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‘The situation over there really bothers me’: Ronald Reagan and the Northern Ireland conflict

Abstract. *A neglected area of transatlantic history is the relationship between the Reagan administration and the Northern Ireland conflict. This article will seek to address this situation by charting the extent of Ronald Reagan’s interest in the Northern Irish conflict and the ways and means that other protagonists sought to secure or prevent his involvement. It will examine the president’s approach in the context of different views within his administration, the State Department’s wish to maintain American neutrality on the issue, and the desire of leading Irish-American politicians for the American government to be much more interventionist. These debates coincided with significant developments in Northern Ireland. Therefore, Reagan’s contribution to the Anglo-Irish process encapsulates a variety of issues: the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland during the 1980s; the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement; and the internationalisation of the conflict before the election of President Bill Clinton in 1993.*

The contribution of President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) to the Northern Irish peace process has been the subject of considerable discussion, both journalistic and scholarly. In contrast, the role of President Ronald Reagan (1981-9) and his administration in the Anglo-Irish process has received comparatively little attention.¹

¹ Journalistic accounts include: Conor O’Clery, *The Greening of the White House* (Dublin, 1996), and *Daring Diplomacy: Clinton’s Secret Search for Peace in Ireland* (Boulder, CO., 1997); Eamonn Mallie and David McKittrick, *Endgame in Ireland* (London, 2001); and, Eamonn Mallie and David

As a result, scholarship relating to U.S. influence on Northern Ireland needs to be rebalanced. Similarly, previous examples of scholarship about U.S. influence on the Northern Ireland conflict were not able to consult significant primary source material now available in the American, British and Irish archives, and instead relied on other sources, such as oral history, diaries, memoirs, and the press.² This article utilises the most recently available primary source material and seeks to develop a more nuanced understanding of Reagan's relationship with the Northern Ireland. It argues that

McKittrick, *The Fight for peace: the secret story behind the Irish peace process* (London, 1996). Interdisciplinary scholarship on the topic include: Roger MacGinty and John Darby, *Guns and Government: the management of the Northern Ireland peace process* (New York, 2001); and, Paul Arthur, *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland problem* (Belfast, 2000). For an introduction to the Clinton administration's involvement in Northern Ireland, see, for instance: Paul Dixon, *Northern Ireland: the politics of war and peace* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp 240-77; and, John Dumbrell, "'Hope and history': the U.S. and peace in Northern Ireland", in Michael Cox, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen (eds.), *A Farewell to Arms? From long war to long peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester, 2000), pp 214-223. Reagan always spent St. Patrick's Day at the Irish Embassy, spoke about Northern Ireland fifteen times, and suggest that he persuaded Thatcher of the merits of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement (Mallie and David, *The Fight for Peace*, 279). Likewise, Garret FitzGerald, *All in a life: an autobiography* (London, 1991), p. 527: The former Taoiseach attributed much credit to Reagan for the A.I.A.

² See, for instance: Seán Cronin, *Washington's Irish policy, 1916-1986* (Dublin, 1987); Andrew J. Wilson, *Irish America and the Ulster conflict 1968-1995* (Belfast, 1995); Ray O'Hanlon, *The New Irish Americans* (Niwot, CO., 1998); and, Joseph E. Thompson, *American policy and Northern Ireland: a saga of peacebuilding* (London, 2001). Useful and newly released primary sources of interest to scholars of American influence on Northern Ireland include releases at the Bill Clinton Presidential Library (<http://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/browse?tag=Northern+Ireland>) (25 Sept. 2016). The Edward M. Kennedy Oral Histories at the Miller Center may also be of interest (<http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/edward-kennedy>) (25 Sept. 2016).

Reagan's involvement signalled that the conflict was already undergoing internationalisation prior to the Clinton era and it was motivated by domestic concerns in the United States.³ For instance, this article questions the established view that Reagan simply encouraged Margaret Thatcher (British prime minister, 1979-90) to sign the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and the president's motivations. Indeed, given the increasingly rapid release of primary source material in American and British archives, the relationship between Reagan and Thatcher is subject to growing interest by historians. However, this scholarship has focused on their dynamic as resurgent cold warriors and shared commitment to free markets in an attempt to reverse perceived national decline, and fails to address their interactions in relation to Northern Ireland.⁴ This article will examine Reagan's attitude and approach towards the 'Troubles' and the Anglo-Irish process. It will do so by problematising Reagan's involvement by identifying how Irish-Americans sought to secure the president's intervention, coupled with the debates within the Reagan

³ For the internationalisation of the Northern Ireland conflict generally, see, for instance: Adrian Guelke, 'The American Connection to the Northern Ireland Conflict', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 1:4 (1984), pp 27-39; Adrian Guelke, 'The United States, Irish Americans and the Northern Ireland Peace Process', *International Affairs*, 72:3 (Jul. 1996), pp 521-536; James M. McCormick, 'Introduction,' in James M. McCormick (ed.), *The domestic sources of American foreign policy* (Lanham, MD., 2012), pp 1-18; McCormick, 'Ethnic Interest Groups in American Foreign Policy,' in McCormick (ed.), *Domestic sources*, pp 67-87; and, Lord (David) Owen, 'The resolution of armed conflict: internationalization and its lessons, particularly in Northern Ireland,' in Marianne Elliot (ed.), *The long road to Peace in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool, 2007), pp 25-43.

⁴ See: Richard Aldous, *Reagan and Thatcher: the difficult relationship* (London, 2012); James Cooper, *Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan: a very political special relationship* (Basingstoke, 2012); and, Sally-Ann Treharne, *Reagan and Thatcher's special relationship: Latin America and Anglo-American relations* (Edinburgh, 2015).

administration about American policy towards the ‘Troubles’.⁵ Edwin Meese, who enjoyed a long-standing close professional relationship with the president, recalled that Reagan was proud of his Irish ancestry and would often make Irish jokes. Yet he could not recall Reagan discussing contemporary Irish affairs.⁶ In fact, Reagan was largely uninvolved in the Anglo-Irish process. Nevertheless, by simply invoking the president’s authority, Reagan’s advisers and other protagonists in the U.S. Congress and Irish government, could strengthen their own negotiating positions.

⁵ The connection between domestic politics and foreign policy in the United States is an established phenomenon in the historiography. See, for instance: For recent examples, see: Julian Zelizer, *Arsenals of democracy: the politics of national security – from World War II to the war on terrorism* (New York, 2010); Thomas Alan Schwartz, “‘Henry, . . . Winning an Election Is Terribly Important’: Partisan Politics in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations’, *Diplomatic History*, 33:2 (2009), pp 173-90; Campbell Craig and Fredrik Logevall, *America’s cold war: the politics of insecurity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); and, Jussi Hanhimäki, ‘Global Visions and Parochial Politics: the Persistent Dilemma of the American Century’, *Diplomatic History*, 27:4, (2003), pp 423-47. Of particular concern for historians has been the role of ethnic groups in U.S. foreign policy. For general introductions, see, for instance: Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, race, and American foreign policy* (Boston, Mass., 1992); and, Tony Smith, *Foreign attachments: the power of ethnic groups in the making of American foreign policy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000). Obvious examples are the Israeli and Chinese lobbies. See: Peter H. Koehn and Xiao-huang Yin (eds.), *The expanding roles of Chinese Americans in U.S.-China Relations: transnational networks and Trans-Pacific interactions* (Armonk, NY, 2002); and, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Israel lobby and US foreign policy* (London, 2008).

