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The Last Martyrs – Omagh, Sinn Fein and the Republican Transition from Armalites to Ballot Boxes

By James Siniscalchi

At 3:30 pm August 15, 1998, the quiet market town of Omagh was shattered by the explosion of a 500-pound car bomb. Killed in the blast were Avril Monaghan, pregnant with near term twin girls, her 18-month old daughter, her mother and twenty-eight other women, children and shopkeepers. Hundreds more were wounded or maimed. The victims were common people going about their daily lives, secure in the knowledge that, in light of the recently signed Good Friday Accords (GFA), sectarian violence was a thing of the past.¹ The attack, conducted by a little known Irish Republican Army splinter group numbering fewer than thirty, was a defiant response by disaffected Republican extremists to the IRA Army Council's acceptance of formal negotiations with Unionists, and marked the final turning point in Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican movement's journey from violence.² Unlike previous attacks, this singular event, aimed at destabilizing the agreement itself, galvanized both sides of the Republican / Unionist divide. Public reaction to the bombing was well summed up by Liz O'Donnell, deputy foreign minister of the Irish Republic: "[...] People were lulled into a false sense of security. We thought we were all done with that. We had a deal with militant republicanism – and we felt double crossed."³ Omagh eliminated the possibility that Sinn Fein would ever again be able to find public support for *the armed struggle*. Omagh was a point of no return for the Republican movement: while previously Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams and his Belfast faction had determined ongoing military action was counterproductive to achieving a unified Ireland and civil rights for Catholics in Ulster, public outcry after the bombing made any return to violent

¹ Cannon, Carl M., "Little Respite on an Island of Rage," *National Journal* 30.30 (Sept. 5, 1998): pp. 2034-35.

² Gelb, Norman, "Northern Ireland After Omagh: Uncertain Peace," *The New Leader* 8.11 (Oct. 5, 1998): p. 5.

³ Cannon, p. 2035.

action retrograde. “I believe the Omagh bombing was a watershed,’ said Seamus Mallon, the highest-ranking Catholic official in the new Northern Ireland governmental body. ‘People have drawn a line in the sand beyond which violence will never be allowed to exist here again.’”⁴

Securing IRA disarmament, in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing, marked Sinn Fein’s final transition from front organization to legitimate political party. The significance of examining this transition lays in the hope that, by examining Sinn Fein and the Irish experience, a guide may be found to peaceful resolution of other long standing ethno-religious conflicts.

For the bulk of its study, the Republican movement has been seen as a fringe manifestation of the frustrations of poor and working class Catholics, with no legitimate interest in the political process. The inclusion of Sinn Fein in the negotiation of the GFA unnaturally shifted the balance of power.⁵ By allowing what was perceived as the front organization of the IRA to take the leading role during the peace process without securing a renunciation of *the armed struggle*, the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom, intentionally or not, legitimized the IRA’s militarism.⁶ As a result, the Republican movement must be reevaluated.⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Shirlow, Peter and Mark McGovern, “Language, Discourse and the Irish peace process,” *Political Geography* 17(2), p.174. Sinn Fein’s inability to consistently earn more than 10-13% of the votes cast in national elections in the 1980s, at the height of its pre-Good Friday Accords political popularity, suggests that the inclusion of Sinn Fein in peace negotiations over compensated the party for its meager political support.

⁶ Richards, A., “Terrorist groups and political fronts: The IRA, Sinn Fein, the peace process and democracy,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13(4): p. 77.

⁷ McBride, Ian, “The Shadow of the Gunmen: Irish Historians and the IRA,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46(3): p. 690-1, 702 and 708. Traditional scholarship with regard to the history of *The Troubles* tends toward a non-partisan Unionist bias. While later schools of thought attempted to address this issue, Republicanism generally, and Sinn Fein in particular, had always been treated as a fringe movement, not legitimate and not part of main stream Irish nationalism. While beyond the scope of this paper, this historiography has been extensively covered by Ian McBride and his insight informs this work.

