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New Book Draws Policy Lessons from Northern Ireland Crisis

For Immediate Release

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(Washington, DC)—In the new book “The British State and the Northern Ireland Crisis, 1969-73” (United States Institute of Peace), author William Beattie Smith traces the evolution of British policy in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1973 and depicts how easily a conflict over national identity can turn into bloodshed. In four case studies of British policymaking, Smith goes beyond the traditional historical narrative to test hypotheses and systematically identify patterns that could recur under comparable conditions in other times and places.

In each case, Smith highlights a discrete policy followed by the British government in tackling political disorder in Northern Ireland and examines why the policy was pursued. He outlines three broad strategic options—reform, coercion, and power-sharing—highlights policy missteps and successes, and provides a detailed historical account of how policy decisions affected levels of political violence.

“Perhaps the most important lesson of the book is that policymaking for conflict resolution needs to be evidence-based and self-aware,” Smith states, “If an outside power intends to intervene in an internal conflict in a divided society, its policymakers should equip themselves with full and accurate background information and should have a scientific understanding of the preconditions for the conflict and the political worldviews of the organizations and ideologies on both sides.”

While advocating caution in extrapolating lessons from Northern Ireland to other conflict regions, Smith derives strategic lessons from the British intervention in Northern Ireland, highlighting the importance of understanding local culture, accurate and timely intelligence, the integration of policies and operations across all government agencies, and the capacity to adapt quickly in response to events.

“Terminating a well-organized insurgency that has popular support requires not only military power and effective intelligence operations,” states Smith, “but also political authority, a persuasive message, deep understanding, good coordination, sustained concentration, and a clear vision of both the current situation and an attainable peaceful future.”

About the Author

William Beattie Smith is a senior research fellow with Queen's University Belfast School of Politics. An independent policy analyst, he specializes in the prevention, management, and resolution of political violence in divided societies. Smith has worked extensively for government and community organizations in Northern Ireland and for the European Commission.

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ABOUT THE UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE

The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) provides the analysis, training and tools that help prevent, manage and end violent international conflicts, promote stability and professionalize the field of peacebuilding.

In March 2011, the Institute moved into its permanent headquarters at the northwest corner of the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The headquarters will serve as a national hub for research, training and on-the-ground work in preventing and managing international conflict and allow USIP to address the difficult problems of war and peace using cost-effective and efficient problem-solving approaches. It houses the working offices of USIP, a state of the art conference center, a professional education and training Academy, and a public education center.

To learn more about the Institute and its work, please go to: <http://www.usip.org>.

The British State and the Northern Ireland Crisis, 1969-73

Questions and Answers with the Author

Why did you choose to write about this conflict?

I was born in Belfast and I have lived through the Troubles. As a public official and political scientist, I have witnessed both the terror and the gradual dawning of peace since 1994. I have known and shared ideas with British ministers and with politicians from both sides to the conflict. I understand the depth of feeling on both sides. I agree with the view expressed by Queen Elizabeth during her recent historic visit to Ireland, that the work of peacemakers in Ireland offers hope to others around the world and that through the right understanding and sustained effort, peace will prevail. This includes apparently intractable cases such as Israel/Palestine, the war-ravaged countries of central Asia and the countries affected by the so-called Arab Spring. By drawing out the lessons of Northern Ireland's hard-won experience, I intend to contribute to the collective effort of peacemakers everywhere to improve our skills and understanding.

What is the premise of the volume?

Some commentators have expressed doubts about the value of cross-national research in conflict resolution. I accept that simplistic generalizations must be avoided. So instead of comparing Northern Ireland with other places, I decided to compare four distinct policy approaches pursued by the British government in Northern Ireland at different periods.

Each of my four case studies is designed to identify the impacts of rational, cognitive, political and organizational factors inside the machinery of the state. I then compare the four cases in order to assess which of these sets of factors made the most impact and how.

What policy choices exist for governments facing political violence?

The fundamental choice is between coercion and concessions. Coercion means using force or the threat of force to suppress or restrain protest. Coercive measures range from judicial procedures, constrained by statute and precedent, through curfews and mass detention to targeted assassination and genocide. In democratic societies, they generally fail except to the extent that they have real legitimacy and broad popular support. As to concessions, it is useful to distinguish between policy reforms, which offer limited compliance with the demands of protest leaders; and constitutional reforms, which bring protest leaders into the machinery of government.

Policymakers may direct either type of response at entire communities, at politically active groups only or exclusively at critical individuals leading protest organizations.

Why go back to a period of failure?

I wanted to explore what factors shape states' strategies for tackling ethnic violence: Why do they choose coercion rather than concessions? Having selected the British state in Northern Ireland as my example, I realised that when they first engaged with the conflict, its ministers and mandarins knew little about the place. They learned largely by trial and error. It took four years to devise the official doctrine which underpinned the eventual agreement—essentially powersharing between the leaders of the two traditions.

