

PRINCIPLES FOR PEACE: NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE  
MIDDLE EAST

GEORGE MITCHELL, Senate Majority Leader

November 4, 1998

The 1998 Issam Fares Lecture



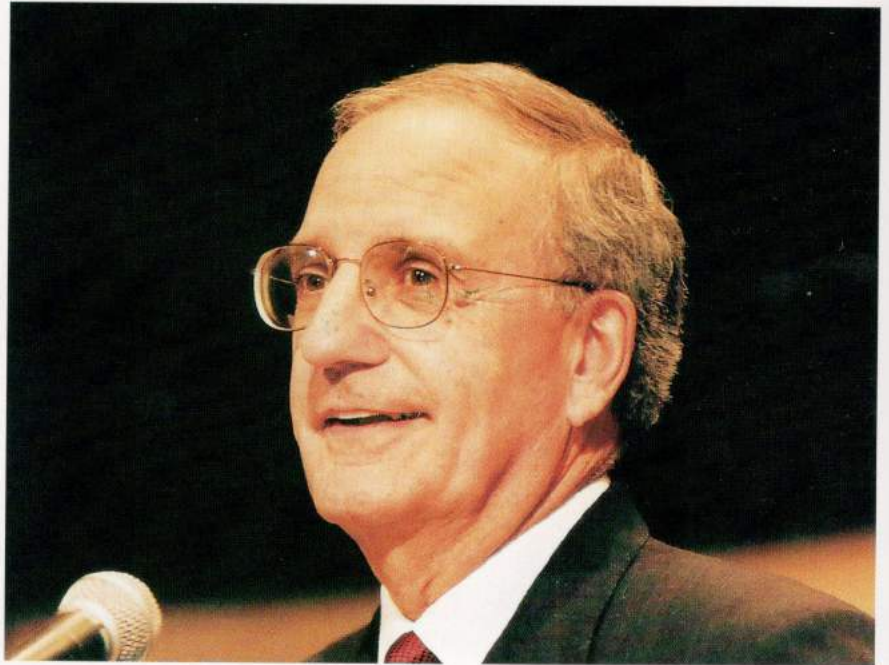
*"Principles for Peace: Northern Ireland and The Middle East"*

The Honorable George J. Mitchell

November 4, 1998



## **GEORGE MITCHELL**



George J. Mitchell was appointed to the United States Senate in 1980, and then was elected to a full term in 1982. Following an illustrious career in the Senate spanning 14 years, he left in 1995 as the Senate Majority Leader, and enjoyed bipartisan respect during his tenure. For six consecutive years he was voted «the most respected member of the Senate.»

Later Senator Mitchell served as Chairman of the Peace Negotiations in Northern Ireland. Under his leadership an historic accord ending years of conflict was agreed upon by the governments of Ireland and the United Kingdom and the political parties of Northern Ireland.

Senator Mitchell led the successful 1990 reauthorization of the Clean Air Act, including new controls on acid rain toxins, and was the author of the first national oil spill prevention and clean-up law. His efforts were also instrumental in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, landmark legislation extending civil rights to the disabled, as well as the passage of a higher education bill that expands opportunities for millions of Americans. A leader in opening markets to trade, Senator Mitchell led the Senate to ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement and creation of the World Trade Organization.

Upon leaving the Senate, Senator Mitchell joined the Washington, D.C. law firm of Verner, Liipfert, Bernhard, McPherson and Hand. He also serves as chairman of the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention of crises in international affairs. At the request of the British and Irish governments, he served as chairman of the International Commission on Disarmament in Northern Ireland, and as chairman of the Peace Talks in Northern Ireland.





