

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

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

March 17, 2024

The President. Hello, hello, hello.

Audience members. Hello!

The President. We've got a great guest with us today. We ought to change the rules in the United States: When St. Patrick's Day falls on a Sunday, the next day is a holiday. *[Laughter]*

On behalf of the Finnegans of County Louth and the Blewitts of County Mayo—*[applause]*—my mother Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden of Scranton, Pennsylvania—welcome—welcome to St. Patrick's Day at the White House.

The Taoiseach and I extend a hundred thousand welcomes to you, all of you—every one of you—whether you're Irish or whether you wish you were Irish. *[Laughter]* We're very glad you're all here.

Look, St. Patrick's Day is about friendship. And we have many friends here today, because St. Patrick is a moment that—great unity in Washington. Whether you're from the red State or a blue State, on this day, you're Irish green. *[Laughter]* And so—*[applause]*.

We're joined by Members of Congress, as well as members of my Cabinet. Claire Cronin is here, our Ambassador, who's doing—*[applause]*—Claire, you're doing great work.

And of course, our guest of honor, the Taoiseach. It's wonderful to welcome you and Matthew back to the White House. We've spent a lot of—quite a lot of time together on this visit, visiting Capitol Hill, sharing laughs at the Gridiron Dinner. Kamala had you over for breakfast as well. And on top of all that, yesterday Ireland won the Six Nations Rugby—*[inaudible]*. *[Applause]*

My whole family is so excited because two of my cousins who no longer play for the team—they were great stars—you won anyway. *[Laughter]*

It's been a great visit that captures how strong the friendship is between our countries.

Look, we also have friends here today from Northern Ireland: the First Minister and Deputy First Minister—Michelle, Emma. Where were you, Michelle? It's great to have you here.

And I was very happy to see Northern Ireland's Executive Assembly reinstated last month. Now, Northern Ireland has a fully functioning government again. And I didn't—*[inaudible]*—mention your colleague.

Young people of Northern Ireland represent the great peace dividend of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement—the entire generation whose hearts have been shaped not by grievances of the past, but by confidence in a better future that we're writing together.

The United States believes—believes—in that future. Joe Kennedy is here tonight, along with—*[applause]*—that's okay, Joe Joe; you only have 57 here—*[laughter]*—along with dozens of family members—I've got to tell you something. He's leading the charge to ramp up investments in Northern Ireland, because economic opportunity is going to help make the benefits of peace real and lasting. And from one big Irish Catholic family to another, it's great to have the Kennedys here—*[inaudible]*. *[Applause]*

Folks, St. Patrick's Day is a joyful occasion. It's a time to remember with pride our ties to the Emerald Isle, the land of poets and dreamers, fierce fighters, hard workers who endured decades of poverty and subjugation and persevered through it all, because the Irish spirit can never—can never—can never be overcome.

Folks, we remember with awe the waves of Irish immigrants who had the courage to travel across the sea, because they believed, as the poet Seamus Heaney once wrote, "a further shore is reachable from here"—that's what he wrote about—"a further shore is reachable from here." They arrived in America with little more than hope in their hearts and the strength of their dreams. Their sweat is soaked into the foundations of this country.

As I said at the State of the Union, America has a heart and soul that draws in the old and the new, home to people of every place on Earth—from every place on Earth. We all come from somewhere, but we're all Americans. We can never forget that. That's the critical element that binds us together.

And this year, Ireland and the United States mark a milestone: 100 years of diplomatic relations between our countries. One hundred years. I was not—[applause]—I want to make clear: I wasn't there at the hundredth. [Laughter]

In that time, the ties between us have deepened and multiplied. Our economic partnership has grown tremendously, in both directions, I might add. Ireland now is one of the top 10 investors in the United States economy.

And our countries stand proudly for liberty and against tyranny. We stand together and oppose Russia's brutal war of aggression in Ukraine. You can clap for that, please. [Applause] We've got to get this done.

And the Taoiseach and I agree about the urgent need to increase humanitarian aid in Gaza and get the cease-fire deal—[applause]—and get a cease-fire deal that brings our—brings the hostages home and move toward a two-state solution, which is the only path—the only path—for a lasting peace and security.

