Ambassador Interview Series

Geraldine Byrne Nason
Ambassador of the Republic of Ireland to the United States

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With Patrick Ryan, President, Tennessee World Affairs Council

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Patrick Ryan: Welcome to our program. I'm Patrick Ryan, President of the Tennessee World Affairs Council.

Today, we're pleased to bring you a conversation with Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason, the Ambassador of the Republic of Ireland to the United States.

First, let me tell you briefly about the Tennessee World Affairs Council. The Council is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, independent educational association based in Nashville, Tennessee, that works to bring programs and resources to our community to inform people about the challenges the United States faces in the world and global issues. To do that, we ask that you
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become a member or support with your donation. You can visit TNWAC.org to learn more about the Council, review our archives of previous programs, look at the calendar of upcoming events, sign up for our newsletter, sign up for our weekly quiz and find out more about the Council and how you can become a member and make a donation.

Today I'll be talking with Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason. She assumed her role as Ireland's 19th ambassador to the United States last August. She was Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations for Ireland in New York from 2017 to 2022. Previously, she served as Ambassador to France, Second Secretary General in the Department of the Prime Minister of Ireland, Ambassador and Ireland's Deputy Permanent Representative to the European Union and Director of the National Forum on Europe. During her career, Ambassador Byrne Nason has served in Brussels, New York, Paris, Vienna and Helsinki, as second Secretary General of the Department of the Prime Minister from 2011 to 2014, she was the highest ranking female public servant in Ireland. During that time, she was also Secretary General of Ireland's Economic Management Council.

On her arrival in New York, Ambassador Byrne Nason led Ireland's successful campaign for a seat on the United Nations Security Council and led the New York Security Council team for the 2021-2022 term as the world faced increasingly difficult and tumultuous times. So we're very pleased and honored that Ambassador Byrne Nason, during her Nashville visit, has taken time to sit down and talk with us about the U.S. Irish relationship, the Tennessee economic relationship with Ireland, bilateral economic relations and her views on what's going on in the world. So please enjoy this presentation. And again, take a look at TNWAC.org to find out how you can get involved. Thank you.

And welcome Ambassador Geraldine Byrne, Nason to Tennessee, to Nashville and to the Tennessee World Affairs Council. Thanks for being with us today.

Ambassador, you're here on your first visit. You've been holding the post as Ambassador of Ireland to the United States since last summer. And we're very pleased that you're here with us. Tennessee has a lot to offer in the relationship. Why don't you tell us what you see from your position as being Ireland's interest in Tennessee on an economic basis?

Amb Byrne Nason: First of all, thank you for having me today.

I'm delighted to be here. This is my maiden voyage to Tennessee. You've said it yourself I'm in the new role as Ambassador to the United States just a few months. But I've made it my business to come south very soon. Our sense is of being well embedded in the United States as

Irish people with a heritage that's rich and deep. Ten percent of the population of the United States identify as Irish. That's normally associated with the northern United States, with Boston, Chicago, traditional big Irish cities and towns, San Francisco, New York. But in fact, if you look at Tennessee, you'll see that 10% of people in Tennessee also identify as being Irish or Scots-Irish.

We know that the economic opportunities here, not just because of the people-to-people relationship, but also because of your vibrant economic development here and upward trajectory are really important. So, I decided early on in my mandate that I wouldn't waste time and I would come to see firsthand what is on offer here. I've had a tremendously warm welcome.

First of all, recognize that your own economy, from a tax competitive point of view, a tremendous standard of living, but a low cost of living also and a pro-business posture make you very attractive economically. We've already opened up the relationship, but I think there's huge space for us to grow this relationship. On the economic side the U.S. accounts for about a quarter of all Irish exports into the United States, which is a very important statistic for us here. It's probably in Pharma and in MedTech and also the FedEx presence accounts for that. But that's a representation of a significant Irish import opportunity here in Tennessee. We know that the Irish actors here in your economy account for, according to your statistics, about 10,000 of your jobs. The statistics vary here and there, but that's probably, we would say more modestly around 3000. But we wait for the numbers to settle. The bottom line is we have a good relationship already operating.

