless Irish American dinner tables just like the one I grew up in.

You know, my—and many times as—I heard my dad say: "Joey, everyone is your equal. Everyone is your equal, but nobody is better than you. Everyone is your equal, but nobody is better than you. And, Joey, everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity." It was his favorite

word. I think the word is used by the Irish more than almost any other word: dignity. And: "Joey, as long as you're alive, you have an obligation to strive, and you're not dead until you have seen the face of God. Never give up."

Growing up Irish American gave me the pride that spoke to both sides of the Atlantic, heart and soul that drew from the old and new.

My great-grandfather, Edward Francis Blewitt, was one of the—I think he's only the second Irish Catholic ever elected to the State Senate in the—in Pennsylvania, at a time when not many Catholics were elected to office.

He had an engineering degree from Lafayette College and the heart of an Irish poet. In 1919, in one of the over 100 poems that I found in my—when my mom passed away, in her treasures, he wrote about "his Ireland." In one stanza, he wrote the following:

From the fairest land, except my own,
'Neath sun and star and Moon,
The citadel of Liberty,
My mother's land, Aroon.

Today, around the world, Ireland and the United States continue to stand shoulder to shoulder to defend those core values that make up the essential character of each of our nations.

We're standing together to support the brave people of Ukraine as they defend their democracy against Russia's brutal invasion. And we're standing tight. And I want to thank you for that. And I want to thank—particularly thank the Taoiseach for the generosity of the people of Ireland in welcoming refugees fleeing violence in Ukraine.

We're holding Russia accountable for its aggression and for its war crimes and crimes against humanity that Russia is committing, as I speak, in Ukraine.

We're also working together to take on issues that are going to shape the kind of world in which our children will live. We're tracking the climate crisis—we're tackling it. We're strengthening the global health and promoting food security. And together, we seek a world that's safer, more prosperous, and more peaceful for people everywhere.

This year, we'll celebrate a momentous achievement in our shared history: the hard, hard work of forging the Good Friday Agreement. And I want to thank the folks that are here as well for participating in that. Nearly 25 years ago—it seems hard to believe it's been that long—25 years ago, delivered decades of peace and prosperity for all the people of Northern Ireland.

My really good friend—and he is my great friend; I wish he could be here today—George Mitchell is a good man who worked tirelessly with the people from every community to achieve that breakthrough, always holding fast to their faith in their shared future for the people of Northern Ireland.

Folks, now it's incumbent on all of us to continue to foster that peace, to continue to find common cause so that our work may continue to bear fruit for generations to come.

Taoiseach, we both agree that the recently announced "Windsor Framework" is an important step. We had a long discussion with the Prime Minister of Great Britain about that a couple weeks—a week ago in California. That's going to preserve and strengthen the Good Friday Agreement.

In the past few weeks, I've shared my support for the Framework with both the European Commission President, as well—von der—President von der Leyen. And the Prime Minister says he is going to continue to push.

I also am eager to see Joe Kennedy III, the nephew—a new—where—where are you, Joe? The new Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs. You're doing a good job, Joe, getting down to work with all the communities of Northern Ireland to help realize their extraordinary economic potential.

And I join the people across Northern Ireland in looking forward to seeing the return of a devolved government. Democrat [Democratic; White House correction] sharing-power in governance is the heart of the Good Friday Agreement.

And I want to recognize the five Northern Irish political party leaders who are here today. Gentlemen, would you please stand? And ladies. Sorry. As I said today on Capitol Hill, I want to thank you all for standing together with Chief Constable Byrne in the wake of the attempted murder of Detective Chief Inspector Caldwell.

It was an important show of unity. A refusal to return to violence. Even after nearly 25 years, we can't take for granted a shared future built on peace in Northern Ireland. We can't fail in our effort to seek compromise and cooperation for the good of everyone. And I want each of you to know that the United States will remain your strong friend and partner in the work that lies ahead.