The late 1960s, and particularly 1969, were a transitional time for civil rights movements globally, and Irish Republicanism presented no exception.⁸ A distinct rise in sectarian violence in Belfast, particularly during the Protestant late summer marching season of 1969, created a crisis within the leadership of the IRA. Disconnected from the plight of northern Catholics, the traditional Dublin-based leadership had taken a significant turn to the left, openly espousing a political agenda which included hardline Marxist ideology and a heightened involvement in the Parliamentary electoral process of the Republic – a shift which alienated conservative rural Catholics as well as the urban fighters of Belfast, who, faced with increasing British and Protestant repression, who became ever more invested in a militant solution. This factional schism, prompting extensive intra-Republican violence, resulted a distinct shift in leadership from Dublin to the newly-formed provisional-wing of the movement headquartered in Belfast. Ironically, a young Republican named Gerry Adams, with sympathies on both sides of the split, took on a key leadership role in this new power structure, and was instrumental in the IRA's decision to escalate the military campaign. After the split, increasingly the official wing of the IRA was marginalized and both leadership and momentum shifted to the Provisionals in the north. This factional split would foreshadow ongoing dissention in the movement well into the early 2000s, with a notable distinction: Adams and the provisional leadership in Belfast would be the ones pursuing a distinctly political agenda. Intra-Republican bitterness surrounding this change in ideology and tactics would continue to plague the prospects for lasting peace.⁹

While the goals of the Republican movement, Irish unification, Catholic emancipation in the North and an end to British occupation, were always inherently political, in the aftermath of

⁸ While this global socio-political trend is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to acknowledge that further study of the Republican movement in this context is worthy of consideration.

⁹ Moloney, Ed, *Voices from the grave: Two men's war in Ireland*, (Public Affairs: Philadelphia), p.42-92

the Official / Provisional IRA split and subsequent shift in leadership, shockingly, there was no sophisticated ongoing Republican political program. The IRA's initial strategy was, through direct military action, to attempt to expel British forces from Ulster. Given the disparity in military capability, the failure of this direct strategy seems to have been inevitable. Coupled with the increasing sophistication of British counter-insurgency tactics, the IRA leadership was forced to adopt more long term, low intensity tactics: a war of attrition waged against the economic infrastructure of Ulster, targeted to wear away British resolve to continue the occupation. Under this strategy, Sinn Fein's role was simply to act as "[the] propaganda machine which would provide ideological support for the ongoing military campaign."¹⁰

By the late 1970s, the young, urban and, increasingly political Belfast faction of Sinn Fein, under the leadership of Adams and Martin McGuinness, acknowledged that gathering political support from the majority of the Irish nationalist community was both integral to furthering the IRA's agenda and would require a concerted campaign of political activity. Propaganda support alone was no longer sufficient. The resulting *Armalites and Ballot Boxes* campaign, a combination of the effort to establish Sinn Fein as a significant voice within the nationalist political community¹¹ and an escalation of IRA attacks to avoid the implication of cowardice, was the preliminary attempt at a more political, rather than military approach.¹²

Initially, significant gains were made through this coordinated approach, reaching a high water mark with the 1983 Westminster election, where Sinn Fein was able to garner 43% of the nationalist vote, however, the contradictory nature of the *Armalites and Ballot Boxes* policy

¹⁰ Shirlow, p. 174.

¹¹ These political gains were primarily focused on undermining Sinn Fein's chief political rival, the more moderate Social Democratic Liberal Party (SDLP). As with earlier Republican criticism of the Home Rule party in the 1870s and 80s, Sinn Fein painted the SDLP's reform minded approach as collaborationist.

¹² Ibid.

proved difficult to overcome. While Sinn Fein was able to earn broader support from the nationalists, IRA violence and the resultant Unionist reprisals, only served to further alienate the northern electorate. In subsequent elections Sinn Fein proved unable to earn more than 10-13% of votes cast. Republican violence was focused on forcing the British to concede that Ulster could not be governed in a “legitimate and stable manner” and force a withdrawal, naïvely failing to recognize the pervasive nature of Unionism and the firmly held majority belief that continued partition or unification should be decided by consensus.¹³

The Unionist community and Unionist sentiment were as much of a stumbling block to unification as the British government. A distinct Unionist cultural identity had evolved and escalating Republican violence only served to harden its resolve. That the vast majority of those killed, as much as 90%, were not British military, but civilians, local security forces or Unionist paramilitaries undercut Sinn Fein’s social justice rhetoric and instead supported the idea that the conflict was a civil war. Additionally, a moderation of the British position allowed that they would support unification if a consensus was reached, further weakening Sinn Fein’s arguments for Republican legitimacy.¹⁴

Republican violence alienated mainstream northern voters and participation in the parliamentary process undermined the IRA’s core ideological claim, based on the election of 1918, they represented the only legitimate government of all of Ireland (a policy known as *Abstentionism*). Without a moderation in this core Republican belief, the Belfast faction realized that further political expansion was impossible. Furthermore, there was a dawning recognition among this group that the non-democratic tactics of the IRA might be undermining the goal of

