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Summary.

The I.R.A. and the Republic.

Historical background and strength of the I.R.A.  
(Paragraphs 1 to 3)

Passivity followed by stimulation by splinter  
groups. (Paragraphs 4 and 5)

Policy switch to exploitation of social and  
industrial unrest. (Paragraph 6)

But no total abandonment of anti-British violence,  
which gives the movement its status in Irish eyes  
and emotions. (Paragraphs 7 to 9)

This status precludes effective suppression by  
the Irish Government. (Paragraphs 10 to 12)

Current anti-British plotting; police counter-  
measures. (Paragraph 13)

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Copied to GP1/9

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British Embassy  
Dublin

5 July, 1968

Sir,

The I.R.A. and the Republic.

I have the honour to submit the following observations on the extent to which the rule of law is violated or endangered in Ireland by the existence of illegal political organisations which the Government of the Republic is unable or unwilling to suppress.

2. The principal such body calls itself the Irish Republican Army. Organisationally considered, it is the proscribed military arm of the legal political entity known as Sinn Fein. However, it is wrong to regard the I.R.A. as obediently carrying out instructions received from Sinn Fein; on the contrary, the political attitudes struck by Sinn Fein are dictated to it by the I.R.A.. The names of both branches are intended to claim an honourable descent from the men who liberated Ireland and to manifest a determination to recognise neither the frontier with Northern Ireland nor the "26-Counties Government" in Dublin which has more or less accepted that frontier de facto. (In point of fact the actual survivors from the Revolution and the Anglo-Irish war are mostly members of "the old I.R.A.", a sort of veteran organisation of which the President and the Foreign Minister are strong supporters. Such people by their earlier history and by their continued existence do in a sense give countenance to the activists and make it more difficult for measures to be taken against them; but in the rest of this despatch I shall use I.R.A. to mean simply the believers in violence, the heirs of Pearse who regarded bloodshed as "a cleansing and sanctifying thing").

/3. The I.R.A.

The Rt. Hon. George Thomson, M.P.,  
Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs.

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3. The I.R.A. has consistently maintained its right to exist and to bear arms (and to use arms) in pursuance of its determination to secure a United Ireland. It is in possession of considerable stocks of arms and explosives, and it is known to carry out drills and exercises. Estimates of its numbers are variable, but perhaps something in the region of 1,500 active members would be a fair guess.

4. The results achieved by this body have been on no very significant scale since a campaign of sabotage and violence from 1957 to 1962 was conducted across the Northern Border. That campaign cost Northern Ireland the lives of seven members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and an estimated £700,000 in outright damage. Extra security provisions are reported to have cost some £770,000 a year in the North and £350,000 in the South. But thereafter there appeared to be a decided move towards propaganda and away from violence, and indeed the higher command actually stated\* in 1966 that "on one occasion only in the past twelve years had the movement engaged in 'hostile action' in the Republic".

5. This apparent passivity led to the formation on the flanks of the I.R.A. of one or more ginger groups. The leader of such a group, Behal by name, appeared in May last on television and claimed credit for certain manifestations of physical violence, including interference with Princess Margaret's movements by establishing road-blocks and the firing of shots at H.M. Ships when on courtesy visits to Irish ports, exploits for which he was put in prison, though it did not take very long for him to 'escape'. He alleged that in consequence of his undue activity he had been expelled from the I.R.A.

/6. Most ...

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\* The I.R.A. finds no great difficulty in securing publicity. It is true that the publication by newspapers of the title "I.R.A." is prohibited; but "member of an illegal organisation" has become a universal substitute. The I.R.A. often obtains funds by robbing banks; there has been a spate of such armed robberies in recent weeks and I enclose a newspaper article which attributes them to a splinter group rather than to the parent body. This may or may not be correct.

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6. Most probably he will be reabsorbed, since the passivity of the main body may well have been more apparent than real. According to well-informed sources, the past few years have been a period of re-orientation, a period during which the I.R.A., increasingly penetrated or manipulated by left-wingers and Communists, has set its hand to tasks which it had hitherto deliberately neglected, that is, liaison with international subversive bodies and the exploitation of social and industrial unrest. The first open sign of this new turn in policy came last month when the I.R.A. through its Adjutant General issued a public statement claiming credit for the recent burning of a number of coaches which were being used to carry workers to a strike-bound factory near Limerick. The statement added "We therefore warn all blacklegs and their masters that the I.R.A. is conscious of its duty as the revolutionary Army of the Irish people and will defend the rights of the Irish workers whenever these rights are attacked by foreign or native opportunists in their attempt to exploit Irish labour".

7. But it would be wrong to imagine that in addressing itself to its new task the I.R.A. will completely abandon its old one. Only by maintaining some pressure of tension and physical violence against partition and against the British can it retain that degree of sympathy (sometimes rather grudging and unwilling sympathy) in Irish hearts which secures for it a privileged position amounting almost to legal immunity. Let it retain this position and the Government of the Republic, however hostile it may be to Communism and industrial subversion, however willing to suppress them, will have to think again when the perpetrators of physical violence on these fronts turn out to be clothed with the full patriotic armour of the I.R.A.. Thus no arrests have been made, or are likely to be made, in connection with the burning of the buses in Limerick.

8. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that in order to preserve its image in the eyes of the Irish public, the I.R.A. will feel moved from time to time to commit some violent action in a field related to Anglo-Irish politics.

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9. The fact that such violence should still be a talisman for the I.R.A. in Irish eyes is because the resentment of partition, though it has receded as a factor in day-to-day politics, still remains as a tremendously strong political emotion just under the surface of the Irish mind. I doubt very much if this is sufficiently realised in London. Mrs. Aiken, wife of the Foreign Minister, sympathised with me effusively at dinner last week over a political demonstration on the partition issue which was being planned against me at Ballina, on a visit I was due to make there with the Minister of Industry and Commerce\*. Then she went on: "But after all, how can you blame those people? They're not far from the border there and they know what it's like ... I remember you said in a speech last year that there was nothing left of the British Empire. But there is. You have given back all of your Empire except Northern Ireland. Why don't you give that back to us now and finish the job?". Breaking my hitherto invariable rule about not discussing partition, I asked her: "You make it sound so easy - you regard Northern Ireland as a piece of your property, and we are just to give it back to you? You would just move in and take it over?" "Yes". "But leaving aside the origins, surely we have heavy responsibilities today - you wouldn't want to see a Biafra situation developing, would you?". To which the lady replied with some heat: "There could never be a Biafra in Ireland, Mr. Ambassador, unless you made one! Take out your troops, take away your arms, and those people will see at once which side their bread is buttered on, and they will be loyal Irishmen again from that time forward. Only your army and your subsidies keep them going, only on your orders could we have a Biafra. What you said is right: the responsibility is yours and will remain yours".

/10. ...

\* The demonstration turned out to be rather a flop, though the police took it seriously enough to lay on very considerable protection.

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10. The Irish Cabinet, with the possible exception of Mrs. Aiken's husband, take a rather less simple view of the matter. Scratch them on partition and you will rouse Irish emotions, that is certain: but they have their emotions fairly well under control and are working for that détente with Northern Ireland and that rapprochement with Britain which form an essential accompaniment to their programme of social and economic progress, a programme which is working out very creditably indeed and which they do not want to see endangered. As regards the reunification of Ireland, they vaguely hope to achieve it in the context of the European Common Market. If they thought that in furtherance of such aims it would be profitable and possible to suppress the I.R.A., they would do it. But they do not think they can, and they will not try.

11. Their attitude is easy to understand. The more publicity the I.R.A. can get, the more recruits it will secure for its (theoretically) dwindling ranks; and trials provide excellent publicity. The Government is unwilling to be seen to persecute or to prosecute men who already have some degree of subconscious emotional support from the Irish people for their anti-British actions and who could very soon increase that support to massive proportions if they could exhibit themselves on a platform of patriotic suffering\*. So it is better on the whole for the Government to endure a little discomfort and disorder and humiliation and to hope that the I.R.A. will not go too far.

/12. I may ...

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\* As Shaw Desmond wrote about the 1916 rebels: ... "They had against them the conscious disapproval of at least four-fifths of their countrymen and countrywomen - but behind them they had the unconscious instinct to country of those men and women which is the soul of a people. In a word, to complete the paradox, they had Ireland."

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12. I may say that this attitude of the Irish Government seems to me a very sensible one; I certainly have nothing better to recommend to them.

13. It only remains to add that the I.R.A., whether in order to maintain their reputation against the competition of splinter-groups or in order to provide cover for their social-subversive commitments by a bout of anti-British activity, have apparently chosen what I cannot but regard as a very tiresome gambit: they have convinced the Irish authorities that they have a plot for assassinating the British Ambassador. From official and unofficial conversations with officers of the Special Branch (some of the ablest and most agreeable people I have met in Ireland) I cannot very well doubt that in fact something is in the wind. The result for me is not unprecedented: since the normal deterrent of arrest and punishment does not operate to a sufficient extent where the I.R.A. is concerned, the safety of a person threatened by them can only be secured by an apparatus of protection, overt and covert, operating on a 24-hour basis and with a very high degree of unobtrusive police propinquity in public places. The Irish have had to institute such a system from time to time in recent years, sometimes in respect of a Cabinet Minister, sometimes in respect of a judge, sometimes in respect of a distinguished visitor; and I am told that the record of their Special Branch in carrying out their duties is such that I am not entitled to feel the slightest degree of personal alarm. Nevertheless I cannot avoid two rather ungrateful comments:-

- (a) that though these are much the nicest armed guards I have had in recent years, I would really rather be without them; and
- (b) that if by some millionth chance the opposition should succeed in their efforts, I could not but cherish a life-long grievance at the thought that the assassin in all probability would not be arrested, or if arrested not convicted, or if convicted not held in prison for very long before effecting an "escape".

I have the honour to be, Sir,  
Your most obedient, humble, Servant,

(Sgd.) A.G. Gilchrist.

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