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The Alexis C. Coudert Memorial Lectures - Keynote Address

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ALEXIS C. COUDERT MEMORIAL LECTURE*

George J. Mitchell

Thank you very much, Michael, for your generous remarks. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your warm reception and for the honor you do me in electing me as an honorary member of your Association.

I feel privileged to participate in this lecture series, marking, as has been noted, the 50th Anniversary of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That is, of course, an eloquent and powerful statement, as relevant today as it was when adopted.

I must confess that when I received Michael's invitation to address this Association at the beginning of your conference on human rights, I hesitated. This Association has an international reputation for interest in and knowledge of human rights. I have always found it intimidating to be asked to speak to a group of people who know more about the subject than I do. But I recalled my first day in the Senate.

As you have heard, I was appointed, and it happened quite suddenly. From the time Senator Muskie resigned until the time I went down to Washington to be sworn in as his successor was no more than just a few days; it was quite unexpected.

I flew down to Washington, took a taxi up to The Capitol — it was in the middle of a legislative session — and I went into the Senate Chamber where a regular session of the Senate was underway, which they interrupted to swear me in. It lasted less than 30 seconds. That was my first major disillusionment in the Senate. After I was sworn in, not knowing what else to do, I walked over to Senator Muskie's former office, now my own, and I asked a young, very efficient man who had been Senator Muskie's chief assistant and was now mine what I did next. He rat-

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ted off a long list of instructions, and then he said, "Senator, you have been invited to address a National Convention of Certified Public Accountants who are meeting tonight in Washington, 3,000 of them, they want to hear from you."

And I said, "gosh, it's amazing that they would have known I was going to be here this evening because I didn't know it myself until a few days ago."

"Oh, no," he said. "They have had several cancellations and you are the last resort. You are the only person they could think of who might not have anything to do this evening."

I asked, "well, what do they want me to talk about?" He said, "the Tax Code." I said, "well, each of them knows much more about it than I do, and so how can I go there and talk about it with no preparation." This young man drew himself up and said with a great deal of contempt: "Senator, with that attitude, you'll never get anywhere in politics."

So I went to speak to the accountants on the Tax Code, and here I am to talk to you about human rights.

Actually, I have been asked to talk about my experience in Northern Ireland and how that relates to the subject of your conference, and I will do that; but I would like to begin by mentioning two other places which influenced me in my role in Northern Ireland. They are the United Kingdom and the United States.

I have spent most of the past four years in the United Kingdom and during that time I have come to know much better and to admire that great country. While Greece is the birthplace of democracy, surely Britain is the home of its modern version. The Parliament Building at Westminster, like the Capitol Building in Washington, is a visible symbol of self-government, of individual liberty, of a free and vibrant people.

These are values of which we are justly proud. Of course, as I regularly remind my British friends, Americans haven't always used such flattering words in describing our Mother Country.

Two-hundred-and-eleven-years ago, a small group of Americans gathered in Philadelphia in a constitutional convention. Their objective was independence and self-government. They had lived under a British King and they did not want there ever to be an American King. In retrospect, we can see that they

were brilliantly successful. The United States has now had 42 presidents and no kings.

The product of that convention was, of course, the American Constitution. The part of it that we call the Bill of Rights is, to me, the most concise and eloquent statement ever written of the right of the individual to be free from oppression by government.

That is 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, for the young people who lack the skills needed to compete in the 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.

Personal safety is a fundamental right expressed clearly in Article 3 of The Universal Declaration which states: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person."

For many years, violence and fear settled over Northern Ireland like a heavy, unyielding fog. The conflict hurt the economy, so unemployment rose with violence in a deadly cycle of escalating misery.

After a half-century of discord and only occasional cooperation, the British and Irish Governments concluded that if there was to be any hope of bringing the conflict of Northern Ireland to an end, they would have to cooperate in a sustained effort to lay the foundation for peace. Despite much difficulty, over many setbacks, the governments persevered. A lot of credit has been handed out to many people who did contribute to the effort to bring about peace in Northern Ireland. The governments deserve much more credit than they have gotten.

After years of effort, they finally were able to get peace negotiations underway in June of 1996. The Prime Ministers of the two countries invited me to serve as chairman. I had been involved in Northern Ireland long enough to know what a daunting and seemingly impossible task that was, but in making my decision, I reflected on my own life.