Folks, my friends, since the last time we celebrated St. Patrick's Day together, I made a trip of a lifetime back home to Belfast in 20—20—the 25th anniversary of the peace accords; then to County Louth, where I visited the church where my ancestors were baptized; then to Dublin for a speech at the Irish Parliament; and finally, to County Mayo, to the town called Ballina.

There, a huge cathedral—St. Murdoch's—right on the banks of the River Moy. One of the men who helped build that was Edward Blewitt, my great-great-great-grandfather. He worked in the town brickyard.

In 1828, he was paid—and they gave me a receipt—21 pounds and 12 shillings to help supply the bricks for that cathedral. It was made able to touch—I was—it was made, and I was able to touch some of it with my own hands, the very bricks he made.

And all I could think was this: I'm sure [as; White House correction] Edward labored, he imagined that one day his family would worship at that cathedral, that his children would be baptized there, that future generations of his family would make milestone—mark milestones there. But I doubt he imagined, nearly 200 years later, his great-great-great-grandson would return to the cathedral as President of the United States of America.

On that trip, before I got there, I toured Carlingford Castle, as you remember—in County Louth—Taoiseach. It was likely one of the last glimpses of Ireland that my Finnegan ancestors saw when they sailed away to new lives—for new lives in America. They left in the port of Newry in the year 1850.

And here's an amazing fact. It turns out that [is; White House correction] the exact same port Barack Obama's ancestors sailed from. They left 5 weeks earlier, his ancestors. They were nearly on the same ship. Both of our great-great-great-great-grandchildren—both of their great-great-grandchildren [great-great-great-great-grandchildren; White House correction] ended up President of the United States of America. It's remarkable.

Stories like these are why I often say the Irish are the only people who are nostalgic about the future. [Laughter] We believe in better tomorrows, and we've always—looking for the next horizon. That's a very American trait as well.

Just more proof that the bonds between Ireland and the United States run deep: our joys, our sorrows, our passions, our dreams, our optimism. Even the most—in the most difficult moments, we hold onto hope. That's what we do. We see the world of unlimited possibilities, a future that knows no bounds. And we're writing that future now, and we're doing it together, Ireland and America, just as we have for generations.

Let me end with this. As I said on St. Patrick's Day, at the core of our friends—at the core of our friendship, I remember the words of another great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, who said, "Think where man's glory most begins and ends and say my glory was I had such friends."

We celebrate the bonds of our friendship today, connecting millions of Irish Americans and the American people. We celebrate the friendship between two great nations, one that has shaped our past and strengthened our present and inspires our future.

So happy St. Patrick's Day, everybody.

And now I'd like to welcome the Taoiseach to the podium.

Prime Minister Varadkar. Mr. President, Senators, Representatives, Deputies, MLAs, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends: *a chairde.*

Before I start, I just wanted to very briefly acknowledge two special guests who flew here to be here today. They are Ed Guiney and Andrew Lowe from Element Pictures, who made us very proud by winning four Oscars. So—[applause]. So thank you both so much for the encouragement that you give to other artists and other producers, and it's great to have you here today.

Mr. President, nearly 250 years ago, Irishmen fought as part of your independence struggle. And exactly 100 years ago, the United States became the first country to formally recognize the newly independent Irish state and establish diplomatic relations. The exchange of Ambassadors recognized the sacred promise that had been made between our peoples, forged over centuries, and reflecting the powerful bond between our countries.

This week, meeting so many proud Irish Americans, I've been thinking a lot about sacred promises. And I've been thinking, in particular, of the words of one courageous Irish American, a lawyer and a decorated war hero, who spoke so eloquently about the sacred promises that we make as leaders.

To quote his words, "It's about the promises we make to our children, who deserve a chance to succeed"—the promises we make to each other, the sacred promise to work for a better future for all. Those were the words of Beau Biden.

And I know when we're elected to office, we each make a sacred promise to our communities, our party, our country, to ourselves, and we dedicate ourselves to honor it, not always succeeding, but always doing our best, no matter how challenging the circumstances.

President Biden, one of your country's most sacred promises is to defend the principles of democracy and freedom against tyranny and oppression. And when Ukraine was invaded, you

honored that promise and stood firm against an adversary who tore up the rulebook of international law and repudiated our sacred humanity.

