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World Leaders Forum

Address to Seton Hall University

The Honorable John Hume

March 18, 2004

I am delighted to address you here at Seton Hall University this afternoon on my experiences of making peace in Ireland. It is a special honor for me to be awarded an honorary degree by this, the oldest Catholic diocesan university in the United States.

Yesterday, of course, was St. Patrick's Day and this area of the United States has a long history of association with Ireland. From the days of the colonies when so many Irish people settled here to today's links from the airports in the tri-state region.

It is fitting that we gather this week to consider developments in the Irish peace process, when one considers the influence that people from Ireland, and their descendants, had on the formation of this country. In fact, the printer of the United States Constitution was a man called John Dunlap, who learned his trade in a small town called Strabane that sits on the same river as my home town of Derry. Here at Seton Hall, at the foot of South Mountain, from where George Washington surveyed his troops during the Battle of Connecticut Farms in June of 1780, there is a deep sense of history and of purpose.

And that sense of history is put to use in such positive and forward thinking ways. I know that Seton Hall is at the forefront in developing modern and innovative ways of learning such as using the internet to reduce the impact of distances and increasing community-based learning. These are very important in making education available to as many people as possible, which is so critical for developing society as a whole.

This John C. Whitehead School is, of course, a school of diplomacy and international relations. I noted with interest that the web site for the school talked of this as a place of learning that promoted "a blend of theory and practical experience."

Therefore, I would like to talk to you this afternoon on this subject of "the blend of theory and practice in peacemaking."

John Hume was a co-recipient of the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize for his extraordinary work in the Northern Ireland peace process, including the Good Friday Peace Agreement. He has served as a Member of the European Parliament, a Member of Parliament at Westminster, and was a founding member of the Social Democratic and Labor Party. This speech was given at a ceremony during which he was awarded an honorary degree from the John C. Whitehead School of Diplomacy and International Relations.

This takes on a particularly poignant significance in the aftermath of last week's horrendous attacks on the people of Madrid. We must all set about contributing to a process of peace-building in the world.

At home in Northern Ireland, we are still seeing a political deadlock surrounding the suspension of the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement. Over what is now approaching six years, we have learned the hard way that sustaining the theory behind the Agreement in practice is one of the most difficult steps of all in resolving our conflict.

In fact, in the time since the Agreement was signed at Easter 1998, we have grown to appreciate that the theory of peacemaking and the practice of peacemaking are two distinct and different things. In any conflict resolution process it can never be taken for granted that one follows on inevitably from the other.

The reality is that making peace is very hard work. There are no easy solutions in the search for conflict resolution. It is a long and difficult path, but we all know it must be walked. As Eleanor Roosevelt once observed: "It isn't enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn't enough to believe in it. One must work at it."

In Northern Ireland, success or failure depends on the presence or absence of trust. Without trust a given principle will not necessarily translate into a given reality, and is likely to succumb instead to intransigence, bitterness, or a lack of will.

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Equally with trust, anything is possible, as we saw through the good work over many months of the power-sharing Executive. In fact, only this week the people of my home city which I represent were delighted to see the opening of a major project to improve the road link between Derry and Belfast, a project which was initiated and funded by the Northern Ireland Executive before suspension. The people want to see us return to such bread-and-butter politics which will improve life for everyone in Northern Ireland and across the island.

The Executive's good work actually illustrated that the only way to build trust is to work together to erode past prejudices—what I have previously called the healing process. That has been the single biggest problem in recent times. The trust that had been built up has been badly dissipated and replaced instead with an atmosphere of uncertainty and apprehension that has given rise to the current deadlock.

While many quarters are responsible for these current difficulties, it is ultimately futile to engage in a pointless cycle of recrimination that gets none of us any further forward. It certainly got us nowhere for years.

Remember the Good Friday Agreement is not the property of any political party, politician or government. When the people of Ireland, North and South, voted so overwhelmingly in favor of the Agreement, they took ownership of it.

Therefore, no one has the right to sabotage the people's Agreement. And no true democrat would countenance walking away from the democratically expressed will of the electorate.

Indeed, those who claim that support for the Agreement has diminished need to be clear that if people are less sure-footed now than when they voted for it initially it is primarily because they have not yet seen the Agreement delivered in full. I would contest that community's desire to see the Agreement fully implemented has been consistent and confidence in the Agreement will grow substantially when it is delivered in full. And nobody knows this to be true more than those who constantly try to strangle the Agreement's potential.

