

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Gerry Adams, Leader of Sinn
Fein (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
The First Lady
James Steinberg, Deputy to the President
for National Security Affairs
Lawrence Butler, Director for European
Affairs, NSC Staff, Notetaker

Gerry Adams, Leader of Sinn Fein
Rita O'Hare, Sinn Fein Washington
Representative
Richard McCauley, Sinn Fein Press Officer

DATE, TIME December 8, 1998, 10:26-11:15p.m.
AND PLACE: Omni Shoreham Hotel, Washington, D.C.

Mr. Adams: I brought a copper clock for your daughter. It was handcrafted in Belfast. You can see here the Irish language word for Belfast, which means "fort at the mouth." (U)

Mrs. Clinton: She will treasure this. It is so kind. Thank you. (U)

The President: Thank you. That is very thoughtful. (U)

Mr. Adams: Thank you, Mrs. Clinton, for your work with Vital Voices. (U)

Mrs. Clinton: Seven or eight persons stopped me in the crowd to praise the conference. You know we have a follow-on group working on things. There is real potential. (U)

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Mr. Adams: Sinn Fein is proud of having more women than the other parties. Rita O'Hare is one of our real leaders, and will probably conduct the next negotiations. (U)

Ms. O'Hare: I have been working Jim and Larry over while here. (U)

The President: I saw David Trimble earlier today and gave him a hard time. (S)

Mr. Adams: At a certain level, I understand him, and why unionists behave the way they do. It is part of human nature; we were stupid, and then George Mitchell came along. He was a catalyst for change. The Good Friday Accord recognizes many of the things that were wrong: equality, social and economic. Unionists were out of step. (S)

I think that a deal can be done before Christmas. Martin McGuinness saw Bertie Ahern today and will see Tony Blair tomorrow. However, the way the deal was done was unsatisfactory to us, they didn't show it to us in advance. I told that to Tony Blair. It would have been OK if it had held up. He was there until 2:30 a.m. to talk. He told us not to worry, but he left. He was totally fatigued -- he'd been there for 8-1/2 hours -- it was difficult not to close the deal -- David Trimble told me the next day that there was a deal. The benign view is that the Assembly Party was entirely relaxed, he was in charge. (S)

However, unionism is anti-establishment. He'd (Trimble) seen off Bertie Ahern, stopping him from coming on Wednesday, and then refused to close. (S)

I urged him to make time, finish it, before going to the States. But he argued that there was no time for the Privy Council to meet and act. Well, it's not our problem; let them sort it out. (S)

Equality, Irish language and Inward Investment were taken out of the deal, and we were not involved. This subverted the actual process and I told Prime Minister Blair that we will not be left out again. Tony Blair knows it can and must be done before Christmas, but David Trimble is talking May. (S)

Mr. Steinberg: He is not that pessimistic... (S)

Mr. Adams: It was 5 a.m. when I called you on Good Friday, Mr. President. I forgot the position you hold. I told you at the time that people would try to undo the Accord -- that there was too much looseness, ambiguous language and aspirational words. I am conscious of the battle I fight every day for my place. I know how black Americans felt walking into a white establishment, the reception they got from the security guards, the tremors they experienced. Catholics share that (in Northern Ireland). (S)

But we will burrow away. The Accord must be kept, with no fudge. It established a mechanism for decommissioning. If that had been a pre-condition, I wouldn't have signed up. We took chances and worked hard. We brought African National Congress activists to the Sinn Fein conference to share their experiences, show that it can be done. We were on the road, working our base, talking and convincing. (S)

I've talked to Trimble, but without success on this; if we can work the de Chastelain approach... Tony Blair is afraid to lose Trimble, but we all agreed in good faith to try to make this succeed. (S)

The President: Do you believe their position is because if they include you, you won't decommission, or is it politics? (S)

Ms. O'Hare: Neither. If they dealt with us politically, the situation would be changed beyond what they can accept. It is Trimble, not Paisley or McCartney. He's signed up, but he couldn't get his pre-condition. He is in denial. Decommissioning is... (S)

Mr. Adams: ... a social acceptable way to hollow out the Good Friday Accord. (S)

The President: Do you think it is a pretext? We are seeking signs on Loyalist guns. (S)

Mr. Steinberg: There is a risk from Loyalist guns. (S)

Mr. Adams: He argued to you that the LVF was going to decommission, the Garvaghy Road is under siege. Guns were fired there the other night. An LVF member was arrested. The rumor was that he had a certificate from de Chastelain to surrender the weapon. (S)

The President: Trimble said the LVF is being threatened by the UDA... (S)

Mr. Steinberg: ...but he didn't think it was David Ervine. (S)

Mr. Adams: No, but it was his group out shooting. (S)

The President: I asked Trimble whether he thought there was no start to decommissioning for fear of giving up leverage, or due to ideology, or because republicans have violence in their hearts. He said "loss of leverage, concern that he would be unfair with you." His perspective was interesting.

Mr. Adams: Absolute comfort blanket. That will be his position today, tomorrow it will be different. We need to implement the Accord. I represent a party blocked from its rightful seats in government. "Protestant parliament for a protestant people," was the old slogan for Stormont. Our slogan during the campaign was "ready for government." SDLP is also blocked out, but they have Seamus Mallon. David Trimble could go down as far as May... I said we cannot get to decommissioning, but we have sought to change political conditions. We have the cessation (of hostilities), but Trimble and I haven't shook hands yet. I tell him to keep charging the political conditions, but tell me what you want on decommissioning? Paisley won't accept anything. This is not about guns. I keep coming back to the de Chastelain route. (S)

Blair is a modernizer, he is no imperialist looking down on us. But, the Quinn boys, the Lombeh drums, the Orange Order -- these are still with us. (S)

(Trimble) needs focus and an imaginative way, such as de Chastelain, to move forward. They harbor the idea that we are the ones who can do more. (S)

The President: The idea, maybe, is to synchronize the timing, not publicly, then... (S)

Mr. Adams: Yes, pre-working it. David Trimble has to take ownership. (S)

The President: It has to appear to be done independently and apart. (S)

Mr. Adams: Yes. Six weeks ago, I told Trimble that we'd be in crisis -- see you in three weeks.

The President: Will the Nobel Prize strengthen him, give him some leeway? (C)

Mr. Adams: No. When he went to the funeral in Duncrara, he was warmly applauded. The Nobel Prize will be good for him personally, but not at the political level. He was in shock when he got it. It was like winning the lottery without buying a ticket. Seamus Mallon was really spitting blood last week. (C)

The President: He was really annoyed, I heard. You handled it (the Nobel Prize choice) well. They've (the Nobel Committee) been trying to shine the light of peace and have gotten political recently. They figured they had to have one Catholic and one protestant. They really didn't understand Ireland. (C)

Mr. Adams: Thank you for that. I'd like to raise the case of Richard Johnson. He got a double sentence, and his parents are very elderly. A crowd (of Irish Americans) went up from New York to fix their roof. It is a real hardship, their savings went to his trial and appeal. (C)

Mr. Butler: He is an American, IRA sympathizer, in federal prison. He is due out late next year. There aren't any federal facilities closer to his parents in Massachusetts. (C)

The President: Maybe there is a non-compact agreement with Massachusetts. We used to do this in Arkansas, place federal prisoners with state institutions. Let's see if the system can be cut short. Check with the Counsel's office to see if there are any problems here. (C)

11:15 p.m. [Brief exchange on Wye River, Arafat and Netanyahu while saying goodbye.]

-- End of Conversation --