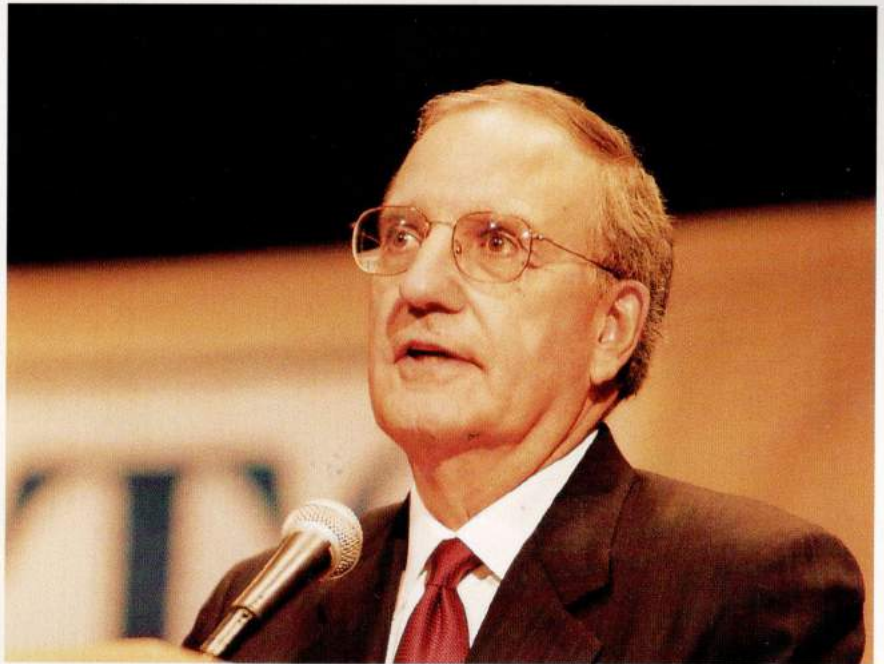
## Issam Fares

This is a special occasion for me, and a unique opportunity for the Issam M. Fares Lecture Series at Tufts University. It is special because our speaker this evening is half-Irish and half-Lebanese. However, above all, he is all-American. Our speaker is a great statesman, a leading conciliator on the world stage, and a man for difficult missions. I would have said he is the man for a «mission impossible.» But he made the «impossible» possible. This is Senator George J. Mitchell.

In addressing the problems of Northern Ireland and the Middle East, our Speaker is addressing the problems of diverse societies under stress, and the process of bringing about peace and stability in these societies through compromise and conciliation. The main issue facing the world today is the persistent conflict between different ethnic communities, different religions, different linguistic groupings, and different nations with different ideologies. The challenge is how to recognize the other, listen to the other, understand the other and live with the other in peace and dynamic interaction. This will not be easy, but it is something that we must work for, if civilization is to progress and endure. Two major conflicts dominated the international scene for the past decades. These are Northern Ireland and Lebanon. Books will be written on how the Northern Ireland conflict was resolved by our speaker.

The experience of Senator Mitchell, as a negotiator in international conflicts, is relevant to the process that concern us in the Middle East. As he activated his Irish component to help resolve the Northern Ireland conflict, I am sure he will not shirk from activating his Lebanese dimension to help resolve the conflicts - potential and actual - that impact on peace, stability, and progress in Lebanon and the Middle East. Senator Mitchell made his career as a legislator. He crowned this career by becoming a missionary of peace. To move from the status of an American statesman to a world statesman, is not only a great honor, but, more importantly a great responsibility. As Chairman of the International Crisis Group, of which I am privileged to be a member, he works with a team of specialists throughout the world to resolve potential conflicts before they erupt into violence and war. This is a new approach to world affairs and one of great importance to the future of peace. Senator Mitchell, we welcome you to this Forum, and look forward to learning from you new approaches that will hasten the processes of peace, stability, and progress in Lebanon and the Middle East.





## George Mitchell

Issam Fares has become an institution

The blessings of liberty for all

*«Our greatness lies in our ideals: individual liberty, equal opportunity, full and fair justice for all, the idea that every citizen should have a fair chance to succeed.»*

It is an honor for me to participate in the Fares Lecture Series here at Tufts University. This is a happy marriage of two impressive institutions. Tufts has a global reputation for excellence in the field of international relations. Its scholars and its scholarship are renowned throughout the world.