⁶ Interview with Mr. Edwin Meese, Washington, D.C. (19 Nov. 2012). (Meese was Reagan’s chief-of-staff when he was governor of California and served as special counselor to the president and the U.S. attorney general in the Reagan administration.) For excellent introductions to oral history and the use of ‘memory’, see, for instance: Paul Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history* (Oxford, 2000), and Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and memory* (Manchester, 2007).

Irish-American concern about Northern Ireland revolved around paramilitary sectarian violence known as the ‘Troubles’, dating from the late 1960s and arguably until the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.⁷ Violence was inflicted by both sides of the community in Northern Ireland and the inequalities often experienced by its Catholics meant that the ‘Troubles’ becoming a focus for Irish-Americans.⁸ Initially, the American executive branch placed little pressure on the British government in relation to Northern Ireland and the ‘Troubles’. The administrations of Richard Nixon (1969-74) and Gerald Ford (1974-7) afforded the subject little attention and when the matter was raised in bilateral discussions with the U.K., the United States took a generally supportive attitude.⁹ Reagan did not comment on the issue when he visited Ireland as Nixon’s emissary to Europe in 1972.¹⁰ The Irish government did comment on Reagan, noting internally that ‘it would seem not unlikely that President Nixon is seeking to build up his stature as a possible candidate for the Vice-Presidency or for some other high office, such as that of Secretary of State’.¹¹ However, the United States government’s position on Northern Ireland evolved as the 1970s progressed.

⁷ For an introduction about the ‘Troubles’, see: Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2007), pp 486-555.

⁸ See, for instance: Wilson, *Irish America*.

⁹ See, for instance: Graeme S. Mount, *895 days that changed the world: the presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (London, 2006), pp 8-11.

¹⁰ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: the role of a lifetime* (New York, 2000), pp 461-62.

¹¹ Letter, To N.S. Ó Nualláin (Roinn an Taoiseach) from civil servant at the Department of Foreign Affairs (identity unclear), 22 Bealtaine 1972, (N.A.I.: Office of Secretary to the President 2003/18/62).

The support of some sympathetic Irish-Americans for the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAIID) – a financier of I.R.A. activities – became a fixture in Irish-American relations and Anglo-American relations from the early 1970s onwards.¹² In 1971 the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) announced that NORAIID should register as a ‘foreign agent’.¹³ Five years later, in a joint communiqué, Gerald Ford, and Liam Cosgrave, the Irish Taoiseach (1973-7), asked Irish-Americans to end support for NORAIID.¹⁴ (The U.S. State Department and Justice Department continued to monitor NORAIID and, despite its denials, in 1984, it again had to register as the agent of a ‘foreign principal’: essentially an agent of the IRA.¹⁵) The Ford-Cosgrave communiqué coincided with a new political strategy to use Irish-American politicians to temper gunrunning and financial support for violence, while influencing the political process in Washington D.C., and ultimately Anglo-American relations, so as to secure a political settlement in Northern Ireland. Under the guidance of the civil rights leader John Hume (a founder of the Social and Democratic Labour Party (S.D.L.P.) in 1970, and leader of the party between 1979 and 2001), the ‘four horsemen’ – Speaker Thomas P. ‘Tip’ O’Neill (Democrat-Massachusetts), Senator Ted Kennedy (Democrat-Massachusetts), Governor Hugh Carey (Democrat-

(I am grateful to the National Archives of Ireland and the Director of the National Archives of Ireland for the use of this, and similar, material.)

¹² NORAIID was initially established in 1970 as a means to help displaced Catholic families after the outbreak of the ‘Troubles’. See: Wilson, *Irish America*, p. 43.

¹³ John Dumbrell, *A special relationship: Anglo-American relations from the cold war to Iraq* (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 247.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Arthur, *Special relationships*, p. 138.

New York), and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Democrat-New York) – were the leading protagonists in this.¹⁶ In an attempt to capture the Irish-American vote, Jimmy Carter discussed Northern Ireland during the 1976 presidential election, was critical of the British government.¹⁷ Carter, as a presidential candidate, even walked down Fifth Avenue in New York City on St Patrick’s Day in 1976 wearing a lapel badge bearing the slogan ‘Get Britain out of Ireland.’¹⁸ As president, Carter issued a statement in 1977 promising American investment in response to any power-sharing agreement.¹⁹ This statement marked a departure from previous U.S. policy. A precedent for American intervention – or at least the possibility of action – had been established prior to Reagan arriving in the Oval Office.²⁰

The 1970s also saw a division amongst Irish-American politicians on the Northern Irish conflict. Rep. Mario Biaggi (Democrat-New York) established the Ad-Hoc Congressional Committee for Irish Affairs (A.C.C.I.A.) in September 1977. Although the A.C.C.I.A. was a bipartisan group, leading Democrats, including O’Neill, did not participate given its ties with the Irish National Caucus, which had republican sympathies.²¹ The influence of congressional Irish-Americans became clear towards the end of the Carter administration. In June 1979, O’Neill publicly supported a ban on American arms sales to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) after Biaggi promised to attach the amendment to the State Department’s annual

¹⁶ Dumbrell, *A special relationship*, pp 247-248.

¹⁷ Dixon, *Northern Ireland*, p. 167.

¹⁸ Alex Brummer, ‘The greening of the White House,’ *The Guardian*, 26 Nov. 1985.

¹⁹ Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship*, pp 247-248.

²⁰ Dixon, *Northern Ireland*, p. 171.

²¹ Thompson, *American Policy*, pp 79-80.

appropriations bill during its passage through Congress. O'Neill hoped that the ban would prompt Thatcher to resolve the conflict. However, he also recognised that he could not campaign against Irish-American support for the I.R.A. while allowing the State Department to permit American arms to be sold to the RUC. In August 1979, O'Neill allowed Biaggi's amendment to pass. This was an unwelcome development for the British government. However, the Carter administration accepted the ban: the president prioritised his domestic agenda and necessary working relationship with the speaker over the risk that the Thatcher government might be offended.²² Carter refused to tackle Congress on the issue, despite a personal appeal from Thatcher when they met in December 1979.²³

The Reagan administration therefore inherited a confident, successful but divided Irish-American lobby. Announced on St Patrick's Day in 1981, the Friends of Ireland (FOI) constituted another congressional group, but comprising of familiar protagonists such as Kennedy and O'Neill. Unlike Biaggi's congressional committee, which relied on the grassroots support of the INC, the FOI enjoyed the support and credibility of congressional leadership. The FOI's condemnation of the I.R.A. and related activism meant that their moderation promoted criticism from some other Irish-Americans. Politicians such as O'Neill and Kennedy were therefore not simply electioneering in their concern for Northern Ireland: the positions that they assumed on the issue only infuriated hard-line Irish-Americans.²⁴ To be successful in

²² Wilson, *Irish America*, pp 159-60.

²³ Margaret Thatcher plenary meeting with President Jimmy Carter, Monday 17 Dec. 1979, *The Margaret Thatcher Foundation* (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/112136>) (25 Oct. 2013) (hereafter just URL).

²⁴ Thompson, *American Policy*, pp 106-7.

tempering republican support and controlling the Irish-American agenda, the four horsemen (and FOI) needed to demonstrate that they were influencing the Anglo-Irish process.

II

Unlike the Democratic Party, the Republican Party's 1980 platform did not include a reference to Northern Ireland.²⁵ The Irish government was aware that Reagan's GOP was 'obsessed' with NATO and, in turn, prioritised Anglo-American relations.²⁶ On 6 November 1980, President-Elect Reagan commented on the suspension of arms-sales to the RUC. He emphasised both his Irish heritage and continuity with American foreign policy: 'I would say with the name of Reagan the US cannot interfere or intervene but if there is any way we can be helpful we would be more than eager because I think it is a very tragic situation.'²⁷

In February 1981, Thatcher became the first major world leader to visit the new president, in a clear indication that the White House believed her to be a leading ally.²⁸ The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advised the prime minister 'to give the President and his advisers an account of the realities of the Northern Ireland

²⁵ Republican Party Platforms: "Republican Party Platform of 1980," 15 July 1980. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25844>) (5 Dec. 2014) (hereafter just URL).

