

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks With Prime Minister Leo Varadkar of Ireland at the Congressional Friends of Ireland Luncheon

March 15, 2024

Speaker of the House of Representatives J. Michael Johnson. All right, let me—if I could have your attention. Steny. Well, thank you all. I know it's been a great time of fellowship and enjoyment. It's been very loud in here. That's a good sign. That's a good sign. Not great acoustics, but great fellowship.

This lunch is a special event, as we noted earlier, because it's a time when we come together here in Washington each year. And what's unique about it, what's important, I think, is that we look past our political differences for this moment in time and we remember the importance of peacemaking and we celebrate the important friendship between our two countries, the United States and Ireland.

And today we all welcome continued efforts to promote and preserve the Good Friday Agreement and promises of a bright future for all the friends of Ireland.

And certainly, at this time, in many ways, our hearts are heavy, in spite of the fun fellowship, because stability is being threatened in Europe and in the Middle East. And our allies and friends, such as Israel and Taiwan, continue to fight for their very right to exist.

And I know everyone in this room is committed to the same things. We know that we all must stand for national sovereignty and work for peace.

And this is an important time for all of us to encourage a productive dialogue and mutual respect. And even when we may disagree on matters of politics and policy, which is inevitable, we should all appreciate traditions like this, an occasion for thoughtful discourse where we can thoughtfully move beyond what Yeats called "polite" but "meaningless words."

When we do that, it restores trust among the people and it renews faith in our institutions. And I think all of us know that we need that desperately right now.

So today I'm happy that we're able to showcase the Irish spirit of charity and humor and friendship that flows through your children and through my children and all the children and all of the friends of Ireland.

So I have the distinct pleasure now of introducing our Commander in Chief and someone who is known everywhere as America's most famous Irishman, President Joe Biden.

President Biden. Well, thank you all very much. Thank you.

Well, Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. I was telling the Speaker at dinner when a good friend of mine and of many of you, a former Senator from Oregon, Senator Smith, came to me when I was Vice President and said: "You know, I've checked it out. You're able to accept this gift." I said, "What's the gift?" He said, "Well, the single most significant compilation of historical records and family records are held by the Mormon church." And he said: "We want to do—we want to do a background for you. We want to check your genealogy for you."

And they ended up showing up 5 months later with six volumes. And one of them pointed out that, on one side of the family, the ones that came from County Louth, they started off in New Orleans. And I've warned them. They could have stayed; I would have been a bit of trouble.

[Laughter]

Folks, look, Mr. Speaker and—I want to—I want you to know that diplomat Shane Leslie once wrote, "Every St. Patrick's Day—every St. Patrick's Day, every Irishman goes out to find another Irishman to make a speech to." So—[laughter]—so thank you for allowing me to find you. Mom, it's okay. [Laughter]

Look, you know, I'm glad I found all of you, because no matter how much we debate, no matter how much we disagree, we always have been able to come together as friends of Ireland. And, you know, the friendship goes back centuries.

But today is an important period, an important milestone: nearly 100 years of diplomatic relations, Taoiseach, and—[inaudible]—100 years of Ireland and the United States.

So, Mr. Speaker, thank you for hosting us today. It's a tradition I've always enjoyed.

And, Taoiseach, thank you for joining us again.

And I'd also like to extend the 100,000 welcomes to all leaders who are involved in the Ireland and Northern Ireland agreements that they've now—put it together. And I think—I just wonder whether my mother would have ever thought that would happen. [Laughter] But it's happened, and it's great. You know, it's great to come together once again.

To all Irish Americans, Democrats and Republican Members here, I'm glad to be united on this issue. We begin the next century of a real partnership. And it has been partnership, but it's really increasing now.

And finally, to all that wish they were Irish, I'm glad you're here too. [Laughter] My grandfather used to say that being Irish is enough. [Laughter] At any rate, I won't go into that. [Laughter]

Well, I stand here as a proud descendant of the Finnegans and the Blewitts. The Finnegans from the County Mayo, which I just was there not long ago, and the Finnegans from County Louth. And this pride is part of my soul, as I'm sure that all of you who are Irish ancestry feel the same way.

