

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at the Congressional Friends of Ireland Luncheon

March 15, 2016

President Obama. Speaker Ryan, Members of Congress, thank you so much for having me here today. Taoiseach and Mrs. Kenny, leaders of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, honored guests: It is always a privilege to join you for this wonderful St. Patrick's Day celebration.

And with names like Obama, Biden, Ryan, and McConnell, you can rest assured that the old sod's stranglehold on power in Washington is as strong as ever. [*Laughter*]

Now, it's true that it's not technically St. Patrick's Day, but that's okay. Most folks who celebrate it aren't Irish either. [*Laughter*] I can talk about them because I am Irish, as I have been prone to mention on this occasion. [*Laughter*]

Back in 2008, the Corrigan Brothers even penned a song called "There is No One as Irish as Barack Obama." [*Laughter*] This is true. As the lyrics go: "From Kerry to Cork, let's hear it for Barack from old Moneygall." And somehow, that line did not result in cries for my birth certificate on the campaign trail. [*Laughter*]

Now, to paraphrase something President Reagan once said at this lunch, on St. Patrick's Day, you should spend time with saints and scholars. So the Taoiseach and I have two more stops to make after this. [*Laughter*]

But we do enjoy this tradition. And I want to thank Speaker Ryan for continuing it. It's a welcome break from politics as usual, a moment when we all trade in our red and power blue ties for our green ones. I always imagine every Taoiseach leaving this lunch marveling at how cheerful and bipartisan Washington is. [*Laughter*]

And while I may not possess the persuasive power of St. Patrick, I do hope the hospitality extended here today is similarly extended to my nominee to the Supreme Court when he or she arrives. [*Laughter*]

There are two things at least on which Democrats and Republicans in America big heartedly agree. One is that we take seriously our responsibility to be good to Ireland's sons and daughters because so many of us are Ireland's sons and daughters. The other is that we strongly support a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland. And America will always remain a partner in that process.

But even if it is an election year, I think the spirit of this day is something worth aspiring to all year round. And, Taoiseach, I hope that you'll forgive me—indulge me for one second as I comment on our domestic politics, just for a moment.

In my State of the Union Address, I remarked that many of you have told me you'd like to see more cooperation and a more elevated debate in Washington, but everyone sometimes feels trapped by their politics. I understand that feeling. I served with many of you in Congress. And so I know that I'm not the only one in this room who may be more than a little dismayed about what's happening on the campaign trail lately. We have heard vulgar and divisive rhetoric aimed at women and minorities, at Americans who don't look like us or pray like us or vote like we do. We've seen misguided attempts to shut down that speech, however offensive it may be. We live in a country where free speech is one of the most important rights that we hold.

In response to those attempts, we've seen actual violence, and we've heard silence from too many of our leaders. Speaker Ryan, I appreciated the words on this topic that you shared with us this morning. But too often, we've accepted this as somehow the new normal.

And it's worth asking ourselves what each of us may have done to contribute to this kind of vicious atmosphere in our politics. I suspect that all of us can recall some intemperate words that we regret. Certainly, I can. And while some may be more to blame than others for the current climate, all of us are responsible for reversing it, for it is a cycle that is not an accurate reflection of America. And it has to stop. And I say that not because it's a matter of political correctness, it's about the way that corrosive behavior can undermine our democracy and our society and even our economy.

In America, there aren't laws that say that we have to be nice to each other or courteous or treat each other with respect. But there are norms. There are customs. There are values that our parents taught us and that we try to teach to our children: to try to treat others the way we want to be treated, the notion that kindness breeds kindness. The longer that we allow the political rhetoric of late to continue, and the longer that we tacitly accept it, we create a permission structure that allows the animosity in one corner of our politics to infect our broader society. And animosity breeds animosity.

And this is also about the American brand. Who are we? How are we perceived around the world? There's a reason that America has always attracted the greatest talent from every corner of the globe. There's a reason that "Made in America" means something. It's because we're creative and dynamic and diverse and inclusive and open. Why would we want to see that brand tarnished? The world pays attention to what we say and what we do.

