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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

DECLASSIFIED
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MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with Taoiseach Bertie Ahern of Ireland
(U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Taoiseach Bertie Ahern

Notetakers: Douglas Bayley, Robin Rickard,
Don Cheramie, Don Gentile, Robert Williams
and Dick Norland

DATE, TIME February 10, 2000, 4:41-4:51 p.m. EST
AND PLACE: Oval Office

The President: Hello. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: Hello, Bill, how are you? (U)

The President: Working hard trying to get things done. How are you? (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: We're down to the wire once again. We should know within three hours whether the IRA will accept what has been worked out. They should have given us an answer by now, but they're meeting three hours from now in Belfast. Three hours from now we should know the result. If the wording that was worked out is agreed to, if that works out, the idea is that it would be given to De Chastelain and he would make that part of it public. Then it would be given to Adams and Trimble first thing in the morning. There's still a chance on that, Bill, but if it doesn't work out we have to look at suspension and a date on suspension so that there isn't an indefinite suspension. (S)

The President: If there's a suspension, how would we get it going again? (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: That's our big concern. One thing not public yet is my legal advice. As you know, we have changed our constitution to allow the north to take away the constitutional link between north and south. My legal advice said there is no legal grounds for the British government to have a suspension, because even though the IRA and Sein Fein have not done

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Reason: 1.5 (d)

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everything we wanted them to do, they are not in breach of the Good Friday Agreement. If it were challenged in the Irish courts, very likely our people would rule that suspension is not lawful. I cannot formally agree to suspension. If there were no suspension -- say if this arrangement tonight doesn't work and there is no suspension -- after 3:00 p.m. tomorrow when Commons closes, I understand from Tony that, if they haven't put down the suspension order effective 12 midnight Friday night, then the Chairman of Trimble's party would then say that he is legally bound to enforce written regulations that would mean that Trimble would have to resign and go to party conference, where he wouldn't win on Saturday. It's a real dilemma. If I don't go along, at least tacitly, I throw Trimble overboard. Neither is very positive. (S)

The President: We've done everything we know how to do with Sinn Fein. I don't think it would do any good to make a public appeal to the IRA, do you? (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: No. What they asked my officials to do, Bill, nobody knows this, is that at 11:00 p.m. tonight, my three senior officials in Belfast are going to be brought to a house, destination unknown, and meet with someone who will give them an answer. I have no option but to tell my people to go to the house. (S)

The President: Of course you don't. (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: I'm going to have to take the chance. (S)

The President: Well, it's a hell of a bind. Why don't you think they won't want to do anything, Bertie? (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: I think it's a combination of things. Adams made up his mind that they should do it, but some of them think they never should have to do it. They keep quoting South Africa where arms were never given over. The other portion is that some of them are afraid that they will lose some of their key people, who would move to the Real IRA, and that it would continue on and they would be fighting with their old colleagues and that is the bigger reason. They're afraid. They do not want to force these guys to move away from them. Interestingly enough, when I met David Trimble today I was not sure how positive it would be. It was a good meeting. He agreed with me, which was amazing, that the British government was wrong not to take down some of these British towers in South Armagh and move some of their soldiers out. But that doesn't get me anywhere. Military leaders would make the decision and, of course, the British government was afraid to overrule them, particularly after Omagh. So we are kind of at the point where if these guys

say yes, we have a real chance because the words from De Chastelain would be pretty strong. De Chastelain welcomes recognition by the IRA that arms have to be dealt with as a necessary objective of the January peace process. The commission further welcomes a statement that they support a secure resolution of the arms issues. If the IRA representative indicates today that they will urgently pursue discussions aimed at reaching an agreement, where the issues of arms would be dealt with, I think if that came out from De Chastelain the British government would have to defer Saturday's meeting. But if they don't, they will move for suspension tomorrow. (S)

The President: There's nothing else I can do? (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: I don't think so, Bill. I would only be asking you to burn up a favor. Tomorrow morning, if they're prepared to move then you could sure help us tomorrow. (S)

The President: Alright, I will be here tomorrow and available. It's going to be a critical day tomorrow. (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: One way or another. The private deal in this one which is not in the statement is that that they would get rid of everything and do it by July of next year. That would have to be given privately to Trimble. (S)

The President: Well, I'll be on pins and needles. You and Tony call me tomorrow if you need to. (S)

Prime Minister Ahern: What we will do when we get word tonight is ring Jim Steinberg and leave a message. If it is no, tomorrow will be crisis management and we'll deal with it. If yes, we have a real selling job to do. (S)

The President: Well thanks. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: Thanks. You are a decent man, Bill. God bless. (U)

The President: Bye. (U)

-- End of Conversation --