STORICAL ROOTS OF NORTHERN IRELAND'S RELIGIOUS CONFLICT: AN AMERICAN VIEW

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For most Americans Ireland brings forth images of St. Patrick's Day tomfoolery, Pat and Mick jokes, kissing the Blarney Stone, and a misty green mix of romance and tragedy as sweet and as strong as Tullamore Dew. Those stereotypes have been shattered since the current "troubles" began in Belfast and Northern Ireland in October, 1968. Shootings, bombings, sniper activity, and other atrocities have poured out of the North into the world's media. We have been witnessing a multi-sided struggle: Protestant majority against Catholic minority, British troops against IRA terrorists, attempts by the British government to moderate Northern Protestant intransigence and to protect the rights of Northern Catholics. In November, 1985, Margaret Thatcher and Garrett Fitzgerald gave the crisis an international dimension by signing a treaty that gives Ireland for the first time a direct role in solving the North-Ireland problem. Many Americans, even those of Irish descent, are completely mystified by the situation. What I hope to do here is to provide a clearer picture of the crisis by examining what lies behind the bombs of Belfast.

My own research interest in Ireland has focused on the 1780's and 1790's, the era of the French Revolution. In those years, an organization called the United Irishmen sought to rise above Ireland's age-old religious divisions and join liberal members of the Anglo-Irish ruling class, Ulster Presbyterians with republican sentiments, and the vast majority of dispossessed Irish Catholics in a program for Catholic Emancipation and reform of the Irish Parliament. The reform movement was transformed into a separatist conspiracy when Britain declared war on France in 1793. The United Irishmen recruited a secret revolutionary army of 200,000 men, sent agents to Paris to solicit a French invasion, and awaited a propitious moment to act. The government counteracted the threat by infiltrating the United Irish with informers, arresting leaders, disarming whole districts of Ireland by force, and fanning into flame the embers of traditional Protestant-Catholic hatreds. The desperate Rebellion of 1798 which Britain brutally crushed was the tragic end of the United Irish movement. It marked the only time in Irish history when Irishmen of all religious persuasions and from

all parts of the island acted jointly in the common cause of independence. As one writer has put it," . . .1798 was the only genuine attempt at inter-confessional nationalist radicalism, and its collapse [was] complete."[1]

It is precisely this lack of a national Irish consensus that lies at the core of the problem in Northern Ireland today. Although they inhabit the same island, Irishmen north and south understand what it means to be an Irishman in ways antithetical and apparently irreconcilable. The roots of these attitudes lie deep in Ireland's past. As one wit put it, "The Irish are a people divided by their history." Again, outsiders are mystified and puzzled by this truism. An English satirist wrote in the lyrics of a song in the 1960's "they blow up policemen, or so I have heard, and blame it on Cromwell and William the Third." And scrawled on a wall in Belfast was this bit of graffiti: "To Hell with the future and long live the past. May God in his heaven look down on Belfast."[2]

The conflict in Belfast is a historical freak. It is as old as the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries and as new as urban terrorism and guerilla warfare. The rhetoric embraces age-old sectarian insults and the newest wrinkle in post-Breshnev European Marxism. At times it spreads to neighboring Britain in senseless acts of violence such as the bombing of downtown London department stores or the 1984 attempt on the life of the prime minister at the Conservative Party conference. The Belfast conflict is at the same time Christendom's last religious war, a war of national liberation, a modern civil rights movement, and a thorny problem of de-colonization that pits descendants of settlers in Northern Ireland against a mother country that they think will abandon them. The complex problem has, to date, defied all solutions. To understand what is going on, we must examine the problem from four perspectives. They are: minority Catholics in the North, the Protestant majority in the North, the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland.

Catholic Minority/Nationalists

The Catholic minority in the North precipitated the present crisis by their demands for equal housing, jobs, and full civil rights under a Protestant-dominated government of Northern Ireland. Since Ireland was partitioned by treaty in 1921, Catholics in the northern

six counties of Ulster have suffered under the same sort of civil disabilities and direct discrimination that long existed for blacks in the American South. Although Catholics make up a third of Ulster's population of a million and a half, until 1972 a Protestant-dominated parliament, the Stormont, systematically blunted their political power in the province through gerrymandering, multiple franchise for property owners, and other types of political chicanery. Government services, housing, and employment opportunities all favored the Protestant majority. Catholics became a permanent underclass in a Protestant-controlled economy, a people disfranchised because their neighbors see them as a Trojan horse for the larger Catholic republic to the south.

