



Department of Justice

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ADDRESS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY TO THE
FRIENDLY SONS OF ST. PATRICK OF LACKAWANNA COUNTY,
SCRANTON, PENNSYLVANIA ON MARCH 17, 1964

I am honored and delighted to be here with you tonight. Your dinner has become one of the most famous of the annual celebrations of this hallowed evening.

I'm aware, of course, of the notable number of sons of St. Patrick who live here in Scranton. And as a son of St. Patrick myself, I know how friendly you've always been -- to President Kennedy in everything that he did -- and to me whenever I've been here.

So I think of these things in addition to the bonds of common kinship that the Irish everywhere feel on St. Patrick's day. This is the day, you know, when legend has it that three requests were granted to St. Patrick by an angel of the Lord, in order to bring happiness and hope to the Irish.

First, that on this day the weather should always be fair to allow the faithful to attend church. Second, that on every Thursday and Saturday twelve Irish souls should be freed from the pains of Hell. And, third, that no outlander should ever rule over Ireland.

Though I have not received the latest weather report from the Emerald Isle, I am confident that no rain fell there today -- officially. Who pays heed to a little Irish mist?

And I have reason to believe that the twelve Irishmen have been regularly released from the nether regions as promised. Judge Nealon just told me he thinks that several of them are here tonight.

We need have no concern over the third promise; in Ireland they are celebrating this day in freedom and liberty.

But you and I know that life was not always this good for the Irish, either back in the old country or here in America.

There was for example, that black day in February, 1847, when it was announced in the House of Commons that 15,000 people a day were dying of starvation in Ireland. And you may recall that Queen Victoria was so moved by this pitiful news that she contributed five pounds to the society for Irish relief.

So the Irish left Ireland. Many of them came here to the United States. They left behind hearts and fields and a nation yearning to be free. It is no wonder that James Joyce described the Atlantic as a bowl of bitter tears, and an earlier poet wrote, "They are going, going, going, and we cannot bid them stay."

This country offered great advantages, even then. But no one familiar with the story of the Irish here would underrate the difficulties they faced after landing in the United States. As the first of the racial minorities, our forefathers were subject to every discrimination found wherever discrimination is known.

But many of them were gifted with a boundless confidence that served them well. One of these was a pugilist from my native Boston. John L. Sullivan won the heavyweight championship of the world not too many years after the flood tide of Irish emigration to this country, and in 1887 he toured the British Isles in triumph.

Some idea of Irish progress can be gathered from his cordial greeting to the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII.

John L. said: "I'm proud to meet you. If you ever come to Boston be sure to look me up; I'll see that you're treated right."

And, referring to the Prince, he later added with Irish generosity: "Anyone can see he's a gentleman. He's the kind of a man you'd like to introduce to your family."

Irish progress here has continued. It was some time ago that the late Fred Allen defined the "lace curtain Irish" as those who "have fruit in the house when no one's sick."

But it was less than nine months ago when President Kennedy, in touring Ireland, used to ask the crowds he talked with how many had cousins in America. The usual response was for nearly every hand in the crowd to be raised. It was with great delight that he was able to reply: "I've seen them, and they're doing well."

And, so, it is my great delight to be with you here tonight as we take a few moments to share the rich heritage of the Irish.

It's worth noting, I think, that all the wealth of our legacy stems from a small island in the far Atlantic with a population one quarter the size of the State of Pennsylvania.

The Irish have survived persecution in their own land and discrimination in ours. They have emerged from the shadow of subjugation into the sunlight of personal liberty and national independence. And they have shared the struggles for freedom of more than a score of nations across the globe. Irish soldiers are enroute tonight to help preserve the peace in Cyprus.

Indeed, Ireland's chief export has been neither potatoes nor linen, but exiles and immigrants who have fought with sword and pen for freedom around the earth.

We need but recall the heroic deeds of the "Wild Geese" -- the officers and soldiers forced to flee their native Ireland after the battle of the Boyne.

Fighting for the French, they broke the ranks of the English at Fontenoy. Fighting for the Spanish, they turned the tide of battle against the Germans at Melazzo.

And, other Irishmen in other years, going into battle with the Union Army -- a green sprig in their hats -- bore the brunt of the hopeless assaults on the Confederate heights at Fredericksburg. Twelve hundred soldiers of the Irish Brigade went into action that bitterly cold December day in 1862. Only 280 survived, as President Kennedy noted last summer when he presented the Brigade's battle-torn flag to the Irish people. "Never were men so brave," General Robert E. Lee said of the Irish Brigade.

And of themselves, the Irish soldiers said:

War-battered dogs are we,
gnawing a naked bone;
Fighters in every land and clime--
for every cause but our own.

Today the Irish enjoy their freedom at a time when billions of people live in deprivation and despair under totalitarian dictatorships stretching eastward from the Wall in Berlin to the troubled borders of South Viet Nam.

The free Irishmen marching everywhere today to the tune of "O'Donnell Abu" and "The Wearing of the Green" are a dramatic contrast to the clattering of hobnail boots on darkened streets; the sound that marks the enslaved nations.

