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Toward Peace in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

That is one side of the coin of liberty. When we adjourned for the Christmas holiday the prospects were bleak. It was in mid-February 1998, on the flight from Dublin back to the United States, that I began to devise a plan to establish an early deadline for an end to the talks. He stayed up all night at the White House, telephoning several of the delegates at critical times in the final hours of negotiation. Most importantly for its survival, the agreement was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South, in a free and democratic election. "This conflict can't be ended." But to succumb to the temptation to retaliate would give the criminals what they want: escalating sectarian violence and the end of the peace process. Peace and political stability are not too much to ask for. In Belfast, they told me, there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence. Despair is the fuel for instability and conflict everywhere.

ESSAYS

TOWARD PEACE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

*George J. Mitchell**

Thank you ladies and gentlemen for your warm reception. Thank you Dean Feerick and Father O'Hare for your generous introductions.

I am the product of two conflicting traditions. In the U.S. Senate, where I served for nearly fifteen years, the tradition is one of lengthy speeches. In Maine, where I was born and raised, the tradition is one of few words. Fortunately for you, I am still from Maine, but I am no longer in the Senate. So I will try not to prolong the evening with a long speech. But I do want to emphasize the gratitude that I feel to be honored in this way.

I join Father O'Hare and Dean Feerick in recognizing former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Judge Milton Pollack. I thank them for their presence here this evening. I also want to acknowledge the presence of the members of the Stein family. I am grateful to them for coming. It is a great honor for me to be associated with an award that bears the name of Louis Stein.

Two hundred and twenty-one years ago, a small group of men gathered in Philadelphia in a constitutional convention. Their objective was independence and self-governance. They were eager to shake off British rule and they did. The product of that convention was the U.S. Constitution. The part of it that we call the Bill of Rights is, to me, the most concise and eloquent statement ever written on the right of the individual to be free from government oppression.

That is one side of the coin of liberty. The other is the need for everyone to have a fair chance to enjoy the blessings of liberty. To a man without a job, to a woman who cannot get good care or education for her child, to the young people who lack the skills needed to compete in a world of technology—they do

* Former Senator from Maine and former Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate. This address was originally given as an acceptance speech for the Fordham University School of Law Stein Prize on October 30, 1998.

not think much about liberty or justice; they worry about coping day to day.

The same is true of people living in a society torn by violence. Without civil order and physical security, freedom and individual liberty come to be seen as mere concepts, unrelated to the daily task of survival. So it was for many years in Northern Ireland. Violence and fear settled over that beautiful land like a heavy, unyielding fog. The conflict hurt the economy. Unemployment rose, with violence, in a deadly cycle of escalating misery.

After a half century and only occasional cooperation, the British and the Irish Governments concluded that if there was to be any hope of bringing the conflict to an end, then they would have to cooperate in a sustained effort to lay the foundation for peace. Despite much difficulty, and over many setbacks, the governments persevered. For that, they deserve more credit than they have gotten. After years of effort, they finally were able to get peace negotiations underway in June of 1996. The Prime Ministers invited me to serve as chairman. I had been involved in Northern Ireland long enough to realize what a daunting task it was. In making my decision I reflected on my own life.

My father was the orphan son of Irish immigrants. He worked as a janitor. My mother was an immigrant from Lebanon who worked in a textile mill. They had no education. My mother could not read or write English. But because of their efforts, because of the openness of American society, and, most importantly, because many people gave me a helping hand along the way, I, their son, was able to become Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate. So when I, who had been helped by so many, was asked to help others, I could not refuse. That the people I was asked to help were in the land of my father's heritage was just a fortuitous coincidence. That I could help was what mattered.

The negotiations were the longest, most difficult with which I have ever been involved. Often, no progress seemed possible. But somehow we kept going. There was an especially bleak and dangerous time in the Christmas season of 1997 and the early months of 1998. There was a determined effort by men of violence on both sides to destroy the process.