A Catholic civil rights movement in the North provoked violent Protestant reaction, the intervention of British troops, and the rebirth of the Irish Republican Army. Inspired by the struggles of blacks in the American civil rights movement and by the May, 1968, "revolution" in Paris, a small group of Catholics began demonstrating to protest discrimination. Ironically, these Catholic activists seemed to accept Ireland's partition as permanent and inevitable, for they were seeking full rights for the minority within British Ulster. Protestants, threatened by any challenge to the status quo, did not see it that way. A civil rights march from Belfast to Londonderry in October, 1968, brought bloody rioting, media attention, and open conflict between Protestants and Catholics. Britain sent in troops in August, 1969, to keep the two sides apart and to protect Catholics from such groups as the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR), an unofficial paramilitary force, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the official police. With a Catholic population to defend and the British army to fight, the IRA rose to new importance under a new name, the Provisionals (Provos). The Northern Ireland crisis was tailor-made for this special breed of irregulars with their distinctive ideal of a united Irish republic.

The IRA holds the republic as a kind of talisman, demanding blood sacrifice and unwavering dedication to its fulfillment.[3] The enemy is not only the British oppressor and his Protestant surrogates in Ulster but also any Irish Catholic who accepts a moderate or negotiated settlement to the Irish problem. Tracing their lineage to the Fenians and the Irish Republican Brotherhood of the 19th century, to the heroes of the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and to the anti-Treaty forces in the Irish Civil War, the IRA are lonely

national liberators. Since the 1921 Treaty, they have been outlaw and severely repressed in the Republic, all political parties conde them and their methods, as do a majority of the Irish people. the North, Catholics welcomed them as protectors in 1969-1970, have since become disenchanted with them because of the ris spiral of violence their presence has created. Since the conf began, the IRA has claimed more Catholic victims than British Protestant, not to mention the stringencies of military occupat laid on all Catholics because the IRA is in their midst. paraphrase Mao Tse Tung, if the people are the sea in which terrorists swim, the Catholic sea in North Ireland is receding the IRA fish have fewer places to hide. If that sounds like rea for hope, let me assure you it is not. The IRA has historica thrived on rejection as evidence that their service to the no cause is pure. Besides, the IRA knows that, despite condemnation, there is a deep and uniquely Hibernian ambivalen about their campaign and that, like them, Catholic nationalists both North and South think that eventual re-unification of Ireland inevitable.[4]

Protestant Majority/Unionists

Small wonder, then, that Northern Protestants or the Unionis feel that they are a people under siege. In Ulster they are majority, firmly hanging on, but in all of Ireland they are minority, in danger, they think, of cultural and ethnic extinctio From the time of "settlement" of Scots and English by James I an Cromwell in the 17th century, Protestants have considere themselves isolated colonials in the midst of an alien and hostil native Irish population. Sometimes their nightmare of massacre cam true, as in the Catholic revolt of 1641, or when the Catholic Iri supported James II, England's last Catholic king, in the war o 1689-1690. Protestant heroes are Oliver Cromwell who viciously tried to eliminate Catholics from Northern Ireland, the brav Apprentice Boys who slammed the gates of Londonderry in the fac of Catholic attackers in 1688, and especially William of Orange, wh crushed King James and his Catholic army and French allies at th Battle of the Boyne in 1690. The anniversary of the Boyne on Jul 12 is an occasion to celebrate Protestant supremacy. With drum booming, Union Jacks unfurled to the wind, Protestants bedecke

with bowler hats and sashes from their Orange Lodges remind themselves and their enemies and critics that Ulster is theirs.

