

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

**Remarks at a Saint Patrick's Day Shamrock Presentation Ceremony With
Prime Minister Brian Cowen of Ireland**

March 17, 2009

President Obama. Well, happy St. Patrick's Day to everybody. I want to welcome *Taoiseach* Brian Cowen and his lovely wife on their first visit to the White House for this wonderful St. Patrick's Day tradition. This is the first for both of us, and with a little bit of luck, I'm sure we'll get it right.

We are pleased to be joined by a statesman who worked as hard as anybody to usher in an age of peace in Northern Ireland, and that is my now Middle East envoy—because he's a glutton for punishment—Senator George Mitchell.

I am also proud today to announce that I am naming a great friend, Dan Rooney, cofounder of the Ireland Fund, unwavering supporter of Irish peace and culture and education—not to mention the owner of the Super Bowl champion Pittsburgh Steelers—as the United States Ambassador to Ireland. He will be an outstanding representative.

Just a private note here: Dan is a great friend. He and his family are as gracious and thoughtful a group of people as I know, and so I know that he is just going to do an outstanding job. And the people of Ireland, I think, will benefit greatly from him representing the United States there.

Now, before I turn it over to *Taoiseach*, it turns out that we have something in common. He hails from County Offaly. And it was brought to my attention on the campaign that my great-great-great grandfather on my mother's side came to America from a small village in this county as well. We are still speculating on whether we are related. [*Laughter*]

I do share, though, a deep appreciation for the remarkable ties between our nations. I am grateful to him for his leadership of Ireland. The bond between our countries could not be stronger. As somebody who comes from Chicago, I know a little bit about Ireland, and the warmth, the good humor, and the fierce passion and intelligence of the Irish people is something that has informed our own culture as well. And so that's why this day and this celebration is so important.

So, with that, what I'd like to do is let *Taoiseach* say a few words. And then I believe he's got something to give me.

Prime Minister Cowen. Well, thank you very much indeed. Mr. President; Secretary of State; Senators; distinguished Members of Congress; members of the Irish delegation; members of the press; ladies and gentlemen. It's, well—first of all, Mary and I would like to thank you, President and First Lady, for your very warm and gracious welcome to the White House this morning. Your invitation to me today and to host this ceremony honors Ireland and all her people at home and abroad.

And I want to, in the first instance, greatly welcome your appointment of Dan Rooney, and we look forward to Dan and Pat coming to Ireland. They will be very welcome. They are regular visitors; they know Ireland so well. And Dan has been a great personal friend of mine down the years too, and I really very much welcome his appointment. And I know how great an honor it is for his family.

Can I say, Mr. President, you were saying you were trying to work out if we're related or not. I just want to say that I have checked, and unfortunately, there are no Kearneys on the electoral register anymore in my electoral district. [Laughter] But if there were, I assure you, I'd have them on my campaign team. [Laughter]

I hope, of course, some day to reciprocate your great hospitality by welcoming you and Mrs. Obama to Ireland, where we will offer you the warmest of Irish welcomes, I can assure you.

Mr. President, during your election campaign you captivated the hearts and minds of millions of people. On the island of Ireland, across Europe, and across the continent, indeed, your story and your message of hope were truly inspirational and universal in their appeal. We offer you our warmest congratulations, our good wishes, and our steadfast support.

Mr. President, St. Patrick's Day is a time of joy and pride for all Irish men and women everywhere. Today when Irish America is bound together by a green thread woven through the great cities and into the heartland and length and breadth of this great country, it is a day, too, of reflection on our immigrant history, of our sense of place and of our need to connect.

St. Patrick, of course, was an immigrant to our shores. He brought with him the great gift of faith, and in doing so he changed our country so much for the better. The Irish, in turn, brought this message of hope and his values of generosity around the globe, including to this great nation.

We are proud of our Irish community in America, of how they have preserved their Irish culture and heritage, and how they have helped build this great country. They have lived and worked here, and they have succeeded. They've enriched Ireland, and they have enriched America.

And on this St. Patrick's Day, in these most difficult times, we remember the enormous trials and deprivations experienced by our immigrant peoples in times past: times of poverty, oppression, and famine, indeed troubles on a scale unimaginable to us today. Their achievements inspire us with the strength of the human spirit and the certainty that we will succeed, and that we will manage our way together to safer and better economic times.

It is my firm conviction that America's leadership, your leadership, will be at the heart of that global resurgence. And every country has its own pressures and difficulties; we must each face up to them and to our own problems. But we also have to stand together in partnership. In Ireland you will find, Mr. President, the most steadfast of friends.

