Stars and Stripes... and Shamrocks?

Clinton's Intervention in Northern Ireland

For decades, tensions flared between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with little recognition or action on the part of American presidents. Even in the face of human rights atrocities and political oppression, American leaders chose not to intervene in the conflict. So why did this all change with the election of Bill Clinton as President? Had Irish-Americans finally convinced the government to do something in their ancestral home? Had the terrorist acts and stifling of democracy reached a breaking point? Or was there something, or someone, else that influenced Clinton to try and resolve the Northern Irish question?

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams (2013)
Source: U.S. State Department

At least since the formation of the Republic of Ireland in 1949, the question of a united Ireland has been an intense issue within the region. Even as tensions and violence escalated, the United States remained largely neutral. Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Bush chose to remain uninvolved in the conflict for two primary reasons: first, they saw the status of Northern Ireland as a domestic issue of the United Kingdom. Second, they did not want to strain the "special relationship" the United States enjoyed with England. However, in the 1990s President Bill Clinton broke away from this inaction, a move largely unprecedented in the eyes of many Americans and foreign policy experts. Two potential factors commonly arise as explanations for this development: that Irish-American interest groups pushed Clinton to intervene, or that Wilsonian ideals of self-determination motivated Clinton's diplomacy. However, I argue that these two factors have substantially less explanatory power in Clinton's policy towards Ireland than a third factor: the appointment of actors with varying motivations to resolve the Irish conflict to key positions within the administration.

THE HISTORICAL AMERICAN RESPONSE TO THE TROUBLES

While it is not clear exactly when the Northern Ireland conflict (often called "the Troubles") began, most historians point to the late 1960s which saw the development of the Irish Civil Rights movement contemporaneously with other global civil rights movements. Though many desired to unite the predominantly Catholic Republic of Ireland with Protestant Northern Ireland, political and cultural differences lead to the outbreak of violence and a quasi-cold war in the region. Terrorist attacks carried out by the Irish Republican Army and its more radical faction, the "Provos," plagued Ireland and parts of the United Kingdom during the 1960s-80s, leaving more than 3,600 dead.[1] It would seem that the Irish-American diaspora was quite concerned with these developments. Indeed, Irish historian Michael Cox purports that Irish-Americans "followed the events in the North with enormous interest, tinged with a good deal of nostalgia about the old country and a feeling that however bad the Irish Republican atrocities happened to be, they were nothing when set alongside the wrongs committed by perfidious Albion [England]."[2] Given the diaspora's purported concern, American politicians ostensibly had a vested interest in Northern Irish diplomacy. The Irish-American population could in fact have a potentially significant political impact in certain regions of the United States, particularly in northeastern states such as Massachusetts, New York, and Connecticut.[3]

However, the longstanding Presidential desire to maintain the "special relationship" with England had consistently outweighed the concerns of Irish-Americans.[4] American policy reflected Presidential desire to maintain the strategic "Anglo-American" partnership predicated on long-standing financial, cultural and linguistic ties. Political scientist Timothy Lynch suggests that this policy followed the realist assumption that Britain mattered more than Ireland because British power had a material effect on American security, while Irish power did not.[5] Beginning with President Richard Nixon, America adopted a policy of least resistance with regard to Northern Ireland. With the Vietnam War and the development of détente, Nixon and his administration "simply mon-

itored events in Northern Ireland without any intention of expressing policy interest," asserting Britain's authority over Northern Ireland and classifying the Troubles as a domestic issue.[6] A former United States diplomat described the policy towards Northern Ireland as "abstentionist neutrality," due to the fact that "the conflict involved two countries with each of whom the US had traditionally friendly relations."[7] A 1979 Congressional Research Service report revealed that the only option with regard to the Irish question was to continue the status quo of direct rule.[8] Yet following the collapse of the Soviet Union, American presidents theoretically enjoyed more leeway to pursue an Irish policy divorced from concerns over maintaining the "special relationship." In the post-Soviet world the relationship became less critical as America and England no longer felt compelled to work together to prevent Communist expansion.[9]

Clinton, the first President elected in this post-Soviet era, diverged from the traditional realist policy and pursued an economic and humanitarian approach toward Ireland.[10] Clinton criticized the previous administrations with regard to the Irish question for "being too deferential to Britain," suggesting that with the end of the Cold War, the United States could be more assertive in intervening in Britain's affairs.[11] Lynch posits that "the US government did not *drift* into intervention in Northern Ireland;" that the Clinton administration's policy was a distinct historical break from previous Administrations.[12] Many historians believe that Clinton's involvement was crucial to the construction of the peace agreement, and "there was nothing inevitable about [the agreement reached] on Good Friday 1998."[13] Clinton and his administration certainly departed from the norm, but why was this the case?

