Remarks by Senator George J. Mitchell

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I commend the Government of Ireland, the Tánaiste, and all those involved in organizing this conference.

It's an honor for me to participate.

I've been asked to speak about my experience in Northern Ireland.

I'd like to begin with a reference to my own country.

Two hundred and twenty five years ago 45 American colonists gathered in Philadelphia in a constitutional convention.

Their objectives were independence and self-governance, and they achieved both.

A decade earlier, the Americans had stated their case for self-governance in the Declaration of Independence.

At the Constitutional Convention they sought to create a framework of government in which the rights claimed in the Declaration could be vindicated and safe guarded.

The result was the American constitution.

The first ten amendments, what we call the Bill of Rights, is, to me, one of the most concise and eloquent statement ever written of the right of the individual to be free from oppression by government.

That's one side of the coin of liberty.

The other is the need for everyone to have a fair chance to enjoy the blessings of liberty.

To a man without a job, to a woman who can't get good care or education for her child, to the young people who lack the skills needed to compete in a world of technology — they don't think much about liberty or justice;

they worry about coping day to day.

The same is true of people living in a society torn by violence.

Without civil order, without physical security, freedom and individual liberty come to be seen as mere concepts, unrelated to the daily task of survival.

So it was for many years in Northern Ireland, as a deadly cycle of misery and recrimination took hold.

After a half century of a cold relationship and only occasional cooperation, the British and Irish Governments concluded that if there was to be any hope of bringing the conflict to an end, they would have to cooperate in a sustained effort to lay the foundation for peace.

So the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 traces its lineage to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the Downing Street Declaration of 1993.

Despite much difficulty, and over many setbacks, the governments persevered.

For that, they deserve more credit than they have gotten.

Tony Blair and Bertie Ahem were brilliant in bringing the process to conclusion, but they would be the first to acknowledge that their predecessors set the stage.

Those predecessors, British and Irish, kept the process going in exceptionally difficult circumstances.

Primary credit, of course, must go to the political leaders of Northern Ireland - the men and women who demonstrated great courage and commitment.

After years of effort, the British and Irish Governments finally were able to get peace negotiations underway in June of 1996.

The prime ministers invited me to serve as chairman.

I had been involved in Northern Ireland long enough to realize what a daunting task it was.

I spent five years in Northern Ireland chairing three separate but related discussions.

The negotiations were the longest I've ever been involved with.

For most of that time, no progress seemed possible.

But somehow we kept going.

There was an especially bleak and dangerous time in the Christmas season of 1997 and the early months of 1998.

We had been at it for a year and a half.

In an effort to encourage progress the negotiations were moved to London in January and to Dublin in February.

But there was no progress in those locations either.

To the contrary, the process moved backward.

In mid-February, on a flight from Dublin back to the U.S., I began to devise a plan to establish an early unbreakable deadline for an end to the talks.

I was convinced that the absence of such a deadline guaranteed failure.

The existence of a deadline couldn't guarantee success - but did make it possible.

It took me a month to put the plan together and to persuade all of the participants.

By late March they were ready.

I recommended a final deadline of midnight, Thursday, April 9th.

I needed the approval of all of the major parties.

Any one of them could have prevented me from establishing a deadline, thereby dooming the talks.

But they all agreed.

I knew then that they were serious and determined.

They wanted to reach an agreement.

They recognized that there had to be a deadline to force a decision.

As we neared the deadline, there were non-stop negotiations.

Blair and Ahern came to Belfast and showed true leadership.

With great skill and assurance, they helped bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion.

President Clinton made an important contribution, as well.

He stayed up all night at the White House, telephoning me and several of the delegates at critical times in the final hours of negotiation.

In a tight time frame, a powerful focus was brought to bear and it produced the right result.

But the very fact that getting an agreement took such extraordinary effort was a warning signal of the difficulties that would follow.

Finally, in the late afternoon of Good Friday, an agreement was reached.

It's important to recognize that the agreement did not, by itself, guarantee a durable peace, political stability, or reconciliation.

It made them possible.

But there still had to be a lot of effort, over a long period of time, to achieve those goals.

For that the political leaders of Northern Ireland again deserve credit.

Despite many setbacks for over a decade they continued the effort.

There were further negotiations and an important breakthrough at St. Andrews in 2007.

Today, peace prevails, but there remain many issues to be resolved.

The leaders and the people of Northern Ireland need our continued support.

They have earned it.

In recent years, I've been asked often what lessons Northern Ireland holds for other conflicts.

I'll try to answer that question now.

I begin with caution.

Each human being is unique, as is each society.

It follows logically, then, that no two conflicts are the same.

Northern Ireland is different from the Middle East, and they're both different from Africa or Asia.

Each conflict requires a unique, local response.

Much as we would like it, there is no magic formula which, once discovered, can be used to end all conflicts.

But there are certain principles which arise out of my experience in Northern Ireland that I believe are universal.

First, I believe there's no such thing as a conflict that can't be ended.

They're created and sustained by human beings.

They can be ended by human beings.

No matter how ancient the conflict, no matter how hateful, no matter how hurtful, peace can prevail.

When I arrived in Northern Ireland I found, to my dismay, a widespread feeling of pessimism among the public and the political leaders.

It's a small, well-informed society where I quickly became well known.

Every day, people would stop me on the street, in the airport, in a restaurant.

They always began with kind words:

"Thank you Senator."

"God bless you."

"We appreciate what you're trying to do."

But they always ended in despair.

"You're wasting your time."

"This conflict can't be ended."

"We've been killing each other for centuries and we're doomed to go on killing each other forever."

As best I could, I worked to reverse such attitudes.