The Social and Democratic Labour Party (SDLP) has never swerved in our support for the Agreement. We are not likely to either, given that it took us nearly thirty years struggling against brutal violence and futile intransigence to persuade others that principled compromise does not equal compromised principles. That is the real strength of the Good Friday Agreement. It provides a democratic common denominator between Unionism and Nationalism, allowing both distinct traditions and identities to find expression while galvanizing the common ground that unites us all.

I believe the people of Ireland will continue to stand by the Agreement. Its rock solid ideals of equality, partnership, and justice can and will be sustained as the best basis for creating a new society in the North and throughout the entire island of Ireland.

I believe the people of Ireland will continue to stand by the Agreement. Its rock solid ideals of equality, partnership, and justice can and will be sustained as the best basis for creating a new society in the North and throughout the entire island of Ireland.

The major challenge that faces us all now is to keep working, to keep pushing those rock solid ideals up the hill, even when those who agreed to help carry the burden have either stood back from their responsibilities or even begun pushing against you. A tall order indeed, but no one thought when we signed the Agreement that the problems that have plagued Northern Ireland society for generations would disappear overnight.

We all knew—and we all recognized at the time—that the achievement of agreement meant only the achievement of a new political context in which the divisions in our community could best be addressed.

We all knew when we signed the Agreement that ahead of us lay a long and arduous road. Unionism and Nationalism, two legitimate and honorable traditions that share the island of Ireland, had for centuries endured a relationship of confrontation and partisanship. The challenge was to agree an accommodation so

that people of all outlooks could move on to enjoy a relationship of conciliation and partnership. We fulfilled that objective when we reached the Agreement.

But that was just the beginning, not the end. Now we must redouble our efforts to ensure the full implementation of the Agreement for all the people of Ireland, North and South, so that we can build real and lasting peace in our community and deliver radical and far-reaching change in our society.

In other words, the principal challenge of Northern Ireland politics today is to put the theory of the Good Friday Agreement fully into practice in the day to day lives of the people.

There are two crux issues in the current review of the Agreement. There is a need for an end to paramilitary activity of every kind, from whatever source including the Provisional IRA. There is also a need for all of the unionist parties to agree to work all of the institutions of the Agreement fully, faithfully, and properly.

One only has to look at policing to see what can be done when the Agreement is allowed to progress. Policing in Northern Ireland has been transformed by the work of the Policing Board and of the District Policing Partnerships and it continues to be so. Sinn Féin needs to face up to its responsibilities and sign up to those new structures of democratic accountability for policing, which according to the Oversight Commissioner Tom Constantine meet “the best practice requirements of any police service in the world.” All of these undertakings are vital for confidence across the community to be built so that we can move forward.

There is, of course, another reality that we must keep in mind. We understand that as difficult as building peace might be, the consequences of letting the best opportunity for peace in a generation slip away are much greater still.

Only the most narrow-minded and sectarian person could countenance a return to the climate of fear endured for the last thirty years as an alternative to the type of situation provided for by the Good Friday Agreement. Do those who ridicule the Agreement and the peace process not remember the harrowing scenes of destruction and devastation over thirty years caused by the absence of a meaningful process? Can they not now picture the anguish of broken-hearted families burying yet another loved one? The peace process in Ireland is not perfect. But life in Ireland today, Northern Ireland in particular has been transformed and we forget this at our peril.

Without underestimating the seriousness of ongoing paramilitary violence or sectarian tensions, we must register honestly that there is a greater level of peace on our streets today than at any point in the last three decades. Quality of life is much better and expectations among our young people are much higher than we have seen in many years.

For all of the current difficulties, there remain real positives.

We all know as well that the Agreement was working very well for quite a long time. The story of the political process since the Agreement has not all been frustration, disappointment, and stagnation.

- The Northern Ireland Executive, encompassing all shades of public opinion in the North, was functioning well and actually delivering real

and meaningful change in the lives of people on the ground, Unionist and Nationalist alike.

- The North South Ministerial Council had been developing a thoughtful and radical agenda on an all-Ireland and cross-border basis and that agenda was serving to break down many of the traditional mistrusts and misperceptions that had existed.
- The British-Irish Council was becoming an innovative instrument for addressing issues of mutual concern between our islands, of particular relevance in the context of today's smaller world.
- Other important changes have been delivered and continue to be, not least in achieving the new beginning in policing.