ETHNIC INTEREST GROUPS LARGELY A NON-FACTOR

When considering American politics, there are countless examples of ethnic groups influencing foreign policy decisions. Probably the most notable example is the purported "Israel Lobby" of Jewish-Americans in the United States. While only 3% of the Americans identify as Jewish, their political importance arguably outstrips their relatively minor population.[14] Jewish-Americans make up significant voting populations in key states such as New York and Florida. Additionally, for this population, "concern with the Middle East is real," leading to active lobbying regarding American policy in the Middle East.[15] While Irish-Americans ostensibly could also be a powerful voting bloc, considering the 44 million Americans that identify as having Irish ancestry, they play a much smaller role in American policy for a variety of reasons.[16] First, as in Ireland itself, the population is deeply divided over religion – Tufts University Professor Tony Smith notes that the two congressional caucuses that only the Irish have is a sign of disagreement, not strength. Second, the group tends to be highly assimilated, having immigrated earlier, creating a more Americanized identity that reduces concern over foreign policy decisions regarding their homeland.[17]

The Shankill Road in Belfast, Northern Ireland (c. 1970)
Source: Fribbler (Wikimedia Commons)

Despite these considerations, Smith and other political scientists recognize that a group of this size has at least some political impact through voting. I argue that the most important political impact the Irish-American population had came through Clinton's *perception* of their voting power. Persons of Irish descent tend to "live in politically significant areas," and "appear to vote as a bloc."[18] Regardless of the minimal, actual power of the Irish-American population, Clinton strongly believed in their power and especially the importance of the Catholic vote and thus sought to address their perceived interests. Clinton requested a "state-by-state breakdown of Irish-American numbers" in 1992 during his campaign, looking to take advantage of their support.[19] After losing the 1992 Connecticut Democratic primary to former Jesuit seminarian and Irish-American Jerry Brown, Clinton committed to appointing a special envoy to Northern Ireland, and said he would "pressure the British on human rights violations [in Northern Ireland] and issue a visa to Gerry Adams, president of Sinn Fein," appealing directly to Irish republicans and nationalists alike.[20] Clinton also decided to "take more of an interest in the events in Northern Ireland" in order to secure the support of "Reagan Democrats" in key areas such as New York City, Boston, and Chicago.[21] He recognized the potential boost he could get by garnering the support of this population, and made moves to appeal to them accordingly.

In the end, Clinton won the New York primary and eventually the Presidency. While the importance of pandering to Irish-American interests in his victory remains an open question, his experience in the 1992 campaign nevertheless helped shape his later policies regarding Northern Ireland. Though Irish-American interest groups did not engage in hard-core lobbying typical of other groups, Clinton's perception of Irish voting power still led him to break from previ-

ous administrations in addressing the question of diplomacy in Northern Ireland.

NATIONAL VALUES OF THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

Another possible explanation for Clinton's unique approach is the historical inclination of the United States to promote its national values abroad. How we define what these values are is important for understanding their effect and reflection in foreign policy. The vindicationism of the early twentieth-century championed by President Woodrow Wilson highlighted the three principles that he believed should be implemented globally: collective security, free trade among nations, and the right to self-determination.[22] These values make up what Harvard political science professor Jonathan Monten suggests is "central to US political identity and sense of national purpose," which has lasted for decades.[23] President of the Council on Foreign Relations Richard N. Haass suggests that "for a century, Democratic and Republican administrations alike have… embraced the spread of democracy as a foreign policy objective."[24] While American Presidents have traditionally invoked these views of exceptionalism regarding almost every foreign policy endeavor, they would not actually come fruition until the Clinton Administration.