The Republic of Ireland today is a country with a past that tugs at your heart and a future that's shaping the world. And it's a global force in culture and the arts and evidenced by the 14 Oscar nominations that went to Irish artists this year.

But I think the most important thing is the voice for moral leadership in the world stage. It's a driver of the economic and technological development of our world. And there's no limit to where the partnership between our nations can take us.

Let me end with this. Everything between Ireland and the United States runs deep: our joys, our sorrows, our passions, our drive, our dreams, our optimism. Even in the most difficult of moments, even in the darkest moments of despair, we hold on to hope. Hope. We believe in a better tomorrow. We see a world not of a shrinking opportunity, but of unlimited possibilities. We see a future that knows no bounds.

Remember Seamus Heaney's poem—his wife was kind enough to send me another copy of it—"The Cure at Troy." He wrote, quote, "History"—

History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
[That] longed-for tidal wave
Of justice [rises] up,
And hope and history rhyme.

Ladies and gentleman, this is an age where we can once more make hope and history rhyme, and I believe that with every fiber of my being. And I've been doing this a long time.

That's the power of this friendship. I really believe it. And that's the strength of our partnership. And, simply put, as my father would say—my mother would say, "That's the Irish of it."

Taoiseach, the floor is yours.

Prime Minister Varadkar. Mr. President, Madam Vice President, Second Gentleman, Senators, Representatives, ladies and gentlemen: As we know, every American President is a little bit Irish on St. Patrick's Day—[laughter]—but some are more Irish than others. [Laughter] And I think it's fair to say that today we're celebrating our national day with a President who is unmistakably a son of Ireland. [Laughter]

President Biden, in your life story we see reflected the story of Ireland. It's a story of service and patriotism, of family, of courage in the face of tragedy, and, above all, unswerving faith in the future.

So tonight we recall the Blewitts of County Mayo and the Finnegans of County Louth, and all those who left Ireland to find a new dream in a new land, in this land.

This year, in Ireland, we celebrated a new national holiday in honor of St. Brigid, who's one of our three patron saints. Brigid represents women, new life, the spring, and inspires us to make our society a better and more equal place.

Colmcille represents learning and engagement with the world, and inspires us to play our part in the community of nations. And Patrick represents, above all else, liberty. The escaped slave and migrant who came to Ireland and ended up teaching us about Christianity and the wider world of which we are a part.

As you know, legend has it that Patrick rid Ireland of its snakes. And—but we know now that there were no actual snakes in Ireland at the time—[laughter]—or, at least, there is no evidence of there ever having been any snakes at that particular time. But of course, this is often the case this—this is symbolic. And the snakes were symbols, symbolic of ignorance, of fear, of despair, and cynicism.

And Ireland is a country that I believe is full of hope. Hope that we can fix the problems that we face both home and abroad, and full of hope for what we can achieve by working together with each other and our friends.

Our dream of an independent country and statehood secured a hundred years ago would not have been possible, I believe, without the support of the United States and the solidarity of so many Irish Americans down the generations who helped us to achieve our national self-determination.

Next month, as you all know, we mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. It could never have been achieved without the steadfast support and commitment of President Biden and so many others who are here in this room today.

And we know that at especially difficult or fragile moments in the search for peace, successive Presidents from both sides of the aisle stepped in with words of encouragement, a hand on the shoulder, or even a gentle shove in the right direction. [Laughter]

We remember President Carter's policy statements on Northern Ireland in August 1977, expressing American concern and urging that we should find a peaceful way forward. And our prayers are with that fine man and his family at this particular time.

President Ronald Reagan spoke of finding a just and peaceful solution, knowing that justice and peace went together, on St. Patrick's Day in 1981, a phrase that was echoed by President Bill Clinton in Derry's Guildhall 14 years later.

Mr. President, carried in these words was the promise of American solidarity, a promise that was kept and fulfilled. Blessed are the peacemakers, and blessed are those who keep the peace alive and, above all, those like President Biden, who keep the faith.

