Ireland and the US in post-war period

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Ireland and the US in the 1950s

by Maurice FitzGerald


Introduction

This chapter deals with certain features of the relationship between Ireland and the US in the first two decades after the Second World War. Drawn from a larger piece of research entitled Symbolism versus Reality: Irish-American diplomatic relations, 1945 to 1963, its scope is not necessarily limited to bilateral diplomatic relations. It avails of other tenets in illustrating their long-standing ties, and small power–superpower relations within the transatlantic context, encompassing some of the main findings revealed by documentary evidence based in the National Archives in Dublin and, perhaps more significantly, Presidential Libraries across the United States of America (US). And it deals with a period that has, to a large degree, been ignored in the secondary literature.1

In many respects, the essential question addressed here boils down to whether the US perceived Ireland and Irish-American relations in the same way that the Irish did. As with all aspects of international relations, in truth with all history, different phases of Irish-American relations were marked by both controversy and banality. Subjects dealt with in this chapter vary from the questionable US practice of getting rid of troublemakers in their establishment by appointing them as American ambassador to Ireland, to the relatively maverick foreign policy of the latter, especially the idealist tack the Irish pursued at the United Nations (UN). In addition, it addresses the problem of partition, especially the US approach, and closes by dealing with visits by dignitaries, concentrating on the trip by Irish president Seán T.O’Kelly to the US in 1959 and John F.Kennedy’s reciprocal visit to Ireland four years later. It is with the personification of relations that this chapter begins, however. By dealing with the issue of diplomatic representatives, it seeks to demonstrate whether Ireland’s perceptions of its relative importance are valid vis-à-vis the people Washington appointed. And, it is with US diplomats that it concentrates, the reason becoming clearer as this next section progresses.

Ministers and ambassadors

Ireland’s official diplomatic representation with the United States dates back to October 1924, when Saorstát Éireann (the Irish Free State) sent its first diplomatic representative outside of the British Commonwealth. This event alone encapsulates the importance of the US to Ireland. However, the same criteria have not necessarily always applied the other way round. In truth, for Washington, Ireland is essentially another Western European state with a large, if relatively influential, ethnic population.

Throughout the war years, the American minister to Ireland was David Gray. He had not been a success. He continuously clashed with the policy of neutrality pursued by taoiseach (Irish prime minister) Éamon de Valera. Indeed, his efforts to isolate Ireland, partly because of its actions on Adolf Hitler’s death, did little for his credibility or his professional integrity. Harry S. Truman had an enormous impact upon Irish-American diplomatic relations when he withdrew Gray in 1947, replacing him with George Garrett. (see Image 1) Gray had been Franklin D. Roosevelt’s appointee, but did not have much influence upon Truman. Garrett, on the other hand, was a relative success; although it has to be said that, for de Valera, anybody would have been a distinct improvement. For instance, Garrett made a valuable contribution to Ireland’s case for access to Marshall Aid, the European Recovery Program. In fact, he was so benevolent towards Ireland that he attracted the wrath of the chief of mission at the Economic Cooperation Administration in London, W. John Kenney. The latter spoke disparagingly of Garrett’s “impassioned plea to Mr. Truman to get more [grant] money for Ireland” at a time when the US was not particularly disposed towards Ireland.

The feeling in Dublin was that the Americans had begun to establish a disturbing practice of getting rid of troublemakers in their establishment – or as historian Dermot Keogh calls them ‘loose cannons’ – by appointing them United States ambassador to Ireland, was nonetheless becoming evident. Thus, it is the calibre of representatives that is particularly worth examining. When US Navy Secretary Francis P. Matthews made an impassioned, though injudicious, speech about the handling of the Korean War, he wound up at the American ambassador’s residence in Dublin’s Phoenix Park. As Dean Acheson wrote, Matthews had “called for preventive war. He was made Ambassador to Ireland”. The latter wanted to come to Ireland at the conclusion of his career. The opportunity came a little earlier than he had anticipated. However, the reality of Ireland in the early 1950s did not quite match his expectations. One commentator has declared that “nothing ... not even literature, has captured the dead, grey misery of Ireland in the 1950s, which was awful for almost everybody”.