It is evident from the rhetoric of the Clinton administration at this time that the United States sought to foster the development of a politically independent and economically interdependent state in Northern Ireland. In an address to the Americans for a New Irish Agenda in 1992, Clinton expressed his vision for the role of the United States in the international system, asserting that, "the United States is now in a position to think clearly about positive change, about support for freedom and democracy and human rights as well as economic opportunities around the world."[25] National Security adviser Anthony Lake reiterated this sentiment in describing the United States' security mission as, "promoting the enlargement of the 'blue areas' of market democracies" as opposed to the policy of previous administrations to contain the expansion of communism.[26]

The importance of democracy and liberty as emphasized by the Clinton administration in such statements was later reflected in the Downing Street Declaration of 1993. The declaration, which was in part brokered by Chair of Americans for a New Irish Agenda Bruce Morrison, pledged, "the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised."[27] This declaration reflected the traditional American ideals that Clinton and his administration had previously promoted with regard to the Irish question.

At a Democratic senatorial campaign dinner in September, 1994, Clinton remarked that the people of Northern Ireland desired the intervention of the United States in the peace process, "[b]ecause they know we stand for freedom and democracy and fairness and opportunity."[28] In an attempt to promote Irish economic prosperity, the Clinton administration organized the White House Economic Summit on Ireland in 1995, with the intention of encouraging American business elites to invest in the counties of the north of the Irish island, a sign that the administration had "thrown its weight behind an effort to revitalize the economy of Ireland."[29] These Wilsonian values that had been embedded in foreign policy decisions for decades were clearly a part of Clinton's motives and plan for intervening in Northern Ireland.

The Clonard Martyrs Memorial Garden in Belfast (2012)
Source: Jen Grantham (Wikimedia Commons)

Beyond just the promotion of core American values, the situation in Northern Ireland fell into the category of what would later be defined as the "Clinton Doctrine." This notion emphasized that "the United States and its allies will intervene where necessary to prevent genocide and other humanitarian catastrophes."[30] In a 1995 address to the White House Investment Conference, Clinton stated, "people who take risks for peace will always be welcome in the White House," imploring the IRA to decommission their weapons and move away from their paramilitary ways.[31]

Clearly, the promotion of American values mattered to the Clinton administration, at least in a rhetorical sense. Yet this rhetoric of human rights and self-determination was not unique to the Clinton administration. In fact, such rhetoric

had persisted for much of the twentieth century. Ultimately, there was a third factor that bears the most weight as a causal explanation of policy change: the appointment of key Irish-Americans and Irish sympathizers as officials to Clinton's cabinet.

THE "GREENING" OF THE WHITE HOUSE

An alternative model for explaining why Clinton took a more active role in finding a solution to the Irish question than any of the previous Presidents during the times of the Troubles considers the role of bureaucratic government actors. In political scientist Graham Allison's institutional model, decisions are made at the top level of government not by any single actor, such as the President, "but rather many actors as players…who act in terms of no consistent set of strategic objectives but rather according to various conceptions of national, organizational, and personal goals."[32] These actors bargain at the highest levels of the government and compete for influence over the President. In the case of the Clinton administration, these actors included National Security Council staff director Nancy Soderberg, National Security Adviser Tony Lake, and United States Ambassador to Ireland Jean Kennedy Smith. Each of these political actors was appointed by Clinton and thus developed a strong rapport with the President that proved to be quite significant. As journalist Niall O'Dowd suggests, "the policy in Ireland was run by Nancy [Soderberg] and Tony Lake at the National Security Council."[33] These officials helped to consolidate Irish diplomacy into the White House. One senior United States diplomat even suggested that there was "a deliberate and successful attempt to cut the State Department out of the picture."[34] Through their appointed positions these actors exerted influence over the President in order to attain their goals, both personal and those they believed to be in the national interest.

Fein leader Gerry Adams and Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID) supporter Joseph Cahill, both of whom were instrumental in advancing the peace process.[38] As the sister of John, Robert, and Ted Kennedy, Smith adhered to her personal preferences regarding the Irish state and this was reflected in her diplomacy.