²⁶ Report on Republican Convention, 'Ireland', 21 July 1980 (NAI: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

²⁷ Brief, provenance unknown, 'President Reagan and Northern Ireland' (NAI: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

²⁸ See: James Cooper, "'I must brief you on the mistakes": When Ronald Reagan met Margaret Thatcher, 25-28 February, 1981,' *The Journal of Policy History* 26:2 (2014), pp 274-297.

situation'.²⁹ Although Thatcher was told by the Northern Ireland Office that the RUC no longer required Ruger revolvers from the United States, it remained politically 'the best position ... for the Americans to lift the ban' so that she could 'say that this has happened'.³⁰ Regardless, it was expected that O'Neill would not agree and Reagan, like Carter, would not want to oppose the speaker on it.³¹ Alexander Haig, the U.S. secretary of state (1981-2), advised Reagan: 'Demonstrate publicly and privately that Thatcher is the major Western leader most attuned to your views on East-West and security issues.'³² However, he warned that the prime minister could raise some issues that he should avoid discussing, for instance Northern Ireland. Haig noted: 'Our policy has been to prevent Northern Ireland from disrupting our close cooperation with the UK and Ireland by adopting a policy of strict neutrality.'³³ Northern Ireland was not a topic of discussion during Thatcher's meetings either with members of the U.S. senate or Reagan.³⁴ Yet Reagan was sympathetic to Thatcher's

²⁹ Steering Brief, Brief by Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 19 Feb. 1981, Prime Minister's Visit to the United States, 25-28 Feb., (The U.K. National Archives: FCO 82/1110, Visit by Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the U.K., to the U.S.A., February 1981: briefs). (Hereafter T.N.A.)

³⁰ Northern Ireland (If Raised), Brief by the Northern Ireland Office, 19 February 1981 (T.N.A.: FCO 82/1110).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Memorandum, Alexander Haig to Ronald Reagan, 'Visit of Prime Minister Thatcher,' Briefing Book re visit of British Prime Minister Thatcher, 25-28 Feb. 1981, (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library [hereafter Reagan Library], Binder 1/2, Box 91434 RAC 1, Executive Secretariat, NSC: VIP Visits).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See: 'No.10 record of conversation (MT-US Senate Members),' 26 Feb. 1981, (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/127292>) (11 Aug. 2014); 'No.10 note of conversation (Reagan-Thatcher meeting),' 26 Feb. 1981 (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/113943>) (11 Aug. 2014).

concerns about the R.U.C. He admitted to journalists the following month that he disagreed with the embargo of arms sales.³⁵

Despite his sympathy for Thatcher on the RUC, Reagan maintained neutrality. Reagan's first presidential St Patrick's Day statement explained:

The United States will continue to urge the parties to come together for a just and peaceful solution ... We will continue to condemn all acts of terrorism and violence, for these cannot solve Northern Ireland's problems. I call on all Americans to question closely any appeal for financial or other aid from groups involved in this conflict to ensure that contributions do not end up in the hands of those who perpetuate violence, either directly or indirectly. I add my personal prayers and the good offices of the United States to those Irish – and indeed to all world citizens – who wish fervently for peace and victory over those who sow fear and terror.³⁶

The White House quickly clarified Reagan's language – namely 'good offices' – in order to avoid any suggestion of an American intervention in Northern Ireland.

Reagan's interest extended to gifting the Irish Embassy a jar of green jellybeans.³⁷

Pressure on Reagan to act increased during the 1981 hunger strike. On 6 May 1981, the 'four horsemen' published the telegram that they had sent to Thatcher, criticising

³⁵ 'Deny aid to guerrillas in Ireland, Reagan asks,' *The Globe and Mail* [Canada], 18 Mar. 1981.

³⁶ Ronald Reagan: "Statement on St. Patrick's Day," 17 Mar. 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43547>) (31 Jul. 2013).

³⁷ Lee Lescaze, 'Reagan Offers "Good Offices" In Ulster Strife,' *The Washington Post*, 18 Mar. 1981.

her ‘intransigence’.³⁸ The ‘four horsemen’ came to believe that the president was sympathetic to their cause. In a meeting with Kennedy on 1 June 1981, Reagan indicated that he was open to intervening.³⁹ The president remarked that ‘the situation over there really bothers me’ and he would ‘give it some serious thought’.⁴⁰

This contrast between Reagan’s personal views and his administration’s foreign policy was reflected in the divisions between the president’s foreign policy advisers. The British government believed that the administration’s decision-making process was ‘incoherent’ as Haig was ‘actively distrusted’ by Reagan and his ‘closest White House advisers’.⁴¹ Richard Allen’s (the national security adviser, 1981-2) role was ‘uncertain except that he can be relied upon to oppose Haig’, and Meese (counselor to the president, 1981-5) was influential ‘across the whole board of policy’ but was ‘not a master of the foreign scene’. Reagan was viewed as poorly informed about the nuances of foreign policy.⁴² This problematic approach to foreign policy suggested that the ‘four horsemen’ had a potential opening to secure Reagan’s commitment to intervention. However, American interests, combined with the frailties of the Thatcher government, ensured that the White House would not undermine Thatcher. In a scathing assessment of their British allies in July 1981, Allen informed Reagan that Britain was subject to ‘troubling political, social and

³⁸ Wilson, *Irish America*, p. 194.

³⁹ Telegram, Ambassador (Wash DC) to Asst Sec Neligan (HQ), ‘President Reagan and Senator Kennedy’, 2 June 1981 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Telegram, From Washington to FCO, ‘US Foreign Policy’, 13 July 1981 (T.N.A.: PREM 19/1152, U.S.A. United States foreign policy; nuclear non-proliferation; part 1).

⁴² Ibid.

economic drift', with Thatcher having 'lost her grip on the political rudder'.⁴³ The administration was concerned that a Labour government 'could prove harmful to our security interests even if reduced to a splinter group'. Reagan was told by Allen: 'With no British leader seeming to have a clear idea of where or how to go, some political turbulence is likely, with adverse effect on the country's reliability as a U.S. ally.'⁴⁴

In a letter on 14 July 1981, Garret FitzGerald, the taoiseach (1981-82, 82-89) asked Reagan to help prevent the death of hunger striker Kieran Doherty (who had been elected to Dáil Éireann on 11 June 1981). FitzGerald wrote: 'I beg you to use your enormous influence with the British Prime Minister within the next 24 hours ... to avert his death so preventing the very dangerous consequences which would inevitably follow'.⁴⁵ According to the Irish record, Seán Donlon (Irish ambassador to the United States, 1978-81) stressed to Michael Deaver (the White House deputy

⁴³ Memorandum, Richard V. Allen to President Reagan, 'Britain Drifts,' 31 July 1981 (<http://www.margarethatcher.org/archive/displaydocument.asp?docid=110522>) (13 Aug. 2012).

⁴⁴ Ibid. The Labour Party disagreed with much of the Reagan administration's foreign policy and inherently opposed the philosophy driving its domestic policy. Similarly, the Reagan administration viewed Labour's policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament as potentially disastrous for the western alliance. This was to such an extent that Neil Kinnock (Foot's successor as Labour Party leader) received a difficult reception in a visit prior to the 1987 U.K. general election. See: Geoffrey Smith, *Reagan and Thatcher* (London, 1990), 228.