Time and again in our history, we have looked to America for leadership on the long and often difficult road to peace. At the darkest moments, the United States has been a constant source of hope, a reservoir of support, and a steady and trusted guide. The contribution of the United States has been immeasurable. And some of those who played a central role in our peace process are with us today, including your Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and, of course, our dear friend, Senator George Mitchell. I wish them well in their work for peace in the Middle East. And I know that their work in Ireland will help to give them the strength and wisdom they will need in the months and years ahead.

We all know that the process of peace-building and of reconciliation takes patience and perseverance. In recent days, an evil, unrepresentative, and tiny minority has challenged the democratic institutions which we have built together in Ireland. The people of Ireland, north

and south, have risen to that challenge. They have spoken with one voice. They have rejected violence and division. They have stood by peace, reconciliation, democracy, and freedom.

Mr. President, there is a phrase in the Irish language—"Is féidir linn"—it may seem familiar. It translates as "Yes, you can." [Laughter] In that spirit, and in the spirit of friendship between our two countries, I am pleased to present you this bowl of Shamrock.

I thank you once more for your kind welcome to the White House, and I wish a very happy St. Patrick's Day to you, to your family, and to the American people. Thank you very much.

President Obama. Well, the—let me try that again. *Is féidir linn?*

Prime Minister Cowen. *Is féidir linn.*

President Obama. *Is féidir linn.* All right. I got that. [Laughter] Yes, we can.

I want to thank the *Taoiseach* and the people of Ireland for this beautiful bowl of shamrocks. Not only does it symbolize the deep and enduring bond between our peoples, but it serves as a hopeful reminder that whatever hardships the winter may bring, the eternal promise of springtime is always around the corner.

Now, the contributions of the Irish to the American story cannot be overstated. Irish signatures are on our founding documents; Irish blood has been spilled on our battlefields; Irish sweat went into building our greatest cities. We are better for their contributions to our democracy, and we are richer for their art and their literature, their poetry and their songs.

Rarely in world history has a nation so small had so large an impact on another. Tens of millions of Americans trace their roots back to the Emerald Isles, and on St. Patrick's Day, many millions more claim too. [Laughter] On behalf of them—[laughter]—and all Americans, I thank the Irish people for this gift and for all that they've contributed to the chronicles and the character of America.

And I do want to share briefly a few words about the recent attacks in Northern Ireland. Almost 11 years ago, the world watched with wonder as brave men and women found the courage to see past the scars of generations of violence and mistrust and come together around a future of peace. We watched with hope as the people of Ireland and Northern Ireland went to the ballot box and overwhelmingly endorsed such a peaceful future.

But every peace process is challenged by those who would seek to destroy it. And no one ever believed that this extraordinary endeavor would be any different. And we knew that there would be setbacks; we knew that there would be false starts. We knew that the opponents of peace would trot out the same old tired violence of the past in hopes that this young agreement would be too fragile to hold.

And the real question was this: When tested, how would the people of Northern Ireland respond? Now we know the answer: They've responded heroically. They and their leaders on both sides have condemned this violence and refrained from the old partisan impulses. They've shown they judge progress by what you build and not what you tear down. And they know that the future is too important to cede to those who are mired in the past.

The thoughts and prayers of Americans everywhere go out to the families of the fallen. And I want everyone listening to know this: The United States will always stand with those who work towards peace. After seeing former adversaries mourning and praying and working together this week, I've never been more confident that peace will prevail.

Now, today is a day for all the people of America and Ireland to celebrate our shared history and our shared future with joy and good cheer. So I can't think of a better place to take the *Taoiseach* for lunch than the Congress. [Laughter]

We'll be—[laughter]—that was good, wasn't it?

Prime Minister Cowen. That was good.

President Obama. You like that? [Laughter] We'll be heading there shortly for the annual Speaker's St. Patrick's Day luncheon, a tradition in which Democrats and Republicans put aside partisanship and unite around one debate only: who is more Irish than whom. [Laughter]

So I thanked the *Taoiseach* in advance for bringing relative peace to Washington for at least this day. [Laughter] Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:38 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House.

Categories: Interviews With the News Media : Exchanges with reporters :: White House; Meetings With Foreign Leaders and International Officials : Ireland, Prime Minister Cowen.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Cowen, Brian; Cowen, Mary; Mitchell, George J.; Pelosi, Nancy; Rooney, Daniel M.

Subjects: Congress : House of Representatives :: Speaker; Ireland : Prime Minister; Ireland : Relations with U.S.; Ireland : U.S Ambassador; Saint Patrick's Day; Sports : Football; United Kingdom : Northern Ireland :: Attacks; United Kingdom : Northern Ireland :: Peace efforts.

DCPD Number: DCPD200900161.