And this is also about what we are teaching our children. We should not have to explain to them this darker side of politics. We should not be afraid to take them to a political rally or let them watch political debates. We should be teaching them that this democracy is a vibrant and precious thing. And it's going to be theirs someday. And we want them to elevate it.

I had the cast of "Hamilton" at the White House yesterday, who are doing an incredible job getting our young people excited about the possibilities of democracy and the power they have to play a part in it. And these young people drawn from every race and every background from all across the city, you could just see the excitement that they had, the notion that they were somehow connected to the story of a Hamilton or a Washington or a Franklin or a Madison. And so we should be asking ourselves, as those in power with this incredible legacy, whether we are delivering that same message to our children. Are we making them excited about being citizens of this great country?

So when we leave this lunch, I think we have a choice. We can condone this race to the bottom or accept it as the way things are and sink further. Or we can roundly reject this kind of behavior, whether we see it in the other party or, more importantly, when we see it in our own party and set a better example for our children and the rest of the country to follow. It starts with us.

Speaker Ryan, you and I don't agree on a lot of policy. But I know you are a great father and a great husband, and I know you want what's best for America. And we may fiercely disagree on policy—and the NFC North—[laughter]—but I don't have a bad word to say about you as a man. And I would never insult my fellow Irish like that.

The point is, we can have political debates without turning on one another. We can disagree without assuming that it's motivated by malice. There are those here who have fought

long and hard to create peace in Northern Ireland and understand what happens when we start going into these dark places, the damage that can be done, and how long it can take to unwind. And so we can treat one another as patriots even if we disagree, as fellow Americans who love this country equally, because it's a place that frees us to have different ideas and different points of view.

So I reject any effort to spread fear or encourage violence or to shut people down when they're trying to speak or turn Americans against one another. And I think as a citizen who will still be leading this office, I will not support somebody who practices that kind of politics. And any leader worthy of our support will remind us that even in a country as big and diverse, as inclusive as ours, what we have in common is far bigger and more important than any of our differences.

That's what carried us through other times that were far more tough and far more dangerous than the one that we're in today, times where we were told to fear the future, times where we were told to turn inward and to turn against each other. And each time, we overcame those fears. Each time, we faced the future with confidence in who we are and what we stand for and the incredible things that we're capable of doing together.

And we do this because we are America. It's a place that sees opportunity where others see peril and that drew so many Irish and other immigrants to our shores. Our unbending belief that we make our own destiny and our unshakable dream that if we work hard and live up to our responsibilities and if we look out for one another, then there is a better day lying right around the bend.

That dream has always come true in America. It is what provided hope and comfort and opportunity for so many that traveled across the Atlantic. It always will, so long as we nurture it.

Happy St. Patrick's Day, everybody. Let me make a toast. To Taoiseach, to Speaker Ryan, to all the leaders who are gathered here, thank you. May God bless you, and may He continue to bless this great country that we love.

[At this point, President Obama offered a toast.]

Speaker of the House of Representatives Paul D. Ryan. Thank you, Mr. President. And now it is my honor to introduce His Excellency, Enda Kenny, Taoiseach of Ireland.

Prime Minister Enda Kenny of Ireland. Thank you. Thank you, please sit. Mr. Speaker; Mr. President; Mr. Vice President; Members of Congress; friends of Ireland; distinguished guests: Fionnuala and I would like to thank you again for the honor and the privilege of being here in this historic room at this historic time. Thank you for the profundity of your words, Mr. President.

Let me say that it's—I think you two people should know that Moneygall is not that far from Graiguenamanagh. *[Laughter]* We have had before—we've had meetings before in houses at the halfway point, and people would always shake hands and say, we agree. And with respect to the President's comments, which reminds me of what President Kennedy said, that this is a time of leadership, not showmanship.

So maybe we might get together somewhere between Graiguenamanagh and Moneygall, if time was appropriate. *[Laughter]* Have a little get-together and say, well, we'll sort it out. *[Laughter]*

I'd like to say that it's a pleasure to be back with so many of you just before the Cherry Blossom Festival and the actual day of St. Patrick's Day. The presence of so many of you here in this room speaks for itself for the continuity of what was begun so many years ago.

