

Of Capital Importance: the Irish Question in Washington DC



Irish Ambassador to the United States, Thomas J. Kiernan, presents a basket of shamrocks to President John F. Kennedy on St. Patrick's Day 1961

On the 26th of June 1963, the 35th President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, touched down in Dublin. “It took 115 years to make this trip, 6,000 miles, and three generations”, JFK proclaimed to an expectant audience. Kennedy’s great-grandfather (on his mother’s side) had emigrated from Bruff, Co. Limerick, to Boston during the 1840s; his great-grandfather (from his father’s side) had emigrated to the New World from New Ross, Co. Wexford. They were just two of approximately two million who left Ireland between 1845 and 1855, due to the Great Irish Famine. Of those who remained on the island, one million would die of starvation and disease.

On the penultimate day of his state visit to Ireland, President Kennedy delivered an address to Dáil Eireann in Dublin. “No country contributed more to building my own than your sons and daughters”, JFK proclaimed to the Irish parliament, highlighting the many outstanding Irish success stories in American political life since independence: James Hoban (the Irish-born architect of the White House), John Barry (the Irish-born ‘father of the US Navy’ during the American Revolutionary War), Thomas Francis Meagher (the leader of the Irish Brigade in the

Union Army during the American Civil War). President Kennedy's address, in short, recognized the exceptional achievements of Irish emigrants in the making of modern America.

A keen student of modern Irish history, Kennedy was further aware of the impact of American politics on Irish independence, concluding his remarks: "no people ever believed more deeply in the cause of Irish freedom than the people of the United States." Washington DC, notably, was of capital importance in the resolution of the Irish Question across the twentieth century.

Consider the events which led to the creation of the Irish State. On January 21st, 1919, members of the Sinn Féin party (from which modern-day Sinn Féin claims political lineage), abstained from attending Westminster, instead establishing a revolutionary assembly at the Mansion House in Dublin: Dáil Éireann. Suppressed by the British administration in September 1919, Dáil Éireann met just three times in 1920 and on four occasions in 1921. Washington DC proved a more democratic forum for public debate during the Irish War of Independence. Crossing the Atlantic, Irish leaders utilised the political and press freedoms offered in the American capital to bypass the censorship of the British regime in Dublin.

Washington offered Ireland friends in high places at the height of the British-Irish conflict. In 1919, the influential Irish-American political pressure group - the Friends of Irish Freedom – secured hearings on Irish self-determination as part of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee deliberations on the League of Nations. One year later, a "Committee of One Hundred" was formed on the Hill to investigate British atrocities in Ireland, comprising Senators, Members of Congress, public intellectuals (such as W.E.B. Du Bois), and media figures (such as Randolph Hearst). Members of the Dáil were invited to address this American Commission on Conditions in Ireland; their testimonies were printed daily in the *Washington Post*. "In the interests of peace with America", British Prime Minister David Lloyd George conceded of the proceedings, "we ought to try to get a settlement". The Anglo-Irish Treaty – creating an independent Irish state - would be signed later that year (6 December 1921).

The achievement of Irish independence served to strengthen the transatlantic ties between the United States and Ireland. In October 1924, President Calvin Coolidge invited T.A. Smiddy to present his credentials as Ireland's envoy extraordinaire and Minister Plenipotentiary to the

United States – the first nation-state to formalize diplomatic relations with Ireland, independent of the United Kingdom. Four years later, W.T. Cosgrave undertook the first Irish state visit to Washington DC, dining at the White House; addressing the US Senate; and holding talks with Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg at the State Department. The “shuttle diplomacy” between Dublin and DC would become a cornerstone of Irish foreign policy over the twentieth century.

Arriving in Washington DC on St. Patrick’s Day for the first time in 1964, the Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O’Neill, remarked to President Lyndon B. Johnson: “as relations between the North of Ireland and the South of Ireland improve, I do so hope that the Irish Question can be removed from American politics”. Instead, the Troubles began, causing thirty years of bitter conflict in Northern Ireland, and direct rule from London. In the absence of a functioning democracy in Belfast, Irish-American political leaders held British rule in Northern Ireland to account in Washington. The “Four Horsemen” – Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Pat Moynihan, Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, and Governor of New York Hugh Carey – issued annual St. Patrick’s Day statements to the media spotlighting the violence in Northern Ireland; founded the Friends of Ireland lobby group in Congress to offset British influence; and persuaded President Carter to issue a statement – the first to come from the Oval Office – signalling American interest in resolving the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The social spaces of DC political life presented invaluable opportunities for Irish political leaders to communicate their views on the conflict to American policymakers. John Hume, the leader of the nationalist SDLP (and future Nobel Peace Prize Laureate), recognised this above all. Invited to dinner parties in the fashionable Georgetown neighbourhood, he impressed upon his fellow guests - among them White House staffers and members of the National Security Council - the need for a cross-community political solution in Northern Ireland. Hume, famously, would brief Senator Kennedy on events across the Atlantic during “moonlight tours” of the National Mall. Hume’s ideas for a peaceful solution to the Troubles were so widely discussed on the United States Senate floor that he became known as the “101st Senator”.

During the St. Patrick’s Day Speaker’s Lunch on the Hill, the Four Horsemen – led by Tip O’Neill - lobbied President Reagan to persuade British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to sign the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, granting the Irish Government in Dublin an advisory role in Northern Ireland for the first time. “It was a mistake that Unionism did not recognise

earlier the importance of that influence,” Democratic Unionist Party leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson later observed, “we needed to be on the Hill, we needed to be in Washington.”

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, ultimately, would be underwritten in Washington DC. President Bill Clinton secured a visa for Gerry Adams to visit the United States in 1994 - despite the protests of the British Foreign Office - leading to an IRA ceasefire. Seconded to Northern Ireland as US Special Envoy one year later, former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell chaired the all-party peace talks in Belfast which led to the Agreement in April 1998. On the line in the West Wing throughout the last night of negotiations, Clinton’s long-distance calls to Gerry Adams and Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble were instrumental in persuading both to sign the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April. Twenty-five years later, the DC-based Ad Hoc Committee to Protect the Good Friday Agreement continues to lobby political representatives across Capitol Hill on issues impacting Northern Ireland in the wake of Brexit.

The 250th anniversary of the American Declaration of Independence offers a critical opportunity to reflect on the legacies of the historic relationships between the United States and Ireland. A new generation of Irish-American political advocates has emerged across the Atlantic, highlighted by the appointment of Joseph Kennedy III – John F. Kennedy’s grandnephew – as US Special Envoy to Northern Ireland (2022-2024). Hundreds of School of Foreign Service students at Georgetown University are registered for courses in Irish Studies. Meanwhile, transatlantic trade and investment continues to be top of the agenda in diplomatic discussions between the United States and Ireland in Washington each St. Patrick’s season. As it looks back on its illustrious history, Irish-America is looking forward to celebrating #America250. As Ireland’s nineteenth Ambassador to the United States, Geraldine Byrne Nason, has concluded of contemporary US-Irish relations: “our twenty-first century ambitions are anchored in a historical relationship.”

Prof. Darragh Gannon is Associate Director of Global Irish Studies at Georgetown University and Ireland Funds Fellow at the Princess Grace Irish Library, Monaco.

His most recent book - *Conflict, Diaspora, and Empire: Irish nationalism in Britain, 1912-1922* (Cambridge University Press, 2023) – was awarded the American Conference for Irish Studies Donald Murphy Prize Honorable Mention.