And, yet, Ulsterites are not really certain that it will remain theirs, which makes them the world's greatest nay-sayers. They say "no" to rights for Ulster's Catholics, a resounding "no" to union with the Catholic South, and a paranoid "no" to the British who have tried numerous strategies to convince them to change. Ulster's Red Hand, held palm up and outward like a cop stopping traffic, is their symbol, and an appropriate one it is, too. It reflects, I think, their defensive negativism and sense of isolation. Three times in the last century Northern Protestants have raised secret armies and threatened conflict if Britain abandoned them--in 1885 at the time of Gladstone's Irish Home Rule Bill, again in 1912-1914 when Home Rule seemed imminent, and in 1921 when their fierce attachment to Union brought the partitioning of Ulster from the rest of Ireland in the Anglo-Irish Treaty. In the tradition of Sir Edward Carson, prominent Unionist in the years before the World War, Protestants still maintain that if pushed, "Ulster Will Fight and Ulster Will Be Right." Relying on the 1949 pledge by Britain that unification of the North and South could only come by a majority vote in Northern Ireland, they hold onto their "No" as a means of survival and identity.

Protestant Unionism in Ulster is a curious mixture of super-patriotism, religious fundamentalism, and anachronistic anti-Catholicism. Protestants point with pride to the sacrifices Ulster made for Britain in two world wars while noting that Ireland remained neutral, sometimes even friendly, to Hitler in the second conflict. Ulster's love for the British connection is undiminished so long as Westminster does not meddle in their internal affairs. But when it does, as one scholar has noted, Ulsterites make "the threat of treason the ultimate act of patriotism."[5] Staunch Presbyterians all, they carry on the simultaneously rigid and independent legacy of John Calvin and John Knox. For years the most vocal spokesman for that tradition has been the Reverend Ian Paisley, head of the Democratic Unionist Party, who mixes appeals for Ulster solidarity with anti-popery invective. Part of the irrationality in Northern Ireland is the Protestant belief that Catholics have large families so they can one day surpass Protestants by sheer numbers. For a Protestant to enter a mixed marriage is to put his life in danger.[6] It is with these attitudes that Ulster faces the Catholic South.

The Republic of Ireland

The Irish Republic, consisting of 26 counties with a popula of over 3 and 1/2 million people, is as Catholic in religion as Gaelic in culture and anti-British in history. The Republic's constitution "recognizes the special position of the Holy Apost and Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by majority of the citizens . . . ."[7] Over 95 percent of Irish citi are Catholics; perhaps the Irish feel Protestants are irrele because their numbers there are so few. The Church and hierarchy influence legislation, particularly on matters of divo birth control, censorship, and social welfare.[8] To date attempt make Ireland a secular state--which might relieve some of anxieties of Northern Protestants--have simply not gotten very For example, in 1986 when Prime Minister Garrett Fitzgerald stak his political reputation on a national referendum on a divorce la the measure failed dismally since the Church opposed it.

Like religion Celtic culture is a litmus test of Irishness. Sin independence, the Gaelic revival, which started in the 19th centu has found official state approval. Road signs are in two langua Gaelic classes are popular, but only in remote Connemara and Aran islands do people still speak the ancient tongue. From perspective of the Republic, to be Irish one must embrace, and allo himself to be embraced, by the Catholic-Gaelic mystique, even if y are bloody Prod or the Jewish mayor of Dublin. The anti-Brit stance of the Republic comes from the 300-year, myth-laden histo struggle for Irish independence. The Republic achieved identity a state in successive steps from autonomy to freedom between 19 and 1949. For Irish republicans, politics has always been anti British; where they have disagreed with one another, often violen so, is on the strategy and speed with which full freedom for Irela was to be attained.

That same kind of ambivalence characterizes the Iri Republic's stance on the Northern Ireland problem. On the o hand, Ireland claims in Article 2 of its constitution that "th national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland."[9] On th other, the government wants no part of the troublesome and violen Protestants and the vast expenses that annexing Ulster would brin To be sure, both major political parties give verbal support to th

ideal that Ireland is and must be one. Public opinion polls show that a majority of Irishmen want unification if, as one observer noted, it "comes easily, costs little, and leaves the status quo [in the Republic] virtually unchanged."[10] The Republic's sympathies are naturally with their co-religionists in the North, those current victims of British conquest and misrule which every Irishman sees as part of his bitter heritage. As the Republic sees it, the six northern counties are Ireland's rightful patrimony; the Northern Ireland problem is of British making and for Britain to resolve.

