

Administration of Barack Obama, 2014

Remarks at a St. Patrick's Day Reception

March 14, 2014

Vice President Joe Biden. Hey, everyone, how are you? Welcome to the White House. And happy St. Patrick's Day week.

In 1963, President Kennedy addressed the Irish Parliament, and he said, and I quote, "Our two nations, divided by distance, have been united by history." And that is obvious to every one of you in this room today. And nothing exemplifies that bond more than this building. It was designed by an Irishman named James Hoban—Hoban. Any Hobans in the room? [*Laughter*] I lived across the street with a guy named Johnny Hoban—anyway, it's a long story. [*Laughter*] And it's been occupied by 19 Presidents of Irish descent, and the remaining were despondent they could not make that claim.

So it's wonderful to be here today in the White House with all of you. And I'm reminded of a New Yorker article that Pat Moynihan, God bless him, put on my desk on a St. Patrick's Day back in the early nineties. There was a New Yorker article that had Pat and Mike sitting in a pub in New York, and Pat looks at Mike and says, "Mike, don't you wish you were in Dublin in a pub wishing you were in New York?" [*Laughter*] At least the Irish Catholic family I came from, that's kind of it. As I said today, we Irish are the only people I know who are nostalgic about the future. But—[*laughter*]. Think about that; you'll know it's true.

So my mom, who passed away a couple of years ago, Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden, used to say—and I mean this sincerely—her notion was, she said, Joey, to be Irish is about family, it's about faith, but most of all, it's about courage, for without courage, you cannot love with abandon. And I think that's one of the defining elements of—that's the Irish of it—that passion that built both our nations and continues to run through the bloodstream of all Irish Americans.

The history of the journey of this great country, in my view, has always been about promise: the promise that anything is possible. It's about possibilities. And Barack and I—the President and I occasionally talk about that. We're both here in the White House, coming from where we came from; the idea that would happen in any other country is unlikely.

And no one embodies the possibilities and promise of our two nations like the leaders you're about to hear from. There's an old Irish expression: A good friend is like a four-leaf clover, hard to find and lucky to have. Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce to you four of my good friends—and I mean that seriously—the President of the United States and Michelle Obama and the Taoiseach and Fionnuala Kenny.

President Obama. Hello, everybody. Well, welcome to the White House. Once again, today is not technically St. Patrick's Day. [*Laughter*] And once again, none of you seem particularly bothered by this. [*Laughter*] At least, you'll have a weekend to recover. [*Laughter*]

I want to start by welcoming Taoiseach Kenny and his lovely wife Fionnuala, who are not just joining us here today, but more importantly, bringing their children. And we won't embarrass them by pointing them out. [*Laughter*] But we're thrilled to have them here. I'm especially grateful that they're here at a time when the rest of Ireland is focused on the final round of the Six Nations Rugby Tournament. And the last match of the legendary Brian

O'Driscoll. I know everyone wants to talk to the Kennys tonight, but let me make sure they have plenty of voice left to cheer on Ireland tomorrow.

Finally, I want to expend—extend a special welcome to Anne Anderson, the newest Ambassador of Ireland to the United States. Anne is the first woman to hold this esteemed position, which means that they might finally get it right. [*Laughter*]

One of Ireland's greatest poets, Patrick Kavanagh, once wrote, "When I wandered over my own hills and talked again to my own people, I looked into the hearts of this life and saw that it was good." That's what St. Patrick's Day is all about. It's about remembering the hills from where so many of us came and the people without whom so many of us would not be here today. And it is about recognizing how much we owe to the Irish men and women who, to borrow a line from James Joyce, lived and laughed and loved and left.

It's also about appreciating how much of our American character has Irish roots. When the first large wave of Irish immigrants set sail for the New World, many of them were already tired, hungry, and desperately poor. And life wasn't always easier in America. Many jobs were closed to Irish immigrants, with signs announcing "No Irish Need Apply," and many of the ones that were available involved long and dirty and thankless tasks that made life difficult and often too short.

But the Irish worked hard. And they persevered. And they supported each other in tight-knit communities, united by faith, where doors were always open and hands were always extended in hard times. Or, to adapt a quote from the author Finley Peter Dunne, there wasn't one struggling family in this world that wasn't carrying three others on its back. And together, they were driven by that most American of ideas, that with enough effort, anybody can build a decent life for their families and leave a better life for their children.

And eventually, that's exactly what happened. In Newburyport, Massachusetts, in the early 20th century, two-thirds of Irish Americans were members of the working class, just one-third in the middle class. But if you looked at the third generation alone—the grandchildren of Irish immigrants—the numbers were reversed. A majority had broken into the middle class.

So the American Dream has always been the Irish American Dream. And that's why so many of you have been working with us to fix our broken immigration system. Under today's laws, many of your parents and grandparents may not have made it here. And too many men and women who want to contribute to our economy are being denied that chance. There's no reason why we can't do for this generation of immigrants what was done for a previous generation, to give them that chance. [*Applause*] All right?

Because like millions of immigrants, the sons and daughters of Erin have always lived by the words of the great Seamus Heaney, who passed away last year: "Believe that further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles."

And before the G-8 summit last June, Michelle and I got a chance to visit Belfast. We saw firsthand the tremendous progress that's been made in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday agreement was signed 16 years ago, as well as the long road that still lies ahead.