At present the British and Irish Governments are holding all-party talks (or at least talks for all those parties who care enough to take part) aimed at creating a new dynamic for restoring the institutions of the Agreement.

I am calling on all participants to these talks to use them constructively. The purpose of the talks must be to address the confidence issues and rebuild the necessary trust so that the Agreement can be put back on track and we can all get back to delivering real change on day to day issues.

In order to achieve this, the talks must result in:

- Confidence that the power-sharing administration will never again be brought down in an effort to appease or prop up any one political party;
- Confidence that we will all be able to enjoy a future free from paramilitary violence and sectarian hatred;
- Certainty that all parties are fully committed to the new beginning in policing, demonstrated through full participation in the Policing Board and underlined by a determination to secure the devolution of policing and justice away from London to the restored Northern Ireland Executive;
- Commitment from all participants to the full implementation of the whole Agreement, not least of all those all-Ireland and cross-border issues that had not yet been fully developed before suspension.

By genuinely addressing these issues I have every confidence that we can put the Agreement back on track in a fuller and better way than ever before. In this new light, people will view the Agreement in a much more positive way than has ever previously been possible. The fulfillment of this objective will have the potential to transform society in Northern Ireland for the better and for good, allowing us to focus on the issues of job creation, education, housing, healthcare, etc.—in other words, real politics.

A former President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, once said that the best social program is a job. I agree one hundred percent. One of the great causes and consequences of the troubles in Northern Ireland was the cycle of poverty and despair of constantly high unemployment and the absence of any investment in our young people's future.

When we were formed in 1970, the SDLP knew there was space for new and radical thinking in the vacuum of the political life of that era. That is why we dedicated ourselves to focusing on the real issues affecting our people. Incredibly, we were the first political party in Northern Ireland in generations to take this approach, while others remained content to engage in the politics of flag-waving and playing the traditional sectarian card.

We believed that the traditional mindsets had to be challenged on all sides and that by focusing on the real political issues the common ground could be cultivated and a new landscape could grow where putting bread on the table would be more important than painting slogans on the gable.

We took—and continue to take—great inspiration from the European experience, which I have referred to as the single greatest example of conflict resolution in the history of the world. The example of the European Union is central to the Good Friday Agreement.

Consider this: In the second half of the twentieth century, the protagonists in two world wars, which saw millions slaughtered, were able to begin working together in each other's shared interests. If this could be achieved, the SDLP argued, then surely there could be no justifiable reason on earth why the people of Northern Ireland could not find an agreed accommodation to our problems.

The first principle of the European Union is the necessity of respect for difference. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "No two men are absolutely alike, not even twins, yet there is so much that is indispensably common to all mankind." The European Union is built on this fundamental principle. No two people are the same. Difference is an accident of birth and therefore is not something we should ever fight about or kill for. In fact, difference is the very essence of humanity, a natural and healthy component of any society. It should be cherished and respected. The founding motto of this nation *E Pluribus Unum*, "from many, one," teaches the same core philosophy.

[W]hile there may be much that divides us, there is much more still that unites us.

The second principle of the European Union was to create inclusive institutions that give legitimate expression to the differences that exist. In the EU those institutions are the Council of Ministers, a Civil Service Commission drawn from all member states and, of course, the European Parliament itself. In the case of the Good Friday Agreement those inclusive institutions are primarily the Northern Executive, the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council, as well as arrangements such as the Policing Board.

And thirdly, the European experience has taught us to work together in the common interests of all—largely in the social and economic sphere—because while there may be much that divides us, there is much more still that unites us. Poverty and unemployment do not stop to take account of their victim's religion or political beliefs.

Born of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights movement inspired by Martin Luther King's example, it should not surprise anyone that the SDLP has always opposed violence from all sides and in all forms. For us violence is wrong. It is immoral. It is counter-productive. Yesterday we celebrated the life and legacy of Martin Luther King. This extract from his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize speech reflects and inspires the thinking of the SDLP:

Violence never brings permanent peace. It solves no social problem: it merely creates new and more complicated ones. Violence is immoral because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding: it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.

