

## Clinton in Northern Ireland thwarts British operations

by William Jones

The three-day visit of President Clinton to Great Britain, Northern Ireland, and Ireland has become a defining moment of his Presidency to date. As one Washington columnist put it, the President faced down the British—and they blinked. This, just a few days after he had successfully “faced down” the attempts by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to force the President to accept a budget to which he was adamantly opposed, beginning the “Cry Baby’s” rapid demise.

In his London speech on Nov. 29 to Britain’s Parliament at Westminster, the President was all graciousness and good will. There was even a good deal of humor in the exchanges between the President and House of Commons speaker Betty Boothroyd, at the expense of Newt Gingrich. Choosing the theme of the Roosevelt-Churchill relationship, the President alluded to the collaboration between the United States and Great Britain during the war years.

The form he chose for his speech, which he himself had carefully worked on, was a panegyric to the U.S.-British relationship. The content, however, was far different than that any President in the last 25 years could have given. In effect, the President was redefining the U.S.-British relationship. Although none of the protagonists referred to this fact, it was recognized by all.

President Clinton expressed a special gratitude for “your efforts in Northern Ireland,” words that must have stuck in the craw of some of his listeners, like Lady Maggie Thatcher, who had been most liberal in her dispatch of British troops to Northern Ireland during her Downing Street years, and most adamant in her refusal to negotiate. In fact, the United States had to bring the British, kicking and screaming, to the negoti-

ating table in Northern Ireland. Only the granting of a visa to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams in September 1993 by the United States, against strong British protest, created a situation in which Adams, a key figure in any negotiations, was lifted from the “non-person” status the British establishment had assigned him. Adams played a key role in attaining the cease-fire in Northern Ireland, now in place for the last 15 months.

### Last-minute negotiations

Just prior to the President’s arrival in London, the British had tried to throw a monkey-wrench into the awaited Anglo-Irish accord that would set a date for all-party talks on Northern Ireland. British Prime Minister John Major’s insistence that the Irish Republican Army had to start to give up its arms *before* talks could begin, was seriously hampering progress on any of the issues. The British were also somewhat perturbed that the “decommissioning” of weapons would be handled by an independent commission headed by former Sen. George Mitchell, the U.S. President’s special adviser on Ireland. Only a last-minute scramble by Ireland’s Prime Minister John Bruton succeeded in getting an agreement before Clinton arrived. The two prime ministers issued their “two-track initiative” just hours before Air Force One touched down in London. The initiative separates the issues of the all-party talks and the “decommissioning,” and sets a target date for the talks for the end of February.

But the tables were turned on the traditional *modus operandi* of U.S.-British relations, according to which the British policymakers manipulate U.S. political and military

might to their advantage. The shift was apparent already in October, when the President met with Russian President Boris Yeltsin at the Franklin Roosevelt home in Hyde Park, New York to initiate a new "partnership" with the Russian leader. Here in London, the President was presenting *his* agenda and asking support for his attempts to secure peace in Northern Ireland, as well as in Bosnia, for which he also made an appeal. "We can help the people of Bosnia as they seek a way back from savagery to civility. And we can build a peaceful, undivided Europe," the President said. There was supreme irony in the President's words, spoken in the city that is the real center of international terrorism and destabilization, and which has callously manipulated the Bosnia conflict for geopolitical reasons, directed against the other European powers.

But the trip to Westminster, which included extensive talks with Prime Minister Major and a 25-minute meeting with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, was simply a prelude to the trip to Northern Ireland. While the President has worked hard since coming into office to achieve peace in Northern Ireland, this was the first time ever that a U.S. President had set foot in what had always been solely a British domain. The amenities in London were an attempt to smoothe over whatever British "feathers" the Presidential visit in Northern Ireland was going to ruffle.

Clearly not everybody was happy. In the general applause following Clinton's comments to the two Houses of Parliament, there were those who demonstratively refrained from clapping. Reflecting the rage among some British circles, the *Daily Mail's* Simon Heffer on Dec. 1 ranted, "We have proceeded with a nervous glance over our shoulder at you and your administration, seeking your approval for what we do in our own country. No wonder you think you can get away with lording it over us."