We have deep people to people cultural ties with you. We know that you have many of your people who travel to Ireland, who choose tourism in Ireland, for example, a big part of our economy also, and we're delighted to support that. So, both of the big Irish agencies, our investment, our foreign direct investment agency, the IGA and Enterprise Ireland, are active here on the ground. We have a brilliant Consul General in Atlanta reflecting Ireland's investment in the southern United States here in Tennessee on a regular basis. I hope from now on open for business, opens to grow the relationship. And we certainly want to see that it's a 21st century development.

So, it's a very forward-looking relationship. We're anchored in the past. We are delighted to know that people of Irish heritage came here in the 1700s that we had founders of Knoxville, founders of Nashville, of Irish ancestry. The three presidents you sent from Tennessee had Irish, Scottish, Irish ancestry. Presidents Jackson and Polk and Johnson all reflected Irish abroad, as I would see it. So, we were now coming full circle back to you to open up and grow a 21st century relationship and also for the next generation of young Americans, young Irish, that they get to know each other.

We're very active in the education sector and we want to see a lot more cross-fertilization to see our young students come here to you. We've been pushing our research and development programs both in Ireland and the United States, to be more interlinked. Our Science Foundation Ireland has been here in Tennessee looking at your wonderful Vanderbilt University, where I

will speak later, but also working with some of your medical facilities to make sure that we make the best of our young people's opportunities. And with my own background, I would argue that through that educational link, it's the best hope for future of international peace and security.

Patrick Ryan: Well, you've laid out very persuasively the interest in Tennessee. But Ireland has done very well in attracting foreign direct investment of its own, especially from the United States. And we'll talk about the U.S.-Irish economic ties. But in terms of Tennessee businesses, what would you tell them about the environment in Ireland that would be attractive to them to look to Ireland for investment?

Amb Byrne Nason: Well, the first thing I would say is that we are the fastest growing economy in the Eurozone, in the European space. Our economic growth last year was in the region of 8%, 7.7% in December. That's remarkable in the current uncertain international environment. We are managing our inflation right now at a level that's well below most of our European partners. And we're also looking forward to a very vibrant 2023. We are the home to some of the biggest and most successful multinational companies worldwide. Nine of the top ten financial services companies are in Dublin. Nine of the top ten high tech companies are in Dublin. We have the new generation automation companies. All of the big internationally recognized ones are based in Dublin. We have an environment and the ethos there that's grown up around those big multinational investors that is hugely supportive of innovation, of small startups, of progressive business practices. But we importantly are also well-situated for U.S. investors because Ireland, now, in the wake of the departure of the United Kingdom from Europe, remains the primary English language speaking member of the European Union.

We are a gateway to Europe for investors. The single market in Europe represents a 450 million consumer market. We can work with U.S. investors on facilitating access in Europe, but also importantly because we are members of the European Union, we are at the table shaping the regulatory environment that supports business, the regulatory environment that facilitates investment. So we are always in conversation with our U.S. friends and partners around how we position ourselves in the European Union to best support those relationships.

We have a young population. I always say young Irish are young Europeans. So, one in four of our young Irish are under 30 years old. We have a demography, so that lends itself to progressive, forward looking economic development. And we want to take full advantage of that in partnership with the United States.

Patrick Ryan: Well, you've identified Ireland as the window to Europe for the United States. Let's turn to the United States-Ireland bilateral relations, and we'll start with the economic piece. So, what level of investment across the board with the United States is attached to the Irish-American relationship?

Amb Byrne Nason: Hugely important economic relationship. I would use the term critical for Ireland. The United States is the number one foreign direct investor in in Ireland. Overall,

foreign direct investment accounts for about 20% of our jobs in Ireland. The U.S. investment on the ground in Ireland accounts for 190,000 jobs right now today, with indirect pick up of jobs in the region of 150,000. So, you're getting very close to 400,000 jobs supported by U.S. foreign direct investment in Ireland and growing. We've seen a little bumpiness around the high-tech sector, but I know from those who are working with those sectors that there is a really strong pipeline.

