

Introduction

If only we were dealing with reasonable people.

—Home Secretary Reginald Maudling¹

On the edge of Europe, paramilitary violence emerged as a lethal threat to the authority of a Western democratic state over thirty years before U.S. president George W. Bush declared war on terror. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) took up arms against the British state in Northern Ireland in 1969 and sustained its insurgency for twenty-six years, defying the determined efforts of successive governments to stop it. The fighting eventually ended with the signing of an international political agreement in April 1998. That document was the outcome of protracted negotiations involving the British and Irish states, IRA representatives, and most of Northern Ireland's political parties.

Northern Ireland's agreement has been celebrated as a model for the resolution of violent political conflicts around the world. Two of the most prominent figures from the Irish peace process, British prime minister Tony Blair and U.S. senator George Mitchell, have been assigned as international peace envoys to the Middle East. Blair has referred to the Irish peace process as an inspiration, saying that "right round the world there are people who have taken heart from it."² Mitchell has identified some basic principles of negotiation that apply to both cases.³

Political scientists have depicted Northern Ireland as comparable with other cases of ethnonational internal war.⁴ But some commentators and negotiators are skeptical about the value of cross-national comparisons.⁵ The debate continues over how research can best contribute to the design of workable and sustainable solutions to internal conflicts. But both sides agree on the value of drawing the best possible inferences from these painful experiences. It could be as damaging for governments, negotiators, and mediators to apply inappropriate generalizations out of context as to ignore opportunities for knowledge transfer altogether. This book is a contribution to the collective effort of peacebuilders around the world to learn from and improve our collective understanding.

When the British state first engaged with the Northern Ireland conflict during 1969, the ministers, senior officials, and military commanders assigned to the problem knew little about the place, its people, their turbulent histories, and their ideologies. They learned by trial and error. It took some three years to put in place the essential components of the policy doctrine that eventually resulted in the agreement. This book starts from the premise that there may be as much wisdom to be harvested from the failures of that early formative period as from later successes.

The challenge was not an easy one. British security officials have acknowledged their opponents as “one of the most effective terrorist organisations in history. Professional, dedicated, highly skilled and resilient, it [the IRA] conducted a sustained and lethal campaign in Northern Ireland, mainland United Kingdom (UK) and on the continent of Europe.”⁶ The IRA’s mission was to create an independent all-Ireland socialist republic. To this end, it exploited quasi-religious rhetoric, revolutionary mythology, and patriotic sentiment to legitimize and promote what British ministers at the time denounced as “terrorism” but which its activists called “the armed struggle.”⁷ In classic guerrilla style, the IRA turned Britain’s strengths to its own advantage. Adding political campaigning to paramilitary violence, it secured substantial popular support from the minority community in a deeply divided society.

The IRA campaign did not attain its ultimate objectives. Northern Ireland remains in the United Kingdom, and there is arguably less evidence of socialism throughout Ireland now than when it began. The Republic of Ireland amended its constitution in 1998 so that it no longer declares jurisdiction over the entire island; it is debatable whether this represents progress toward unification.

Nevertheless, the IRA did achieve clear and substantial gains. The British terminated the majority-controlled administration that had run Northern Ireland since its creation in 1920, undertook to work for a united Ireland if a majority of the electorate supported it, introduced new power-sharing arrangements designed to guarantee minority participation in a new devolved administration, promoted new all-Ireland institutions that were presented as a step toward unification, and gave the Irish government substantial influence over British policy decisions. These were considerable achievements for a force of under two thousand fighters confronting one of the world’s most experienced and best-equipped armies.

Why did the British yield so much? Did they appease violence or respond pragmatically to the changing elements of an intractable problem with no perfect solution? As events moved on, did they draw the right lessons from experience? This book analyzes and assesses Britain’s policy responses to what is euphemistically known locally as “the Troubles.” It

examines four discrete policy approaches, starting with the decision in August 1969 to reform Northern Ireland's police service and ending with the comprehensive constitutional agreement of December 1973. This was the formative period for Britain's political and security policies, setting the pattern for the next thirty-three years. During 1973, London settled on an approach that subsequently crystallized as the organizational doctrine of the Northern Ireland Office, the department created in 1972 to coordinate security and political development policies.