⁴⁵ Telegram, M Burke (HQ) to Ambassador London), 'Following for your information is the text of a letter handed over to President Reagan on 14 July, 1981', 15 July 1981 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

chief of staff, 1981-5) ‘the need for an early response’.⁴⁶ According to Deaver, the president had already asked Allen to consider the situation and, given media interest, he would respond ‘as soon as possible’. Deaver was concerned that the British government was being blackmailed. Donlon reported that Allen was also not ‘very sympathetic’ because Ireland was not a member of NATO and held a ‘somewhat primitive view about how to deal with the IRA’. Whereas Reagan was sympathetic to Kennedy’s case for American involvement, White House staff were unenthusiastic. Clearly uncertain in light of his advisers’ stance, Reagan candidly told Donlon that he did not think that ‘this is one for me’. Instead, the president told Donlon that he viewed the ‘Troubles’ as ‘a war between two rival religious factions’ and, subsequently, ‘wondered why the heads of the churches could not give a more positive lead’. Reagan also assigned blame to communists who were ‘obviously involved as they had been, for example, on US campuses during the Vietnam era’. Donlon did not believe that his explanation of the history of paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland ‘succeeded in doing much more than confusing the president’. Nonetheless, the ambassador informed the Irish government that the president was overall ‘well informed and anxious to help in any way he could’.⁴⁷ Ultimately, Reagan refused to intervene in the hunger strike. In a reply to FitzGerald on 23 July, he wrote: ‘I appreciate the depth of concern which prompted your letter and want you to know how sorrowfully I, along with millions of other Americans, view this tragic conflict.’⁴⁸ He added that American intervention was not possible, although ‘U.S.

⁴⁶ Telegram, Ambassador (Washington DC) to Asst Sec Neligan (HQ), ‘Representations to President,’ 15 July 1981 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Letter, Ronald Reagan to Garret FitzGerald, 23 July 1981 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

policy and my own personal feelings as expressed in my St. Patrick's Day statement are well known to the British Government'.⁴⁹ The White House told the British embassy that Reagan's letter was 'masterfully non-committal'.⁵⁰ The president's neutrality represented a prioritising of Anglo-American relations. Indeed, Reagan and Thatcher only briefly discussed the hunger strike at the Ottawa economic summit in July 1981, with the president reassuring the prime minister that he would not interfere.⁵¹

Uncertainty over Reagan's views on Northern Ireland abounded, particularly due to the comments of William P. Clark Jr. (deputy secretary of state, 1981-82; national security adviser 1982-3; secretary of the interior, 1983-7), who was a long-term associate of Reagan and considered himself to be an Irish-American.⁵² In August 1981, Clark told Donlon that the State Department opposed Reagan intervening because Northern Ireland was viewed as a British domestic issue, while unnamed 'astute political advisers' to the president argued that it was a 'no win situation'.⁵³ Despite the opposition of many in the administration, Clark assured the Irish ambassador that the president 'felt deeply' about Northern Ireland and was willing to play a constructive role, which would also satisfy Irish-Americans in Congress and the country. Donlon believed that 'any message delivered by Clark

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ UKE Washington to FCO, 'Irish Prime Minister's Letter to President Reagan,' 30 July 1981 (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/125275>) (11 Aug. 2014).

⁵¹ Wilson, *Irish America*, p. 194.

⁵² See: Paul Kengor and Patricia Clark Doerner, *The Judge: William P. Clark, Ronald Reagan's top hand* (San Francisco, 2007).

⁵³ Telegram, Ambassador (Washington) to HQ, 'Conversation with Deputy Secretary of State William Patrick Clark', 13 Aug. 1981 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

accurately represents the president's position'.⁵⁴ Hume was equally convinced of Reagan's intentions: 'he was very committed to ... doing anything that he could to support what happened in Ireland ... he strongly supported anything that Tip O'Neill and Ted Kennedy decided about Ireland because there they were united ... in their Irish roots'.⁵⁵ Therefore, Reagan's enthusiasm to act on Northern Ireland was tempered by internal debates in his administration about the issue and wider foreign policy concerns, such as Anglo-American relations. This even extended to an address at the Irish Historical Society in New York in November 1981. Clark told Irish embassy officials that the speech originally included 'a helpful' paragraph on Northern Ireland, which had been agreed by both Ambassador Donlon and the British, but Meese intervened.⁵⁶ Subsequently, Reagan's remarks were autobiographical and light-hearted, making only one reference to Northern Ireland:

Today, as has been said here already tonight, there is tragedy again in the Emerald Isle. The Cardinal prayed and His Holiness, the Pope, plead for peace when he visited Ireland. I think we all should pray that responsible leaders on both sides and the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland can bring peace to that beautiful Isle once again. And once again, we can join John Locke in saying, 'O Ireland, isn't it grand you look—Like a

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Interview with John Hume, 29 Sept. 2005 (Miller Center, University of Virginia) (http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/interview/john_hume) (02 Oct. 2015).

⁵⁶ 'Telegram, Ambassador (Washington) to Secretary HQ, 25 Nov. 1981 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

bride in her rich adornment? And with all the pent-up love in [of] my heart, I bid you top o' the mornin'!' ⁵⁷

The Reagan administration's neutrality was called into question by a *faux pas* made by Clark in December 1981. During a visit to Ireland in December 1981, Clark publicly declared in an interview on Raidió Teilifís Éireann (R.T.É.) that the American people wanted to see a unified Ireland. Furious British officials were relieved that the State Department speedily clarified that this remark was not indicative of a change in administration policy.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, officials at the British embassy in Washington, D.C. informed their colleagues in London that Clark's remarks were 'not something which he let slip in the heat of the moment but an idea which had been determined to get across in public at some point during his visit to Dublin'.⁵⁹ Another point of concern to the British was a letter from Reagan, which Clark handed to the Taoiseach (which the Irish shared with the British as Clark was not as forthcoming). After stressing his interest in Northern Ireland, reaffirming his neutrality, and emphasising his St Patrick's Day statement, Reagan wrote:

We believe a lasting solution can be found only in a process of reconciliation between the two Irish political traditions and between Britain and Ireland. The

⁵⁷ Ronald Reagan: "Remarks in New York, New York, at the 84th Annual Dinner of the Irish American Historical Society," 6 Nov. 1981. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43221>) (5 Dec. 2014).

⁵⁸ William Borders, 'Haig Aide's Remark on Irish Unification Stirs Furor in Britain,' *The New York Times*, 9 Dec. 1981.

⁵⁹ Letter, JS Wall (British Embassy, Washington D.C.) to PKC Thomas (Republic of Ireland Department, FCO), 'President Reagan's letter to Dr FitzGerald,' 22 Feb. 1982 (T.N.A.: CJ 4/3914).

United States welcomes the efforts of the Irish and British governments in widening the framework of their cooperation to this end.⁶⁰

The FCO asked the British embassy to raise with the State Department the line, ‘reconciliation between the two Irish political traditions’.⁶¹ The British government believed that it ‘implies an all-Ireland solution to Northern Ireland’s problems’ and was suggestive of a ‘veiled reference to Irish unity’.⁶² The British embassy confirmed that the State Department will ‘try ... to ensure that the phrase is not used again’. In a conversation with Nicholas Henderson (the British ambassador to the United States, 1979-82), Clark quickly clarified his position on reunification and apologised for warning the British government about Reagan’s letter to FitzGerald.⁶³ Clark continued to be a concern for British officials working on Northern Ireland. After he was appointed NSA, the British Embassy briefed the FCO: ‘Clark is one of Reagan’s oldest and closest associates ... and, in his time at the State Department, he has continued to have the ear of the president’.⁶⁴ They further warned that there was ‘no doubt that Clark will be one of the inner circle at the White House’ and ‘the one subject which seems to have aroused his personal interest has been Northern Ireland’.