We see this as going from strength to strength. But I always find I have to sort of underline here that while the United States is such a hugely important partner on the ground in Ireland, that Ireland -- it's a two-way street and Ireland is actually a very significant partner for a small island of five million people, we are the United States ninth foreign direct investor. So statistically, let alone if you look at scale, that's pretty impressive number. Irish investment into the United States supports today 100,000 jobs directly here. In the United States. And I'm hoping some of those will also make their way to Tennessee very soon. But at the moment, the bigger relationship is a very positive one, and we want that to continue. We see, of course, that our opportunity to work as a European player has added advantage at both ends of the spectrum in terms of that economic relationship. We work very, very much and in Brussels as members of the European Union, to ensure that the wider trading relationship is in good order, that it's kept in good health.

We are the two most important trading blocs in the world. If you call the United States a bloc, certainly the biggest trader in the world and you know, we want to make sure that those relationships are settled and that we leverage each other's interests in a mutually beneficial way. And Ireland being at the table as the most open economy in Europe, and certainly we're one of the most open economies in the world. Full stop. We see it hugely to our advantage that we're working in that harmonious way for an open, vibrant trading relationship with the United States, not least when we're in such an uncertain security environment internationally.

Patrick Ryan: You talked in the luncheon today about the political relationship, and you made reference to the Good Friday Agreement. For those in our audience who don't know, we're not familiar with that. Can you talk a little bit about the American involvement in that process?

Amb Byrne Nason: Absolutely. I mean, I would say that the peace and stability on the island of Ireland is an American foreign policy success -- over time and over administrations.

So, we're very lucky to have had bipartisan support. The U.S. government and successive administrations have reached out to support us in the efforts that were vain for some time to deliver peace on the island of Ireland. And exactly 25 years ago the stars aligned in a way politically and on the ground in terms of the insecurity, to deliver the Good Friday Agreement. A very well-known U.S. negotiator under President Clinton at the time, George Mitchell, then a U.S. senator was pivotal to that negotiation and to the outcome. And the British and Irish Governments, together with the people of Northern Ireland, took all measures, including in Ireland, to constitutional change in order to deliver the Good Friday Agreement.

That agreement, quite simply put, transformed the future of my country. And we will always be deeply grateful to the United States for the support given then to deliver on that agreement. But of course, as everyone knows, signing on the dotted line is the easy part. Usually, the hard part is the roll out, the implementation of peace. And we have had 25 years of success in delivering on that.

We've seen Northern Ireland transform itself. But we're currently in a in a period of some uncertainty in Northern Ireland. We've had elections there in May which haven't resulted in the parties coming to the table to form the Assembly and the Executive, much to the regret of most of the majority of people in Northern Ireland and indeed certainly to the regret of business in Northern Ireland. One party, the Democratic Unionist Party, will only agree to come into government in Northern Ireland once the discussions on the Brexit protocol have been resolved. That's a whole other complex issue. We want to see that negotiation resolved very quickly and return the democratically elected people in Northern Ireland to their rightful place in an uncertain economic and political environment doing the job they were elected by the people of Northern Ireland to do.

Regrettably, the people of Northern Ireland, as we know, did not vote for Brexit, but they now are faced with managing the results of that and the protocol will help to ensure that the people in Northern Ireland have the benefit of being members of the, and have access to the, single European market as well as being part of the integrity of the UK single market and prevailing. So we want to see the best of both worlds for the people of Northern Ireland. It's taken a while to get there. It's been very frustrating for the people of Northern Ireland in particular, but also for the government in Dublin. And we know that this new government in London are working with Brussels to resolve the issues. Ireland is not part of that negotiation. That's an issue that's related to Brexit. It's an issue that's related to the European Union and the United Kingdom.

We're hopeful that those negotiations will soon come to a successful conclusion and that we can see Northern Ireland, see its institutions stood up again and deliver on their democratic responsibility to the people that they represent.

Patrick Ryan: Well, you've leapt into my fourth and fifth questions ahead. But let me just turn back to the political relationship with the United States. Last summer, I believe the prime minister was in Washington, he met President Biden. And among the issues they talked about was immigration from Ireland. So, when Americans think about immigration, they think about the southern border.

But there's also a question of immigration from Ireland. And some of the people who come are not on the books, so to speak. How big of an issue is that, whether in terms of numbers or just the seriousness of the relationship and what measures might be under way to deal with the problem?