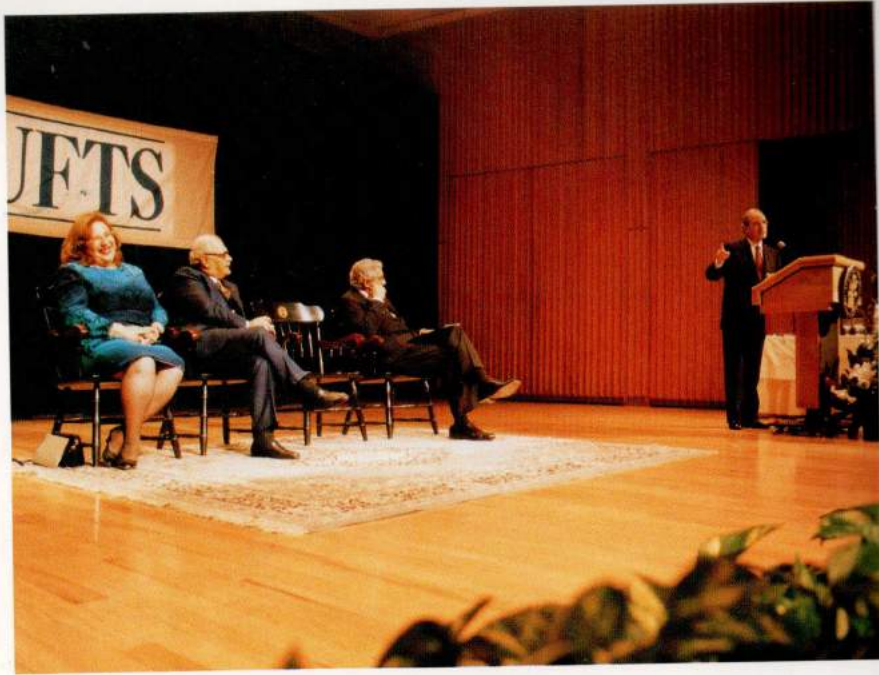
Issam Fares has become an institution in his own right, achieving an eminent reputation as a public official and philanthropist dedicated to peace and democracy in the Middle East and throughout the world. It is a coincidence, but for me a source of special satisfaction, that my mother was born in Lebanon which is, of course, the home of Issam and his family. Issam, I count myself among your friends and admirers and I am pleased that you and your family could be here this evening.

The subject of my remarks is «Principles of Peace: Northern Ireland and the Middle East.» Although they are distant lands, in both, the highway of peace runs directly through the United States, so it is appropriate to begin here.

Over two centuries ago, a small group of men met in Philadelphia in a Constitutional Convention that was one of the turning points in human history. They had as their central objective the prevention of tyranny in America. They had lived under a British king. They did not want there ever to be an American king. They were brilliantly successful. We have had 42 presidents and no kings. The framework for government they created enabled the newly United States to become the strongest economic and military power in the world. But necessary as it is, that power is not the ultimate source of American influence. The United States was a great nation long before it was a great military power. That is because our greatness lies in our ideals: individual liberty, equal opportunity, full and fair justice for all, the idea that every citizen should have a fair chance to succeed. The American Constitution is more than a framework for self-government. It is an act of political and literary genius. The Bill of Rights is the most concise and eloquent statement ever written on 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 cannot get decent health care for her child, to the young people who lack the skills needed to compete in a world of technology - they do not think much about liberty or justice; they worry about coping day to day.

Here is the greatest challenge and opportunity for America and American ideals: how to use our power and influence to make available to all our





## North Ireland peace

*«Our objectives must include peace and democracy. Around the world, we can make a difference. We already have in Northern Ireland, thanks to President Clinton's commitment and leadership.»*

people, and to others, the full blessings of liberty.

Our objectives must include peace and democracy. Around the world, we can make a difference. We already have in Northern Ireland, thanks to President Clinton's commitment and leadership. For decades, violence and fear settled over that beautiful land like a heavy, unyielding fog. Bombings and riots hurt the economy. Unemployment rose, with violence, in a deadly cycle of escalating misery.

Finally, after years of effort, the British and Irish governments were able to get peace negotiations underway in June of 1996. At their invitation, I agreed to serve as Chairman. It was the longest, most difficult negotiation I have ever been involved with. Often, 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 months that followed. There was a sharp increase in sectarian killings; an effort by men of violence on both sides to destroy the process. Early this year I concluded that a deadline for the negotiations was necessary if there was to be any chance of success. I decided on the Easter weekend, which had the advantage of having special significance in Irish history.

In late March, I met with all of the participants in the negotiations: two governments and eight political leaders. I recommended to them a final deadline of midnight, Thursday, April 9<sup>th</sup>. They all agreed. 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. The Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Ireland, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, came to Belfast and showed true leadership. There would not have been an agreement without their personal involvement. During the night, President Clinton played a crucial role, calling several of the participants. Finally, in the late afternoon of Good Friday, we reached agreement.

It is important to recognize that the agreement does not, by itself, guarantee a durable peace, 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 the agreement will endure because it is fair and balanced. It requires the use of exclusively democratic and peaceful means to resolve differences, and it commits all of the parties to the total disarmament of paramilitary organizations. It stresses the need for mutual respect and tolerance between communities. It is based on the principle that the future of Northern Ireland





## Lessons for the Middle East

*«Each human being is unique. Each human society is unique. It follows logically, then, 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.»*

*«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 in Northern Ireland; at times they nearly succeeded.»*

should be decided by the people of Northern Ireland.

Since my return to the US, I have been asked what lessons Northern Ireland holds for other conflicts, especially the Middle East. I will try to answer that question now.