⁶⁰ Telegram, From Dublin to FCO, 7 Dec. 1981 (T.N.A.: CJ 4/3914).

⁶¹ Letter, PKC Thomas (Republic of Ireland Department, FCO) to JS Wall (British Embassy, Washington D.C.), ‘President Reagan’s letter to Dr FitzGerald,’ 1 Feb. 1982 (T.N.A.: CJ 4/3914).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Letter, AKC Wood (APS/Lord Privy Seal) to AJ Coles (10 Downing Street), ‘Northern Ireland: Mr Clarke’s remarks,’ 10 Dec. 1981 (T.N.A.: CJ 4/3845, United States Involvement in Northern Ireland and visits to the USA by Northern Ireland politicians).

⁶⁴ Telegram, From Washington to FCO, ‘President Reagan’s National Security Adviser,’ 7 Jan. 1982 (T.N.A.: CJ 4/3914).

Nevertheless, there was hope that this would change: ‘As one NSC staffer put it to us, with luck, Clark will now be too busy to devote much time to that issue.’⁶⁵ By 1982, it was clear to the Irish government that Reagan was concerned about Northern Ireland and that Clark wanted him to intervene, while the State Department and White House advisers, such as Allen and Meese, opposed Clark for foreign policy reasons and the political consequences of a ‘no-win situation’.⁶⁶

Reagan clearly followed the advice from Meese, Allen and the State Department. During a meeting with Charles Haughey, the taoiseach, in March 1982, the president was interested in Northern Ireland but ultimately non-committal.⁶⁷ Haughey argued that the ‘ultimate solution to the problem lay in Irish unity and the final withdrawal of the British from Ireland’. In reply, Reagan wondered whether the people in Northern Ireland agreed. He suggested that ‘the majority of the Irish people must yearn for peace but are terrified by the extremists on both sides’ and ‘then sought some information on the persons who would be providing entertainment at the lunch’.⁶⁸ By June 1982, Clark’s impact on policy towards Northern Ireland was reduced. Commander Dennis Blair, a member of the National Security Council, briefed British officials that although Clark’s interest in Northern Ireland ‘was strong as ever’, it was clear that Reagan ‘saw the political dangers of involving himself in

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ ‘Attitudes of current U.S. Administration on Northern Ireland,’ March 1982 (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1604).

⁶⁷ ‘Meeting between the Taoiseach President Reagan, White House, 17 Mar. 1982’ (N.A.I.: D/Foreign Affairs, 2012/59/1603).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Irish politics, and would keep right out of it'.⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly then, Reagan and Thatcher did not discuss Northern Ireland during his visit to the U.K. in June 1982, instead focusing on the Middle East, the Falklands War, and the forthcoming NATO summit (later that month).⁷⁰

III

Irish-American leaders viewed the New Ireland Forum (NIF) in 1983-4 as a means to agree a solution on Northern Ireland. Constitutional nationalist parties (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, SDLP and Labour) participated, the unionists refused on the basis that it was a biased process, and Sinn Féin was excluded due to its connections with the I.R.A.⁷¹ Reagan's cautious interest in developments was evident in his telephone conversation with FitzGerald (again the taoiseach) on St. Patrick's Day in 1983.⁷² Reagan stated:

⁶⁹ Letter, RA Harrington (Northern Ireland Office) to Patrick Eyers (Republic of Ireland Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 'Commander Dennis Blair, National Security Council,' 7 June 1982 (T.N.A.: CJ 4/3914).

⁷⁰ 'Record of a meeting between the Prime Minister and the President of the United States of America on Wednesday 9 June 1982 at 10 Downing Street at 0945' (T.N.A.: PREM 19/943, USA. Visit to UK by President Reagan, June 1982: meetings with Prime Minister; part 2).

⁷¹ Wilson, *Irish America*, pp 240-42.

⁷² Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Head of State Files. Memorandum of Telephone Call between Reagan and FitzGerald, 17 Mar. 1983, *The Reagan Files* (<http://www.thereaganfiles.com/19830517-hos.pdf>) (9 Aug. 2015).

I wanted to take this opportunity to speak to you of my own personal interests in the efforts that you are undertaking to achieve reconciliation between the two Irish communities. You can count on me to do whatever we can to support that effort. Our ambassador, Peter Dailey [1982-4], keeps me up to date on your thinking, so I hope you will stay in close touch with him.⁷³

In reply, FitzGerald explained that the NIF had been established as part of the ‘efforts to reconcile the two traditions in Ireland’. The Taoiseach asked for Reagan’s support for the NIF. Reagan quickly sought to end the conversation: ‘Well, we shall retain our good relationship and shall cooperate with you ... I think something is happening with our connection. You’ve begun to fade’. There was not a problem with FitzGerald’s connection.⁷⁴ Despite Reagan’s interest, he followed the advice of the majority of his White House staff and avoided any serious involvement. In contrast, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution in support of the NIF and a united Ireland on St Patrick’s Day in 1983.⁷⁵ Northern Ireland was not raised when Thatcher met Reagan at the White House on 29 September 1983.⁷⁶ Despite Congressional concern, the

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Wilson, *Irish America*, p. 240

⁷⁶ Thatcher and Reagan held two meetings: a tête-à-tête with just note takers and a working lunch, which was attended by Howe, Shultz, Clark, Regan, Louis and other aides from each country. See: ‘Record of a conversation between the prime minister and the president of the United States at the White House at 1137 hours on Thursday, 29 September 1983’ and ‘Record of a conversation at a working lunch given by the president of the United States for the prime minister at the White House at 1240 on Thursday, 29 September 1983’ (T.N.A.: PREM 19/1153, Prime Minister’s visit to Washington, September 1983; part 3).

Reagan administration still refused to intervene in the Anglo-Irish process, prioritising its relationship with Thatcher. In the subsequent month, Reagan even rejected Kennedy's appeal for an American peace envoy.⁷⁷

FitzGerald visited the White House on St. Patrick's Day in 1984.⁷⁸ The taoiseach began his conversation with Reagan by discussing Northern Ireland and the NIF, saying that he 'hoped for a constructive outcome'. Preferring not to engage with the NIF, Reagan remarked: 'what was happening there was all, ostensibly, happening in the name of God, but it was the same God'. He inquired whether 'a majority of the people there could get together' or if this was prevented as 'each side was simply been intimidated by its own radical groups'? This was now a recurring observation from the president.⁷⁹ FitzGerald also met Bush, telling the vice-president that 'he would like to describe the work of the Forum'.⁸⁰ Yet Bush turned the conversation to the American supply of arms for the I.R.A. When FitzGerald again tried to discuss the NIF, Bush again changed the topic of conversation, this time focusing on Ireland's forthcoming presidency of the European Economic Community.⁸¹ When meeting with George Shultz, the U.S. secretary of state (1982-9) side-stepped the NIF by sympathising with the British view of trying to avoid anything that could worsen the situation: 'a good physicians rule – avoid anything which might make the patient

⁷⁷ Wilson, *Irish America*, p. 241.

⁷⁸ 'Taoiseach's Meeting with President Reagan, White House, 16th March, 1984' (N.A.I.: D/Taoiseach, 2014/105/824).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Taoiseach's Visit to America, 'Meeting with Vice-President Bush, 14 March, 1984' (N.A.I.: D/Taoiseach, 2014/105/824).