The British

Britain would like nothing better than to find a solution to the dilemma, but the linkage with Ulster has been forged by a common past and culture, interdependence in times of crisis, and economic subordination. The ties between the larger island and Ulster are strong, cemented by that strain of Protestant loyalism which England exploited more than once to hold the rest of the Catholic island in check. Now the roles are reversed: Ulster Unionists are holding Britain to the connection for their protection, not unlike the Tories at the time of our revolution or the French colonists in Algeria during De Gaulle's withdrawal. Because of its proximity Ireland was strategically important to Britain until this age of nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles made geography irrelevant. Both the Republic of Ireland and the northern province fall under Britain's economic sphere, regardless of the political division. Ireland is an underdeveloped and economically backward island of five million people, while Britain is an industrial giant of 54 million people. On the world money market, the Irish pound is always pegged to the British one. Ulster takes from the United Kingdom much more than she contributes, particularly in aid given to the chronically unemployed. According to one recent observer, "the difference between the amount Britain spends there and the amount Ulster pays in taxes, is now running at 1.5 billion pounds, or $2.2 billion, or almost $1500 for every man, woman, and child."[11]

Since the present "troubles" in Belfast and Ulster began, Britain has been drawn into the unsavory business of suppressing incipient civil war and trying to temper Protestant treatment of their Catholic neighbors. The 10,000 or so British troops, operating in Catholic areas where the IRA lurks, have usually made Catholic

synonymous with enemy. The strictures of the Emergency Pow Act, internment, and midnight arrests and interrogation ha likewise all fallen upon Catholics. For Britain the situation becam most polarized in 1980-81 when IRA prisoners in H-block sough martyrdom in hunger strikes, focusing world attention on th nationalist cause and British "cruelty." Whatever steps Britain to towards reconciliation and reform foundered on Ulster's inter sectarian hatreds. After suspending the Stormont Parliament a imposing direct rule, in 1974 London tried to initiate an inter religious, multi-party, power-sharing executive for Ulster under th Sunningdale agreement. Unionists responded with widespread strik that made the plan unworkable. In 1982, Prime Minister Thatche tried to implement a Northern Ireland assembly of Catholic an Protestant parties to move Ulster gradually toward autonom Catholic deputies elected to the proposed body refused to take their seats because, they claimed, Britain was not doing enough to protect the rights of the minority. Since internal solutions seemed hopeless in late 1985 Britain and Ireland agreed to "internationalize" the Northern Ireland problem which is where the issue stands now.[12]

In mid-November, 1985, while the world's eyes were focused on the first summit meeting of Reagan and Gorbachev at Geneva, Margaret Thatcher and Garrett Fitzgerald met at Hillsborough Castle near Belfast to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement on Northern Ireland. For the first time, it gives the Irish republic direct influence in the affairs of Northern Ireland in three important areas--reorganization of the police, reforms in the judiciary, and strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws to protect Ulster's Catholics. At the same time, the treaty promises "maintenance of the sovereign link between Ulster and London so important to the Protestant/Unionist majority."[13]

As expected, Protestant reaction to the treaty has been bitter, even violent. Especially vulnerable have been members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary who are pledged to uphold the law. In the weeks after the agreement was signed, Belfast was plastered with the slogan, "Ulster Says No!" Ian Paisley and James Molyneux, leaders of the two Unionist parties, denounced the treaty at a rally of some 80,000 supporters. During Christmas week, 1985, 30 constables were injured by rock-throwing Protestants in a riot near Belfast. Violence intensified during 1986, particularly during the summer marching season when protesters directly confronted police

London newspapers reported that Protestants threatened 184 constables, firebombed the homes of some 35 others, and killed 11 people.[14] By their actions, Protestants upheld the Unionist view summed up by Ian Paisley: "This agreement is part of a process consciously designed to take Northern Ireland into an all-Ireland republic."[15]