My father, as you have heard, was the orphan son of Irish immigrants. He was a janitor. My mother, an immigrant from Lebanon, worked nights in a textile mill. Neither had any education. My mother could not read or write. But because of their efforts, because many people gave me a helping hand along the way and, most importantly, because of the openness of American society, our society, their son was able to become the Majority Leader of the United States Senate. So when I, who was helped by so many, was asked by the Prime Ministers of Britain and Ireland to help others, I could not refuse. That the people I was asked to help were in the land of my father's heritage was just a coincidence; that I could help was what mattered.

The negotiations were the longest, most difficult task I have ever been involved with. Often, no progress seemed possible. But somehow, through tremendous violence, upheaval, uncertainty, over many obstacles, we kept going.

There was an especially bleak, dangerous time in the Christmas season of 1997 and the early months of this year. There was a determined effort by men of violence on both sides to destroy the peace process. In early December, almost exactly a year ago this week, we tried hard to get an agreement on a statement of the key issues to be resolved and the processes for revolving them. Despite intense effort and round the clock discussion, no agreement was possible. When we adjourned for the Christmas holiday, a year ago next week, the prospects were bleak. If they couldn't even agree on defining the key issues, I thought, how will they ever agree on solutions to those issues.

Two days after Christmas, a prominent loyalist parliamentary figure was murdered in prison. That touched off a sharp increase in sectarian killings as a vicious cycle of revenge took place; shootings and assassinations occurred on a regular basis over the next several weeks. The negotiations were moved from Northern Ireland to London in January and then to Dublin in February in an effort to encourage progress; but the opposite occurred. The London meeting was largely taken up with the expulsion of a Unionist Party. The Dublin meeting was taken up with the expulsion of a Nationalist Party. The process was moving backward.

It was in February on a flight from Dublin back here to New York that I began to devise a plan to establish an early

deadline to end the talks. I was convinced that the absence of such a deadline guaranteed failure. The existence of a deadline didn't guarantee success, but I believed that it made it possible.

It took me over 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. They all agreed. They wanted to reach an agreement and recognized that there had to be a deadline to force them to make a decision.

As we neared the deadline, there were nonstop negotiations. Prime Ministers Blair of the United Kingdom, and Ahern of the Republic of Ireland came to Belfast and they showed true leadership. There wouldn't have been an agreement without their personal involvement. They didn't just supervise the negotiations, they conducted them.

President Clinton made an important contribution, as well. He stayed up all night at the White House on the last crucial day, telephoning several of the delegates at critical times in the final hours. So 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 an extraordinary effort was a clear warning signal of the difficulties that would follow when implementation of the agreement was to take place.

Finally, in the late afternoon of April 10th of this year, Good Friday, an agreement was reached. It's important to recognize that the agreement does not, by itself, provide or guarantee a durable peace, or political stability, or reconciliation. It makes them possible, but there will have to be a lot of effort in good faith for a long time to achieve those goals.

I believe that the agreement will endure because it's fair and balanced. It requires the use of exclusively democratic and peaceful means to resolve political differences. It commits all of the parties to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organizations. It stresses the need for mutual respect and tolerance between the communities, and it's based on the principle that the future of Northern Ireland should be decided by the people of Northern Ireland.

It also includes constitutional change in both Ireland and the United Kingdom. It creates new democratic institutions to provide self-government in Northern Ireland and to encourage

cooperation between the North and the South for their mutual benefit, and it explicitly repudiates the use or the threat of violence for any political purpose.

Most importantly for its survival, the agreement was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people of Ireland, North and South, in a free and democratic election. On May 22nd, about six weeks after the agreement was reached, in the first all-Ireland vote in 80 years, 71 percent of the voters in the North and 95 percent of the voters in the South approved the agreement. That's a strong statement by the people. It sends a powerful message to political leaders that the people want peace and they support the agreement as the way to get it.

In the past few months, I have been asked often what lessons Northern Ireland may hold for other conflicts. I will try briefly to respond to that question now.

I begin with caution. Each individual is unique; each society is unique; and it follows logically, therefore, that no two conflicts are the same. 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 I learned from my experience in Northern Ireland which I believe are universal.