Let me congratulate you, Paul, on your appointment as Speaker of the House. This is a really challenging position in a challenging time, politically, both here and internationally. And the world has always looked to America to lead. And it's not good when we find a situation where that doesn't apply. So you, with your experience and your longstanding friendship with Ireland, is something that we can be very proud of, in taking on a really challenging role in the American politics, but also with profound effects internationally. I wish you the very best of luck in that.

And might I say that obviously the relationship between our two countries is as vibrant and as strong as ever? The line of investment both ways is unprecedented. Irish companies now employ 100,000 people across 50 States in the United States. And that's very different from the situation that applied for a century and a half, where the migration was one way, and emigration from the country meant that the parcel from America and the remittances back to Ireland kept people alive, essentially, until such time as we have come to a point where we can employ and contribute to the great American society and the greater commerce of the world. Obviously, our trading links are such that we want to develop that in the time ahead.

Clearly, the base in Ireland of a thousand multinationals, with many of them from the United States, have given an opportunity for young Irish people to give vent to their imaginative qualities of creativity and ingenuity of being able to meet the bar, however high the challenge is. And we're very proud of that association, and it's having an impact on our young people with their opportunity to give of their best.

When Brian McMahon was a teacher in Listowel, he used to say that the person in front of the class actually has a challenge, and that is to find the gift or the flower that every person has got. How do you find it? How do you appreciate it? How do you nurture it? And given the state of communications and volume of material that's currently available for every student, teachers have become directors and counselors and finders and appreciate where the talent and the flare lies that will meet the challenge of the time ahead.

I'd like to thank you, Speaker and Mr. President, for your support for Northern Ireland. Gary Hart did a fabulous job over there recently in terms of his influence in putting together the conditions that applied for the Fresh Start to become a fact. And I'm glad to see Peter King and Richard Neal and the other Friends of Ireland who have also contributed to that. I know you're going over later for the—for some commemorative celebrations.

I also recognize the Secretary of State and the Deputy First Minister—is Arlene here? Arlene? First Minister Arlene Foster, Deputy First Minister. Martin McGuinness and I recognize the leader of the Sinn Fein party here, Gerry Adams, as well.

Clearly, this is a situation that is one that is so precious to us and so near to us that it means that we've got to mind a fragile peace very carefully.

I was saddened this morning, I have to say, to learn of the death of Adrian Ismay, who was an officer of the Northern Ireland prison service. And on your behalf, I'd like to express our sympathy to his wife at this dreadful time. He died after having been discharged from hospital after a bomb was placed under his vehicle on Friday, the 4th of March. Let's just say that this was a callous and cowardly attack on the entire community. And that's why, in the words of the President, it is really important that we focus on peace continuity and reject those who wish to

return to days of violence and the dark days when these attacks were commonplace. That agenda will not succeed. And we best honor his memory by redoubling our efforts to build a truly peaceful future for all the people of Northern Ireland, which I'm sure as you will wish also.

George Mitchell, in his time, made a remarkable impact on—as an Irish American with a real interest in seeing that peace was put together. And I'm glad to see that he's the grand marshal of the New York parade this year. And that's a recognition of the wonderful part that he played over those years.

As you know, John Boehner, Paul, did all of this stuff here for the last number of years, and he used to say before he'd—when he'd speak, "Well, I'm going to get rolled again about immigration today, might I, so I'm as well to have mentioned it now." [*Laughter*] So that has now passed on to your desk—[*laughter*]—and will be a matter for the next administration. So look out. I commend President Obama for what he did in terms of the executive authority that he has. Obviously, there are matters of court there.

But this is an issue for us, Paul, as you're well aware. And as an Irish American with strong roots in Graiguenamanagh, what we're going to do is get all of those who have emigrated from that 20-mile radius of Graiguenamanagh and send them down here to you so that you will see them. [*Laughter*] And we want them to be documented, and we want them to be able to play their part for the country, of their—where they now live as law-abiding citizens, and we want them to be able to participate fully in American society.