The problem continues to be that Ulster Unionists and Irish Catholic Nationalists still strongly disagree about what it means to be a loyal Irishman. This is perhaps best brought home by a statement from a history professor who teaches at Queen's University, Belfast. Catholic Nationalists tell us, he says,

> that you are only a part of part of a nation if you feel yourself to be. But the corollary of this is also so. A nation is only a nation if its definition of itself gives a sense of belonging to all within the entity. If it does not, then the manner in which the nation is defined is erroneous.[16]

The conundrum, then, is this: Irish Nationalists revere the notion of reunifying Ireland, but only on their own terms, while Northern Ireland Unionists resist modest steps in that direction, even if imposed by the British to whom they claim to be loyal.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by briefly examining the possibilities for peace in Northern Ireland. It may be that the conflict simply will continue in its present form with no resolution for some time to come. Both the diehard Unionists and the IRA provisionals prefer that scenario, for the continuing violence provides the only valid reason for their existence. There are signs, too, that the war is winding down. Less than 300 active IRA terrorists are now thought to be regularly operating in Belfast. Although the city and province have suffered heavily over the last 20 years, Belfast does not look like a Beirut to come. Those Irishmen who advocate "Brits Out," an immediate or phased withdrawal of British troops, are indulging their emotions but not using their intelligence. If Britain should withdraw, the Protestants would use the chance to eliminate IRA guerrillas and to punish the Catholic population which gave them

haven. The repercussions in the Irish Republic and in Britain would be incalculable. Perhaps the Anglo-Irish treaty which Thatcher and Fitzgerald negotiated--now over a year old--will be a positive step toward peace. It's too early to tell. So far the agreement seems to have generated more enthusiasm among the politicians than it has among the people of Ireland, north or south.

In his book, *The Green Flag*, Robert Kee remarked, "the Irish were a race before they were a nation, and they were a conspiracy before that." Certainly Ulster is proof that if there is to be an Irish nationalism embracing all peoples on the Emerald Isle, it has a long way to go. In Northern Ireland, the world has witnessed in microcosm what happens when people fundamentally disagree about what national identity is. We Americans take for granted a commonality of purpose and nationhood that in Northern Ireland and in the two parts of Ireland simply does not, and indeed may never exist. Ultimately, Northern Ireland awaits the work of reconciliation between people who now are unable to do it. As John Hume, leader of the moderate Catholic SDLP party in Ulster put it, "real unity is built upon the acceptance of diversity."[17] Until that happens, it's likely that the bombs of Belfast still will shatter hopes for peace.

NOTES

[1]Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Ireland Will Not Have Peace," *Harper's Magazine*, December, 1976, p. 35.

[2]Jonathon Bartlett, ed., *Northern Ireland* (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1983), p. 5.

[3]O'Brien, "Ireland," p. 36.

[4]Ibid., pp. 34-35. See also Jack Beatty, "The Troubles Today," in Bartlett, *Northern Ireland*, p. 128.

[5]Padraig O'Malley, *The Uncivil Wars: Ireland Today* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983) p. 5.

[6]Ibid., pp. 67-69; Anthony Bailey, "Reporter at Large," in Bartlett, *Northern Ireland*, pp. 112-113.

[7]Herb Greer, "Ulster: In the Empty House of the Stare," in ibid., p. 48.

[8]O'Malley, *Ireland Today*, pp. 62-65.

[9]Ibid., p. 32.

[10]Ibid., p. 96.

[11]Simon Hoggart, "Dungannon Postcard," *New Republic*, January 6 and 13,1986.

[12]Thomas O. Melia, "The Other Summit," *New Republic*, December 2, 1985, pp. 17-18.

[13]Ibid., p. 18.

[14]*The Sunday Times* (London), April 13, 1986; *The Independent* (London), November 11, 1986.

[15]*Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, January 19, 1986, p. 19A. See also *Christian Science Monitor*, November 11, 22, 25 and December 11, 1985.

[16]*The Irish Times*, excerpted in *Bulletin of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland*, April, 1986, supplement, p. 5.

[17]Melia, "The Other Summit," p. 18.