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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary
(Nantucket, Massachusetts)

For Immediate Release August 20, 1999

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AT AMERICAN IRELAND FUND DINNER

Private Residence
Nantucket, Massachusetts

7:25 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Let me begin by joining others in thanking Bob and Mia for having us in their beautiful, beautiful home and making us all feel at home. I thank Jack and Lyle for their work on the fundraisers and for all the many things they've done for me over many, many years.

I thank all the boardmembers of the American Ireland fund who are here. And I congratulate you on honoring Tim Russert. (Applause.) You know, most of us who have tried to be professionally Irish -- (laughter) -- you know, we get our Irish shtick down, you know. This is about the best I've ever seen. (Laughter and applause.) And I say it because it is because it's genuine. You could feel it. You could feel it. His heart was in his remarks. You could see it was yesterday that he was a young man writing that statement for Senator Moynihan.

For the American Irish, which is probably the largest diaspora in the world, the last 30 years of the Troubles have been a source of enormous heartbreak and frustration and sometimes downright disgust -- but always, always, love. And I want to thank Tim for his continuing passionate commitment to the principles of peace and equality in Ireland. And I thank you for honoring him.

I also want to thank you more than I can say for honoring Hillary with the proceeds of this fundraiser to Vital Voices. In so many ways in Ireland, we have moved almost in two different worlds in the last six and a half years. And sometimes, I think her world will have more to do with whether peace really takes hold than the one that I have moved in.

The first big decision I had to make was whether to give a visa to Gerry Adams. Remember? (Applause.) And I was told -- here I was, this ardent Anglophile who had spent two years in college in England and knew most of the Kings of England in order and all of that sort of stuff, and the Queen. And they said, well, if you do this, you will just destroy the special relationship between the United States and Britain. And I said, well, if I don't do it, we're never going to get anybody off the dime over there.

And so we made it absolutely clear that we would not tolerate terrorism, that this trip could not be used to raise money to buy guns or ammunition, that this was to be a gesture of peace. Well, the rest is history -- good, bad and indifferent, but at least it got us off the dime. And the Irish people have pretty well done the rest. They voted for the Good Friday Accords in overwhelming numbers. We had the parliamentary elections following on them. We've had a lot of institutions start.

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But let me say that I think one of the things that made all this possible is the American Ireland Fund for the last 20 years. Why? Because all that money you raised and put in there created opportunity after opportunity after opportunity for people, and so they saw there could be a different future.

You know, one of the problems you have if you go into a place like Kosovo now, to get people to quit killing each other and staying in the same old rut, hating people because they're not in their tribe, and the way they worship God or their ethnic group, is that they cannot imagine a tomorrow that is different from yesterday and today.

The American Ireland Fund, by just being there, in Ireland and in Northern Ireland for 20 years, you know, the place is booming now, but for most of the last 20 years it was about the poorest country in Europe. And you were there, day-in and day-out, month-in and month-out, year-in and year-out, and I am telling you it made a difference. I know. I've been there. I've been on the streets, I've been in those neighborhoods, I've seen your projects, I've seen the people you've helped.

And so as we move forward, you ought to remember that one of the reasons that the Good Friday Accords were overwhelmingly embraced by the people in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, is that they could visualize a different tomorrow. And the American Ireland Fund helped them to do that, and you should be very proud of yourself. (Applause.)

But one of the things that I have learned from the Middle East, from Northern Ireland, from Kosovo and Bosnia, from the tribal wars in Africa I've tried to help deal with, is that in addition to people being able to visualize a different tomorrow, you have to have leaders who can let go.

There was reconciliation in South Africa because Nelson Mandela could let go; and he had a whole lot more to let go of than most of the Irish do. I mean, let's fess up here. (Laughter.) He had a lot more to let go of than most of the Irish do. But because he could let go, we were able to make peace. And that's why I said what I did about Hillary and the Vital Voices.

We've had some of these women in the White House in the Oval Office. They're very practical. I mean, people that have buried their children. They still get up in the morning and they have to go to the store and buy food and they have to do this, that and the other thing -- do practical things, and they are enormously practical people. And they have no vested interest in the continuation of the conflict.

And so I say to you that helping these people in Vital Voices will make more than the park that Hillary talked about, there will be lots of parks like that and lots of things that people will do together. And you've got to get these kids out here. You see -- if you see kids in Ireland, if you see kids in the Middle East, if you see kids anywhere who get to each other soon enough before they're taught how to hate, they change the whole future.

And the last thing I want to say is this: You all -- those of you who are really interested in this, you know what the deal is now. We had a big election and the Good Friday Accord was approved. Then we had elections for Parliament and they worked. They were honest and they were full and everybody got into the Parliament at Stormant. And I went there and shook hands with them all.

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But the agreement that said anybody that got over a certain percentage of vote in the election would also be in the executive branch -- and Sinn Fein got enough to get in. The Agreement also said that there would be decommissioning that would be finished within 18 months according to a schedule to be set up by the commission, which now is headed by General DeChastelein (phonetic), the former Canadian Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

So we're back to that old trust issue because the Unionists don't want Sinn Fein in the executive until they have a symbolic act of decommissioning, and the IRA say, well, we don't want to do that until we know we're not going to get snookered. Well, obviously, this is at some level, it almost looks like two kids daring each other to go first.

But if you look beneath that, they say, well, it's our people that voted for the peace. We wanted to render our arms to them, not to the other side and have them claim that they got some victory over us; this is a victory that the people together voted for. So this argument goes on endlessly.

Now, let me tell you, the good news is that everybody on all sides agrees to all parts of the Good Friday Accords, everybody on all sides agrees that it all has to be done by next May. Nobody wants to get rid of anything else about the agreement, and the only problem we've got left is the sequencing of standing up the executive branch and decommissioning. That is all that will be discussed when Senator Mitchell reconvenes the group on September the 6th. And when the Good Friday Agreements were reached, it was anticipated that roadblocks might develop, and so they set this up.

So all I would say to all of you is that part of this problem is trust. And at some point, they're going to have to figure out a way that they're both trusting each other at the same time. So you get out of this, you go first. You know, it's like two kids standing on a big, old diving board holding hands and looking down into a deep pool.

Part of it is that unlike the women that Hillary deals with in Vital Voices, some of these folks have been doing this for so long that their whole identity is caught up in the continuation of the conflict. I say this in all respect. I'm not attacking them, but it's true. So what we have to do is to find ways to help them let go. And that's why the work of the American Ireland Fund is still important. Even though the economy is going like crazy -- I've talked to Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern about this repeatedly -- we have got to target those critical decision-makers and give them an image of a life they can have that will be meaningful and rich -- I don't mean materially rich, I mean it'll have a lot of texture and meaning and standing in the community if they let go.

So thank you for what you've done, thank you for supporting Vital Voices. The women are doing better than the men now in promoting peace for the reasons I've said. (Laughter and applause.) But this deal in September may be our last chance for a generation, and we cannot blow it. It's too late to turn back now, as Mr. Morrison sang. (Laughter.) It is too late. And so we need the voices. I can look at people in this room that I know I've been working on this now with many of you for a long time. We have got to help them let go. And you can do it. Thank you and God bless you. (Applause.)

END 7:35 P.M. EDT

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