In early December, we had tried to get agreement on a

statement of key issues to be resolved and on a process for resolving them. Despite intense effort, no agreement was possible. When we adjourned for the Christmas holiday the prospects were bleak. If they could not agree on a definition of the key issues, I thought, then how will they ever agree on solutions to those issues?

Two days after Christmas, a prominent loyalist was murdered in prison. That touched off a sharp increase in sectarian killings as a vicious cycle of revenge took hold. The negotiations were moved to London in January and to Dublin in February in an effort to encourage progress. But the opposite occurred. The London meeting was largely taken up by the temporary expulsion of a unionist party. The Dublin meeting was taken up by the expulsion of a nationalist party. The process was moving backward.

It was in mid-February 1998, on the flight from Dublin back to the United States, that I began to devise a plan to establish an early deadline for an end to the talks. I was convinced that the absence of such a deadline guaranteed failure. The existence of a deadline could not guarantee success—but it made success possible.

It took me a month to put the plan together and to persuade all of the participants to support it. By late March they were ready. I recommended a final deadline of midnight, Thursday, April 9, 1998. They all agreed. They wanted to reach an agreement. They recognized that there had to be a deadline to force a decision. As we neared the deadline, there were non-stop negotiations. Prime Ministers Blair and Ahern came to Belfast and showed true leadership. There would not have been an agreement without their personal involvement. Blair and Ahern did not just supervise the negotiations. They conducted them.

It was a dangerous high-wire act. A single misstep meant disaster. But slowly and steadily, with great skill and assurance, they got safely across the divide. President Clinton made an important contribution as well. He stayed up all night at the White House, telephoning several of the delegates at critical times in the final hours of negotiation. In a tight time frame, a powerful focus was brought to bear, and it produced the right result. But the very fact that getting an agreement took such extraordinary

effort was a warning signal of the difficulties that would follow as the agreement was implemented.

Finally, in the late afternoon of Good Friday, an agreement was reached. It is important to recognize that the agreement does not, by itself, provide or guarantee a durable peace, political stability, or reconciliation. It makes them possible. But there will have to be a lot of effort, in good faith, for a long time, to achieve those goals.

I believe that the agreement will endure because it is fair and balanced. It requires the use of exclusively democratic and peaceful means to resolve differences, and it commits all of the parties to the total disarmament of paramilitary organizations. It stresses the need for mutual respect and tolerance between communities. It is based on the principle that the future of Northern Ireland should be decided by the people of Northern Ireland. It includes constitutional changes in the Republic of Ireland and in the United Kingdom. It creates new democratic institutions to provide self-governance in Northern Ireland and to encourage cooperation between the North and the South for their mutual benefit. It explicitly repudiates the use or threat of violence for any political purpose.

Most importantly for its survival, the agreement was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South, in a free and democratic election. On May 22, 1998, in the first all-island vote in eighty years, seventy-one percent of voters in the North and ninety-five percent of voters in the South voted for the Agreement. That is a strong statement by the people. It sent a powerful message to political leaders that the people want peace and that they support the agreement as the way to get it.

In the past few months, I have often been asked what lessons Northern Ireland holds for other conflicts. I will try to answer that question now. I begin with caution. Each human being is unique, as is each society. It follows logically, then, that no two conflicts are the same. Much as we would like it, there is no magic formula that, once discovered, can be used to end all conflicts. But there are certain principles that arise out of my experience in Northern Ireland that I believe are universal.

First, I believe there is no such thing as a conflict that cannot be ended. They are created and sustained by human beings.

They can be ended by human beings. No matter how ancient the conflict, no matter how hateful, no matter how hurtful, peace can prevail.

When I arrived in Northern Ireland, I found, to my dismay, a widespread feeling of pessimism among the public and the political leaders. It is a small, well-informed society where I quickly became well-known. Every day, people stopped me on the street, in the airport, or in a restaurant. They always began with kind words. "Thank you Senator." "God bless you." "We appreciate what you're trying to do." But they always ended in despair. "You're wasting your time." "This conflict can't be ended." "We've been killing each other for centuries and we're doomed to go on killing each other forever."

