

From: Englund, William [mailto:wenglund@nationaljournal.com]

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To: Hogan, Katherine J.

Cc: Finkenbinder, Benjamin N.

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At 7:20 your pool was escorted into the East Room of the White House, past the Shannon Rovers, a pipe and drum band from Chicago. The room was crowded with Irish Americans and people from the Irish embassy, and others. Former Sen. George Mitchell, who was instrumental in fashioning the Good Friday agreement 11 years ago, was there, as was Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago and Gov. Martin O'Malley of Maryland. Your pooler notes that since last week George and Martha Washington have been hung (in portraits) on the east wall of the room, flanked by Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt. An American and an Irish flag stood at the south end of the room, where the speakers stood.

The decor included green table cloths and green floral displays on the two larger tables at the north end of the room. Four green spotlights lent an unusual visual effect. All the guests were standing, with drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

At 7:32 p.m., the VPOTUS and his wife, the POTUS, the FLOTUS, the Taoiseach Brian Cowen and his wife Mary entered the room, to moderate applause. Joe Biden spoke first. A transcript has been promised for later. "We're here to celebrate the friendship between our two great nations," he said. These are the two nations that, frankly, define him the most, he said. He mentioned an old Irish proverb, "There's no strength without unity." Today, he said, Ireland and America celebrate the strength that comes from centuries of unity. Then he talked about the evacuation of Boston, which took place on March 17, 1776, getting cheers from the

audience. He said that the American password that day was, literally, "Saint Patrick."

"So when Americans are all done up in Kelly green and engage in revelry tonight, it's likely a result of their keen desire to know more about the American Revolution -- or maybe not."

He talked about his mother, Catherine Eugenia Finnegan Biden, in the hospital, and said she was doing better. She wanted to know why he hadn't been wearing green when he stopped in early this morning. "Mom, I got my green on tonight." (A necktie). "My mother is the soul, spirit, and essence of what it means to be an Irish-American. She's spiritual, she's romantic, she honors tradition and understands that the thickest of all substances is blood and the greatest of all virtues is courage."

He mentioned another old Irish proverb: "A friend's eye is a good mirror."

"I hope it's true," he said. "When I look in the president's eye, I sure like what I see reflecting back."

At 7:37 he introduced the president.

"I notice that the Boston crowd's a little rambunctious tonight," he said. "How about Chicago?" That brought much hooting and cheering. He mentioned that the White House was designed by an Irish architect (it was James Hoban). He said Cowen's gift of shamrocks earlier today was a "symbol of the enduring ties between our two nations and a reminder of the everlasting promise of spring."

He touched on the recent deaths in Northern Ireland, and said Americans' thoughts and prayers go out to the families of the fallen. He mentioned that Northern Ireland's First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness were at the reception.

"The United States of America will always stand with those who are working towards peace," he said. "I have never been more confident that peace will prevail."

He said that Irish signatures are on America's founding documents, that Irish blood has been spilled on America's battlefields, and that Irish sweat went into building "our great cities." Americans, he said, identify so strongly with the story of St. Patrick, because it is a story about "believing in the unseen, and making that belief a reality."

He talked at some length about JFK, and his trip back to Ireland. "Teddy Kennedy wishes he could be here tonight. But I guarantee you this much: the thought of all of you here tonight has his eyes smiling, and he

expects you to party." The president ended by quoting William Butler Yeats, whom he called his favorite poet: "There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't met." (A quick google check has failed to convince your pooler that this was actually Yeats' saying.)

Then Cowen spoke. He also mentioned Hoban's work on the White House. "We were always good in the construction business," he said.

"America does ambition well, ambition to succeed, ambition to build a better future. America does pride well, justifiable pride. ... America does change well, and does hope pretty well, as well.

"Ireland does connection well, and the proof is here. ... Ireland does imagination well."

He said he taught President Obama this morning how to say "yes we can" in Irish. Your pooler will not attempt to capture the spelling of that phrase.

Obama ended this session by saying to the crowd, "Stay as long as you want. Try to avoid putting any lampshades on your head."

Then we hustled to the State Dining Room, for another reception and a promised repetition of all the speeches -- but there were some notable variations. This reception room was a little less crowded, and there were no green spotlights. A strong aroma of smoked salmon filled the room. Abraham Lincoln looked down from over the fireplace. Shaun Donovan, secretary of Housing and Urban Development, was in the crowd.

There were green cookies on a side table, and flutes of emerald green sparkling wine (!)

At 7:55 the featured speakers entered.

Biden added one line to his speech, as he talked about his mother. "Bravey lives in the heart of all of us," he said, "and you should expect it to be summoned one day."

Obama began by saying, "Joe is an outstanding vice president. Jill instructs him on how to be an outstanding vice president. Joe's mother is just a sweetheart."

The president expanded on the subject of his own Irish roots. He said his great-great-great grandfather on his mother's side was a bootmaker from County Offaly. He said he had been invited to come for a visit, and enjoy a pint. "We're going to take them up on this offer," he said, to cheers. "You can tell these are my friends here because they cheered about the pint." Then, turning to Cowen, he complained that Guinness tastes much better in Ireland than in the U.S., which must mean that the

Irish are keeping the best stuff for themselves. "We should start a trade dispute," he said.

He ended by saying, "No matter what hardships may come, joy can always be found in this land."

Then it was Cowen's turn, and he was in for a surprise. "We begin by welcoming today a strong friend of the United States," he said--then stopped in surprise as he realized he was reading President Obama's speech off the teleprompter. "Why don't these things work for me?" he asked, as the crowd roared. "Thank you for having us. Who said these things were idiot-proof?" Then he got his bearings and gave the same talk that he delivered in the East Room.

When he ended, at 8:12, Obama stepped to the microphone and said, "First, I'd like to say thank you to President Obama...(much laughter). Happy Saint Patrick's Day, everybody." Then we were escorted out.