Obviously, it's a situation that I've often referred to, in the words of the American national anthem—"the land of the free and the home of the brave"—and that's where they want to be able to contribute. And because of, I suppose, politics at the end of the day on the broader scale, not just the Irish, this is an issue that needs to be dealt with.

We have similar problems now with migration on a vast scale coming into Europe. This is causing political challenges for many countries. And as I say, it's a case of leadership at the end of the day, being able to bring about a result here.

So you know yourselves the contribution that has been made by Irish over the centuries to the United States. And the success of the recent film, "Brooklyn," based on the novel by Colm Toibin, shows how strongly the immigrant experience continues to resonate with a modern audience. This year there were nine nominations for Oscars from Ireland, which speaks, if you like, of the continued creativity that our young people have.

So as a small Irish nation, obviously, those who have traveled and those who are here in the United States want to be part of the greater community in full legitimacy, whether it be Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Toronto, or wherever—they come to America, they like to do that. Other countries—Australia, Britain, and Europe—in the same way.

This year, as you know, marks the 100th anniversary of the 1916 Rising, which was a seminal moment in the history of Ireland, which set the country on a path which ultimately led to economic and political independence. This could not have happened without the support of the United States of America. The proclamation, which was read by Padraic Pearse outside the steps of the General Post Office on Easter Monday 20—1916, speaks specifically of the support of our, as he called it, our exiled children in America. Those exiled children, many of them—their descendants are here in this room—provided the crucial support to ensure that Irish independence, for so long a dream, finally became a reality.

Now, I want you to understand that we want this to be a very inclusive, comprehensive, sensitive experience for everybody. And in that sense, the program that has been put out has been couched in that manner, to take into account the contribution or the involvement of everybody, irrespective of their religion, of their creed, of their politics, of where they came from. So, in that sense, the commemorative centenary events are for everybody, for the entire country.

So I'm especially pleased to learn about the commemorative events planned for here in the Congress, Paul. And I know that at the Kennedy Center in May, there's a 3-week opportunity to learn the poetry of Ireland, the songs of Ireland, the music of Ireland. If you want to participate, you'd be more than welcome.

I also understand that here in the U.S., there will be the Ireland 100; it's a 3-week festival of Irish arts and culture, which takes place, as I say, over that period.

Let me just say, finally, that I know that—I think on the grounds of the Capitol Building here, there will be the planting of an oak tree. Whether you plant it, or whoever plants it, it's a privilege that it should grow here. And it's an Irish oak. And my hope would be that as we start the journey of the second hundred years, that when that tree is a hundred years old, and it stands proudly here in the vicinity of the Capitol Building, that it has grown tall and straight into the light, and that it represents our country and the pride that we feel in being here in America, in this building, which was partially constructed under the engineering ingenuity of James Hoban, who designed the White House—so when you're relaxed on there, Mr. President, it's an Irish architect who designed that for you. [*Laughter*] But I do hope that that tree represents a symbol of continuity and that it reflects the best of what it is: of truth and courage and our common humanity.

And that's where we need to be. And that's where politics can bring us. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:06 p.m. in the Rayburn Room at the U.S. Capitol. In his remarks, he referred to Fionnuala Kenny, wife of Prime Minister Kenny; Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.; and Senate Majority Leader Mitchell A. McConnell. Prime Minister Kenny referred to former Sen. Gary W. Hart, in his capacity as the U.S. Secretary of State's Personal Representative for Northern Ireland; Reps. Peter T. King and Richard E. Neal, in their capacity as cochairs of the Congressional Friends of Ireland Caucus; United Kingdom's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Theresa Villiers; First Minister Arlene Foster and Deputy First Minister J. Martin P. McGuinness of Northern Ireland; Sharon Ismay, wife of Adrian Ismay, a Northern Ireland prison officer who was injured in a bombing in Belfast, Northern Ireland, on March 4, and subsequently died from his injuries on March 15; former Sen. George J. Mitchell, in his former capacity as U.S. Special Envoy to Northern Ireland; and former Speaker of the House of Representatives John A. Boehner.

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