As best I could, I worked to reverse such attitudes. This is the special responsibility of political leaders, from whom many in the public take their cue. Leaders must lead. And one way is to create an attitude of success, the belief that problems can be solved, that things can be better. Not in a foolish or unrealistic way, but in a way that creates hope and confidence among the people.

A second need is for a clear and determined policy not to yield to the men of violence. Over and over, they tried to destroy the peace process in Northern Ireland; at times they nearly succeeded.

In July, three young Catholic boys were burned to death as they slept. In August, a devastating bomb killed twenty-nine people and injured three hundred, Protestant and Catholic alike. These were acts of appalling ignorance and hatred. They must be totally condemned. But to succumb to the temptation to retaliate would give the criminals what they want: escalating sectarian violence and the end of the peace process. The way to respond is to bring those who committed these crimes to justice swiftly and to go forward in peace.

That means there must be an endless supply of patience and perseverance. Sometimes the mountains seem so high and the rivers so wide that it is hard to continue the journey. But no matter how bleak the outlook, the search for peace must go on.

Seeking an end to conflict is not for the timid or the tentative. It takes courage, perseverance, and steady nerves in the face of violence. I believe that it is a mistake to say in advance

that if acts of violence occur, then the negotiations will stop. That is an invitation to those who use violence to destroy the peace process, and it transfers control of the agenda from the peaceful majority to the violent minority.

A third need is a willingness to compromise. Peace and political stability cannot be achieved in sharply divided societies unless there is a genuine willingness to understand the other point of view and to enter into principled compromise. That is easy to say, but very hard to do because it requires of political leaders that they take the risks for peace.

Most political leaders dislike risk-taking of any kind. Most get to be leaders by minimizing risk. To ask them, in the most difficult and dangerous of circumstances, to be bold, is asking much. But it must be asked of them and they must respond if there is to be hope for peace. I know that it can be done because I saw it first-hand in Northern Ireland. Men and women, some of whom had never before met, never before spoken, who had spent their entire lives in conflict, came together in an agreement for peace. Admittedly, it was long and difficult. But it did happen. And if it happened there, it can happen elsewhere.

A fourth principle is to recognize that the implementation of agreements is as difficult, and as important, as reaching them. That should be self-evident. But often just getting an agreement is so difficult that the natural tendency is to celebrate, and then turn to other issues. But as we are now seeing in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East, and in the Balkans, getting it done is often harder than agreeing to do it.

Once again, patience and perseverance are necessary. It is especially important that Americans, busy at home and all across the world, not be distracted or become complacent by the good feeling created by a highly-publicized agreement. If a conflict is important enough to get involved, we must see it through all the way to a fair and successful conclusion.

The governments and the parties so far have been unable to resolve issues relating to the formation of the executive of the new Northern Ireland Assembly and the decommissioning of arms. There is uneasiness among some about the continuing release of prisoners. In 1999, there will be further controversy when reports are received from independent commissions on

policing and the criminal justice system. It will take extraordinary determination and commitment to get safely through all of these problems. But I believe that it can be done and will be done. It would be an immense tragedy were the process to fail now. The British and Irish Governments and the political leaders of Northern Ireland have come too far to let peace slip away. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than the troubles that they have had over the past several decades. Peace and political stability are not too much to ask for. They are the minimal need for a decent and caring society.

There is a final point that to me is so important that it extends beyond open conflict. I recall clearly my first day in Northern Ireland, nearly four years ago. I saw for the first time the huge wall that physically separates the communities in Belfast. Thirty feet high, topped in places with barbed wire, it is an ugly reminder of the intensity and duration of the conflict. Ironically, it is called the Peace Line.

