

**Remarks at the Friends of Ireland Luncheon**

*March 20, 2012*

Thank you. Please. Well, thank you, John. Thank you, everybody. I know we are all glad to welcome *Taoiseach* Kenny and his lovely wife back to Washington. Technically, you may be aware, it is not St. Patrick's Day. [*Laughter*] Of course, technically, most Americans who celebrate St. Patrick's Day are not Irish. So it's a wash. [*Laughter*]

I want to thank our top Irishman in the White House, Joe Biden, who is here, and Speaker Boehner for being such a gracious host. I want to welcome Ambassador Collins and Mrs. Collins, distinguished Members of the House and the Senate, leaders from Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Britain. Thank you all for coming.

I always think about how every *Taoiseach* must leave this luncheon marveling at how cheerful and bipartisan Washington is. It's remarkable. And that's something worth aspiring to, even during an election year.

As John mentioned, this wonderful tradition began with Speaker Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan. And when I was getting ready this morning, I came across some advice that Tip gave to anybody who was making a St. Patrick's Day speech. As the story goes, Tip was once asked to deliver a speech to the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick in Pennsylvania. He figured the Irishmen would arrive early, perhaps have a few drinks, relax a little bit, and by the time he stood up to speak, they would applaud anything he said as long as he kept it short.

Then, as Tip was getting dressed, one of the—his aides ran up to him, out of breath, and said he had just found out that no drinking was allowed before dinner, only afterwards. And Tip panicked a little bit. He realized he had to prepare. So he grabbed a few pages from "Famous Irishmen of America," underlined some passages, acted like he had planned it all along. The speech went extraordinarily well, and afterwards, he was complimented on his thoroughness and studiousness in preparing for the speech.

So Tip's lesson was: Always know your audience, and don't count on drinks getting you through the evening. [*Laughter*]

But Tip also taught us something else. He taught us that even in the midst of partisanship and passion, true friendship can exist in this town. Tip and President Reagan famously had fierce battles and genuine disagreements. But after the work ended, the two men did their best to put partisanship aside. According to Tip, President Reagan used to begin calls with, "Hello, Tip, is it after 6 o'clock?" [*Laughter*] To which the Speaker would reply, "Absolutely, Mr. President." And then they could enjoy each other's company.

For his part, the President said he always knew Tip was behind him, even if it was just at the State of the Union—[*laughter*]—whispering to the Vice President after every policy proposal, "Forget it." [*Laughter*] "No way." "Fat chance." [*Laughter*] I can relate. [*Laughter*]

So it is no surprise that the two proud Irishmen came together to start this luncheon, with the Speaker promising to cook some Boston corned beef and the President offering to "polish up some new Irish jokes." Later, our friend Ted Kennedy and others persuaded *Taoiseach* to join them. And today, the only argument we have is over who has more green in their family tree.

For once, I have some bragging rights here. Last spring, the *Taoiseach* and Mrs. Kenny hosted Michelle and I for a wonderful visit to Ireland. And one of the highlights was a trip to the small village of Moneygall, where my great-great-great-grandfather on my mother's side lived before he set sail for America. I met my eighth cousin Henry, who has my ears, I might point out. [Laughter] We had a pint of Guinness at the local pub. And I got a chance to see firsthand the kind of hospitality that the big-hearted people of Ireland have always been known for.

So today is about celebrating those people, as well as the tens of millions of Americans who trace their heritage across the ocean to the Emerald Isle. Never has a nation so small had such an enormous impact on another. Never has anyone taught us more about the value of faith and friendship, about the capacity of the human spirit, about the simple truth that it's harder to disagree when we recognize ourselves in each other, which is easier to do when we're all wearing green.

So to *Taoiseach* Kenny, I want to thank you and Fionnuala for joining us here today. And I want to thank the people of Ireland for their friendship, now and always. Cheers.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:58 p.m. in the Rayburn Room at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland and his wife Fionnuala; Ireland's Ambassador to the U.S. Michael Collins and his wife Marie; and his cousin Henry Healy of Moneygall, Ireland. Audio was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

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