Not only the successful U.S. efforts to bring Sinn Fein into the negotiations broke with British precedent, in which Sinn Fein was simply considered a non-player, but also the personal intervention of the President, who intended to go to Northern Ireland to speak to the Unionist parties and to present his own government as an honest broker in the talks, must have been particularly galling for those British mandarins, who had seen the area as their "eminent domain" for centuries. No doubt, enraged and unreconstructed British aristocrats are now gathering in smoke-filled rooms to discuss how to stop this "upstart" President. Knowing that terrorism, destabilization, and psychological warfare are all integral elements of this group's "bag of tricks," ought to cause heightened awareness among White House policy planners as well as among those responsible for the President's security.

### **'One hundred thousand welcomes'**

The reception the President received when he landed in Belfast should have belied any impression that this was "Brit-

ish turf." As Clinton's entourage drove in from the airport in the wee hours of the morning, people had begun to line up along the roads to get a glimpse of the American President. The turnout was far greater than anyone could have imagined. In a public meeting in Derry (or Londonderry, for the Unionists), the first of several on this whirlwind tour, people jammed the Guildhall Square, waiting for hours to see the U.S. President. "We want Bull, we want Bull," the crowd chanted, calling for "Bill" in the local dialect. When he appeared, a roar went up from the crowd, with thousands of people waving small American flags. "There was not a Union flag nor a Tricolour [the flag of the Irish Republic] to be found in the entire city that day," noted one native observer.

In his speech, President Clinton pointed out that it was Derry that had been the model for the architectural design of Philadelphia in the mind of an Ulster Protestant, William Penn, a soldier turned Quaker, who "founded Pennsylvania, a colony unique in the New World because it was based on a principle of religious tolerance." "Today when he travels to the States," the President said, "John Hume is fond of reminding us about the phrase that Americans established in Philadelphia as the motto of our nation, *E pluribus unum*—'Out of many, one'—the belief that back then Quakers and Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians, could practice their religion, celebrate their culture, honor their traditions, and live as neighbors in peace." "We are struggling to live out William Penn's vision," the President said, "and we pray that you will be able to live out that vision as well." "The time has come for the peacemakers to triumph in Northern Ireland, and the United States will support them as they do," the President promised.

A beaming John Hume was looking on from the podium that day. Hume, a representative for the Social Democratic and Labour Party in the British Parliament from Derry, was one of the key people with whom the administration had worked closely to help bring about the cease-fire. The President called Hume "Ireland's most tireless champion for civil rights."

Earlier in the day the President spoke to workers and the community of Mackies Metal Plant, one of the Belfast employers which had worked to break down job discrimination in Northern Ireland, and which is situated along the Belfast "peace line," the wall of steel and stone that had long separated Protestant and Catholic areas. The President was greeted by two Belfast children, Catherine Hamill, a 9-year Catholic girl whose 29-year-old father had been killed in the "Troubles," and 10-year-old David Sterrett, a Protestant. Most poignant was the letter Catherine had written for the President. "My first daddy died in the 'Troubles,'" Catherine said. "It was the saddest day of my life. I still think of him. Now it is nice and peaceful. My Christmas wish is that peace and love will last forever in Ireland." Catherine got a big hug from the President, moved by her words.

"For 25 years now, the history of Northern Ireland has

been written in the blood of its children and their parents,” the President told his Mackies audience. “The cease-fire turned the page on that history; it must not be allowed to turn back. We will stand with those who take risks for peace, in Northern Ireland and around the world,” the President said. “If you walk down this path continually, you will not walk alone.” The President also announced that “those who do show the courage to break with the past are entitled to their stake in the future,” making clear that even those previously involved in the violence on either side, would be included in the peace, if they walk the road of peace.

### ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’

Later in the day, President Clinton spoke to over 80,000 people in front of the City Hall in Belfast, where he lit the city’s Christmas tree, a gift of the people of Nashville, Tennessee, the home town of Vice President Al Gore. Speaking for himself and for the First Lady, the President called the day, “one of the most remarkable days of our lives.” Mrs. Clinton, in addition to accompanying the President at the official events, also had her own itinerary, speaking with some of the women at the Women’s Drop-In Centre in Belfast, a haven for mothers and wives on both sides to come and talk of their experiences. They discussed social issues, jobs, and the challenges of bringing up children in a violent city. Lighting the tree, the President said, “And when God was with us, He said no words more important than these: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the Earth.’ ”

In a well-orchestrated “chance” meeting in the Catholic West Belfast, when President Clinton had stopped to do some shopping, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams appeared for the first public handshake with the President. They had met earlier at the Washington Conference on Ireland in May, but not before the cameras. “*Cead Mile Failte*,” Adams proffered the President the traditional Irish greeting, meaning, “One hundred thousand welcomes.”

Later in the evening, at a reception in the President’s honor at the Europa Hotel in Belfast, Clinton met with some of the top Unionist leaders to discuss the perspectives for peace. The reception was also attended by Gerry Adams. All the major Unionist figures seemed pleased that the U.S. President was personally engaged in the peace process. As Gary McMichael, leader of the Ulster Democratic Party, one of those loyalist leaders whom President Clinton named as responsible for bringing about the cease-fire, told *EIR*: “What Bill Clinton has been able to do, is to concentrate people’s minds on what this peace process is about. It’s not about decommissioning. It’s not about the various nuances of the impasse. It’s about keeping the peace. It’s about creating the tolerance between the communities which will allow them to move forward to an agreement. . . . It’s about changing people’s minds by creating an openness where they can embrace political change. In that respect, the visit

will be a tremendous catalyst to give the maneuverability to those who need it most.” Even for those who looked to Britain for their support, the United States has now become the major player.

Proceeding on to Dublin, President Clinton addressed 100,000 people on College Green. “I’ve been here before,” the President told his listeners, referring to a little-known trip he had made to Ireland as a student at Oxford in the late 1960s, precisely when the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland started to flare up.

### The Irish in world history

Addressing the Irish Parliament (the Dail) later in the day, President Clinton referred to the important role of Irish immigrants in the American Civil War. “The regimental banner brought by President Kennedy that hangs in this house reminds us of the nearly 200,000 Irishmen who took up arms in our Civil War. Many of them barely were off the ships when they joined the Union forces,” the President said. “They fought and died at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. Theirs was only the first of countless contributions to our nation from those who fled the famine. But that contribution enabled us to remain a nation and to be here with you today in partnership for peace for your nation and for the peoples who live on this island.”

The President also referred to the valuable role of the Irish monks 1,500 years ago, when they preserved the records of civilization. “It has been said, probably without overstatement, that the Irish, in that dark period, saved civilization,” the President told his listeners. “Now we seek to repay that in some small way—by being a partner with you for peace. We seek somehow to communicate to every single person who lives here that we want for all of your children the right to grow up in an Ireland where this entire island gives every man and woman the right to live up to the fullest of their God-given abilities and gives people the right to live in equality, freedom and dignity.”

Also attending his speech in the Dail was Gerry Adams, long considered *persona non grata* there, wearing the traditional green Sinn Fein insignia. Many things were rapidly changing on the Emerald Isle—thanks to the persistence of the President.

Immediately following the visit, former Senator Mitchell was scheduled to continue the talks to achieve an agreement on the “decommissioning” of arms, a task that will not be an easy one. In addition, there is also planned a follow-up conference to last May’s White House Conference on Investment, sometime in the first half of next year and probably in Chicago. Much remains to be done. As Gary McMichaels noted, many people had been “over-optimistic” about the results of the White House conference last May. As one Belfast-based journalist pointed out to *EIR*, “Economic development is key. That’s what will solidify the whole peace process.”