First, I concluded my experience in Northern Ireland with the unshakeable conviction that there is no such thing as a conflict which can't be ended. Conflicts are created and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings. No matter how ancient the conflict, no matter how much harm or hurt has been done, peace can prevail if pursued with sufficient determination and vigor.

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 known. Every day, people stopped me on the street, in an airport, in a restaurant, dozens and dozens of people. They always began with kind words, "thank you, Senator, God bless you, we appreciate what you are doing." And they also always ended with despair, "you are wasting your time, this conflict can't be ended, we have been killing each other for centuries, we are doomed to go on forever."

One week before the agreement was reached, 87 percent of the people in a poll expressed the belief that no agreement was possible.

As best I could, I worked to reverse such attitudes, particularly among the delegates to the negotiations. This, it seems to me, is the special responsibility of political leaders from whom many in the public take their cue. Leaders must lead. One way is to create an attitude of success, the belief that problems can be solved, that conflicts can be ended, that things can be better. Not in a foolish or unrealistic way, but in a way that creates hope and inspires confidence among the people.

A second need is for a clear and determined policy not to yield to the men of violence. Over and over they tried to destroy the peace process of Northern Ireland and at times they very nearly succeeded. In July of this year, after the agreement was reached and approved by the people, three young Catholic boys aged 6, 10 and 12 were burned to death as they slept in their beds. In August, a devastating bomb in the town of Omagh killed 29 people and injured 300, Protestant and Catholic alike.

Those were acts of appalling ignorance and hatred. They must be totally condemned. But to succumb to retaliation would give the criminals what they wanted, escalating sectarian violence and an end to the peace process. The way to respond is to swiftly bring these criminals to justice and to go forward in peace. That means there must be an endless supply of patience and perseverance.

Sometimes the mountains seem so high and the rivers seem 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 tentative; it takes courage, it takes perseverance, it takes steady nerves in the face of horrible violence.

I believe it a mistake to say in advance that if acts of violence occur, the peace process will stop. That's an invitation to those who use violence to destroy the 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 can't 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. It's 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. Most of them get to be leaders by minimizing risk. It's asking a lot to ask of them that they be bold in the most difficult and dangerous of circumstances. But it must be asked and they must respond if there is to be any hope for peace.

I know it can be done because I saw it firsthand in Northern Ireland. Men and women, some of whom had never met, never before spoken, who had spent their entire lives in conflict, several of them had been targets of assassination attempts, had been shot; several of them have served prison terms for killing people in the other community. But they 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 peace agreements is as difficult and as important as reaching them. That should be self-evident. But often just getting an agreement is so difficult that the natural tendency is to celebrate, then go home and turn to other matters. But as we are now seeing, not just in Northern Ireland, but also in the Balkans and Middle East, getting it done is often harder than agreeing to do it.

Once again, patience and perseverance are necessary.

It is especially important that Americans, busy at home and all across the world, not be distracted or become complacent by the good feeling created by a highly-publicized agreement. If a conflict is important enough for us to get involved in, we must see it through all the way to a fair and successful conclusion.

Right now, as we speak, the governments and the parties so far have been unable to resolve issues relating to the formation of the Executive of the new Northern Ireland Assembly or the decommissioning of arms by the paramilitary organizations.

There is widespread uneasiness among some about the continuing release of prisoners, and next year there will be further intense controversy when reports are received from independent commissions on policing and the criminal justice system. It will take extraordinary determination and commitment to get

safely through all of these problems, but I believe that it can be done and I pray that it will be done.

It would be an immense tragedy for this process to fail. The British and Irish Governments and the people of Northern Ireland have come too far to let peace slip away now. The people of Northern Ireland deserve better than the troubles they have had over the past several decades. Peace and political stability are not a lot to ask for; indeed, they are the minimal needs in a decent and caring society.

There is one final point that is so important to me that it extends beyond open conflict. I recall clearly that my first day in Northern Ireland, nearly four years ago, I saw for the first time the huge wall which physically separates the two communities in Belfast. Thirty feet high, topped in some places with barbed wire, it's an ugly reminder of the intensity and the duration of the conflict.

