

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

### IRELAND



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U.S. Administration and Northern Ireland and developments  
relating to the sale of arms to the RUC

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1. In recent years the U.S. administration has had to attempt to balance in its policy on Northern Ireland two quite conflicting approaches. On the one hand, the traditional U.S. establishment approach has been to regard Northern Ireland as an internal U.K. affair. On the other hand, Northern Ireland has become a subject of some popular interest and concern in the U.S. and the articulation of this interest and concern by certain politicians has obliged the administration to adopt a more positive stance. However the State Department and other elements in the U.S. establishment tend where possible to revert to non-intervention and acceptance of the "internal nature" for the U.K. of the Northern Ireland problem. The British authorities are very sensitive to any suggestion of overt U.S. administration involvement in Northern Ireland and it is therefore to be presumed that the British engage in forceful and sustained lobbying to inhibit such a development.

2. During the 1976 U.S. presidential election campaign, the then Governor Carter responded to pressure from the Irish National Caucus by agreeing to meet with Caucus supporters in Pittsburg. Following approaches by the Irish Government and in consultation with four major Irish-American leaders (O'Neill, Kennedy, Moynihan and Carey), Carter as President refused to have any further contact with the Caucus. On the other hand, and again in consultation with the Irish Government and the four Irish-American political leaders, in August 1977 President Carter issued a statement in which he called for an end to violence and to American support for organisations involved in violence.

3. The initiative leading to President Carter's statement was formally taken by the four Democratic leaders of Irish descent who coordinated their approach at every step with the Irish Government and with John Hume. This relationship is well known both to the Executive, i.e. State Department and White House - as well as to the British, although it was never formally acknowledged by



either. Detailed diplomatic negotiations subsequently took place with both Governments. The permanent levels of the Administration (and notably the State Department) strongly backed British efforts first of all to quash and later, acknowledging the reality of O'Neill's enormous influence with Carter, to limit the range of the statement. The statement that emerged on 30 August 1977, although unprecedented in committing the Administration to an eventual role in helping solve the problems, nevertheless fell short of the desiderata of the Irish Government and the four U.S. politicians. In short, for the first time on this issue, Irish Government influence as exercised through the four leaders had proved to be very considerable but not absolute. President Carter in his tribute to O'Neill screened at the Ireland Fund dinner on 10 May 1978 formally acknowledged the Speaker's role in formulating Administration policy on Northern Ireland, thus effectively disposing of the Caucus claim to have initiated the Presidential statement.

4. A press disclosure towards the end of May 1979 that the U.S. State Department had authorised the Sturm Ruger Corporation of Connecticut to sell 3000 .375 magnum handguns and 500 .223 semi-automatic rifles to the RUC provoked Speaker "Tip" O'Neill to issue a statement on 1 June on the merits of supplying arms to any group or persons in Northern Ireland.

5. The Speaker's remarks were widely misinterpreted by British and Northern Ireland political figures and reactions were generally negative. The Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Mr. Atkins, maintained that the arms were to defend the Northern Ireland community and the RUC from attacks while at the same time he defended the impartiality of the force. The DUP MP for East Belfast, Mr. Peter Robinson, urged the FCO to protest to the U.S. Government about the continual meddling of "this supposedly responsible American" in Northern Ireland affairs. Mr. Peter Jay, the then British Ambassador in Washington met Speaker O'Neill on 5 June 1979 and rejected his alleged imputation that the RUC was a sectarian force and an instrument of repression of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. The Speaker's point that the sale would make more difficult the attainment of the common objective of reducing support in the U.S. for the IRA was not acknowledged. However, in the U.S. the Speaker's comments were broadly supported even in the



normally pro-British establishment press.