And so this year, as we mark that anniversary, we look to the future and all that still needs to be done. Our mission now is to find ways of realizing the potential for everyone who calls Ireland home. We want to see the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement restored so they can provide hope for a new generation. And we'd like to see the people of Northern Ireland benefit from the rich economic opportunities available to them.

Around the world, the flame of freedom burns brightly despite the efforts of those who would extinguish it. Our collective freedom is imperiled by the damage we're doing to our planet, our changing climate, and the loss of biodiversity.

And Russia's brutal war against Ukraine has reminded us that freedom can never be taken for granted. And when we defend freedom abroad, we also protect our own freedom at home.

To honor the many generations of Americans who helped make our dream of freedom a reality, and as a permanent reminder of the strong and everlasting relationship between our two countries, earlier on today I brought a special gift from Ireland this year. It wasn't the Mayo jersey, which we brought as well. [Laughter]

It was, in fact, our tricolor, which is a national symbol of peace, reconciliation, and hope. And through its colors, it symbolizes the two traditions on our island—the green and orange—and the promise of lasting peace and a new dispensation between them. A dream of a shared future on a shared island.

This special flag, which I presented to President Biden earlier, was flown just once before, at an event in Waterford, to mark the 175th anniversary of the first flight of our flag in Ireland. That very first tricolor was flown on the Mall in Waterford by Thomas Francis Meagher, a 24-year-old idealist, who later fought for freedom in this country in some of the bloodiest battles in the American Civil War.

His bravery and that of the Irish Brigade was so great that when President Lincoln visited one of the battlefields, it's said he kissed the Irish colors, saying, "God bless the Irish flag."

So, President, I hope that this flag will find a permanent home in this White House as a reminder of the unbreakable bonds between our countries and our people. It represents our values and our history, as well as our faith in what we can achieve together in the future.

So thank you, Mr. President, for the very warm welcome that you've extended to me and my delegation on this very special occasion. We look forward to welcoming you in Ireland very soon. We look forward to welcoming you home.

And I know that you'll be received with open arms and the very warmest of hearts.

[At this point, Prime Minister Varadkar spoke in Irish; no translation was provided. He then continued in English as follows.]

Thank you very much, and a very happy St. Patrick's Day.

[Prime Minister Varadkar presented the Shamrock Bowl to President Biden.]

President Biden. [Inaudible]—occasion when this was presented, I'm tempted to eat it. [Laughter] I'm not going to. [Laughter] Thank you.

[Musician Niall Horan performed several songs. President Biden then spoke as follows.]

Well, you sure in hell didn't seem nervous to me.

Folks, I couldn't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow, but I know one thing: Isn't it amazing—isn't it amazing—how song can generate so many thoughts and hopes and prayers and makes you—take you back?

When you were singing, even though I've never lived in Ireland, I just kept thinking of the places that I did live, with my grandparents in Scranton, when Scranton died. Not died—but Scranton—everything went south in Scranton. We moved to Claymont.

It just is amazing what song does. And you do it so well. You make us feel. And that's amazing. Thank you.

And come back anytime, man. Come back anytime.

Mr. Horan. I will.

President Biden. And tell that guy to pay more attention to me now.

[President Biden pointed to the audience.]

You know what I mean? All right?

Thank you. Thanks, everybody. Stick around and have some refreshments, okay?

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:13 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. John C. Carney, Jr., of Delaware; Matthew Barrett, partner of Prime Minister Varadkar; Ireland's Ambassador to the U.S. Geraldine Byrne Nason; United Kingdom's Ambassador to the U.S. Karen Pierce; former U.S. Sen. George J. Mitchell, in his former capacity as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland; Prime Minister Rishi Sunak of the United Kingdom; Chief Constable Simon Byrne of the Police Service of Northern Ireland; Detective Chief Inspector John Caldwell, who was shot several times by suspected New Irish Republican Army gunmen in Omagh, Northern Ireland, on February 22; and Marie Heaney, wife of Irish poet Seamus Heaney.

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