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.174-175.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.174-176.

unification. At great risk of splintering the Republican movement, in recognition of this reality, Sinn Fein made significant attempts throughout the 1980s to win an electoral mandate in the Irish Republic. While *Armalites and Ballot Boxes* incorporated a significant political component, at its core, it remained a largely military strategy. Failure to dislodge the British occupation as well as failure to achieve more than 6% of the vote in national elections indicated that the campaign had failed and continued use of violence was increasingly unjustifiable, even among Sinn Fein supporters. Failure to generate popular support for the continued military campaign signaled failure of the policy as a whole. Increasingly, there was a realization within the Belfast faction that the IRA “made itself a cause of war [and] that it was doing little more than alienating sections of both communities whose consent [...] was essential to advance Irish unification.” John Hume, leader of the moderately nationalist Social Democratic Liberal Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein’s chief nationalist rival, went so far as to say that the British government was no longer the chief impediment to unification.¹⁵

Armalites and Ballot Boxes, while unsuccessful in achieving the ultimate goal of ending the occupation, did force the governments of Britain and the Irish Republic to make policy changes. Sinn Fein’s political advancement in the 1980s, coupled with the realization by the British government that the IRA could not be easily defeated militarily, forced a revitalization of cooperation with the Republic. The 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement, an attempt to open dialog between the nationalist community, the Irish Republic and the British government purposely excluded any group who refused to renounce violence in an attempt to marginalize Sinn Fein, but also signaled that a negotiated settlement might be possible. British willingness in the 1980s and early 1990s to accept unification by consensus further undermined Sinn Fein’s arguments that

¹⁵ Ibid.

Britain was an aggressor pursuing imperialistic aims, and the possibility of dialog toward a multi-party negotiated settlement became real if Sinn Fein could find a way to recognize a more pluralistic nationalist interest. Increasingly, sectarian violence was the significant factor in maintaining the militarization of the conflict and preventing useful dialog toward a solution. The rise of a Catholic middle class in Ulster, with the resultant shift in values toward more materialistic goals and away from Republican political ideals served to further erode Sinn Fein's traditional base of support. Another, more significant shift in political strategy was required for Sinn Fein, the IRA and the Republican movement to maintain relevancy. Despite the risk, and the very real threat of intra-republican violence, moderation of the policy of *Abstentionism* was essential.¹⁶

The shift was signaled in the 1989 book, *A Scenario for Peace*, where Adams set out a strategy for cooperation with various national and international bodies to secure peace and support for Irish unification. This strategy, using the Anglo-Irish agreement of 1985, an attempt to open a dialog between the nationalist community, the Irish Republic and the British government, as a framework for uncovering common objectives, signaled a willingness by Sinn Fein to operate within a diplomatic and political framework. For the first time, the possibility of negotiated settlement through peaceful dialog was acknowledged by the Republican leadership as a path toward non-violent resolution to the conflict. In this way, Sinn Fein signaled a further willingness to join an Irish unification community including moderate elements, like the Irish Republic and the SDLP, and by the late 1980s a broad nationalist position began to develop based on the key principal of national self-determination. Mindful that under *Armalites and*

¹⁶ Ultimately, this moderation did result, in 1986, in the formation of strongly abstentionist splinter groups like Republican Sinn Fein and The Real IRA, which, as evidenced by the Omagh bombing, would have a bloody impact on the peace process. *Ibid.*, p.176 and 177.

Ballot Boxes, Sinn Fein effort was focused on undermining the SDLP, significant dialog was required to reconcile the two parties. What emerged, in 1988, was an understanding that, while fundamentally in disagreement over methods, the two groups shared a common goal of unification. This understanding required that Sinn Fein dilute its Marxist social radicalism in an effort to appeal to the SDLP's more mainstream liberal ideology and tone down its revolutionary criticism of the SDLP's participation within governmental structures.¹⁷ By 1991, this shift also allowed for protracted secret negotiations between Sinn Fein and the British government, which lead to an understanding that, if the IRA halted their violent campaign a systematic withdrawal over time was achievable. In the words of Sinn Fein councilor for North Belfast, Joe Austen: "[...] they wished to disengage. The problem for them was that they could not be seen to disengage because of IRA activity[.]"¹⁸ Sinn Fein's response was a new political strategy - *the unarmed struggle*.