Matthews died of a heart attack before he had completed his term of office, the first American minister to pass away in office since William McDowell, who had died in 1934 at the banquet held to celebrate the presentation of his credentials. Despite the brevity of his tenure, the latter was still very important to bilateral relations simply because he presented his credentials to de Valera and not to the governor general, the British monarch’s representative in Ireland.

With regard to the calibre of American representatives, Scott McLeod is another case in point. Officially US State Department chief of security, McLeod was a ‘witch hunter’ during the early years of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s first administration. Of course, this was the period in which the demagogue Joe McCarthy was at the height of his powers. McLeod’s targets for elimination from the US State Department included communist agents, “fellow-travellers” (socialists and liberals), homosexuals and moral deviants. He managed to contrive one controversy too many though. US secretary of state John Foster Dulles was asked to dig up a job for him, but McLeod turned down the post of US secretary to Guam. Finally, he was

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2. Nuala Ó Faolain, “Women want power and influence so as to change the world for the better”, Irish Times, 19 April 1993.
forced to take the ambassador’s job in Ireland. (see Image 2)

Whether it was a Democrat or Republican president, it did not matter. The Irish post was neither crucial nor terribly taxing. When Kennedy spoke to Irish ambassador John Hearne in 1961 on the topic of diplomatic representation, the US president promised to send a really good ambassador. But Hearne was dismissive. He understood that the Americans did not have enough ‘good men’ to go around. It is worth noting that Dublin was not prepared to accept a woman in the post at that time. Indeed, one of Hearne’s predecessors as Irish ambassador in Washington, Seán Nunan – who served as Irish foreign affairs departmental secretary – expressed the view that “we are not desirous of having a woman in the post”.4

There are however other examples of the relatively poor standard of American representatives sent to Ireland. This assertion is not just limited to the appointment of ambassadors. Essentially second in command, US counsellors changed posts very regularly. Between 1947 and 1954, this post was held by seven different people, even prompting the US ambassador in Ireland to comment that there had been too much “chopping and changing”.5

But this is not to say that Irish representatives accredited to the US always acted with complete propriety. Their fascination with partition – at the behest of Dublin – gained little except State Department antagonism. At other times, the activities of Irish diplomats attracted the ire of superiors and colleagues alike; for instance, highly narrative reports on subjects ranging from Teamsters’ corruption to the Suez crisis often lacked substantive analysis. Still, the general standard of Ireland’s representatives contrasts favourably with the rather poor calibre of their American contemporaries. US administrations apparently saw the Irish job as either a reward for services rendered to a political party, rather than to the country, or as a way to offload a ‘loose cannon’. On the other hand, Irish governments viewed the US post as the pinnacle of a diplomatic career – as with Hearne – or as the platform for better things – as with Seán Nunan, who became the senior civil servant in Ireland’s Department of External Affairs after his tenure in the US.

From this brief general overview of diplomatic representatives, and the contrast between the approach of a small power and a superpower, this chapter next moves on to investigate Irish-American relations within the context of the UN. Indeed, the multilateral platform afforded by this forum offers plenty of examples of bilateral relations at work.

The multilateral arena

Ireland has always been a strong advocate of multilateral activity, dating back to its time at the League of Nations. The Dublin government believed that such a globally interactive institution should act as a bulwark for world peace through a policy of collective security, but had been disappointed by that organisation, just as it would be by the UN. However, the UN still offered a platform for a small nation to air its views on world peace and justice.