In fact, as many of you know, when I served on Capitol Hill, my colleagues used to kid me because I always quoted Irish poets. They thought I quoted Irish poets, Rev, because I was Irish. I don't do it for that reason. Because they're the best poets in the world, that's why I quote them. [Laughter]

Steny, it's true. [Laughter]

And, you know, I really—today there's one poem in particular that comes to mind. It was written by my great-grandfather Edward Francis Blewitt, who was only the second Catholic elected to the State senate in the State of Pennsylvania, back in 1906. And he wrote a book of poems, a hundred poems, and—about his—he referred to it as his Ireland.

One, he called "The Worker." And here's what he said: "No barrier is too thick or strong to stay the onward march each day. A goal they seek, a goal they find. Hardship for them is but real play."

And I think, together, Ireland and America are always marching forward toward a better world, toward a better life, and one of greater liberty, greater dignity, and greater equity and outcomes of opportunity and possibilities for everybody—possibilities.

I was with Xi Jinping a couple of years ago on the Tibetan Plateau, and he asked me could I define America. And I said—this was recorded by him, as well. I said, "Yes, in one word." He said, "What's that?" I said, "Possibilities."

Think about it. What defines us as Americans? We think anything is possible. Anything is possible if we do it together.

Well, together, Ireland and America have always moved onward for a better future, one of greater liberty, greater dignity, greater equality, opportunity, and possibility. And even when those barriers seem so thick and so strong, even—even when we face sorrow, setbacks, and divisions and darkness, together, we've always persevered, Ireland and the United States. We've always held out hope in horizons that we've not yet seen.

You know, I often say that the Irish are the only people in the world who are nostalgic about tomorrow. [*Laughter*] Think about it. That's an original quote, unfortunately.

But they—that's—[*inaudible*]—seems who we are. And I often say that because wherever there is a yearning for freedom, wherever there is a call for progress, people around the world, they can always count on Ireland and the United States to be on their side, not just for hope, but to help, to help —them in their march forward. We see this in our support of Ukraine and the people in the face of Putin's vicious onslaught against Ukraine.

Taoiseach, we had a meeting earlier today. I told you that I'm deeply grateful for Ireland's unwavering humanitarian aid to the people of not only Ukraine, but also Gaza. I'm committed to continue to do our part. I'm confident the vast majority—and excuse me for saying this, but I think the vast majority of Members of Congress are willing to do their part and continue to urge every Member in this room to stand up to Vladimir Putin. He's a thug—a thug.

And I urge you to send me the national security bill now. The bill includes funding for Ukraine and Israel and, maybe equally important, humanitarian assistance to Gaza. They badly, badly need it. And it sends a clear message that America stands up for freedom and we bow down to no one—to no one—in the world.

You know, I said in Belfast last year, where we marked the 25th anniversary of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement, I'm also committed to protecting peace and progress in Northern Ireland. We all know—we all know that we feel—I assume all of us feel the same way. That includes Northern Ireland's newest leaders, Minister O'Neill, and your Deputy First Minister—are you guys here? Stand up. [*Applause*] Thank you.

As a friend of mine from Claymont, Delaware, would say, "Who woulda thunk it?" [*Laughter*]

Thankfully, you're here.

And look, to both of you, for—thank you for reminding us what possibilities are as we work across the aisle and rise above longstanding disagreements.

Let me close with this. I think we stand at an inflection point not only in American history, but in world history where the decisions we make now are going to determine what the next three, four, five, six decades are going to look like. And I believe history is watching. I think history is watching.

Today let us resolve to march forward with each other and all those who—all those who seek a better future. Like our ancestors, remember no barrier is too thick or too strong for Ireland and the United States to get through. There's nothing—nothing—our nations can't do together when we work together. And I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I'm confident there's not a thing we can't do if we work together. And I say the same thing. Remember this is the United States of America. There is nothing—nothing, nothing, nothing—beyond our capacity when we work together.

So my prayer today is, we continue and we increase our working together. Thank you all for having me.

Speaker Johnson. Thank you for your remarks, Mr. President.

And our next guest, though he is now leading the country and I believe he is the youngest to ever hold his office, he started out—you may not know this—as an intern in these very halls more than two decades ago. And while this is my first time having the pleasure to meet him in person, he's no stranger to this lunch either. He's been in leadership for quite some time. And he's done a few of these.

Will you please join me in welcoming our guest of honor from the Republic of Ireland, the Taoiseach.