I begin with caution. Each human being is unique. Each human society is unique. It follows logically, then, 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 that I believe are universal in their reach. They arise out of my experience in Northern Ireland and I would like to share some of them with you this evening.

First, I believe there is no such thing as a conflict that cannot be ended. They are 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 wide-spread feeling of pessimism among the public and the political leaders. It is 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 a compliment: «Thank you, Senator.» «God bless you.» «We appreciate what you are trying to do.» But they always ended in despair: «But you are wasting your time.» «This conflict cannot be ended.» «We have been killing each other for centuries and we are 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 things can be better. Not in a foolish or unrealistic way, but in a way that creates hope and confidence among the people. This is especially necessary in the Middle East, where the sheer length of the conflict breeds doubt and despair.

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 in Northern Ireland; at times they nearly succeeded. In July, 10 Catholic churches were burned, and three young Catholics were burned to death. In August, a devastating bomb in the town of Omagh killed 29 people and injured 220, Protestant and Catholic alike. These were acts of appalling ignorance and hatred. They must be totally condemned. But to succumb to the temptation to retaliate would give the criminals what they want: escalating sectarian





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violence and the end of the peace process. The way to respond is to swiftly bring those who committed this crime to justice and 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 so wide that it is hard to continue the journey. But no matter how bleak the outlook, the search for peace must go on.

This, too, is especially critical in the Middle East. There have been terrible acts of murder. There will almost certainly be more in the future. But to say in advance that if the terrorists strike hard enough the peace process will end is to hand over to them control of the future. Rather, the policy should be to make clear that the peace process will continue despite the violent efforts of those who oppose it. Seeking an end to conflict is not for the timid or the tentative. It takes courage, perseverance and steady nerves in the face of terrorism.

I believe there can be peace in the Middle East. Indeed, I believe there will be peace in the Middle East, because the alternative is so contrary to the interests of the vast majority of people on both sides. Most of the people in the Middle East want a just and lasting peace. Their lives and their futures cannot be held hostage to violent minorities.

A third need is a willingness to compromise. Peace and political stability are not achievable between 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. Most 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 know it can be done, because I saw it first-hand in 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 in the Middle East.

A fourth principle is to recognize that the implementation of 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 relax.



*«If a conflict is important enough for us to get involved in the first place, we should see it through all the way to a fair and successful conclusion.»*

But as we are now seeing in Northern Ireland, with the Good Friday Agreement, and in the Middle East, with the Wye Agreement, getting it done is often harder than agreeing to do it.

Once again, patience and perseverance are necessary. It is especially important that we Americans, who are 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 the first place, we should see it through all the way to a fair and successful conclusion. Again, that is particularly so in the Middle East. No one can doubt the central role the US must play in the full and fair implementation of the Oslo and Wye Agreements.

There is a fifth and final point that to me is so important that it extends beyond open conflict. I recall clearly my first day in Northern Ireland. I saw for the first time the huge wall which physically separates Catholics from Protestants in Belfast. Thirty feet high, topped with barbed wire, it is an ugly reminder of the intensity and duration of the conflict. Ironically, it is 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 there is a high correlation between unemployment and violence. 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 Manila, or in the Middle East. Despair is the fuel for instability and conflict everywhere. Hope is essential to peace and stability. Men and women everywhere need the satisfaction of doing something worthwhile and meaningful with their lives.

I am convinced that peace in Northern Ireland will bring in its wake opportunity and hope, the economic growth so necessary to political stability. I believe the same is true of the Middle East. Ask yourselves: What if all of the energy, the effort, that were now devoted to the building of prosperity on all sides? What a flowering there could be. What growth there could be. Most importantly, what hope there would be. That is why there should be peace in the Middle East, why there must be peace.

Finally, I believe that in Northern Ireland there is a lesson for Americans. Although we must be strong and prepared to use that strength where necessary, the US often can play a critical role without using force or spending a lot of money.

**The US can play a critical  
diplomatic role**



*«Because we have the most powerful military force in history, some in our country appear to feel that our rhetoric must be as loud as our weapons. But the opposite is true.»*



*«It was always emotional for me, because my mother was an immigrant from Lebanon, my father the orphan son of immigrants from Ireland. They had no education. My mother could not read or write and they worked all their lives at very low-paying jobs.»*

**No hope in a society of fear and violence**

Because we have the most powerful military force in history, some in our country appear to feel that our rhetoric must be as loud as our weapons. But the opposite is true: the stronger we are, the less we need to brag about it. At the right time and place, American idealism and optimism combined with patience, understanding and encouragement, can be valuable weapons in the quest for peace.

