

Exchange With Reporters During Discussions With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom in Birmingham
May 15, 1998

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Prime Minister, have you been talking about the further—accord in Ireland?

Prime Minister Blair. Obviously, we have discussed it, and I think that the reason why it's so important for people to understand in Northern Ireland that this is a way forward for the future is that it entrenches for the very first time the principle of consent in both the Constitution of the Republic of Ireland and in the agreements between all the parties. And I want to emphasize particularly that at the heart of this agreement is the belief that we only make progress if people give up violence for good.

And we will make sure in the legislation that comes before our Parliament in order to give effect to this agreement that we make that commitment, very, very clearly expressed in that legislation, so that if people are supporting this agreement, they are supporting an end to violence once and for all.

Q. Mr. President?

President Clinton. Well, first let me say that, obviously, the impending vote is being watched very closely in America. Especially Irish-Americans, Protestant and Catholic alike, are passionately interested in what will happen. But we think it's clearly a decision for the Irish to make.

And I would just say that, to me, as a friend from the outside, it appears to be the chance of a generation for peace. We will stand with those who stand for peace, but I want to make it equally clear that anyone who reverts to violence, from whatever side and whatever faction, will have no friends in America. We have supported this peace process. We applaud the Prime Minister and Prime Minister Ahern and all those who were involved in it, all the parties. And we intend to stand with the people who stood for peace. Those who do not, if there's any reversion of violence, as far as I'm con-

cerned those people will have no friends in America.

Q. Sir, why did you decide not to go to Northern Ireland or Ireland on this trip?

President Clinton. Well, we consulted with the parties, but my instinct was, all along, that while I think we—that the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic know that the biggest Irish diaspora is in the United States, and they know that I personally care a lot about this. It is, after all, their future, their lives. They will have to live with the consequences of it.

It's not like having Prime Minister Blair and Prime Minister Ahern or Mr. Major going up there. Northern Ireland is a part of this nation. And so, no matter how friendly an outsider I am, I still am an outsider. I won't have to live with this. And my instinct was that unless there was an overwhelming sense that I should go, it would be better to send my messages from without the country until after the vote occurs, because it's their decision to make.

But I just want every single person in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Republic to know that we will support the peace process and the people who do it. And anybody who returns to violence, we will not befriend, because this is the chance of our lifetimes, anyway, to do this. And I hope it will not be squandered.

Thank you.

Group of Eight Summit

Q. How was the meeting today?

President Clinton. Very, very good, actually. We have a good leader. [Laughter]

NOTE: The exchange began at approximately 6 p.m. at the International Convention Center. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland; and former Prime Minister John Major of the United Kingdom.