

THE WHITE HOUSE

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MEMORANDUM OF TELEPHONE CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Telcon with Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Prime Minister Ahern

Notetakers: Marianna Papadimitriou, Jim
Smith, Marc Koehler, Jeff Rathke, Wylma
Robinson, Mary Ann Peters

DATE, TIME July 15, 1997, 11:46 - 11:52 a.m.
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: Hello, Taoiseach? (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: It's me. (U)

The President: It's Bill Clinton, how are you? Congratulations.
(U)

Prime Minister Ahern: I'm fine and thank you very much. It's
very nice to talk to you. How is everything going for you? (U)

The President: Everything is going fine for us here, I just got
back from my trip to Europe with the NATO group. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: All went well? (U)

The President: Yes, it went well. I had a brief opportunity to
speak to Blair about what you are trying to do together on
Northern Ireland. I wanted to call and let you know I am
committed to supporting your efforts. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: I really appreciate that and, needless to
say, thank you for your close interest and engagement. As you
know from your visit here, we continue to try to get back to the
peace process and get momentum into it. Decommissioning is the
key issue. We have agreed to a joint paper over the last few
weeks and today we made more progress with London on trying to
move that forward. We've set ourselves a fairly tight timetable,
and are working to get it all out of the way so that by the end

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of July when we all break for holiday, if we get a ceasefire we can actually have talks on September 15. There are a lot of problems, a lot of troubles, a lot of ways it could go right or wrong. But at least the two governments are working well together and, with all your assistance, we are in as good a position as we've been in for the last year and a half. Whether it will be good enough, we don't yet know. (C)

The President: We will do our best. I know the decommissioning issue is the key and Sandy Berger, my National Security Advisor, is going to call Trimble this week to urge him to move the talks into substance. We have always taken the position that talks that include Sinn Fein have the best chance of long-term success. But eventually they will have to declare a ceasefire. What do you think the chances of a ceasefire are? (C)

Prime Minister Ahern: I think it is probably back to being fairly good, providing we stick to the Mitchell report. Any drift or attempt to make decommissioning mandatory, not voluntary, will fail. No matter what you or I say, it won't work. The Loyalists and the Republicans will say that if decommissioning is not voluntary, as part of the process, they will pull away from it. But if we can get over that and get Trimble on board and hold the line on the voluntary aspect of the Mitchell report, then the chances of a ceasefire are not bad. We've given clarifications to Sinn Fein, as have the British. We've both done it. If you ask me to put it on the 50-50 line, I would put it on the right side of 50 rather than the wrong side of 50. What is required is that the decommissioning issue not knock this off. On most of the other issues, such as prisoners, and the confidence issues, these are fairly well out of the way. (C)

The President: That's the best news I've heard in a while. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: I don't want to simplify and say it is a one-item agenda, but there is only one big item -- decommissioning. On the other ones, we have an understanding with Sinn Fein not to create difficulties. So if we can just move it forward that little bit. All your people have been very, very helpful; we appreciate what they have been doing. There were a few hairy weeks there. And poor old George Mitchell -- he is a great friend of mine, but he has more patience than anyone I know. (C)

The President: Well, he is well trained for that. He had to work with the U.S. Senate, where they can talk things to death. But he's a good man. (C)

Prime Minister Ahern: He is. We really appreciate you sending him to us, because anyone else would have jumped out of the

window or gone home by now. At least the British Government has fixed the terms of moving into a three-strand process by September 15 and set a May deadline. We may not make that, but at least there are parameters that weren't there before, and that is extremely helpful. (C)

The President: Well, you take care of yourself. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: I certainly will, Mr. President. (U)

The President: Let me know if there is anything we can do. You can call me anytime, and our people are in touch all the time. I feel hopeful, with the energy you and Blair have put into this, that we have a shot here. We want to be a constructive force. (C)

Prime Minister Ahern: Well, I certainly look forward to working with you because you have given us a good start. I appreciate all the chances you have taken along the way, because, quite frankly, I worked with Reynolds a number of years ago at the start of the process and we would never have managed to do it on our own because of all the distrust. We have our people working together now and if we can just get Trimble not to try to get everything written in stone, we can actually get into talks. If he demands too much it will just make it impossible. Other than that we can work on it. (C)

The President: Well, we'll work on it. (C)

Prime Minister Ahern: It's a great honor to talk to you. I look forward to seeing you soon. (U)

The President: Bye. (U)

Prime Minister Ahern: Bye. (U)

-- End of Conversation --