Amb Byrne Nason: Well, immigration, I know, is a very politically sensitive issue in the United States, and I'm only a few months in the job, but I'm beginning to get a measure of just how challenging that is.

Patrick Ryan: I'm surprised the Irish ambassador hasn't been to the Texas border.

Amb Byrne Nason: [Laughter] Not quite. But as you say, there are different challenges within that immigration issue, if I put it in very general terms. Fact is this country was built on immigration and Irish people know that better than most. We have the unfortunate situation in Ireland where we, for over a century, exported our people.

We're a net immigration host now in Ireland. Just as a parenthesis, 17% of the population of Ireland right now were not born in Ireland. So, we have become, instead of exporting our people, we are importing people from, largely from Europe, from North Africa. We have 70,000 Ukrainians in Ireland at the moment, so we're a very diverse on the island of Ireland. But over time we have had generations of Irish people come to make their fortune and to build their families and their futures here in the United States. In any of the parts of the United States I've been in, people would recognize, have done good where they've arrived.

It's true that in recent generations some people have come without they the legal permission to stay in the United States. And we are looking at two things in terms of Irish interest in immigration. One is an opening up the window for a new generation of Irish to come into the United States legally. We don't think the immigration opportunity that we Irish bring to you as the United States should be over, because there are issues in relation to immigration in other parts of the country.

We would argue that we have bright young people who should merit an opportunity to come and work and support the evolution of your economy still. So, there's that legal path of immigration we would like to see opened up further, even in a politically sensitive time. But also, there are people here who are unresolved in terms of their legal status, and they are a significant number. I don't know the exact number, but I think that the important thing is they are people who have been here and contributed sometimes over a couple of generations to life in the United States, to their communities, to their political society and certainly to the economy. And we would like to see that recognized. And so, we have been looking for ways to resolve that aspect of their lives. Some of them are in dire economic situation.

The Irish government, in its own way, supports all of the immigrants who came to the United States. We have what we call an emigrant support program that covers legal and those who without the legal status here. But we would we argue when we have political conversations that there should be an open mind to addressing those unresolved issues. And certainly the Irish government raises that political level all the time, even recognizing the contextual complexity of that right now. We would like also, as I say, to see young, bright contributors come through legally.

Patrick Ryan: Let's turn back to Brexit. You talked about Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland protocol. But if we can expand that conversation to the post-Brexit environment, the relationship with the United Kingdom, your very close trading partner.

Help us understand more about the Northern Ireland Protocol and the single market and the borders and the implications of Brexit in terms of the border, the economic trade border being across the Irish Sea as opposed to the territory between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Amb Byrne Nason: Even your question tells your listeners it's a complex issue. The reality is that until the Brexit referendum, Ireland and the United Kingdom and that then included Northern Ireland, we all operated in the same free trade zone in the European Union.

We were all part of the same market. Once the United Kingdom, decided to leave the European Union, it threw up a whole range of challenges, not least how do the United Kingdom protect the integrity of their markets, their single market, and for Europe, how does Europe protect the integrity of its market?

And suddenly an issue that we, as Ireland had raised many times, which had been given no attention whatsoever during the debate before Brexit, suddenly Northern Ireland became an issue that people recognized was a challenge not accommodated for in the thinking ahead of Brexit.

The decision was to, and the British government into fact designed the protocol, to design a protocol that would take into account the sui generis nature of Northern Ireland being on the one hand in the European Union still as part of the island of Ireland and on the part of the UK single market at the same time.

The objective in all of this, from the Irish Government's point of view, is not just to protect, of course our single market interest and the European Union's interest in the single market, but to ensure that there would be no obstacle to free movement of people, trade, goods, services on the island of Ireland. I grew up on an island where there was a hard border, where the border was policed, where it was a military line that you crossed and no one in Ireland, following the Good Friday Agreement, ever wants to see that again. And neither the British nor the Irish government want to revert to an infrastructure that expresses a border.

So, we have to come up with a creative solution. The protocol was intended to do that, to allow trade right across the island into the European Union, respecting the decision that the majority of people in the United Kingdom, but not the majority of people in Northern Ireland made to leave the European Union. So now we have spent at least the last two years very much forward and back in complex discussions without much success between London and Brussels.