So, the first point I'd like to make arises from the traditional Irish concern for freedom -- everywhere. I know of few in our land -- and I hope none in this room -- who would ignore threats to peace and freedom in far off places.

We realize, as John Boyle O'Reilly once wrote, that:

The world is large, when its weary leagues
two loving hearts divide;
But the world is small, when your enemy
is loose on the other side.

No problem weighs heavier on the conscience of free men than the fate of millions held in iron captivity.

But what is taking place on the other side of the Iron Curtain should not be the only matter of concern to us who are committed to freedom. I would hope that none here would ignore the current struggle of some of our fellow citizens right here in the United States for their measure of freedom. In considering this it may be helpful for us to recall some of the conditions that existed in Ireland from 1691 until well into the nineteenth century against which our forefathers fought.

We might remember, for instance, that in the Ireland of 1691 no Irish Catholic could vote, serve on a jury, enter a university, become a lawyer, work for the government or marry a Protestant. And our pride in the progress of the Irish is chilled by the tragic irony that it has not been progress for everyone.

We know that it has not been progress for humanity. I know it because so much work of the Department of Justice today is devoted to securing these or comparable rights for all Americans in the United States in 1964.

There are Americans who -- as the Irish did -- still face discrimination in employment--sometimes open, sometimes hidden. There are cities in America today that are torn with strife over whether a Negro should be allowed to drive a garbage truck; and there are walls of silent conspiracy that block the progress of others because of race or creed, without regard to ability.

It is toward concern for these issues -- and vigorous participation on the side of freedom -- that our Irish heritage must impel us. If we are true to this heritage, we cannot stand aside.

There are two other areas of concern which I feel are of paramount importance and to which the Irish tradition speaks in ringing tones. One is the status of freedom in colonies and second our relationship to the underdeveloped nations of the world.

The greatest enemy of freedom today, of course, is Communism, a tyranny that holds its captives in vice-like subjugation on a global scale. For nearly twenty years we and our Allies have striven to halt the Communist advance. But one of the weaknesses in our common front has been the restraint on freedom sponsored by our Allies and accepted by ourselves.

The conduct of our foreign affairs should be consistently based on our recognition of every man's right to be economically and politically free. This is in the American tradition. We were, after all, the victor in our own war for independence. We promulgated the Monroe Doctrine and the "open door" policy with their clear warnings to the colonial powers of Europe.

We gave self determination to our own dependencies; and for more than a century we opposed colonial exploitation elsewhere. But throughout all this we were still living largely in splendid isolation, removed from a direct control of world destiny.

This was changed by World War II. The frontiers of our national security became the frontiers of the world. We found ourselves obliged to deal with the harsh facts of existence on a global basis.

For the sake of our own security, we found our destiny to be closely linked with that of nations that maintained large colonial empires on which they felt their ultimate security depended. In some of the underdeveloped countries we have found our destiny linked with ruling powers or classes which hold the vast majority of their people in economic or military subjugation.

It is easy for us to believe that the imperialism of the West was infinitely preferable to the tyranny of Communism. But the sullen hostility of the African and Asian colonial nations have shown us that not all hold the same view. The bloody struggles for liberty from the sands of Algeria to the steaming jungles of Indonesia and Viet Nam proved that others would make the same sacrifices to throw off the yoke of imperialism today that the Irish did more than a half century ago.

And we have a longer way to go in helping the people of some other nations to free themselves from economic domination. This is a part of our national policy not only because it is humane but also because it is essential. Our future may depend on how well this is understood throughout the world,-- how well it is understood that we still champion the quality of freedom everywhere that Americans enjoy at home.

I like to think -- as did President Kennedy -- that the emerald thread runs into the cloth we weave today, that these policies in which he believed so strongly and which President Johnson is advancing, are the current flowering of the Irish tradition. They are directed toward freedom for all Americans here and for all peoples throughout the world. And I like to think that these policies will survive and continue as the cause of Irish freedom survived the death of "The Liberator," Owen Roe O'Neill.

As you'll recall, O'Neill was one of the great figures of Irish history. It was of the period after his death, when the entire Irish nation was overwhelmed with grief, that the following lines were written:

Sagest in the council was he,
kindest in the Hall;
Sure we never won a battle
--'twas Owen won them all
Soft as woman's was your voice, O'Neill:
bright was your eye,
Oh! why did you leave us, Owen?
why did you die?

Your troubles are all over,
you're at rest with God on high,
But we're slaves, and we're orphans, Owen!
--why did you die?

We're sheep without a shepherd,
when the snow shuts out the sky--
Oh! why did you leave us, Owen?
Why did you die?

So, on this St. Patrick's evening let me urge you one final time to recall the heritage of the Irish. Let us hold out our hands to those who struggle for freedom today -- at home and abroad -- as Ireland struggled for a thousand years.

Let us not leave them to be "sheep without a shepherd when the snow shuts out the sky." Let us show them that we have not forgotten the constancy and the faith and the hope -- of the Irish.