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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telecon with Irish Prime Minister Ahern

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Prime Minister Ahern

Notetaker: Larry Wright, Robert Ford, David Higgins, George Chastain, Jim Smith

DATE, TIME February 12, 1998, 6:08-6:15 p.m. EST
AND PLACE: Oval Office

The President: Hello?

Prime Minister Ahern: Hello?

The President: Bertie?

Prime Minister Ahern: President, how are you?

The President: Well, we have a little problem, don't we?

Prime Minister Ahern: Well, it...

The President: I talked to Tony Blair, and my role is to support you guys and use leverage to help you with Sinn Fein and keep the Unionists in a fairly sensible frame of mind. I don't want to leave Tony hanging out there. If you two can have a common position, it would be easier for me to support it. However, this puts you in a pickle, but Tony is convinced the IRA did this.

Prime Minister Ahern: I have to be honest. It looks like they were part of it, but I don't think it was directed by the political leadership, but it seems they sanctioned it. Nine Catholics have been killed, and they got the right guys. However, in reality, it was wrong to do it.

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The President: What about this idea of letting them out for awhile and then putting them back in?

Prime Minister Ahern: I think it is the best that can be achieved.

The President: Can we sell it to Adams and that crowd?

Prime Minister Ahern: I have my guy out tonight talking to them. I think their reaction will be very hostile because they will talk about their electorate mandate. The reality is that we have to be consistent. Two weeks ago, the Protestants were involved in killing. Since we threw out one crowd, we can't ignore hard facts about another group. If they would accept getting out, we could still talk to them outside about getting them back rather quickly. If they get all difficult, it could get messy.

The President: Yeah.

Prime Minister Ahern: The alternative is that we don't throw them out for a while, but the Unionists will leave and we will be in a position where the international world will say we are not credible.

The President: Well, let me ask you this; why do you think this happened?

Prime Minister Ahern: My view is simple enough, President. It is not as sinister as some would make it. These guys on the ground live in local ghettos, and pressure was put on them because they did not react to the death of nine Catholics. There were cartoons on the wall saying "When we needed the IRA, they ran away." They didn't kill innocent Protestants, they killed those responsible. These guys saw their authority leaving them. If we were living in the bush, this would be seen as good guys and bad guys, but we are not living in the bush. I don't think it's an attempt to wreck the whole thing.

The President: Yeah. I figure there might have been some division within the IRA, and they don't think they can make a stronger statement. We urged Sinn Fein to make a stronger statement and the IRA. We can't leave Blair without cover, but their withdrawal can't lead to more violence.

Prime Minister Ahern: Well, that's it. I think that if they accept, it will put pressure on us and everyone else. They will

say because they are electorally mandated, they should not be out at all. However, that won't hold up. What Tony would like is for Sinn Fein to say "We denounce the IRA," this, that, and the other. That's very logical, but I have to say, President, it won't happen. It hasn't happened in 30 years.

The President: That's not going to happen. Yeah.

Prime Minister Ahern: In defense of Tony, he knows that, too.

The President: Well,...

Prime Minister Ahern: The best position is if we could use combined efforts to: a) convince them they need to get out, b) it will only be for a short time, and c) we keep talking to them. I don't see an alternative.

The President: I will support you, if you have a unified position. It is easy for me. You just tell me what I can do to get things from getting even crazier.

Prime Minister Ahern: Anything your people can do to get them to accept a short period. I hate saying this, but I'd rather they be in, but I can't keep pressing Tony to do unreasonable things.

The President: They have a bird's nest on the ground. They have got to realize Tony is willing to do this. Trimble has less leverage with him. It is a hell of a time for them to do this. But Jesus, we don't need this.

Prime Minister Ahern: No, we don't. I've been putting pressure on Tony to get Trimble to talk to Adams, and he was getting placed, and then this bloody backfire. Anything your people can do to tell them they need to take their medicine.

The President: Okay, I got my marching orders. Good-bye.

Prime Minister Ahern: Thank you, President.

The President: Thank you, my friend.

Prime Minister Ahern: God bless.

The President: God bless.

-- End of Conversation --