The Potsdam Conference of 1945 had dealt with the issue of neutrals. The US, United Kingdom (UK), and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) agreed to “support U.N. membership for states which remained neutral during the war and which fulfil the qualifications for U.N. membership”. This policy was not fully implemented. Following Potsdam, five neutral unoccupied non-beligerants applied for UN membership; of these, only Afghanistan, Sweden and Yemen were admitted. Ireland’s early application for membership

4 Seán Nunan telegram (untransmitted draft), circa late May 1951, Department of External Affairs (D/FA) file P218, National Archives, Dublin (NA).
5 Joseph Brennan to Conor Cruise O’Brien, 28 January 1953, D/FA-318/40/3, NA.
showed a certain keenness to participate in international affairs after the suffocating and self-imposed alienation of its ‘Emergency’ – the Second World War. Despite American support, the USSR vetoed the Irish and Portuguese applications for admission. Ireland’s “isolation, psychologically and intellectually” was acute, as “Irish people found themselves strangers, and not very popular ones, in a strange post-war world”. Irish applications were consistently, perhaps understandably, vetoed by the Soviets until 1955, especially when it is considered that Dublin only opened bilateral diplomatic relations with the USSR in 1972.

The dawning of a new era of multilateral relations began for Ireland when it was finally allowed to join the UN in the mid-1950s. As it proved in the League of Nations, Ireland became a very active member upon the new global stage it had been given. The early years of its UN membership – especially between 1957 and 1961 – have been described by commentator and former diplomat Conor Cruise O’Brien as possibly Ireland’s most exciting time in purely diplomatic terms. Irish foreign minister Frank Aiken “pursued an independent line at the United Nations, aimed at the reduction of cold war tensions ...[especially] the non-dissemination of nuclear weapons”. At the same time, the US continuously tried to massage the Irish vote, but failed. And though its voting patterns coincided with the US more often than not (even to a larger degree than Sweden did), Ireland still voted independently as a small, but neutral, Western European power, deviating from the expected path on numerous occasions, causing consternation in the process.

Although the 1956 Hungarian uprising and subsequent invasion signalled that the US was in no position to take any affirmative action regarding Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe, this episode was roundly condemned, with Ireland and the United States in full agreement. The Suez crisis came as rather a shock and demonstrated the need for strong and tested leadership to run international affairs effectively. Charles Bohlen believed that the US acted responsibly during the crisis; he said: “I think he [Eisenhower] was quite right on that. It caused a great deal of trouble with our allies”. Ireland’s position in the UN was generally supportive of American handling of the affair. It no doubt helped that this policy position went against British interests.

Nonetheless, it is in regard to China that Irish-American relations reached one of their lowest ebbs. Dulles “was perpetually arguing for a vigorous and even more vigorous form of containment of Communism” and was more dogmatic in his approach to the China question than Eisenhower might ordinarily have been. The Americans strictly adhered to a policy of opposition even to discussions about discussing the entry of communist China into the UN, never mind debating actual entry. It was a political position and the question of fairness did not enter into the equation. Washington was lobbied hard to continue its policy, Irish-American politicians prominent among them. Sherman Adams reaffirmed the continued:

... firm opposition of this Government and the American people to the seating of representatives of the

6. “Agreements reached at the Cairo, Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam Conferences: Implementation and United States Policy” - Research Project #80 September 1948, Subject Series, Box #69, White House Central Files (Confidential File), Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri (HST).
9. John W.Hanes to Henry Cabot Lodge, 6 February 1956, General Correspondence and Memoranda Series, Box #4, Dulles Papers, HST, Hanes to Horace Flanigan, 9 February 1956, General Correspondence and Memoranda Series, Box #4, Dulles Papers, HST, Flanigan to Hanes, 10 February 1956, General Correspondence and Memoranda Series, Box #4, Dulles Papers, HST; Flanigan to Hanes, 16 February 1956, General Correspondence and Memoranda Series, Box #4, Dulles Papers, HST.
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Chinese Communist regime in United Nations bodies ... the United States does not intend to recognize the China Communist regime.\(^\text{13}\)

Eisenhower’s stated position remained that:

... existing international facts ... preclude the seating of the Chinese Communist regime to represent China in the UN ... We have every reason to fear that the Chinese Communist regime in fact now seeks representation in the UN in order to promote the objectives of international Communism by creating dissension among the nations of the world, rather than to become a partner in seeking just and peaceful solutions for the world’s problems.\(^\text{14}\)

The American executive and legislature were both strongly against China’s admission to the UN. The US stuck to its war-time policy of recognising administrations in exile, rather than ‘puppet governments’, when it suited its purposes. After all, the UN was still at war with China over Korea, and obviously “an armistice is not peace”.\(^\text{15}\) The Republican Platform of 1956 validated the government’s position on ‘Red China’, opposing its seating in the United Nations and continuing the support afforded to the Republic of China on Formosa.

The Swedish government’s position regarding China is interesting in this regard. They saw the problem of China simply as being “which government should be recognized as the government of China”; thereby, which government should have China’s membership of the United Nations and its permanent seat on the Security Council? Britain, Denmark, India, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland all recognised the Peking government as having this legitimacy. The United States and a majority of the UN recognised the Formosa government in this respect. It is worth noting that, back in 1950, Dulles had said:

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\text{I have now come to believe that the United Nations will best serve the cause of peace if its Assembly is representative of what the world actually is, and not merely representative of the Parts which we like. Therefore, we ought to be willing that all nations should be members without attempting to appraise closely those which are ‘good’ and those which are ‘bad’. Already that distinction is obliterated by the present membership of the United Nations ... Some of the present member nations and others that might become members, have governments that are not representative of the people. But in fact they are governments – that is, if they govern – then they have a power which should be represented in any organization that purports to mirror world reality.}\text{16}
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The Swedes held their ground in direct opposition to the US government’s position on the China question. This was also be the path that Ireland would courageously follow.

Irish foreign minister Aiken – who was effectively based in New York – believed that both the Peking and Formosan governments should be represented at the United Nations as a matter of principle. He was not naive enough to believe, for instance, that a UN resolution could force the Chinese out of Tibet, but it would certainly have made them more accountable. At that stage, little more than an admonition of China could ever be expected from the UN due to the power of the veto. Aiken did not uphold the notion that the Peking government should take Formosan representation over. He did however believe that Formosa should co-exist with mainland China under the UN’s aegis. The Irish foreign minister praised US patronage of Formosa, but he believed that China should be allowed to take a seat at the UN and, more importantly, in the Security Council. Aiken felt that the time to discuss the

\(^{13}\) Sherman Adams to John W.McCormack, 6 July 1954, Official File 85-DD, Box #332, White House Central Files, DDE.

\(^{14}\) Dwight D.Eisenhower to Walter H.Judd, 24 October 1953, Subject Series, Box #99, Central Files, DDE.

\(^{15}\) Evening Star, 8 August 1953, A-4, Official File 85-DD, Box #332, Central Files, DDE.

\(^{16}\) Oster Unden to Matthew Woll, 28 October 1954, Official File 85-DD, Box #332, Central Files, DDE.
question in an adult fashion had come at last.17

On 23 September 1957, the US ambassador to the UN, Henry Cabot Lodge, sent a telegram to Dulles stating that “the F[oreign] M[inister] of Ireland is going nuts – he is going to support the Red China item despite what we were told”. (see Image 3) This decision obviously came as a huge surprise to the Americans. Because of protocol and diplomatic niceties, Lodge realised that in public he could only "express regret" to Aiken over this decision; at the time though Lodge wondered aloud if Dulles could not do something more useful.18 US bitterness did not escape Aiken.19 As Dulles was not on particularly good terms with him, this left the Americans in a quandary. Dulles and Lodge appeared to agree during their conversation that taking this position on China was “a bad thing for a Catholic to do”. It was perhaps at this stage that the Americans thought to use Aiken’s religion against him and in order to force Ireland’s hand.20

A telephone call followed to the Irish delegation at the UN and was received by the most senior member available, Máire MacEntee. At Eisenhower’s behest, an eminent member of the American hierarchy, Cardinal Francis Spellman of New York, ‘suggested’ to MacEntee that the position taken by Aiken was inappropriate for a member of the Catholic church. He ‘requested’ that the Irish position on the China question be ‘reviewed’. Such intimidatory tactics are interesting, not so much from the perspective that a senior member of the American clergy was interfering in the affairs of a sovereign state, but that the United States government should use such an innovative stratagem. It was prepared to go to such lengths to keep the Chinese communists out of the United Nations; indeed, China was not recognised by the US until Richard Nixon’s presidency.