On that first morning, I met with the Catholics on their side of the wall, in the afternoon with the Protestants on their side. Their messages had not been coordinated, but they were the same. In Belfast, they told me, there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence. They said that there, where men and women have no opportunity, or hope, they are more likely to take the path to violence.

As I sat and listened to them, I thought that I could just as easily be in Chicago, or Calcutta, or Johannesburg, or the Middle East. Despair is the fuel for instability and conflict everywhere. Hope is essential to peace and stability. Men and women everywhere need income to support their families, and they need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful with their lives.

The Universal Declaration¹ also recognizes this basic right. Article 23 states: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment."

The conflict in Northern Ireland is obviously not exclusively or even primarily economic. It involves religion and national identity: unionists identify with and want to remain part of the

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Dec. 10, 1948, G.A. Res. 217A, U.N. GAOR, 3d Sess., 67th plen. mtg., at 135, U.N. Doc. A/810 (1948).

United Kingdom; nationalists identify with and want to become part of a united Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement acknowledges the legitimacy of both aspirations. And, it creates the possibility that economic prosperity will flow from and contribute to lasting peace.

My most fervent hope is that history will record that the troubles ended on August 15, 1998, at Omagh, that the bomb that shattered the calm of that warm summer afternoon was the last spasm of a long and violent conflict. Amidst the death and destruction, there was laid bare the utter senselessness of trying to solve the political problems of Northern Ireland by violence. It will not work. It will only make things worse.

Two weeks later, I accompanied Prime Minister Blair and President Clinton to Omagh, to meet with the survivors and the relatives of the dead. There were hundreds of people present. Among them were two with whom I spoke and who I will never forget. Claire Gallagher is fifteen years old, tall and lovely, an aspiring pianist. She lost both her eyes. As we spoke, she sat, with two large white patches where her eyes used to be, an exemplar of grace and courage. Michael Monaghan is thirty-three years old. He lost his wife, who was pregnant, their eighteen-month old daughter, and his wife's mother; three generations wiped out in a single, senseless moment. Michael was left with three children under the age of five. One of them, Patrick, two years old, asks his father every day, "When's Mommy coming home?" Despite their terrible and irreparable loss, both Claire and Michael urged that the peace process go forward. Their courage gave me hope. Their determination gave me resolve.

I am not objective. I am deeply biased in favor of the people of Northern Ireland. Having spent nearly four years among them, I have come to like and to admire them. While they can be quarrelsome and too quick to take offense, they are also warm and generous, energetic and productive. They have made mistakes, but they are learning from them. They are learning that violence will not solve their problems, that unionists and nationalists have more in common than they have differences and that knowledge of their history is a good thing, but being chained to the past is not.

There will be many setbacks along the way, but the direction for Northern Ireland was firmly set when the people approved

the Good Friday Agreement in referendum. The people there are sick of war. They are sick of so many funerals, especially those involving the small white coffins of children, prematurely laid into the rolling green fields of their beautiful countryside. They want peace, and I hope that they can keep it.

When the agreement was reached, at about six o'clock on the evening of April 10, 1998, we had been in negotiations for nearly two years and continuously for about the last forty hours. We were elated and exhausted. In my parting comments, I told the delegates that the agreement was, for me, the realization of a dream that had sustained me for three and a half years, the longest, most difficult years of my life. Now, I said, I have a new dream. It is to return to Northern Ireland in a few years with my young son. We will roam the country, taking in the sights and sounds of that lovely land. Then, on a rainy afternoon, we will drive to Stormont and sit quietly in the visitors' gallery in the Northern Assembly. There we will watch and listen as the members debate the ordinary issues of life in a democratic society: education, health care, tourism, and agriculture. There will be no talk of war, for the war will have long been over. There will be no talk of peace, for peace will be taken for granted. On that day, the day on which peace is taken for granted in Northern Ireland, I will be fulfilled and people of good will everywhere will rejoice.