At the core of the book are six questions. What processes of understanding and reasoning, political pressures, and organizational factors shaped British policies? What principles and interests underpinned them? How were dilemmas and uncertainties resolved? Why did policies evolve as they did? How effective were they? When they failed, what lessons were learned?

The book goes beyond traditional historical narrative to test hypotheses and systematically identify patterns that in theory could recur under comparable conditions in other times and places. It transforms historical events into analytic episodes, distinguishing the universal from the idiosyncratic and setting out its findings in generalizable terms.

A government generally depicts its policies as the products of rational processes of decision-making. In reality, however, they are heavily influenced by the political forces and organizational constraints to which policymakers are subjected. Policy decisions are made under pressure by people who lack essential information and are uncertain about the intentions and capabilities of other players.

In examining the successive policy choices of British ministers, this book draws on four broad models of explanation: economic, psychological, political, and organizational. Each is related to a distinct tradition of policy analysis. The carefully structured application of each of these models in turn structures the analysis, enables robust conclusions to be drawn, and helps to identify lessons for transfer.

Chapter 1 explains how policymakers understand political violence and use the resources at their disposal to tackle it. It defines three broad strategic options—reform, coercion, and power sharing—and identifies factors that influence which of the three are selected in practice. Chapter 2 turns to Northern Ireland, describing the underlying preconditions for the violence in conflicting national aspirations, rooted in Ireland's troubled history and reinforced since the 1880s by a series of mutually reinforcing political, social, economic, and cultural divisions.

Chapters 3 to 6 present four case studies, each of which focuses on a pivotal point in Britain's evolving policy toward Northern Ireland. Chapter 3 looks at the package of reforms that Britain introduced in response

to a protest campaign that resulted in rioting and street fighting, particularly the reform of the police service in September 1969. Chapter 4 examines how the role of the British army in Northern Ireland developed from peacekeeping to coercion in response to an increasingly violent insurgency, focusing on the introduction of internment in August 1971. Chapter 5 considers how the perceived failure of this coercive approach led Britain to suspend Northern Ireland's devolved administration in March 1972, replacing it with direct rule, a system of government that persisted, despite short unstable periods of devolution, until 2007. Chapter 6 analyzes the development of what some commentators have depicted as Britain's first comprehensive strategy to address the roots of the conflict, power sharing with an Irish dimension. With occasional deviations and varying interpretations, Labour and Conservative governments have pursued this since then as the most promising formula for a sustainable accommodation.

Chapter 7 compares the findings from the four case studies, traces the evolution of policy, and evaluates the relative importance of rational calculation, patterns of understanding, party politics, diplomatic pressures, organizational structure, and official doctrine in shaping policies and initiating radical change. Chapter 8 looks at what worked, what failed, and why. The last chapter looks at possible lessons for other conflicts, in particular the implications for political development policies.

Note on Government Sources

In researching this book I consulted official papers at the UK National Archives at Kew, the National Archives of Ireland in Dublin, and the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland in Belfast. The main categories of sources are abbreviated in the endnotes as follows. CAB refers to records of the Cabinet Office, CJ to records created or inherited by the Northern Ireland Office, DEFÉ to records of the Ministry of Defence, FCO to records of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and its predecessors, HO to records of the Home Office, MoD to records of the Ministry of Defence, NAI to records of the Government of Ireland (Dublin), PREM to records of the Prime Minister's Office, and PRONI to records of the Government of Northern Ireland (Belfast).

Notes

1. UK Public Records Office (PRO) CAB130/522, paper dated November 10, 1971.
2. Interview, *Belfast Telegraph*, September 4, 2010.
3. George Mitchell, Dean Acheson Lecture, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, May 24, 2010, available at www.usip.org.

4. See, e.g., J. McGarry and B. O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).
5. See, e.g., D. Trimble, "Misunderstanding Ulster," 2007, available at www.davidtrimble.org (accessed September 16, 2010). Trimble was the leader of the Unionist Party during the 1998 negotiations and subsequently Northern Ireland's first minister.
6. Ministry of Defence, "Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland," Ministry of Defence internal paper, July 2006, paragraph 106c.
7. The IRA's constitution commits it to five means of advancing its mission, one of which is "to wage revolutionary armed struggle." The document is reprinted as Appendix 3 in E. Moloney, *The Secret History of the IRA* (London: Penguin Press, 2002).