⁸¹ Ibid.

worse'.⁸² The Reagan administration simply refused to engage with the specifics of the Anglo-Irish process. This was echoed in Reagan's diary entry about this meeting with FitzGerald: 'He's a fine man. I think we gave him some different insights in Central Am. He's very brave & outspoken about the terrorism in N. Ireland. We held a St. Patrick's Day lunch which was great fun'.⁸³

Reagan's visit to Ireland and the United Kingdom in 1984 provided some outstanding footage for his re-election campaign later that year. He was also filmed meeting other world leaders at the G7 economic summit in London and participating in the celebrations for the fortieth anniversary of D-Day on Normandy's beaches.⁸⁴ Reagan returned to his ancestral home of Ballyporeen, County Tipperary, claiming to represent forty million Irish-Americans (or, as translated by one journalist, forty million voters).⁸⁵ In a speech to a joint session of the Irish parliament, Reagan outlined American foreign policy, his plans for economic prosperity, and his approach to the cold war.⁸⁶ On Northern Ireland, he stressed his opposition to violence: 'there is no place for the crude, cowardly violence of terrorism ... end the violence ... end it completely ... end it now'. Reagan did speak optimistically about the Anglo-Irish

⁸² Cable, Washington to HQ, 'Meeting between Taoiseach, Dr Garret FitzGerald and U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz: 16th March 1984, Washington DC' (N.A.I.: D/Taoiseach, 2014/105/824).

⁸³ Douglas Brinkley (ed.), Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries* (New York, 2007), Friday, 16 Mar. – 18 Mar. 1984, 226.

⁸⁴ See, for instance: Cannon, *President Reagan*, pp 424-87.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 406.

⁸⁶ "Address Before a Joint Session of the Irish National Parliament June 4, 1984." *The Public Papers of Ronald W. Reagan*. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1984/60484a.htm>) (3 Sept. 2013) (hereafter just URL.)

process, observing that there was ‘legitimate cause for hope’ and praising the ‘constructive’ NIF.⁸⁷ The NIF had concluded in May 1984, proposing either a fully reunited Irish state, a federal state of Ireland and Northern Ireland, or a Northern Ireland under shared authority of Britain and Ireland.

Reagan was briefed about the NIF’s potential importance. Robert ‘Bud’ McFarlane (NSA, 1983-5) noted that it called for the British ‘to cooperate in facilitating movement toward Irish unity’, so advised the president ‘to avoid direct involvement, while reaffirming our support for all efforts – by both the Irish and British – to find a peaceful and constitutional solution’.⁸⁸ Shultz warned Reagan that Fitzgerald would likely ask him to use his ‘good offices with Mrs. Thatcher’ in support of the NIF proposals.⁸⁹ The Taoiseach wanted to convince Reagan of the virtues of the NIF. In a speech at Dublin Castle during the dinner held in Reagan’s honour on 3 June, FitzGerald argued that the NIF’s conclusions were ‘courageous, realistic, compassionate’.⁹⁰ As Reagan’s advisers anticipated, the NIF was the leading topic of conversation during the meeting with the Taoiseach on 4 June.⁹¹ FitzGerald ‘hoped that the President would have a few words with her of encouragement and

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Memorandum for the President, From: Robert C. McFarlane, Subject: Your European Trip: Bilateral Aspects, 18 May 1984 (Reagan Library, The President’s Trip to Europe: Ireland, UK and Normandy 1 of 6, RAC Box 20, 06/01/1984 – 06/10/1984 Binder, Office of Coordination, NSC: Records, Box 10).

⁸⁹ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to The President, Subject: Your Trip to Ireland: Setting and Issues (Reagan Library, The President’s Trip to Europe: Ireland, UK and Normandy 1 of 6, RAC Box 20, 06/01/1984 – 06/10/1984 Binder, Office of Coordination, NSC: Records, Box 10).

⁹⁰ ‘Address of An Taoiseach, Dr, Garret FitzGerald T.D. at Dinner in Honour of President Ronald Reagan, Dublin Castle, 3 June, 1984’ (N.A.I.: D/Taoiseach, 2014/105/487).

⁹¹ ‘Taoiseach’s Meeting with President Reagan, 4th June, 1984’ (N.A.I.: D/Taoiseach, 2014/105/824).

support ... on the Forum report'. In reply, Reagan suggested an indicator of Thatcher's approach was in the Falklands War: 'What did the people themselves want?'⁹² In advance of his meeting with Thatcher, Reagan was advised by Shultz to maintain neutrality:

While the issue of Northern Ireland is relatively quiet at the moment, the Prime Minister may have to give it greater attention in the months ahead, in light of the just-issued report of FitzGerald's New Ireland Forum. She may inquire about your impressions after your trip to Ireland. Making clear that the U.S. does not wish to intrude into a problem which should be resolved by Anglo-Irish cooperation, you might ask for her assessment of prospects for progress.⁹³

Shultz's brief was indicative of administration and State Department interest in the progress of the Anglo-Irish process.

In October 1984, the Anglo-Irish process was challenged by the I.R.A.'s attempt on Thatcher's life at the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the Conservative Party conference.⁹⁴ The bombing, followed by Thatcher's rejection of the NIF's conclusions at the Anglo-Irish summit in November 1984 meant that the prospects for

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Memorandum for: The President, From: George P. Shultz, Subject: Your Trip to the United Kingdom: Setting and Issues, 14 May 1984, Reagan Library, The President's Trip to Europe: Ireland, UK and Normandy (1 of 6) RAC Box 20, 06/01/1984 – 06/10/1984 (Binder), Office of Coordination, NSC: Records, Box 10.

⁹⁴ Richard Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain: the politics and social upheaval of the 1980s* (London, 2009), p. 216.

the Anglo-Irish process were bleak.⁹⁵ Subsequently, the Irish government and Irish-Americans decided to ‘play the Reagan card’ and exploit the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’ in order to change Thatcher’s approach. There was an opening for this at the White House. Kennedy recalled that as Reagan entered his second term, the administration’s approach to Northern Ireland was evolving and discussion about substantial issues related to the ‘Troubles’ and Anglo-Irish process were permitted.⁹⁶ Indeed, Reagan’s second term saw Meese leave the White House for the position of attorney general (1985-88) and the departure of Deaver in May 1985.

Thatcher’s opposition to the NIF was greeted by outrage amongst congressional Irish-Americans. O’Neill wrote to the president, arguing that Thatcher endangered ‘the best hope for a peaceful, lawful and constitutional resolution to the tragedy of Northern Ireland’.⁹⁷ O’Neill asked that Reagan urge Thatcher to renew Anglo-Irish discussions and recognise the NIF’s ‘significant support in Congress and among Irish-Americans interested in bringing peace to the beautiful land of their forebears’.⁹⁸ O’Neill also wrote to Reagan as a member of the FOI.⁹⁹ The ACCIA wrote to Reagan, asking him to discuss Northern Ireland with Thatcher when she visited Reagan in December 1984. Biaggi argued: ‘We are cognizant of the need for

⁹⁵ See: Margaret Thatcher, Press Conference following Anglo-Irish Summit, 19 Nov. 1984 (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105790>) (31 Jul. 2013).

⁹⁶ Interview with Edward M. Kennedy, 20 Mar. 2006 (Miller Center, University of Virginia) (http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/interview/edward_m_kennedy_3-20-2006) (2 Oct. 2015).

⁹⁷ Letter, Thomas P. O’Neill to Ronald Reagan, 13 Dec. 1984 (Reagan Library, 8434471, Congressional Correspondence by member L-Z, Box 90520, Chris Lehman, Files 4/18 [0].)