This shift away from militancy allowed for a re-imagining of the roles of the British and Irish governments. While in the past the British pursued a policy of containment and isolation with regard to Sinn Fein, this new political environment forced a need to draw new parties to the negotiating table. The shift away from violence also opened the opportunity for a reevaluation of the roots of Unionist identity. To make these changes required recognition of the largely superficial nature of the traditional Protestant / Catholic sectarian conflict and acknowledged the need for reconciliation.¹⁹ Central to Sinn Fein's commitment to the peace process was the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The division of communities between Catholic and Protestant, while certainly rooted in British discrimination against Catholicism and the associated policies in Ulster, could leave one with the mistaken impression that, at their core, *The Troubles* were a conflict between two fanatically religious sects. It is important to recognize, in modern times, the causes of friction were largely social, economic and political, rather than religious. It is also important to acknowledge that the ongoing conflict placed significant parts of both communities in similar economic peril. Sinn Fein's Marxist ideology, to some degree, acknowledged this commonality within Ulster's

recognition of the British need and intension to withdraw. It is important to note that this moderation of ideology was conducted without either, overtly accepting the legitimacy of the established British position in Ulster, nor relinquishing the legitimacy of the IRA's past militancy. Adams also called on the Republic to "take the initiative." Specifically, he urged the Dublin government to enlist international support for the peace process and advised, in an effort to re-contextualize Unionism in the framework of unification, to "reassure the unionist community of a total commitment to their civil and religious rights [...]." ²⁰ The softening of Sinn Fein's traditional ideology allowed for the party's reintegration into the broader Irish nationalist movement, inclusive of the SDLP, the Irish Republic and (to some degree) more moderate pro-Unionist organizations. This acceptance that "reconciliation through constructive dialog and debate" with Unionists was at the core of this transition. ²¹ Buoyed by global events, Adams' Sinn Fein, less defined by traditional concepts of sectarian conflict and more defined in the context of justice (both social and economic), national identity and community encouraged their own broader acceptance and fostered the type of broad based support the party had long sought. It was in this context that Sinn Fein was able to call for demilitarization of the conflict and establish its criteria for peace. ²²

At midnight on August 31, 1994 the IRA declared its readiness to abandon violence and pursue a negotiated peace by ordering its fighters to lay down their arms. "The struggle is not over,' Gerry Adams, the head of Sinn Fein, the I.R.A.'s political arm, told hundreds outside his

working class. While religion served as the significant division amongst the communities, the points of disagreement were far more secular; religious affiliation was simply an easy short-hand for distinguishing the factions.

²⁰ Adams, Gerry, *Free Ireland: Toward a Lasting Peace* (Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart: 1986, 1994), p.178-179.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.177.

²² Shirlow, p.179.

headquarters. ‘The struggle has entered a new phase.’”²³ In December of 1993 the British and Irish governments outlined the terms under which Sinn Fein could join peace negotiations, and an agreement to permanently end the violence was a key stipulation. By unilaterally ending the violence, Adams and Sinn Fein were able to secure a seat at the negotiating table without addressing decommissioning, and to demand a corresponding reduction in military presence by Britain.²⁴ Adams, in one broad gesture, and through distancing himself from a doctrine already determined counterproductive to the movement, had succeeded in securing Sinn Fein’s continued involvement in the design of a post-colonial Irish state. Ominously, the issue of permanent IRA disarmament was left unaddressed. While the 1994 cease fire was a significant step toward putting an end to the conflict, the IRA retained the capability to use violence to advance their political agenda. In a moment which seems prescient, John Alderdice, leader of the bipartisan Alliance Party (drawing on both Republican and Unionist constituents for support), advocated cautioned, “[...] most people here feel they judge the [IRA] by their actions and not by their words, [...]. So everyone will be watching very closely to see what happens.”²⁵ On February 9, 1996, only eighteen months after the announcement, a massive explosion ripped through the Canary Wharf section of East London, killing two and wounding at least one hundred “on ‘direct instructions from the army leadership.’”²⁶

Within hours after an IRA announcement that they would resume *the armed struggle* in reaction to British insistence that the issue of IRA weapons be resolved before Sinn Fein would be accorded full standing in the negotiations, the British, Irish and American governments were

²³ Schmidt, William E., “I.R.A. Declares Cease-Fire, Seeing ‘New Opportunity’ to Negotiate Irish Peace,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1994.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Stevenson, Richard W., “I.R.A. Issues Claim of Responsibility for London Bomb,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1996.

