

Remarks at a Saint Patrick's Day Reception

March 17, 2011

Good evening, everybody. Welcome to the White House on this beautiful St. Patrick's Day. It was remarked upon that the fountain is the appropriate green this year. Last year, Michelle asked the White House team to make the fountain green, and it was a little tepid. [Laughter] So people just thought there was algae in the fountain. [Laughter] This year they made sure that there was no confusion, so we're very happy about that.

I am not going to stand up here very long because, as the old Irish saying goes, everyone is wise until he speaks. [Laughter] And I know we've got some entertainment to get to. But the Irish also tells us that what fills the eye fills the heart. And tonight, in this room filled with so many friends both old and new, I can't imagine a better place to be than right here with the sons and daughters of Ireland—and those who wish they were. [Laughter]

I want to start by welcoming Taoiseach Kenny and his lovely wife Fionnuala. Please give them a big round of applause. Now, poor Taoiseach, he's only been in office for a little over a week. [Laughter] He's already jetlagged. [Laughter] But I'm honored that he agreed to leave the unpacking for another day and fly across the ocean to be with us here tonight.

We also have more than a few Irish and Irish American friends in the house tonight. I want to thank our very talented performers as well as the members of my administration and the Members of Congress who are here. We are joined by three very Irish Governors: Martin O'Malley, Dan Malloy, and Pat Quinn. Thank you for coming.

Every year at this time, we're reminded of just how many strands of green are woven into our American story. And even though St. Patrick's Day has perhaps been better known for revelry than reflection—[laughter]—it's also a chance for us to remember how the journey to America began for so many of our ancestors—including, as I discovered as I was running for office, one of mine—how millions of Irish boarded dank and crowded ships with a

promise to send for their families later, often with no friends, no money, and nothing but hope waiting for them on the other side.

Like so many immigrants who came to call this country home, these men and women were guided by a deep faith and an unwavering belief that here in America, a better life is available for anybody who's willing to try. And even though they weren't always welcomed in their new land, they persevered. They built and led and defended our country while still holding fast to their heritage. And in many ways, what it means to be Irish helped define what it means to be American.

That's why today, when we think about a Tip O'Neill—whose daughter, by the way, is here tonight, and his granddaughter; it was wonderful to meet them—or a Ronald Reagan, we see an example of how it's possible to argue over policy without sacrificing friendship, how it's easy to disagree without being disagreeable if you make the effort.

When we think about a Henry Ford or a Cyrus McCormick, we see the ingenuity that has driven generations of Americans to build the businesses and create the inventions that have helped make a nation an engine of prosperity.

When we think about an Audie Murphy or a John King, two of the hundreds of Irish Americans who've won the Medal of Honor, we see the heroism and bravery that comes with risking your own life for your country.

When we think about a family like the Kennedys, we see a steadfast belief in the importance of service and the duty each of us has to stand up for those who can't stand up for themselves.

In so many ways, the Irish and their descendants have set an example for us as a people. But they've also set an example for us as a nation struggling to be more just and more free. In 1845, Frederick Douglass, the great fighter for freedom here in this country, had just published his "Narrative of a Life of an American Slave." And even as the book was a bestseller,

Douglass began receiving steady streams of threats to his life.

So he decided to embark on a 2-year lecture tour of the British Isles until things cooled down. He began by spending 4 months in Ireland, far from the threat of slave catchers, where he quickly found common ground with a people locked in their own struggle against oppression.

As Douglass wrote: "I have spent some of the happiest moments of my life since landing in this country. I seem to have undergone a transformation. I live a new life." It was at a Dublin rally that Douglass met the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell. And soon, the two struck up an unlikely friendship. O'Connell was a fierce opponent of slavery, and he began calling Douglass "the Black O'Connell of the United States." [Laughter]

For his part, Douglass drew inspiration from the Irishman's courage and intelligence, ultimately modeling his own struggle for justice on O'Connell's belief that change could be achieved peacefully through rule of law. Daniel O'Connell never lived to see another great emancipator named Abraham Lincoln put pen to paper and bring slavery to an end. But the

two men shared a universal desire for freedom, one that cannot be contained by language or culture or even the span of an ocean.

And stories like this remind us just how deeply intertwined our two nations are. Nights like this remind us how much we share. And so as we celebrate together, let us take a moment to appreciate all that Ireland has given to America: the faith we keep, the family we hold close, the laughter and song and warmth we feel when surrounded by the ones we love.

On behalf of the American people, I want to thank the people of Ireland. In the years ahead, may our sons and daughters only grow closer. And now I would like to present to you the Taoiseach of Ireland. Happy St. Patrick's Day to all of you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:18 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Martin J. O'Malley of Maryland; Gov. Dannel P. Malloy of Connecticut; and Gov. Patrick J. Quinn III of Illinois. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Vice President Joe Biden and Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland.

Remarks on the Situation in Libya March 18, 2011

Good afternoon, everybody. I want to take this opportunity to update the American people about the situation in Libya. Over the last several weeks, the world has watched events unfold in Libya with hope and alarm. Last month, protesters took to the streets across the country to demand their universal rights and a government that is accountable to them and responsive to their aspirations. But they were met with an iron fist.

Within days, whole parts of the country declared their independence from a brutal regime and members of the Government serving in Libya and abroad chose to align themselves with the forces of change. Muammar Qadhafi clearly lost the confidence of his own people and the legitimacy to lead.

Instead of respecting the rights of his own people, Qadhafi chose the path of brutal suppression. Innocent civilians were beaten, imprisoned, and in some cases killed. Peaceful protests were forcefully put down. Hospitals were attacked and patients disappeared. A campaign of intimidation and repression began.

In the face of this injustice, the United States and the international community moved swiftly. Sanctions were put in place by the United States and our allies and partners. The U.N. Security Council imposed further sanctions, an arms embargo, and the specter of international accountability for Qadhafi and those around him. Humanitarian assistance was positioned on Libya's borders, and those displaced by the violence received our help. Ample warning was given that Qadhafi needed