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Letter, Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr. et al to Ronald Reagan, 20 Dec. 1984 (Reagan Library, Thatcher Visit – Dec 84 [3], Box 90902, European and Soviet Affairs Directorate, NSC: Records).

the United States not to be in the position of advocating or imposing a particular solution', but urged Reagan to practice 'some quiet diplomacy ... in the just pursuit of peace and justice in Northern Ireland'.¹⁰⁰

IV

The Reagan administration would alter its neutral position towards the Anglo-Irish process. Shultz briefed Reagan to discuss Northern Ireland with Thatcher during their meeting at Camp David in December 1984. He suggested that Reagan should encourage the prime minister to make progress at the next Anglo-Irish summit, so as to prevent 'a radicalization of Irish-American opinion which would endanger our current bipartisan policy toward Northern Ireland'.¹⁰¹ But Reagan failed to raise the issue; instead Thatcher did, in an acknowledgement of Irish-American interest. The American record reads: 'Mrs Thatcher said she wished to address the situation in Northern Ireland. Despite reports to the contrary, she and Garret FitzGerald were on good terms and we are working toward making progress on this difficult question.'¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Letter, Mario Biaggi et al to Ronald Reagan, 17 December 1984 (Reagan Library, 834470, Congressional Correspondence by member L-Z, Box 90520, Chris Lehman, Files 4/18 [0]).

¹⁰¹ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to Ronald Reagan, 20 Dec. 1984, 'Your meeting with Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, December 22, 1984' (Reagan Library, United Kingdom: Prime Minister Official Visit, December 22, 1984 2/3, Box 91440 RAC 6, Executive Secretariat, NSC: VIP Visits).

¹⁰² Memorandum of Conversation, Meeting with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, 22 Dec. 1984, Camp David, 10: 40 a.m. – 11: 10 a.m., Private Meeting, Aspen Lodge, 11:30 a.m. – 1:25 p.m., Expanded Meeting and Lunch, Laurel Lodge, 22 Dec.1984 (Reagan Library, Thatcher Visit, Dec 84 [1], Box 90902, European and Soviet Affairs Directorate, NSC: Records).

Reagan then expressed Congress' uneasiness: 'The President said making progress is important, and observed that there is great Congressional interest in this matter. Indeed, Tip O'Neill has sent him a personal letter, asking him to appeal to Mrs. Thatcher to be reasonable and forthcoming.'¹⁰³ Subsequently, Reagan wrote to the speaker, exaggerating his comments to the prime minister:

During my meeting with Mrs. Thatcher at Camp David on December 22, I made a special effort to bring your letter to her personal attention and to convey your message of concern. I also personally emphasized the need for progress in resolving the complex situation in Northern Ireland, and the desirability for flexibility in the part of all the involved parties.¹⁰⁴

The belief that Reagan had leaned on Thatcher was a popular one.¹⁰⁵ For instance, in his memoir, FitzGerald wrote that Reagan expressed his concern to Thatcher, which was 'somewhat to the surprise' of his advisers and the State Department. FitzGerald believed that the president's intervention 'must have been a factor contributing to the more positive approach the British adopted'.¹⁰⁶ However, it was Shultz, aware of the tension with – and within – Congress on the issue, who had encouraged Reagan to raise the issue. O'Neill's opposition to violence needed the shelter of political cover from Reagan's influence with Thatcher. Moreover, Reagan took this as an opportunity to display his political nous, successfully negotiating the need to placate

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Letter, Ronald Reagan to Thomas P. O'Neill, 9 Jan. 1985 (Reagan Library, Congressional Correspondence by member L-Z, Box 90520, Chris Lehman Files 4/18 [0], Box 3).

¹⁰⁵ Mallie and McKittrick, *The fight for peace*, p. 279.

¹⁰⁶ FitzGerald, *All in a life*, p. 527.

O'Neill and other Irish-Americans, while also not distracting from his meeting with Thatcher. He allowed Thatcher to raise the issue, and then essentially pointed out the existence of O'Neill's letter and his appeal. Therefore, Reagan was not criticising Thatcher – instead he simply passed on the message from O'Neill. He never criticised Thatcher, thus he cooperated with the speaker, and did not risk an unneeded quarrel with the British prime minister. Reagan and Thatcher prioritised a wide-range of policy issues, including arms control, the economy, the Middle East, terrorism and the Soviet Union. Significantly, the meeting included Thatcher's account of her meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev early that year at Chequers (while he was emerging as a credible candidate to become the Soviet Union's general secretary). The prime minister told Reagan that 'he was an unusual Russian in that he was much less constrained, more charming, open to discussion and debate'.¹⁰⁷

Thatcher returned to the United States in February 1985. She addressed a joint session of Congress, using her remarks to criticise NORAIID and reassure Congress that the Anglo-Irish process was progressing.¹⁰⁸ Before meeting Thatcher in the White House, Reagan was advised to stress: 'Our policy on Northern Ireland has not changed. Despite urgings by some US politicians that we get directly involved, we have no intention of injecting ourselves into this complex and emotional issue.'¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Meeting with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, Camp David, 22 December 1984 (Reagan Library, Thatcher Visit, Dec 84 1, Box 90902, European and Soviet Affairs Directorate, NSC: Records).

¹⁰⁸ Margaret Thatcher, Speech to Joint Houses of Congress, 20 Feb. 1985 (<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105968>) (1 Aug. 2013).

¹⁰⁹ Memorandum, George P. Shultz to Ronald Reagan, 15 Feb. 1985, 'Your meeting with Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, February 20, 1985' (Reagan Library, United

Although a record of this meeting is unavailable, according to FitzGerald's memoir, Reagan assured the Irish ambassador that he had again raised Northern Ireland with Thatcher and 'believe[d] that the Prime Minister really wanted to do something about the problem'.¹¹⁰ There would indeed be significant progress. The Anglo-Irish Agreement (A.I.A.) was signed on 15 November 1985, meaning that the Irish government would be consulted over Northern Ireland's affairs.¹¹¹

The British and Irish governments sought the assistance of leading Irish-Americans at this stage in the Anglo-Irish process, in particular Reagan and O'Neill. McFarlane advised Reagan about 'emissaries who came on a private mission' on behalf of Thatcher and FitzGerald, asking 'that the president and speaker would endorse the AIA and reiterate their condemnation for violence and terrorism in a joined public appearance'.¹¹² The NSA passed on the British and Irish view that a joint statement from 'America's two most prominent Irishmen' could 'send a signal of hope and moderation to the people of troubled Ireland'. The British and Irish governments also expressed a hope for 'tangible, financial support to assist with the economic and social development of those areas that have suffered from the

Kingdom: Prime Minister Thatcher Official Visit, 02/20/1985 1 of 2, Box 91440 RAC Box 6, Executive Secretariat, NSC: V.I.P. Visits).

¹¹⁰ FitzGerald, *All in a life*, 535.

¹¹¹ Vinen, *Thatcher's Britain*, p. 217. For the Anglo-Irish Agreement, see, for instance: Thomas Hennessey, *The Northern Ireland peace process: ending the Troubles?* (Dublin, 2000), pp 19-66; and, Feargal Cochrane, *Unionist politics and the politics of unionism since the Anglo-Irish Agreement* (Cork, 1997).