And before my speech at the Waterfront, Michelle was introduced by a 16-year-old girl named Hannah Nelson. And Hannah is here—[*applause*—there she is, right there. Hey, Hannah. [*Laughter*] Hannah is a member of the first generation of Northern Irish to grow up knowing the possibilities of peace. And in her introduction, she said: "Often in Northern Ireland, we hear about our past. . . . But truthfully, we should not let the past pull us apart and

stop us moving forward. . . . We need to listen to each other and we need to compromise. Most importantly, we need to clearly value each other."

And so if Hannah and that generation reflects such wisdom, I think their elders, all of us, need to pay attention, follow their advice. Young people like Hannah give us hope for the future because they're driven by the same optimism, the same belief in miracles that drove their ancestors. But they also benefit from something that didn't exist for members of the previous generation, and that's a hard-won peace that is theirs to nurture and advance. They have an example of what's possible.

So to the people of Ireland and Northern Ireland, I'll close by paraphrasing Seamus Heaney again. The Ireland you now inhabit is one that your contemporaries have helped imagine. But the Ireland that you will inhabit is one your children are helping to build, one that's more just and more peaceful and more tolerant and more fair.

And with that, I want to propose a toast. And I'm going to—this is the best that I can do, water. [*Laughter*] Clearly, they had the wrong day. [*Laughter*] May our children continue to enjoy the bonds we share tonight, of family, faith, friendship, and hope for the future. "So fill me to the parting glass; Good night and joy be with you all."

And now it is my pleasure to introduce my good friend, Taoiseach Kenny.

[*At this point, Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland spoke briefly in Irish, but no translation was provided.*]

Prime Minister Kenny. Welcome, everybody, here to the White House. Mr. President and First Lady Michelle, Mr. Vice President, Dr. Biden, ladies and gentlemen: Fionnuala and I are delighted to be with you here at the White House to celebrate the Feast of St. Patrick. Thank you for your warm hospitality in honor of Ireland and of the Irish people.

Thank you for the toast, Mr. President. I didn't think that austerity was biting that far into the White House. [*Laughter*] Really.

As we make strides in our own economic recovery, it is wonderful to know that our country still occupies such a special place in the heart and the mind of the United States of America.

Mr. President, in June last year, we met at the G–8 summit in Fermanagh. Next day, at Dublin, came out with a warm summer welcome for Michelle and Malia and Sasha. And tonight, sir, I just want to make something very clear: I have heard what I regard the insider speculation surrounding your attributed desire to keep your Vice President off our island as being wholly without foundation. [*Laughter*] And at the same time, summoning the persuasive spirit of St. Patrick, I did put in a word for Joe this morning. [*Laughter*] His work is invaluable. His listening ear is critical. Thank you, Mr. President, for authorizing him to travel to Ireland. We have a golf date.

So I look forward to welcoming him home with Jill to the land of our forebears, to the land of his people and of our people, together, as we say, in—[*inaudible*]*—Oileán ár sinsear*—the island of our ancestors—where 5 million of us live and 70 million call home. [*Laughter*] And home—and our sense of it—is what makes us who we are as Irish people.

Just as the Forbes magazine recently was declaring Ireland to be the best country in the world for business, out there in the Atlantic, east of here, storms Hercules and Darwin were making a declaration of their own, through the awesome power of nature, gifting us remnants

of Neolithic settlements, ghosts of drowned oak forests, 7,000-years-old remnants uncovered on our beaches and land near sea.

So, Mr. President, these are excavations not just of our history, but of life on our island, the geology of our heart. And they signal our tradition and our capacity to endure and to adapt, to survive and to thrive, to know fear, to know loss, and yet to conscript new generations to courage and vision and a brilliant future across the millennia.

That's why, today, we have the most adaptable workforce in the world and the youngest workforce in the European Union. That's why in no other country in the world do U.S. multinationals and U.S. emerging companies have as big a presence as they have in our country.

And according to the received wisdom of its not being enough to do well, but to do good, so I'm proud to say that despite our difficulties, we are the most generous people in Europe in our giving to those in need, and every day since the United Nations was founded, the Irish are somewhere on the globe involved in peacekeeping or humanitarian duties. And as we are, Mr. President, we are ever mindful of the kindness that America, in turn, has shown to us and to our people.

And this evening, as we celebrate St. Patrick, who was himself an immigrant, Mr. President, I am heartened by your words, and I thank you for all you are doing and others in this great country are doing to help our men and women living here undocumented. We know America will sort this out.

I'm thrilled you mentioned young Hannah. I saw her deliver her words last year on television. Congratulations. And from you to Mark Pollock, whom I see here in front of me, without sight, without the capability of walking, yet he has done extraordinary things in a sense of his vision and his courage of what we can do with our shared humanity. You're very welcome here.

So, sir, as we take our leave here this evening, we do remember absent friends whom you've mentioned, in particular, he who documented the dream, the farmer's son, the known blood relative of the gods, Seamus Heaney. And in his memory, and in honor of St. Patrick, let us do as he asks when he said, "go beyond what's reliable . . . and recollect how bold you were when I visited you first, with departures you cannot go back on."

So, Mr. President, First Lady, Ireland has made its departure. There is no going back. Tonight, then, let our two nations, our two countries, Ireland and the United States, heed and live the last words of Seamus Heaney texted to his wife before he left, "*Noli timere*"—"Do not be afraid."

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 5:15 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Naoise, Ferdia, and Aoibhinn Kenny, children of Prime Minister Kenny; Brian O'Driscoll, outside center, Ireland's Leinster provincial rugby team; and Hannah Nelson, winner of an essay contest sponsored by the U.S. consulate in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Prime Minister Kenny referred to Jill T. Biden, wife of Vice President Biden; and adventure athlete, speaker, and author Mark Pollock.

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