I am hopeful about the future in Northern Ireland because the clear and strong desire of the people is for peace and political stability. They want their children to have a decent chance in life. Before I entered the Senate I had the privilege of serving as a federal judge. In that position I had great power. What I most enjoyed was presiding over citizenship ceremonies. A group of people who had come from every part of the world, who had gone through all the required procedures, gathered before me in a federal courtroom. There I administered to them the Oath of Allegiance to the United States, and I made them Americans. It was always emotional for me, because my mother was an immigrant from Lebanon, my father the orphan son of immigrants from Ireland. They had no education. My mother could not read or write and they worked all their lives at very low-paying jobs.

But because of their efforts, and more importantly, because of the openness of American society, I, their son, was able to become the Majority Leader of the United States Senate.

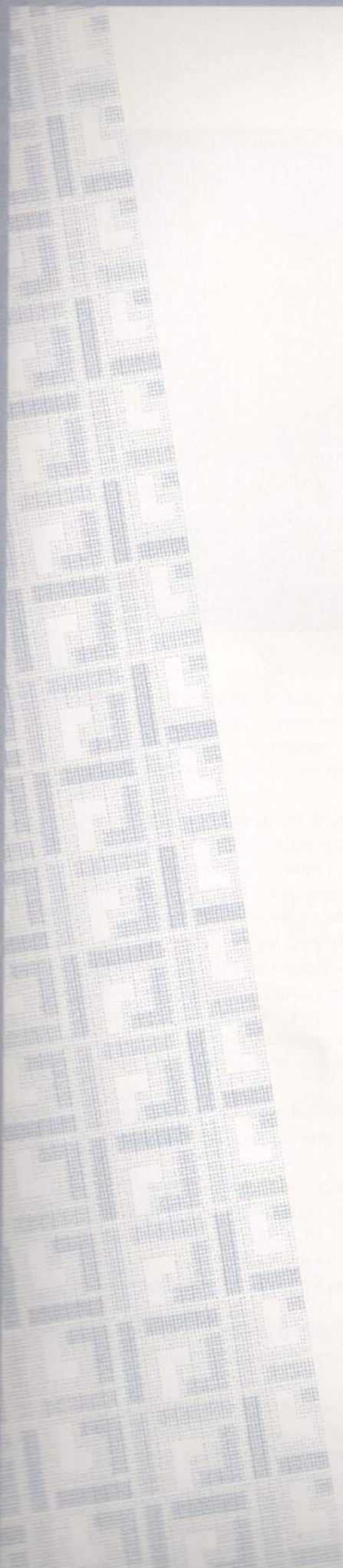
Afterward, I spoke personally with each new American, individually and in family groups. I asked them where they came from, how they came, why they came. Their stories were different, but they were all inspiring, and through them ran a common theme, best expressed by a young Asian. When I asked why he had come, he replied, in slow and halting English, «I came because here in America everybody has a chance.»

A young man who had been an American for just a few minutes summed up the meaning of our country in a single sentence. Here, everybody has a chance.

I was one of those who had a chance, and I thank God for the many people who gave me a helping hand along the way. Then, at a time and in a place that I did not seek or expect, I was given the opportunity to help others to have a chance. That they are in Ireland, the land of my father's heritage, was just a coincidence. That I was able to help was what mattered.

It is hard to have hope in a society dominated by fear and violence. And so I, who was helped by so many, did what I could to help to end the violence.





*«It is hard to have hope in a society dominated by fear and violence. And so I, who was helped by so many, did what I could to help to end the violence, to banish the fear, to enable the people of Northern Ireland to live in peace and reconciliation.»*

to banish the fear, to enable the people of Northern Ireland to live in peace and reconciliation. Peace must come first. Then elections and democratic institutions to help peace endure. Then, most difficult but most important, the decline of hate and the rise of hope. That will take a long time.

So, in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East, as everywhere, it is to the children that we must look for a better and brighter future.

Last October my wife gave birth to our son. Sixty-one babies were born in Northern Ireland on the same day. A few days later, in what was for me a painful parting, I flew back to Belfast, to the negotiations. On that long, lonely flight I wondered what life would be like for my son if he had been born in Northern Ireland. What would life be like for those 61 children if they had been born Americans?

The aspirations of parents everywhere are the same: for their children to be safe and secure, healthy and happy, well-cared for, and well-educated, able to go as high and as far as their talent and willingness to work will take them.

I want that for our son. I want it for those 61 children in Northern Ireland. And, with you, I want it for the children of the Middle East. I know you share with me in a prayer that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be one of peace and prosperity in that long-troubled land.