I considered that there would be more to be learned from the many failures of that formative period than from the later time, when the doctrine had crystallised.

What are the lessons for policymakers?

Perhaps the most important lesson is that policymaking for conflict resolution needs to be transparently evidence-based and intelligently self-aware. Top decision makers should be wary of false optimism, their own preconceptions, transient political pressures and organizational rigidities. They must realize that the solution they get will depend on who they give the problem to: diplomats will propose negotiations, generals force.

Restoring peace should not be confused with imposing one's own worldview. During this formative period, British policymakers were hampered by ignorance of Irish history and a simple inability to come to terms with the fundamental difference between the politics they were accustomed to and the politics of the region. They believed that if Northern Ireland's political leaders would conduct their affairs in line with British democratic standards, all would be well. One obvious lesson—read up on your political history!

Another lesson is the value of anticipating problems before they get out of hand. There is a common pattern of engagement between states and protestors in which concessions encourage more aggressive forms of protest, resulting in more widespread coercion. This fuels more violent and sustained protest and can strengthen insurgent organizations. In a divided society, concessions to one side may provoke violence by the other, resulting in a policy pendulum whereby the state offers concessions to whichever side prevents the greater risk, so generating continuous protest and counter-protest. Once the spiral begins, it's hard to stop. State coercion is itself a major cause of violence. But where coercion is used it should be consistent and as far as practicable compliant with international human rights standards.

What are the lessons for peace research?

The book will be valuable for peace researchers everywhere. It sets out a robust practical framework for the analysis of democratic governments' approaches to the management and regulation of violent political conflict in deeply divided regions. It will enable those working for peace to become more aware of the intellectual, political and organizational constraints which are likely to impact policy and frustrate them in achieving their goals. Once they know what they are, they can plan for them.

The final chapter also illustrates the limitations and qualifications which must apply to ostensibly consociational solutions in any particular case, especially where the territory in question is the subject of competing sovereignty claims between neighboring states.

What lies ahead for Northern Ireland?

It would be unwise to offer any predictions. The one certainty is that unforeseen events will occur. A pessimist might point to the fact that deep divisions persist, notably in education and housing. Irreconcilable national aspirations are still the basis for party politics. Small factions have broken away from the main body of Irish republicanism, dramatizing their opposition to the agreement through bullets and bombs.

But I am cautiously optimistic. As long as the two national governments and the party leaders continue to support the agreement, the prospects are excellent. The agreement is rooted in an international treaty between the British and Irish governments. Queen Elizabeth's recent visit to Ireland cemented the improvement in relations between the two countries which has been developing over the past two decades. The Irish state no longer claims jurisdiction over the entire island, and the majority community in Northern Ireland has accepted powersharing as an everyday reality. Mainstream republicanism has decisively moved beyond violence. The Assembly and Executive created by the agreement have recently completed their first uninterrupted term of office, and have successfully taken control over policing and criminal justice. In the Assembly election campaign of May 2011 the largest parties' manifestoes focused on strengthening the economy, and they received a fresh mandate for working together.

Praise for *The British State and the Northern Ireland Crisis, 1969–73*

“This volume is a model of lucidity and clarity and a joy to read. Although the particular case study is well known, Smith brings many new insights through an extensive trawl of the archives in London, Dublin, and Belfast, and in his use of private interviews.”

—**Paul Arthur**, University of Ulster

“This is an excellent study of a crucial period of British policy towards Northern Ireland. The author has done a very good job in searching the archives and producing a clear and coherent narrative in a detail that has not been matched before. This book is a useful addition to the literature on the Northern Ireland conflict because it is informed by a close understanding of the historical evidence and an acute knowledge of how the British and Irish political systems work.”

—**Paul Dixon**, Kingston University

“A highly intelligent, systematic, and original argument about a vitally important subject.”

—**Richard English**, University of St. Andrews

“Bill Smith provides us with a unique insight into the use of policy responses by states in managing and resolving violent political conflicts while placing his sharp lens on the unintended consequences of these policy responses. In using a range of case studies from Northern Ireland, dealing with policing, justice, and governance, the author shows how policymakers need to focus on ‘the context’ for their decisions and be more aware of the choices they make. There are tools here which will help ‘peace technicians’ heighten their awareness of the policymaking context. You will find solid evidence of what works and what does not in the policymakers’ world when dealing with violent political conflict.”

—**Monica McWilliams**, Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

“This is an intelligent and impressive book, with a wealth of detail. Applying useful models from political science, Smith’s book is clear and cogent—a very accurate monograph which adds to our knowledge of the formative years of the Northern Ireland conflict. The book is admirably objective and few policy actors are spared criticism.”

—**Jon Tonge**, University of Liverpool