This is the special responsibility of political leaders, from whom many in the public take their cue.

Leaders must lead.

And one way is to create an attitude of success, the belief that problems can be solved, that things can be better.

Not in a foolish or unrealistic way, but in a way that creates hope and confidence among the people.

A second need is for a clear and determined policy not to yield to the men of violence.

In July, 1998, after the agreement was reached and approved in a referendum, three young boys were burned to death as they slept.

A month later, a devastating bomb in Omagh killed thirty people and injured over three hundred.

These were acts of appalling ignorance and hatred.

They had to be and were totally condemned.

But the people of Northern Ireland did not succumb to the temptation to retaliate.

That would have given the criminals what they wanted: escalating sectarian violence and the end of the peace process.

That means there must be an endless supply of patience and perseverance.

Sometimes the mountains seem so high and rivers so wide that it's hard to continue the journey.

But no matter how bleak the outlook, the search for peace must go on.

Seeking an end to conflict is not for the timid or the tentative.

It takes courage, perseverance and steady nerves in the face of violence.

I believe it a mistake to say in advance that if acts of violence occur the negotiations will stop.

That's an invitation to those who use violence to destroy the peace process, and it transfers control of the agenda from the peaceful majority to the violent minority.

A third need is a willingness to compromise.

Peace and political stability cannot be achieved in sharply divided societies unless there is a genuine willingness to understand the other point of view and to enter into principled compromise.

That is easy to say, but very hard to do, because it requires of political leaders that they take risks for peace.

Most political leaders dislike risk-taking of any kind.

Many get to be leaders by minimizing risk.

To ask them, in the most difficult and dangerous of circumstances, to be bold, is asking much.

But it must be asked of them, and they must respond, if there is to be hope for peace.

I knew it can be done, because I saw it first-hand in Northern Ireland.

The political leaders of Northern Ireland, men and women, some of whom had never before met, never before spoken, who had spent their entire lives in conflict, came together in an agreement for peace.

Admittedly, it was long and difficult.

But it did happen.

And if it happened there, it can happen elsewhere.

A fourth principle is to recognize that the implementation of agreements is as important as reaching them, and often more difficult.

That should be self-evident.

But getting an agreement is so difficult that the natural human tendency is to celebrate, then to turn to other matters.

But getting it done is usually more difficult than agreeing to do it.

Once again, patience and perseverance are necessary.

It is especially important that those involved not become complacent by the good feeling created by a highly publicized agreement.

If a conflict is important enough to get involved in, it must be seen through all the way to a fair and successful conclusion.

Peace and political stability are not too much to ask for.

They are the minimal needs for a decent and caring society.

There's an important final point.

I recall clearly my first day in Northern Ireland, seventeen years ago.

I saw for the first time the huge wall which physically separates the communities in Belfast.

Thirty feet high, topped in places with barbed wire, it is a stark reminder of the intensity and duration of the conflict.

Ironically, it's called The Peace Line.

On that first morning I met with nationalists on their side of the wall, in the afternoon with unionists on their side.

Their messages had not been coordinated, but they were essentially the same:

In Belfast, they told me, there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence.

They said that where men and women have no opportunity, no hope, they are more likely to take the path of violence.

As I sat and listened to them, I thought that I could just as easily be in Chicago, or Calcutta, or Johannesburg, or in the Middle East.

Despair is fuel for instability.

Hope is essential to peace and stability.

The importance of economic opportunity is political stability and in conflict resolution cannot be overstated.

It is critical.

Men and women everywhere need income to support their families, and they need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful with their lives.

The conflict in Northern Ireland obviously was not exclusively or even primarily economic.

It involved religion and national identity:

Unionists tend to identify with and want to remain part of the United Kingdom;

Nationalists tend to identify with and want to become part of a united Ireland.

The Good Friday agreement acknowledges the legitimacy of both aspirations.

It requires, however, that advocacy be exclusively by democratic and peaceful means, and it commits all to the democratic principle that a change in status can occur only with the freely given consent of the people of Northern Ireland.

And the agreement creates the possibility that economic prosperity will flow from and contribute to lasting peace.

I am not objective.

I favor of the people of Northern Ireland.

Having spent years with them, I've come to like and admire them.

While they can be quarrelsome and quick to take offense, they are also warm and generous, energetic and productive.

When the agreement was reached, at about six o'clock on the evening of April 10, we had been in negotiations for nearly two years and continuously for the last few days.

We were elated and exhausted. In my parting comments I told them that the agreement was, for me, the realization of a dream that had sustained me for three and a half years, the longest, most difficult years of my life.

Now, I said, I have a new dream.

It is to return to Northern Ireland some day with my young son, Andrew, who had been born during the negotiations.

We will roam the country, taking in the sights and sounds of that lovely land.

Then, on a rainy afternoon, we will drive to Stormont and sit quietly in the visitors gallery in the Northern Ireland assembly.

There we will watch and listen as the members debate the ordinary issues of life in a democratic society - education, healthcare, tourism, agriculture.

There will be no talk of war, for the war will have long been over.

There will be no talk of peace, for peace will be taken for granted.

On that day, the day on which peace is taken for granted in Northern Ireland, I will be fulfilled and people of good everywhere will rejoice.

A few weeks ago, fourteen years after I spoke those words, my son and I made that journey.

We spent a week traveling all across Northern Ireland.

We sat in the Visitor's Gallery at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

We listened to a calm, peaceful, and democratic debate.

We heard a minister report to the Assembly on a conference he had just attended.

It was as dry as dust and as boring as only a government report can be.

But it was music to my ears, wonderful to hear.

It was truly one of the best days of my life.