Despite such intimidation, the Irish foreign minister made a statement the following day, 24 September 1957, in which he said:

Like many others here, we have no sympathy whatever with the ideology of the Peking Government. We condemn its aggressive policies in China itself and its conduct in North Korea ... If merely by refusing to discuss the question of the representation of China in the United Nations we could do anything to improve the situation in China and Korea we would vote without hesitation in favour of that course. We are not, however, convinced that refusal to discuss the question can now serve such a purpose ... Our aims should be to win acceptance for the principles of the Charter in China and to secure self-determination for the people of Korea. The belief of my delegation is that in present circumstances progress can best be made to these ends by having a full and open discussion of the question of the representation of China in this Assembly. We are voting, therefore, in favour of the amendment proposed ...21

Not surprisingly the reaction was tremendous. Newspapers and radio broadcasts delivered an instant sense of astonishment, while demonstrating a complete lack of understanding at the Irish government’s reasoning. The stance of the Catholic church’s hierarchy showed exactly where it stood; the Irish Independent quoted Archbishop Richard J.Cushing as saying:

The encouragement given this diabolical regime by the Irish delegation at the UN shocked and saddened me and all the clergy and faithful of the Archdiocese of Boston. How could Ireland in the light of her own history do such a thing?

The Archbishop of Armagh and Irish primate, John Cardinal D’Alton, said that all of Catholic Ireland was against the recognition of Communist China “which is still guilty of

18. Lodge to John Foster Dulles, 23 September 1957, Telephone Calls Series, Box #7, Dulles Papers, DDE.
19. Aiken oral history, p.18.
20. Lodge to Dulles, 23 September 1957, Telephone Calls Series, Box #7, Dulles Papers, DDE.
21. Paper clippings, General File 122, Box #816, Central Files, DDE.
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The central domestic and foreign policy ambition of the Irish government has been to abolish partition. The main development in the era under review was the growing mood in Dublin to resolve the crisis peaceably. In 1948, while out of government, de Valera paid an extensive visit to the US, along with Aiken. The main thrust of this American tour was to explain the link between partition and Irish neutrality, especially within the context of World War Two. They had many interested listeners, including a young Congressman Kennedy, who is supposed to have made quite an impression upon them. De Valera met Truman on 10 March 1948. After paying his respects, de Valera spoke against partition, but was stone-walled. In truth, the whole visit was an irritant to the State Department, as it only

With a firm belief that the UN gives the smaller countries an opportunity to reduce East-West tensions, Aiken is largely responsible for Ireland’s occasionally independent actions at the UN ...26

Multilateral organisations, such as the UN, thus offered Ireland a chance to raise matters about which it felt particularly strongly. But, while it made some progress regarding certain multilateral issues, even if Irish-American relations suffered, this was not to be the experience in relation to partition. In this regard, Dublin made little progress through Washington.

The US approach to partition

Until recent years, the central domestic and foreign policy ambition of the Irish government has been to abolish partition. The main development in the era under review was the growing mood in Dublin to resolve the crisis peaceably. In 1948, while out of government, de Valera paid an extensive visit to the US, along with Aiken. The main thrust of this American tour was to explain the link between partition and Irish neutrality, especially within the context of World War Two. They had many interested listeners, including a young Congressman Kennedy, who is supposed to have made quite an impression upon them. De Valera met Truman on 10 March 1948. After paying his respects, de Valera spoke against partition, but was stone-walled.27 In truth, the whole visit was an irritant to the State Department, as it only

22. Irish Independent, 9 October 1957, General File 122, Box #816, Central Files, DDE.
23. Tablet, 28 September 1957, General File 122, Box #816, Central Files, DDE.
27. “Presidential Appointments File”, Box #88, President’s Secretary’s Files, Truman Papers, HST.
aroused Irish-American pressure from various quarters:

Mr. de Valera’s recent trip to this country has resulted in increased agitation for U.S. intervention in this dispute, which this Department continues to consider as one to be settled between Ireland and Britain.