I will say take the opportunity of this moment to say that I have been really struck by the extraordinary flexibility and openness of the European Union in supporting the work to find a solution on this issue. I was Ambassador in Brussels to the European Union, and it's known as a

behemoth, it's known as a big bureaucracy and rigid. And I have to say, it couldn't be any further from the truth in this Brexit discussion.

There has been a creative, innovative approach on the part of Brussels, on the part of the other members of the European Union who have kept faith with Ireland through all of this negotiation. So, we have been frustrated by the amount of time it's taken in in London. There have been a few changes in government and we understand what a change in government brings. We're hopeful that this new government under Prime Minister Sunak will finish this job and soon, and that we will see a negotiation between London and Brussels conclude in the very foreseeable future.

We come up to the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in April. We want to be in a position where the institutions in Northern Ireland are stood up. Are functioning. And to look ahead to the next stage of Northern Ireland's development. And there's a whole generation, happily, a whole generation on the island of Ireland and in Northern Ireland, who have never known conflict, who don't remember what we call "the troubles" and the havoc that reached on the island of Ireland. We have no desire to revert to that. We see this upcoming anniversary as a moment, of course, of reflection about the great American foreign policy success I mentioned in the Good Friday Agreement, but also as a moment for looking forward.

President Biden recently appointed former Congressman Joe Kennedy from Boston to be a special envoy with a mandate to look at the economic future of Northern Ireland. We think that's where we should be looking ahead to the future as we mark this anniversary.

We will be in good shape to do that once the protocol has been set aside, as it were the challenge, and that the people and the business in Northern Ireland find their way back to full executive formation and action.

Patrick Ryan: Well, in the remaining time, I have two large areas of inquiry. But let me ask if you could briefly address another anniversary that Ireland has. It's been 50 years in the EU and you've been ambassador to the EU.

What has the EU membership meant for Ireland? And then I'm going to ask you about your perspective on the global landscape and what we see as tumultuous times.

Amb Byrne Nason: Well, in terms of the impact of European Union membership on Ireland, I would say I've used the word already, but transformative. Ireland, you know, when we joined the European Union, our GDP in 1974 was half of the average of the European, other European member states. It's now double that. We're twice the average of every European state.

We were a small, agrarian peripheral economy. We're now the most vibrant economy in the European Union I mentioned earlier, growth rates and job creation, a net import of people from other European countries.

We are seen, quite frankly, as the success story of the European Union. I know that when in 2004, the ten members of the Eastern Bloc, as it was then known, countries like Poland, Hungary, the Estonians, were joining the European Union. They invited Irish politicians to come on the ground in Eastern Europe to explain how you make such a success of that membership. When Ireland joined the European Union back in the seventies, we were also a different society. And as a woman, I'm very conscious that women have benefited more than any other sector of Irish society from European Union membership. When we joined equal pay was not part of our legislative framework.

We actually had to have a derogation for the first year and a half because we couldn't pay equal pay in the seventies, which tells you the nature of Ireland at the time. Irish Public Service women who married had to resign until we joined the European Union. So, I wouldn't be sitting here as a wife and mother if we weren't members of the European Union. Other minorities, like our LGBTQ communities, have all benefited from the progressive European legislation.

As you know, Ireland was the first country to introduce marriage for all, as it's sometimes called here, same sex marriage. So, we have had a progressive pathway in Europe. We've had a huge economic advantage in being part of the European single market. But I think probably the biggest advantage of our membership has been the coming of age of Ireland politically.

And, you know, we find ourselves at the table as a peer of the United Kingdom, of France, of Germany. But many of the really important policies in the European Union, like tax policy, security and defense, foreign policy, are agreed by consensus. So, our voice found a level that we never imagined it could. We're now one of the eight longest serving members of the European Union. So, we are now a net contributor to the European budget. We're influential. We're at that table helping to shape the future of almost 500 million people and for a small peripheral island in the Atlantic, for the next stop is the United States, that's a pretty remarkable transformation in 50 years.

And I will say to you, in terms of public perception, 88% of people last year in Ireland, in a census said that they supported our membership. So that reflects what people in Ireland believe the success feels like.