faced with the likely collapse of the peace process. Concern was expressed at the time that this action indicated a split between Sinn Fein and the IRA Army Council; that Adams, forced to walk a tightrope between hard line advocates of a continued military campaign frustrated by the perceived lack of progress toward withdrawal and his pursuit of a peaceful resolution, had been excluded from the decision to resume violence. More disturbingly, 2001 revelations indicating Adams and McGuinness' leadership of the Army Council²⁷, point toward Adams' complicity in the bomb plot and suggest that he had resorted to violence in an effort to break the stalemate. In radio and television interviews only a day after the bombing, Adams insisted he had no prior knowledge, and that "blame for the bombing was 'squarely with the I.R.A.,' and [that the attack] left him 'very sad.'" Notably, Adams refused to condemn the attack.²⁸

In the aftermath of the bombing, the importance of external pressure, particularly from the Clinton administration, cannot be overlooked. Through encouraging close contact between Adams and his administration, exploitation of the *special relationship* with Britain, and in cooperation with the Republic, Clinton encouraged the resumption of negotiations under conditions which all parties found tolerable, if not amenable. After a lapse the cease fire resumed and the peace process continued.²⁹

The Canary Wharf episode, while disruptive of the process, also signaled the willingness of the involved parties to overcome significant obstacles in pursuit of a lasting peace. Brokered with American help and signed on Good Friday, April 10, 1998, the Good Friday Accords established a structure for the devolution of home rule in the North. Ratified with 85% of popular

²⁷ Clark, Liam, "Leaked list names the men who run the IRA," *Sunday Times*, London, March 25, 2001, p. 28.

²⁸ Stevenson.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

support in both Ulster and the Republic³⁰, the GFA represented the most substantive step toward a permanent solution to sectarian violence, however, the issue of decommissioning IRA weapons was still left open.³¹ Sinn Fein's inability to deliver on disarmament would continue to haunt the peace process. While the end of *The Troubles* seemed at hand, within three months, this illusion was to be shattered by a Saturday morning bombing in the market town of Omagh.

On Thursday, September 3, 1998, less than a month after the bombing, American President Bill Clinton visited Ulster on the hope that he could "encourage various symbolic gestures on the part of the feuding parties [,]" which might ameliorate the mistrustful situation and salvage the peace process.³² The preceding Monday night, Sinn Fein Vice President, Pat Doherty, appeared on television in front of a live audience to discuss the peace process and was welcomed with an overwhelmingly negative response. Faced with mounting pressure to immediately renounce violence and disarm the IRA, and stuck by the vehemence of the outcry, both public and diplomatic, two days before Clinton's arrival, Adams announced: "Sinn Fein believe the violence we have seen must be for all of us now a thing of the past, over done with and gone. I am committed to play my part, as is Sinn Fein."³³ While leveraging the IRA's continued access to weapons had, up to that point, been critical to Adams' negotiation strategy in an effort to secure as much reform as possible, the use of implied Republican violence was no longer tenable. While Unionist leaders argued that the statement was insufficient because it did not address decommissioning, within days Adams had appointed Martin McGuinness, long time

³⁰ Cannon, p. 2034.

³¹ Crook, Clive, "Peace in Northern Ireland? Not just yet," *National Journal* 32.7 (2000): p. 452.

³² Cannon, pp. 2034-2036.

³³ *Ibid.*

Belfast associate, Sinn Fein negotiator and former Chief of Staff of the IRA, (and future Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland) to negotiate the dismantling of IRA weapons stockpiles.³⁴

Ultimately it was this commitment to decommissioning which lent credibility to Sinn Fein's transformation; the culmination of thirty years of increasingly sophisticated political strategies. While outside international support and involvement was important to the peace process, pragmatism and a willingness to accept that a political, not a military, solution was the only available path to achieve Republican goals, was the impulse which ensured peace. The party could no longer consider a return to militarism -- public reaction after Omagh ensured that. The hardening of American attitudes toward terrorism in the early 2000s only served to make the repercussions of a return to an armed struggle simply too dire to consider.³⁵ By renouncing violence once and for all, Adams had finally placed Sinn Fein on the path to democratic legitimacy. While parliamentary challenges remained, after Omagh, the specter of large scale Republican violence no longer loomed over the political future of Ulster. The future of post-colonial Ireland would be born at the ballot box and the negotiating table, not from the barrel of an Armalite.

³⁴ Ibid., p.2036.

³⁵ Richards, p.82.

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