6. In mid-July 1979 during a debate on the 1980 Appropriations Bill for the State, Judiciary and Commerce Departments Congressman Biaggi tabled a resolution to prevent funds voted to the State Department from being used to sanction the sale, transfer or gift of arms to the RUC. He withdrew his resolution following an assurance that the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House would investigate the question of arms deliveries to Northern Ireland. On 30 July, the Secretary of the Committee held an informal meeting at which Nimitz of the State Department indicated that the State Department had suspended all private sales of arms to Northern Ireland pending a review on policy on such exports. Both Biaggi of the ad hoc Congressional Committee and Fr. Seán McManus of the Irish National Caucus claimed credit for the suspension.

7. Prime Minister Thatcher paid an official visit to Washington on 17 December 1979 and her programme included meetings at the White House and at a joint session of Senate and House Committees concerned with Foreign Affairs. Among her objectives during the visit was the removal of the U.S. ban on the sale of arms to the RUC. Immediately after her visit, the President made a private plea to Speaker O'Neill to change his position in regard to the arms sales. The British were, he said, among the best U.S. supporters in dealing with the terrorists who were holding U.S. hostages in Iran and it seemed reasonable that they should expect similar support in their efforts to deal with terrorism in Northern Ireland. The Speaker however continued to oppose arms sales to the RUC. In a Commons reply on 20 December Mrs. Thatcher said that there is not as yet a ban and that they have placed another order for 3,000 Ruger revolvers which has neither been accepted nor rejected. She said she had made it perfectly clear that, if that order were rejected, it would be not only wrong, but a propaganda victory for the IRA. Following her talks with the President, the White House in a statement said the President and Mrs. Thatcher "condemned support for organisations and individuals engaged directly or indirectly in campaigns of violence and agreed that such campaigns only delay the day when peace and reconciliation can come to Northern Ireland".



While the content of this reference in the communique is not dramatic, the fact that an Anglo-American summit communique referred at all to Northern Ireland is a remarkable departure which represents a significant inter-nationalisation of the issue. This departure is attributable largely to Irish Government influence on the Irish issue, via Speaker O'Neill, on the U.S. administration.

8. The fullest recent statement of U.S. Government policy on Northern Ireland was made at a Press Conference in Washington on 5 September 1979 by Secretary of State Vance:-

Question: Mr. Secretary, as you know, Prime Ministers Lynch and Thatcher are meeting today. You or the Department recently suspended arms sales to the Royal Ulster Constabulary. In the meantime, people like Governor Carey have even stepped in to offer mediation. My question, is, when will this study that you are doing now on this be completed, and are you contemplating suggesting to Mrs. Thatcher and the British Government a new political initiative to try and solve the problem?

Secretary Vance: The answer is that we are not planning to suggest a new political initiative. Our position has been - and President Carter stated it very clearly in 1977 - a position of impartiality. It is a position which supports the bringing together of the various factions in an attempt to try and move towards a peaceful solution.

It is an immensely difficult problem, as all of us know - one of the most difficult of these types of problems that exist throughout the world.

The position which we have taken is supported by the British Government, by the Irish Government and by the political parties in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. For us to intrude ourselves in at this point into the Irish situation, in my judgement, would not be wise. I think it would be resented by the parties concerned, and they are the ones that should deal with this issue".



9. During the Papal visit to the U.S. in October 1969, President Carter and the Pope discussed Northern Ireland. A White House press statement quotes them as jointly condemning "resort to violence, by any party, for any reason". President Carter also referred publicly during the visit to the search for peace in Northern Ireland as in Rhodesia, in Nicaragua and the Middle East. While such references have been interpreted as an "internationalisation of the Northern conflict, no more concrete attitude on the part of the U.S. administration has emerged.

10. During the course of a visit to the USA, Lord Carrington met Speaker O'Neill on 6 May 1980. Lord Carrington raised the question of arms for the RUC and O'Neill indicated that he could not agree to have the appropriate licences issued at that stage because such action could only benefit the Provisional IRA who would use the affair to collect more money and to try and gain support from politicians running for election in Irish-American districts. He hoped that the British could find it possible in the circumstances to look for weapons for the RUC in some other country. As far as can be ascertained Lord Carrington did not discuss the Northern Ireland situation with the President, the Secretary of State or any of the other politicians whom he met in the U.S.A.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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