Patrick Ryan: Let me turn to talk about being on the world stage as a distinguished international studies person. You represented Ireland at the United Nations, and during the time when I was held a seat on the Security Council at the U.N., I would love to have the time to talk about the details of what's happening in Ukraine and the implications of the Russian invasion. But just give us your impressions of what's going on in the world in an era where we should be working altogether to fight climate change and humanitarian issues in places like Africa and South East Asia and South West Asia. But we see conflicts, great power conflicts emerging. The situation in the Western Pacific with China and its neighbors, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a return to autocracy in many nations.

As a diplomat of great standing and experience how do you react to those kinds of things?

Amb Byrne Nason: I think you've posited the international environment as it is. It's unstable. It's challenged. And I think it's in a phase of disruption. I would use that term, disruption of the international order, that I haven't seen in my diplomatic career before.

Ireland was delighted to win a seat - we had to campaign to sit at the Security Council table. And when we assumed that role at the beginning of 2021, although there were pockets of instability, there wasn't a sense that at the global level tectonic plates were shifting. Frankly, in the two years we sat on the council, that changed.

We saw that in Technicolor on the 24th of February, when President Putin began his illegal war against Ukraine. The first time we've seen a nuclear power, a Permanent Member of the Security Council attack, a small neighbor, and the territorial integrity, the sovereignty of Ukraine disrupted and affronted. And in fact, our view of that, which leads to the broader sense of what the international environment is like now, is that it wasn't just an invasion of another country. It was an affront to the international order that we believe prevails. It's an affront on the human rights side. It's an affront on the humanitarian side. It's an affront to the respect for international law, which it opens up the risk of huge dislocation internationally. And on the humanitarian front.

You know, the Ukrainian war or the war in Ukraine has also shone a light now on fragilities elsewhere in the globe. While we were on the Security Council as Ireland, we paid huge attention and worked very hard to support countries in Africa. 60% of the agenda of the Security Council is focused on Africa. As the neighborhood war in Europe started, we began to see that the whole international support system for food security became not just fragile, but was disrupted. And we're seeing the knock-on effects of war in the Sahel, where there was already disruption and uncertainty with jihadists.

Now we're finding famine settling in Somalia. A Little bit further north of Sahel, you have in eastern Africa, both countries near stable countries like Kenya, suffering huge challenges from this disruptive effect of the war.

We think that, first of all, we want this war to end and we want to see rightfully, the Ukrainian territorial integrity, including all its territory rightfully restored. But we are also deeply concerned that on the wider level, there are now big challenges emerging that are having disruptive effects. You mentioned Asia and of course, you know, the role of China is critically important, critically important politically and economically. At the Security Council China and Russia adopted often similar positions, not always.

You mentioned, for example climate in your question. We think an issue like climate security is absolutely critically important and Ireland had the courage as a member of the Security Council to be the first country ever to put climate security on the table at the UN. Not to say that every conflict was climate related, but to say the Security Council had an obligation, given the scale of the climate challenge, to look at the security implications.

The Sahel is a very good example of that. In the resolution we put on the table we had the highest number ever of U.N. member states in the U.N., 113 countries signed up to that. China took a neutral position -- did not object, did not support. We were blocked in that by Russia. The Russian Federation voted against. So, in other words, a Permanent Member blocked, vetoed our resolution. That's a roundabout way of saying China and Russia aren't always the same in their positioning. But on some of the bigger issues, we really need to work hard and harder to try and produce a more stable international environment. It's not only about obvious conflict on a day-to-day basis, it's about the insecurities around food, around health and certainly around climate.

And if I may finish off on one challenge that doesn't get much airtime, but I'll use my one moment left to mention it. It's the nuclear threat. And we're seeing some of that, you know, on the ground in the Ukraine, very worrying issues around nuclear energy, nuclear plants. But we're also coming up next week to the Doomsday Clock, the annual look at where we stand.

While on the Security Council, Ireland took a very forward role on nuclear disarmament. It's in our DNA. We were at the heart in the U.N. in the 1960s of delivering on the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. On the Security Council I chaired the JCPOA work which was linked to the Iranian nuclear deal, that I regret he United States walked away from that we need to watch very carefully.