A mural in Belfast, Northern Ireland (2012)
Source: Jen Grantham (Wikimedia Commons)

National Security Adviser Tony Lake seemed to have a vested interest in orchestrating a successful resolution to the Troubles, but not necessarily because of any personal connections. According to others in the administration, the Northern Irish conflict provided Lake an opportunity to enhance his own reputation in a career that was described as "unusually bleak… zero for three on the big ones [Vietnam, Iran, Bosnia]."[39] A senior US diplomat suggested that Lake sought to define his legacy through Northern Ireland policy – it was a chance to "[solve] one of the great, thorniest problems in the world," for which he would receive credit.[40] According

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Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith's diplomacy was described as "the visible extension of influential Irish Americans with a nationalist agenda," and was considered prone to over-identifying with the host country, also her ancestral home.[35] The United States ambassador to the United Kingdom accused Smith of being "the in-house coach for the Irish lobby," and "an ardent IRA apologist," another clear indication of where her true interests laid.[36] Smith's first days as ambassador were notable in her decision to have deputy of the Dublin embassy Tom Tonkin reassigned. Tonkin had not been a supporter of Irish initiatives regarding the Northern Ireland conflict and carried out a strict application of American visa laws, denying many young Irish people from visiting.[37] Smith was also a key player in coordinating the granting of visas to Sinn

to reports by a senior adviser to the Irish government, Lake spent a quarter of his time on Ireland and constantly had four or five members of his National Security Council staff engaged with the Irish question.[41] By encouraging involvement in Northern Ireland, Lake would improve his own status as a diplomat, a seemingly easy win because this conflict had no military component for the Americans.

Nancy Soderberg, Clinton's special National Security Council assistant, "had met everyone and anyone from Northern Ireland and Ireland who passed through Washington."[42] She was obviously very well versed in the situation in Ireland, and soon took over the formation of policy towards Northern Ireland, even requiring that all proposals be approved by the

Jean Kennedy Smith, US Ambassador to Ireland (c. 1953)
Source: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

NSC.[43] Like Lake, she also stood to gain significantly from a successful foreign policy in Northern Ireland, and with Lake "saw an opportunity to rise professionally."[44] This was reflected in her policy of defying precedent, going against the "procedurally pro-British" tendencies of the State Department as she put it.[45] Together, Soderberg and Lake helped shape the informal network of communication that underpinned Clinton's Irish policy, which essentially cut out the State Department. Following their personal goals, Soderberg and Lake pursued a policy in Northern Ireland that would boost their own standing as well as the legacy of President Clinton.

In addition to these advisers close to Clinton, Irish-American politicians enjoyed an amplified voice in the Clinton administration. After Clinton's inaction early in his term with respect to the Irish question, Senators Ted Kennedy and Daniel Moynihan spearheaded a movement in Congress to pressure the President to grant Adams a visa.[46] The decision to grant this visa marked the first major shift in Clinton's involvement, overturning "a 50-year hegemony over Irish policy… that the British government had exercised through the State Department."[47] Along with Kennedy and Moynihan, former Connecticut Senator and national chairman of the Democratic Party Christopher Dodd was alleged to have convinced the President to grant the visa to Adams between the seventeenth and eighteenth holes during a private round of golf.[48] It was clear that Kennedy and fellow Irish-Americans and sympathizers to Irish unity were important in supporting Clinton's foreign policy.

A CONFLUENCE OF THEORIES

It is evident that the Irish-American public did not play a direct role in Clinton's decision to intervene in Northern Ireland, but their perceived voting power helped spur Clinton's interest in the issue. After concluding that he needed the support of the Catholics in order to win the Democratic nomination, Clinton's promise to the Irish-American population essentially obligated him to facilitate the resolution of the Irish question. However, seeing as he did not take action immediately, this factor alone did not lead to the intervention of the Clinton administration.

Concern over Wilsonian ideals of exceptionalism – human rights, democracy, self-determination – is also not a satisfactory explanation. These rhetorical appeals had occurred for over half a century, yet had produced little Presidential action. Up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Presidents had seen themselves as hamstrung towards Ireland by the "special relationship." While Clinton did embrace the rhetoric of exceptionalism and self-determination, it certainly was not unique to him. Ultimately, his administration's intervention required a third, key factor.

The development that helped shift policy significantly was the influence of Irish-Americans at the top levels of the government. Clinton-appointed actors exerted great sway over the President and his decisions. Clinton's administration demonstrated more receptiveness to the strong Irish-American voices in Congress and special interest groups. In previous administrations, the Irish-American presence in government did not wield much influence – Senators Kennedy and Moynihan along with House Speaker Tip O'Neill had served in Congress for decades with little to show in terms of policy favoring, or even remote acknowledgement of their Irish brethren. This dynamic changed with Clinton and his appointments of Tony Lake, Nancy Soderberg, and Jean Kennedy Smith. These voices collectively outweighed those of the State Department and other government actors, thereby encouraging Clinton's active intervention in Northern Ireland.

Endnotes

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