Much of the agitation centred on raising American interest so that Washington would have to bring pressure to bear on the London government. One suggested form included halting economic aid to the British as long as they ‘occupied’ Northern Ireland. In reality, de Valera’s trip was ill-timed. The State Department consensus was for the administration not to be seen to intervene or to take sides on the issue:

It has long been the view of this Department that the subject of the boundary which partitions Ireland and Northern Ireland is one for discussion between the Irish and British governments and one in which this country should not intrude.28

De Valera’s trip was a failure, just as a previous visit by Aiken had been in 1941, and as Irish foreign minister Seán MacBride’s trip to the US would be in 1951. The hint was not taken.

Ireland and Irish-American votes were considerably more important around election time in the US, but other than that the main Western European countries the US focused on remained the UK, France, Germany and Italy. The Irish government’s refusal to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), because such an action would reflect de jure recognition of partition, was a major development with long-lasting implications. The UK government’s Ireland Act of 1949 proved to be the central thinking behind not only London’s policy on partition because, although not stated overtly, it was mirrored in the US position as encapsulated in NSC 83/1, a policy the Eisenhower administrations followed rigidly. (see Image 4) It would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of NSC 83/1. Indeed, its central prognosis would still be valid a decade later in November 1960, outlining as it did the operational basis of US foreign policy towards Ireland. As Richard Finnegan has argued, “Ireland’s relationship with America hardly commanded the constant and diligent attention of the United States National Security Council”.29 Such vigilance was not required.

Throughout the post-war period the United States took a markedly consistent approach towards partition. Pressure from the Irish-American lobby remained persistent, but with little reward. Their activities were not going to force the US to take action favouring Dublin’s view, certainly not in the face of the contribution Northern Ireland made in the Second World War or to endanger Anglo-American relations at the beginning of the Cold War. The White House referred all matters appertaining to partition to the State Department, where it was discreetly buried. Irish correspondence continuously tried to raise the issue, only ever meeting a similar sort of refrain from the State Department:

The Administration is well aware of the questions arising from the political status of Northern Ireland and has given the most careful consideration to the bearing of these questions on the relations of the United States with the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom, two of this country’s closest friends. It is believed that this is not a matter in which the United States could properly or usefully intervene.30

One such letter from the Irish foreign minister in 1958 strongly reiterated Ireland’s position

30. Howard Pyle to P. J. Morrissey, 9 July 1956, General File 122, Box #816, Central Files, DDE.
on partition. Although Aiken accepted that the UK’s position was causing resentment in Ireland and with Irish people abroad, he felt that the Dublin government was not in a position to force the issue; quite the opposite in fact. Ireland’s policy, though invidious, was he maintained correct, and would be rewarded in time. Under the premiership of Lemass, the Irish government’s position on partition began to change noticeably. It had become increasingly obvious that active diplomacy and creative propaganda were never going to change the situation. Thus, Dublin’s position transformed into a more conciliatory line towards the de facto state of Northern Ireland.

So, what happened to the US approach to partition when an Irish-American became president? The answer was not what the Irish might have wanted to hear. Kennedy’s ancestry affected his position on partition, but not in a way that might have been expected. His avuncular relationship with UK prime minister Harold Macmillan was very strong. And, when he came to office, he was not about to antagonise one of America’s major allies. This was in complete contrast to the position he took both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. In 1956, for instance, Kennedy co-sponsored an unsuccessful resolution in favour of the whole of Ireland achieving self-determination, unless a plebiscite declared otherwise. In a subsequent conversation about partition, Irish ambassador Thomas J. Kiernan mentioned this to US president Kennedy, but the latter had clearly been cultivating the Irish vote. He held onto these views through to 1960, primarily because it was a vote-winner.