Ironically, it's called the Peace Line. On that first morning, I met with Catholics on their side of the wall, in the afternoon with Protestants on their side. Their messages had not been coordinated, but they were the same. In Belfast and in the other urban areas of Northern Ireland, they told me, there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence. They told me that when 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 in Calcutta, or Johannesburg, or the Middle East. Despair is the fuel for conflict and instability everywhere in the world. Hope and opportunity are essential to peace and stability. Men and women everywhere need the income to support their families, and they need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful with their lives.

The Universal Declaration also recognizes this as a basic right. Article 23 begins with the words, "Everyone has the right to work." The conflict in Northern Ireland is obviously not exclusively or even primarily economic. It involves religion and national identity. The Unionists identify with and want to remain part of the United Kingdom; Nationalists identify with and want to become part of a United Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement acknowledges the legitimacy of both aspirations and

it creates the possibility that economic prosperity will flow from and contribute to a lasting peace.

My most fervent hope is that history will record that the conflict, which has come to be known there as the "Troubles," ended on August 15th 1998 at Omagh, that the bomb which shattered the town that warm summer afternoon was in fact the last spasm of violence in a long and violent conflict. Amidst the death and destruction there was laid bare the utter senselessness of trying to solve the political problems of Northern Ireland by violence. It won't work. It will only make things worse.

Two weeks later, I accompanied Prime Minister Blair and President Clinton to Omagh to meet with the survivors and with the relatives of those killed. There were hundreds of people present. Among those with whom I spoke, there were two whom I will never forget. Claire Gallagher is fifteen-years-old, tall and lovely, an aspiring pianist. She lost both of her eyes. As we spoke, she sat with two large white patches where her eyes used to be, an exemplar of grace and courage.

Michael Monahan is thirty-three-years-old. In the blast he lost his wife, who was pregnant, their eighteen-month-old daughter and his wife's mother — three generations wiped out in a single, brutal, senseless moment. Michael was left with three children under the age of five, and he told me that one of them, his son Patrick, two-years-old, asks his father every day, "Daddy, when is Mommy coming home?"

Despite their terrible and irreparable losses, both Claire and Michael told me that what they wanted most was for the peace process to go forward. Their determination gave me resolve and their courage gave me hope.

I am not objective. I am deeply biased in favor of the people of Northern Ireland. I spent nearly four years among them. I came to like and admire them. While they are quarrelsome and quick to take offense, they are warm and generous, energetic and productive. They made mistakes, but they are learning from them. They are learning that violence won't solve their problems, they are learning that Unionists and Nationalists have more in common than their differences, and they are learning that knowledge of history is a good thing, but being chained to the past is not.

There will be many setbacks along the way, but the direction for Northern Ireland was firmly set when the people approved the Good Friday Agreement. The people of Ireland are sick of war. They are sick of so many funerals, especially those involving the small, white coffins of children prematurely laid in the rolling green fields of their beautiful countryside.

They want peace and I pray that they can keep it.

When the agreement was reached on the evening of April 10th, we had been in negotiations for nearly two years, and we had been in session continuously for about forty hours. We were all elated, but totally exhausted. There was a great deal of emotion and tears flowed — tears of exhaustion, tears of relief, tears of joy.

In my parting comment to the men and women with whom I spent two very long and difficult years, I told them that for me the agreement was the realization of a dream, a dream that had sustained me through three-and-a-half difficult years.

Now, I said, I have a new dream. My new dream is to return to Northern Ireland in a few years with my young son. We will travel the country — it's a beautiful country — and we will meet and talk with the warm and generous people there. Then on a rainy afternoon, we will drive to the building which houses the Northern Ireland Assembly and we will sit quietly in the visitors' gallery. There we will watch and listen as the members of that Assembly 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, on the day when peace is taken for granted in Northern Ireland, I will be truly fulfilled, and people of goodwill everywhere will rejoice.

Thank you for your attention.

Michael A. Cooper

I think, Senator Mitchell, that I and others here understand better now than we did earlier in the evening how you were able to accomplish what you did and what a magnificent person it took to achieve that accomplishment. We conferred honorary membership on you, and you honored us by being here. Thank you for it.



Compliments of Reuters/Danilo Krstanovic/Archive Photos

Young students demonstrate for United Sarajevo in the centre of the city December 11. Bosnian Serb officials on Monday were preparing for a referendum in Sarajevo's Serb-held northern and western suburbs, which revert to government control under the terms of the Dayton peace plan.