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

Prime Minister Varadkar. Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, Members of Congress, First Minister, Deputy First Minister, esteemed friends and colleagues, it is a honor and a privilege to be back among friends here in Washington, DC, today. And thank you, Mr. Speaker, for continuing the tradition of hosting this lunch today. We are very appreciative.

I believe that Ireland is perhaps the only country in the world that can get away with turning our national holiday into an international week of events or, in some places, a whole month.
[Laughter]

We're also unique in having a national holiday where the head of government and all the senior Ministers leave the country to celebrate it around the world—*[laughter]*—with our diaspora and our friends and our allies.

St. Patrick's Day is more than our national holiday. It is an international moment. It's when we get to share our story with the world: a story of faith in the future, no matter what the obstacles; hope in our ability to work together for the greater good; and of charity towards those who are experiencing suffering.

As the President acknowledged, since we last gathered here last year, the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement have returned. And it's hugely significant that we're joined here today by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill and Emma Little-Pengelly, two women from different political traditions who are showing what can be achieved working together, holding jointly a coequal office as heads of government of Northern Ireland. It is so good to have both of you here today.

And it's really good to see colleagues here as well, Ministers and Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, including the Speaker of the Assembly, Mr. Poots. Also, to see Members of the House of Commons here too and Members of Dáil Éireann and Oireachtas here, too, as well. So very much seeing all three strands of the Good Friday Agreement, the totality of relationships—Northern Ireland, North-South, and East-West—all represented here today, which makes this a very special moment.

And I want, on behalf of all of us, to thank the United States and Members from both sides of the aisle and, indeed, beyond politics for what you've done to help make Ireland and Northern Ireland a place where young people can dream of coming times brighter than their grandparents could ever have dared imagine.

So thank you for your role in giving us back our future. We'll forever remember the steadfast work of so many Members of Congress—Democrat and Republican—as well as successive administrations over the years who have made this possible.

Throughout the entirety of the peace process, the Friends of Ireland Caucus have been our resolute friends. And on behalf of the Irish people, thank you for your commitment to Ireland. Our country is so grateful for your friendship, for your leadership, and for your enduring support. So, thank you so much.

Mr. Speaker, someday soon, we would really like to welcome you to Ireland. So consider this the official invitation. We'd love to show you around.

And, of course, last year, we had the pleasure of showing President Biden around the country. Although he knows it so well, I don't think he needed a tour guide. But it was a wonderful opportunity for him to reconnect with relatives and friends and also to make new ones.

Mr. Speaker, today, as we run into St. Patrick's Day, I'm thinking very much of the prayer of St. Patrick, which was alluded to earlier. As we face the most complicated and difficult circumstances in the world, problems that have no easy answers, which demand that we do our best to repel the forces of darkness, to defend our values, and to shield the innocent—I'm thinking of St. Patrick's prayer today for strength and protection against every cruel and merciless power.

When I reflect on the war being waged by Russia against Ukraine, the light of democracy, the rule of international law, and liberty itself are under attack from a relentless adversary who would extinguish them. Ukraine must not fall. And together, we need to stand by Ukraine for as long as it takes.

I'm also thinking of St. Patrick's prayer today when he prayed for the wisdom to guide us, when I reflect on the catastrophe that's unfolding in the Middle East: the savage attacks of October 7 on Israel and the terrible violence and loss of human life in Gaza which has followed and continues. And we very much want that to end.

These are global challenges that demand our courage, our empathy, and our action. And we pray for the wisdom of St. Patrick in facing them.

Mr. Speaker, over a hundred years ago, Ireland and the U.S. established diplomatic relations, the oldest republic welcoming the newest member of the international community. And since then, it's a relationship that has grown on respect, friendship, and shared kinship.

So, thank you so much for helping us in those hundred years to take our place among the nations of the world. We look forward to working with America for the next hundred years, a second century of friendship and alliance.

[Prime Minister Varadkar spoke briefly in Irish; no translation was provided. He then concluded in English as follows.]

Happy St. Patrick's Day, and thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 1:35 p.m. in the Rayburn Room at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to former Sen. Gordon H. Smith; Rep. Steny H. Hoyer; President Xi Jinping of China; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; and First Minister Michelle O'Neill and Deputy First Minister Emma Little-Pengelly of Northern Ireland.

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