¹¹² Memorandum, Robert C. McFarlane/M.B. Oglesby, Jr. to President Reagan, Meeting with Tip O'Neill & Irish & UK Ambassadors 11/15/85, 15 Nov. 1985 (Reagan Library, Coordination Office, National Security Council: Records, Box 10). [According to FitzGerald, the emissaries were Donlon for Irish and Robert Armstrong, Secretary of the Cabinet, for the U.K.: FitzGerald, *All in life*, 542.]

instability'. Therefore, Reagan's statement would 'lay the groundwork for possible future U.S. funding'. The importance of domestic politics was clear in the White House's considerations. McFarlane explained: 'The Speaker is impressed that you are willing, on the eve of your trip to Geneva, to address the Irish question personally in public.' (Reagan was scheduled to meet Gorbachev, now the Soviet general secretary.) The Reagan administration was serious in its response to the A.I.A. Reagan and O'Neill met to discuss 'bipartisan, public support' and 'to lay the groundwork for possible future U.S. funding in support of the rebuilding of Northern Ireland'. The administration's commitment was also underlined by the attendance of key dignitaries at that meeting: Bush, Shultz, Donald T. Regan (White House chief of staff, 1985-7), McFarlane, M.B. Oglesby, Jr. (head of Legislative Affairs), Ros Ridgway (assistant secretary of state), Ronald K. Sable (NSC), Peter R. Sommer (NSC), Kirk O'Donnell (O'Neill's senior aide), Sir Oliver Wright, the British ambassador to the United States (1982-6), and the Irish ambassador to the United States, Pádraig MacKernan (1985-91).¹¹³ Reagan's statement praised the A.I.A. as an initiative: 'which pledges to both communities in Northern Ireland respect for their rights and traditions within a society free from violence and intimidation'.¹¹⁴ The president diarised: 'At 9 A.M. Wash. Time P.M.s Thatcher & FitzGerald (Ireland) signed an agreement on bringing peace to Northern Ireland. Tip O'Neill came down & we were photographed together endorsing their action & making statements of

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Statement on the United Kingdom-Ireland Agreement Concerning Northern Ireland, November 15, 1985" (<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1985/111585a.htm>) (1 Aug. 2013).

support.’¹¹⁵ Reagan recognised the A.I.A.’s importance as part of a process of bringing peace to Northern Ireland.

The Reagan administration’s willingness to support the A.I.A. can be explained through the cynicism of politicking: it was a positive development for which the president could hope to claim some credit with O’Neill and Irish-Americans. Crucially, it also represented an opportunity to strengthen broader administration objectives. Without Meese and Deaver objecting to Reagan’s association with the Irish question, the president sought to connect the aid programme to other Reaganite policies. Kennedy recalled that Reagan initially proposed \$50 million over five years, although reflecting the free-market spirit of the 1980s, ‘most of it was all incentive for the private sector to come in’.¹¹⁶ A more ambitious bargain quickly emerged. Congress had frustrated the administration in their efforts to support the Nicaraguan Contras. They were an obsession for Reagan, who even described them as ‘the moral equal of our Founding Fathers’.¹¹⁷ Not everyone shared Reagan’s sentiments, including O’Neill and the majority in Congress, which resulted in a ban on U.S. government financial support for the Contras in their struggle against the Marxist Sandinista regime in 1984. The resulting 1985-7 Iran-Contra affair, in which the Reagan administration illegally financed the Contras, was such a serious scandal that it threatened Reagan’s presidency.¹¹⁸ Thus, Kennedy

¹¹⁵ Brinkley, Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, 15 Nov. 1985, p. 368.

¹¹⁶ Interview with Edward M. Kennedy, 27 Feb. 2006 (Miller Center, University of Virginia) (http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/interview/edward_m_kennedy_2-27-2006) (2 Oct. 2015).

¹¹⁷ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Dinner of the Conservative Political Action Conference, Friday 1 March, 1985” (http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/search/speeches/speech_srch.html) (13 Nov. 2013).

¹¹⁸ See, for instance: Michael Schaller, *Ronald Reagan* (Oxford, 2011), pp 73-80.

recalled that when he and O'Neill approached Donald T. Regan about the direct aid, he 'indicated he was prepared to get us the money if we were prepared to call off the dogs on the [Edward Patrick] Boland Amendment, which was to end the war with the Contras, in Nicaragua. It was sort of a quid pro quo, and we weren't going to have that'.¹¹⁹ The political process of securing the aid even led to a candid discussion between FitzGerald and O'Neill. Frustrated by the White House, the speaker asked the Taoiseach whether he had persuaded the president to financial support the A.I.A.: 'Cut the bullshit ... Is President Reagan going to go for the larger money or isn't he?'. Much to O'Neill's irritation, FitzGerald accurately replied: 'This is a matter that's going to have to be solved here in this country.'¹²⁰ Despite the politicking, American aid to Northern Ireland was secured and it proved O'Neill's final political victory before his retirement in 1987. The House of Representatives unanimously voted in March 1986 to grant Northern Ireland a five-year \$250 million aid package.¹²¹

V

Recalling his 1984 visit to Ireland in his memoir, Reagan wrote exclusively about his visit to Country Tipperary.¹²² He did not include any reference to the New

¹¹⁹ Interview with Edward M. Kennedy, 27 Feb. 2006 (Miller Center, University of Virginia) (http://millercenter.org/oralhistory/interview/edward_m_kennedy_2-27-2006) (2 Oct. 2015).

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ See: Wilson, *Irish America*, pp 254-56.

¹²² Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (London, 1990), p. 373. I am grateful to Liam Chambers and the anonymous readers of this article for their insightful and constructive comments. Likewise, my thanks must go to Thomas Robb for his comments on an earlier draft of this piece of work. I would like also like to thank the archivists at the British and Irish national archives, the Ronald Reagan Presidential

Ireland Forum, the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, the Anglo-Irish process, or any discussion with any Taoiseach he met during his presidency. Yet Reagan was certainly an actor in the Anglo-Irish process, albeit a reluctant one and influenced by competing priorities in foreign policy and domestic politics. Further research the about United States and Northern Ireland during the Reagan epoch is therefore warranted. Reagan's advisers were divided, with most demonstrating a nuanced understanding of U.S. interests. For them, taking account of British sensitivities was their top priority: the Anglo-American relationship, especially its security aspects, was simply not worth jeopardising by involving the administration in the Anglo-Irish process. A clear effort to downplay the issue was therefore a cornerstone of Reagan's advisers' approach to Northern Ireland. For the president, it appears that he ultimately saw an intervention as a means of furthering good relations with O'Neill. Moreover, his support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement fulfilled a crucial and publicly stated criteria: he was asked to become involved.

Reagan abandoned his administration's policy of neutrality and discussed the Anglo-Irish process with Thatcher in 1984 and a year later he endorsed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. This was not due to his concern about the 'Troubles'. Instead, Reagan's domestic political concerns triumphed over strategic factors. Thus, the president ultimately claimed to O'Neill to have raised the issue with Thatcher in 1984. Reagan's position, therefore, regarding the Northern Ireland conflict was similar to that of his predecessor, Carter, who seemingly spoke out about Northern Ireland as a means to a political end with his Democratic supporters and allies. Nonetheless, regardless of his motivations, Reagan did intervene more directly than

Library, and the various online repositories for their assistance. Finally, I am grateful to Mr Edwin Meese for our research interview in 2012.

any of his predecessors in the Anglo-Irish process and established a trend of ever-increasing U.S. involvement in Northern Ireland. By simply discussing the issue with Thatcher, Reagan could claim to have encouraged her to act positively in negotiations with FitzGerald, and the British and Irish governments sought his endorsement of the A.I.A. Moreover, even by raising the subject, the president involved the United States to a greater degree. Thus, Reagan's level of involvement constitutes an embryonic internationalisation of the Northern Ireland conflict in 1985, which foreshadowed the beginning of greater intervention by the American government in the 1990s.