The greatest tragedy of the past three decades in Northern Ireland is that more people did not share our view about the brutality and futility of violence. But the violence served only to strengthen our resolve that a peaceful solution would be found and underline to commitment to find it. We knew as well that we had to go further than mere condemnation of violence. We also had to make every effort to help remove violence from our communities.

From this position we wanted to challenge the traditional mindsets in Northern Ireland politics. We wanted to challenge old Unionist thinking. On one hand, Unionists wished to protect their identity and their ethos. We had no quarrel with that. Not only have Unionists every right to protect their identity, we recognized that it is absolutely essential in attempting to resolve our problem that the identity of Unionism is fully protected and respected.

It was the methods employed by Unionists with which we disagreed, their determination to hold all power in their own hands. The practice of government for fifty years in the old Northern Ireland was to exclude anyone who was not Unionist. This, of course, led to widespread discrimination in jobs, housing, and voting rights, which in the end is bound to lead to division. Our challenge to Unionists was to recognize that because of their geography and their numbers the problem could not be resolved without them. Therefore, we challenged them to come to the negotiating table and reach an agreement through which their identity would be fully upheld. They did.

And it was not just Unionist thinking that needed to be challenged. Martin Luther King often spoke of the need not just to question your opponent but also to question yourself. This was certainly true of Northern Ireland because thinking in my own community—the Nationalist community—also needed to change.

Traditionally Nationalists viewed the problem as territorial, that if we could only achieve territorial unity then the problems would be solved. This, of course, was naïve and misleading.

Our challenge to that mindset was that it is people that have rights not territory, that without people any piece of earth is only a jungle. Historically, it was the people of Ireland that were divided not the territory and therefore agreement among all the people was the only solution. The logic of the challenge to that mindset was that since it was the people of Ireland that were divided violence had not only no role to play in solving the problem. Violence only served to deepen the divisions and make the problems worse. The line on the map is only a symptom of a much deeper border. The real border that had to be addressed was in the hearts and minds of people. That is a problem that cannot be solved either through victory or violence.

We recognized as well that leadership demands more than simple problem identification. We understood that true leadership is not about pointing the finger of blame, but rather it is about pointing the way forward. We knew we had to advance an analysis that reflected the reality of life and not one that merely outlined how we would like life to be. We framed our analysis as the “three sets of relationships:”

- The relationship between the people of Northern Ireland;
- The relationship between Nationalists and Unionists across the entire island of Ireland;
- The relationship between the people of Ireland and the people of Britain.

The SDLP said consistently that the question of how these core relationships should be addressed would have to be central to any future negotiations and at the heart of any prospective agreement. To follow any other approach would be to avoid the real depth of the problem and would ultimately be futile.

In the negotiations that led to the Agreement, we were clear as well that the principle of consent would have to be enshrined. This meant that a majority of the people of Northern Ireland would have to give their consent to a change in the constitutional status of the North. This is a central component of the Good Friday Agreement and should give reassurance to Unionists who have traditionally feared change being imposed upon them.

So often during the past thirty years and more it was the people who had suffered most that showed the greatest compassion and dignity in the face of unbearable grief.

It was the father of a young nurse, murdered in the Enniskillen bomb in 1987, who offered forgiveness to her murderers.

It was the daughter of a murder victim in the Rising Sun bar in the village of Greysteel in 1994 who told me at her father's funeral that her family had prayed that my efforts to bring the violence to an end would succeed.

It was the mother of a young victim of the Omagh bomb in 1998 whose courage shamed the bombers when she referred to the example of Mahatma Gandhi and spoke of good conquering evil.

These are the type of people whose courage, resilience and compassion provided us all with the inspiration to achieve the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. It is in their names, in the names of their loved ones and in the names of all the victims of

the past thirty years that we must now continue to carry the Agreement forward and make it work to the benefit of all.

In the Agreement we vowed to replace alienation with accommodation, exclusion with equality. We pledged to cross the traditional lines of division and forge instead new lines of co-operation. We must get back to this goal.

Through the Agreement we will transform the very nature of Irish society for the better, giving real hope to a brand new generation of young people.

By the Agreement we will stand in defense of the principle of democracy and the leap of faith our people took almost six years ago now.

We in Northern Ireland have not yet fully put the theory of peace as articulated by the Good Friday Agreement into practice. But I pledge we will do all in our power to achieve this aim. We owe nothing less to ourselves and to the world.