The risk of nuclear threat -- you mentioned the Indo-Pacific. The Pakistani and Indian discussions around that are difficult and worrying. So, you know, the nuclear threat remains a serious threat to all of us. While we're not watching, in North Korea, we're seeing a lot of activity that worries us also. So, it's a universal threat.

In addition to all the other reasons for instability, I just wanted to mention that we need to be very vigilant around the nuclear threat.

Patrick Ryan: For sure. It's an issue that's not well discussed. And our World Affairs Council, we paid attention to it. We had former Secretary of Defense William Perry, who's an advocate for nuclear nonproliferation and the President of Ploughshares Joe Cirincione, here with us to talk about those issues. So, we try to continue to raise the alarm of how important that is, along with the Iran nuclear deal.

Let me conclude by asking about the U.S.-Irish cultural relationship and the warm bonds you alluded to in the number of presidents from Tennessee, but they're also presidents of the United States in contemporary times who have had Irish roots. I can recall seeing President Obama in a pub and in Ireland looking for his Irish roots.

Amb Byrne Nason: Absolutely.

Patrick Ryan: And some others. But talk to us in closing about the relationship and the people-to-people basis.

Amb Byrne Nason: The people-to-people relationship is absolutely the basis on which we began this love affair between the two countries. And it's driven forward by that link. I feel that as an Irish Ambassador in Washington, I'm stunned by the welcome, but also by the interest that people have in Irish links with each other. President Biden, your current president, happens to be probably the most Irish president since John F Kennedy. And I would say poetically that this is the 60th anniversary since John F Kennedy visited Ireland, and we intend to mark that in June in Ireland. You know, he and his family are beloved on the island of Ireland.

And President Biden, as it happens, comes from -- his Finnegan part of his ancestry comes from my home county, County Louth. So, when I was introduced to him just before Christmas, it was like two Louth people having a first chat. He immediately raised our common Louth roots.

So, all of this revolves around, you know, it's not macro level diplomacy, high vision and trade deals that make a relationship. It's the people-to-people relationship.

I would have to say, since I've arrived here in Tennessee, that I'm also so struck by how big a part music plays in that relationship and that traffic of our musicians in both directions. I know you sent the banjo to us and we've made very good use of it. But also listening to your amazing Bluegrass music, the Country and Western music you hear in this region. It's so resonant of traditional Irish music. And we're so thrilled that that cross-pollenization has taken. And I know that here tomorrow I'm going to go to Compass Records who record an extraordinary amount of traditional Irish music, probably the biggest player in the field. So, bringing a very new and modern link between our two cultural offers,

We, you know, we want to grow that relationship. We claim Elvis Presley, Dolly Parton, as well as Davy Crockett and your presidents. Garth Brooks was just in Ireland and took over the whole island for a few weeks. And people are culturally interested in the United States, and we like to think that our music and our dance -- Riverdance are here at the moment, I spent a lot of my youth as an Irish dancer. I believe it's one of the more extraordinary expressions of our cultural offer here in the United States.

And I'm also delighted to see, which is a new, relatively new development that a number of your universities have Irish studies programs. I've just come from a number of years in New York where at the Irish Center, Irish Glucksman House at NYU in New York has a very vibrant Irish studies program. I know that we have them in Boston. We have them on the West Coast in several universities. I'd love to see more US students engaging in those. That opens up the window then as many US students who go on their year abroad spend time in Dublin. We're very welcoming. Most of our universities have numbers of U.S. students.

So, our cultural ties, that's what binds us. They're deep. They're sincere. But I like to use the phrase that they're also ties that bind us they're with nostalgia but we're looking ahead. So, it's

nostalgia with a keen eye to the next generation and the future. And I hope over my time as Ambassador I at least manage to grow that one little bit. And I'll be back to Tennessee to see how the roots are growing.

Patrick Ryan: Well, we look forward to you coming back and having an opportunity to raise a pint of Guinness in your honor.

Amb Byrne Nason: Thank you.

Patrick Ryan: A few places around town where we can do that. We've been talking with the Ambassador of Ireland to the United States, Geraldine Byrne Nason. Thank you, Madam Ambassador, for your time today and sharing your insights and perspectives with the World Affairs Council.

Amb Byrne Nason: Thank you, most sincerely.

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