So, on behalf of Ireland and the wider European community, we commend your leadership and reaffirm that Europe stands with you and with Ukraine for as long as it takes. The battle lines are 5,000 miles away, but if Ukraine loses, Putin will soon threaten others closer to home. Dictators cannot be appeased. Dictators can only be defeated. And liberty must prevail.

This evening, in this White House, I'm also reminded by the words of another great Irish American President, John F. Kennedy, who spoke to the Oireachtas—the Irish Parliament—in the final months of his life.

President Kennedy issued a challenge to the Irish nation to be the protector of the weak and small. And when somebody dies before their time, as he did, their words can assume a kind of prophecy, a sort of sacred promise for the future.

As a country, we've tried to live up to the mission he set for us when he predicted that one day we would have something to give the world, "a future of peace with freedom." And those words resonate even more strongly today.

And tonight let us all reflect on the words of President Kennedy when he urged us to do the most important work of peace in protecting the weak and small and, as he said in the Irish Parliament, "from Cork to Congo, from Galway to the Gaza Strip." President Biden, when we met on Friday, we spoke of our shared hope for Israeli and Palestinian states living side by side in peace and security.

And I've always believed that America is a force for good in the world. You've helped to advance liberty and democracy around the globe. You saved Europe and the world from fascism in the 1940s, from communism after that. You stopped ethnic cleansing in Kosovo and Bosnia and helped bring peace to Ireland and unification to Germany. And today, you stand with us in our fight to save democracy and freedom in Ukraine.

Mr. President, as you know, the Irish people are deeply troubled about the catastrophe that's unfolding before our eyes in Gaza. And when I travel the world, leaders often ask me why the Irish have such empathy for the Palestinian people. And the answer is simple: We see our history in their eyes, a story of displacement, of dispossession and national identity questioned and denied, forced emigration, discrimination, and now hunger.

So we support your work and that of your administration to secure a humanitarian cease-fire and create—to create the space for lasting peace.

The people of Gaza desperately need food, medicine, and shelter. And most especially, they need the bombs to stop. This has to stop, on both sides, the hostages brought home, and humanitarian relief allowed in. Israel must reverse its precipitous decision to authorize a land incursion into Rafah.

And, after a hundred years of violence, as you said, the only secure future lies in two states, peaceful and sovereign, side by side. And Ireland stands ready to recognize a Palestinian state with like-minded partners when it's most helpful for peace.

Mr. President, we also see Israel's history reflected in our eyes: a diaspora whose heart never left home, no matter how many generations passed; a nation-state that was reborn; and a language revived.

I believe it's possible to be for Israel and for Palestine, and I believe you do too, because the life of a Palestinian child is equal to that of an Israeli one, and the aspiration of the Palestinian

people to have a homeland and a fully fledged state in the land of their forefathers is equal to that of Israel's.

And I also believe there are lessons that can be drawn from our own peace process in Northern Ireland, particularly the concept of parity of esteem and the totality of relationships, and also the crucial role of America, which provided a chairman for our peace talks in Senator George Mitchell. There was a permanent secretariat, and America provided confidence and oversight.

Mr. President, as you know, today we're joined here in the White House by Michelle O'Neill as First Minister and Emma Little-Pengelly as Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, a joint office in which they are coequal, two courageous women, demonstrating every day what's possible by putting aside old animosities and working together.

The Good Friday Agreement is working again. And thank you all so much for making that possible. I think they've got off to a great start. And the Irish Government is working with them and the Executive in Belfast to build on the peace and prosperity that has been achieved in the last 26 years and to make sure it's shared by all.

And thank you, Mr. President, for your ongoing interest in Ireland and Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement. We've known each other for many years, met on many occasions, and the only—your only ask has ever been: How can I help?

So thank you, Mr. President, for the warm welcome you've extended to me, the enormous amount of time you've given to me and my delegation on this very special occasion.

[At this point, Prime Minister Varadkar spoke in Irish; no translation was provided. Prime Minister Varadkar then presented a Shamrock Bowl to President Biden.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:25 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Matthew Barrett, partner of Prime Minister Varadkar; Vice President Kamala D. Harris; and U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland for Economic Affairs Joseph P. Kennedy III. He also referred to his cousins Rob and Dave Kearney. Prime Minister Varadkar referred to Ed Guiney and Andrew Lowe, producers of the film "Poor Things"; President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin of Russia; and former Sen. George J. Mitchell, in his former capacity as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 18.

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