Northern Ireland: How the US told the IRA to begin decommissioning

Mike Ingram
31 October 2001

An article in last Sunday's *Observer* newspaper gives a revealing insight into how the commencement of IRA weapons decommissioning came about.

The intense pressure from the US, which any informed observer could not but fail to see, is explained at great length. Some illustrative details could only have come from sources within the American or British government, or possibly from within Sinn Fein.

The author, Alan Ruddock, begins his account with the morning of September 11, the day of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, as the US special envoy to Ireland, Richard Haass was preparing for a meeting with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams. Under the heading, " *How America held the IRA over a barrel*," Ruddock writes:

"After a few minutes of talking about 'inching forward' towards the peace process, Haass finally snapped. 'If any American, service personnel or civilian, is killed in Colombia by the technology the IRA supplied then you can f**k off,' he shouted, finger jabbing towards Adam's chest. 'Don't tell me you know nothing about what's going on there, we know everything about it,'" Ruddock writes.

Haass was referring to the arrest of three alleged IRA men in Columbia in August, one of whom was Sinn Fein's representative in Cuba, Niall Connolly. After the meeting with Haass, Adams made the spurious claim that Connolly's appointment had been made without his knowledge or the authorisation of the international department of Sinn Fein.

In a *World Socialist Web Site* article of October 25, we drew attention to American interests in Northern Ireland and the fact that "Sinn Fein has sought to recast itself in the role of a favoured political representative of American imperialism." The article by Ruddock says, "Adam's principal concern remained the maintenance of warm relations with the American administration and the preservation of millions of dollars from rich, conservative Irish-Americans."

Ruddock cites the case of Bill Flynn, "one of the pivotal figures in Irish-American politics." Describing him as a "close confident of Irish nationalists," Ruddock states that Flynn, as chairman of the Mutual Bank of America, "is a conservative that no government in Washington can ignore."

The *Observer* states Flynn told the IRA that, after Colombia, "the only way to rescue the party's reputation in the US capital was for the IRA to disarm."

"They listen to me because they know I am a strong supporter of what they are doing to unite Ireland," Flynn is said to have told the *Observer*.

According to the *Observer*, Flynn is the "figurehead" for a group of US businessmen sympathetic to Sinn Fein, "who are simultaneously crucial to fundraising while also pushing for an end to the military campaign. Last year the party raised more than $1 million from corporate Irish-American backers and Adams realised that, such was the gravity of the situation, Sinn Fein risked having to close its crucial Washington office."

Flynn was no less forthright than Haass in his communiqués with Adams, which the *Observer* say were couriered by special envoys, as both men were too nervous of being bugged to use the telephone. Flynn told Adams, "They (in Washington) are not going to put up with any more nonsense... After Columbia and then September 11, the time had come for real politics, and we had got to decommission."

Niall O'Dowd, publisher of the New York-based *Irish Voice*, told the *Observer*, "I think that the Americans played an understated but very significant role. And I think that time will reveal the importance of what they did, especially the presence of their

© World Socialist Web Site

ambassador at Sinn Fein's Ard Fheis a couple of weeks ago. In that apparent contradiction was a clear pointer that the US was still involved and engaged, despite Columbia and the World Trade Centre."

The article claims that, "On September 27 at a safe house in Dundalk, an Irish border town where many IRA men on the run from the British security forces live, the Provisionals' leadership held an historic meeting.

"Pat Doherty, a Sinn Fein MP, proposed that, for the coming few months, Martin McGuinness should become the IRA's chief of staff [a position he was rumoured to hold before becoming a more public figure in Sinn Fein following the 1981 hunger strikes] putting the pro-decommissioning wing in the driving seat."

Over the next few weeks, the *Observer* reveals, the Sinn Fein/IRA leadership held meetings throughout Ireland with key figures who were persuaded to back decommissioning. "However, the leadership avoided holding an 'Army Convention' fearing a nationwide gathering of the volunteers would become a focal point for dissent."

This is the background to the closely choreographed events leading to the simultaneous announcement by Adams in Belfast and McGuinness in Washington on October 22, calling on the IRA to "save the peace process". The following day the IRA announced that it had begun to decommission "to save the peace process and to persuade others of our intentions".

Ruddock says, "It was made clear that America had two big sticks to wield—visas for Sinn Fein leaders and the right to fundraise in the US. These would be withdrawn unless there was decommissioning."

Absent from the article is any assessment of what America gets in return. To examine this calls into question the democratic pretences of the Good Friday Agreement and the new political structures it has brought into being. Far from heralding the control of the people of the north of Ireland over their own destiny, the Northern Ireland Assembly brings together Unionist and Republican parties that do the political bidding of one or another of the British, American and Irish governments.

For Britain, the peace process was driven primarily by the fact that its old methods of rule over the north though Unionism and the Protestant ascendancy were no longer effective. With the north's economic decline since the 1960s, Britain's public spending on the province increased substantially. While cross-boarder trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland increased, with the Republic being northern Irelands' number one export market, the south was the main beneficiary. Britain even saw its own interests in the north decline as America's advanced.

For the southern government, the peace process was driven by the requirements of international trade and investments. The Republic had benefited at the expense of the north, becoming the prime European location for transnational corporations, particularly American. But if this was to be expanded, the armed conflict had to be ended.

For the US, the stabilisation of the situation in the north was essential both for existing investment in the south and new possibilities in the north. With the failure of earlier attempts to reach a settlement that excluded Sinn Fein, it was evident that the Republicans must be included within any new political structures.

Their role as proxy for the US, however, has given them standing beyond their wildest dreams. Not only can they maintain US funding for their organisation, but they are now treated as respected bourgeois politicians. One can only imagine McGuinness' self-congratulatory frame of mind as he was ushered into the State Department to meet General Colin Powell, the US Secretary of State as what the *Observer* calls a "small treat" for having agreed to disarm. How better to mark Sinn Fein's transition to respectability than to have the titular head of the IRA shake hands with the man leading America's supposed "war on terrorism".

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site