When Kennedy became president, the issue stayed with the State Department. The Irish-American US president reverted back to the official position, one of non-interference in a dispute between two states close to the United States. Kennedy understood the sentiment attached, but in a world facing far greater problems, partition held a certain lack of importance. Under his presidency, as Irish hopes of partition being resolved rose to their zenith, the reality was the complete opposite; the chances of partition ending swiftly actually reached their nadir. Kennedy looked at partition as coldly and as detached as he would with any other foreign policy issue. The Irish ambassador in Washington maintained that:

... Kennedy was [Irish] in his blood reactions ... in his speed of communication, in his wit, in his ... self-debunking ... Behind that was something that wasn’t Irish; the cold summing up, the logical follow up. And in the matter of issues between Ireland and England the reaction might come in a sentimental way. I don’t know, but when it came to any kind of practical business, the other man behind, the cold man would take control, which is understandable. And the line I’d draw all the time was one of great understanding, of never any kind of intrusion on him in Irish affairs.

Aiken discussed partition with Kennedy, but understood the reality of Washington’s position:

... an American President has a long list of problems and over the years, the relations between Great Britain and the United States have been very close, and they felt a great need to keep together so, in these circumstances great powers don’t take any public action that might upset that relationship.

Interestingly, it was through the Irish ambassador that most of the politically significant Irish-American interaction on the partition question appears to have taken place.

31. Aiken speech to the Federation of American Societies for Irish Independence, 18 August 1958, General File 122, Box #816, Central Files, DDE.
32. Thomas J. Kiernan oral history transcript, JFK, pp.11-12.
34. Kiernan oral history, p.9.
35. Aiken oral history, pp.29-30.
Under Robert Brennan – the Irish ambassador to the US during the Second World War, and throughout the subsequent tenures of Nunan and Hearne – the Irish embassy diligently followed the instructions emanating from the Department of External Affairs. In essence, they cultivated Irish-American politicians and groups in an effort to put pressure on successive Truman and Eisenhower administrations. Under Kennedy, the matter of partition was raised, but made little headway. Irish ambassador Kiernan describes once broaching the question by saying that he never asked the US president “to take any line or make any intervention with Mr. MacMillan”. In reply, Kennedy assured the Irish ambassador that he understood Ireland’s position, but that it could prove very embarrassing to change policy or to be seen to intervene, thereby running the risk of adversely affecting the ‘special relationship’ between the United States and the UK.

On one particular occasion, Kiernan did not raise the question as such, but just wanted to assure Kennedy that the Irish government and people were not expecting the US president to raise the matter in Dáil Éireann (the Irish lower parliamentary house) when he visited in the summer of 1963. It was felt that the US president might find such pressure disconcerting. The Irish ambassador presumed that the subject would still be discussed privately in Ireland.36 True to his reputation, Kennedy did briefly raise the matter in Dáil Éireann, but not as the Irish would perhaps have wished. In fact, he publicly called on the Irish people to look to the future rather than to the past on the partition question. No major declarations or moves favouring Ireland’s interpretation of partition were taken by Kennedy during his presidency, though he would doubtlessly have discussed it privately, even if only in passing, with the British. The official US position remained the same. Kennedy’s outlook was very European in many respects and, on the partition question, the son of the war-time US ambassador to the Court of St James’s was not prepared to court controversy for the sake of it. Irish ambassador Kiernan described him thus: “apart from his Americanism which was a hundred percent, [he] was more British than Irish”.37

The State Department’s official answer to enquiries on partition – which were limited to around three letters a month, mostly from the general public and sometimes from members of Congress on behalf of organisations urging US intervention – remained consistent:

> The Department of State has long been aware of the questions arising from the partition of Ireland. We believe, however, that this is a matter for determination by the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, both of whom are friendly to the U.S., and is, therefore not one in which we can properly or usefully intervene.38

By 1962, the Irish government’s policy demonstrated some change. The taoiseach established a personal “preference for functional co-operation with Northern Ireland where possible”, instead of pursuing a dogmatic and idealist line on partition.39 Under the Lemass government, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) steadily lost support, indeed to such a degree that it quickly posed a decreased threat to the political status quo. Irish legislation passed during the Second World War enabled the government to keep this paramilitary organisation weak and relatively ineffective, as well as illegal. Dublin did not condone any of the IRA’s activities at home or abroad, indeed it was actively trying to curtail them. The main interest of the State Department with this terrorist group was to keep it from exerting pressure on Washington through Irish-American citizens and organisations. Indeed, the view of the US

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38. Benjamin H. Read to McGeorge Bundy, 30 September 1963, “CO 125 Ireland”, Box #60, Kennedy Papers, JFK.
government appears to have been in favour of British and Irish actions at this time, and privately held the view that IRA convicts were not political prisoners but terrorists.

As far as the timeframe here is concerned, the reality of the US government’s position on partition was finally revealed under US president Lyndon B. Johnson when he met the Northern Ireland prime minister, Terence O’Neill, on 17 March 1964. The reaction of the *Belfast Telegraph* was reported as being joyous because heretofore politics, rather than protocol, had dominated relations between the United States and Northern Ireland. It was indeed a significant “diplomatic victory”. The *Irish Times* editorial of 23 March 1964 probably correctly speculated that Kennedy would also have taken this step, as it was the general direction in which he was heading. The political reality of US government views on partition meant that it was never going to put undue pressure on London to solve this delicate problem. By the mid-1960s, relations between Ireland north and south had been improving for some considerable time. The Northern Ireland prime minister’s meeting with Johnson was a relative success from the perspective that this signalled to a large extent the removal of the Irish question from the American political agenda. It also helped to change the course of history. Ireland’s strong relationship with the US has not provided an ‘open door’, as successive Dublin governments may have hoped with partition, to American decision-making processes. Ever since the early 1960s, Ireland has had to face up to realpolitik at work.

Face-to-face meetings engineered by the Irish were less effective when aimed at specific policy areas that went against the national interests of their transatlantic cousins. They had more success when the target was stimulating better relations, especially when examined in terms of the relative weights of small power–superpower relations.

### Visits by heads of state

One of the primary symbols used to engender good relations between two countries is state visits. This chapter investigates two such trips, the Irish president’s visit to the US in 1959 and Kennedy’s visit to Ireland in 1963. It is perhaps the lead-up to the O’Kelly trip, rather than the visit itself, that is most note-worthy, while the reciprocated journey four years later by the US president remains one of the historical highlights of Irish-American relations.

By the mid-1950s, the State Department was being persistently, but unofficially, asked to invite the Irish president to the United States, but “had discouraged it just as much as [t]hey could within the framework of ... friendly relations with Ireland”. Although the State Department could see “no foreign policy advantage”, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the White House was beginning to recognise the political merits of such a trip. They “noted that the Irish Embassy is particularly active in American political circles and is no doubt promoting the visit behind the scenes”. Their assessment was that there were:

... no particular advantages and some disadvantages. His visit would be used to accentuate the partition of Ireland and to urge U.S. support for its termination, and thus embarrass our relations with the

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42. Mr. Merchant to Herbert Hoover, 15 September 1955, Official File 183-J(2), Box #870, Central Files, DDE.
The State Department tried to keep the idea at bay despite informal approaches and furtive promotion of the idea by the Irish diplomatic corps in the US. Pressure from the Irish lobby to invite O’Kelly was pretty standard fare for the State Department to deal with, but a reason could always be found to signify that this was not a “propitious time” for such an invitation. It was noted however that the main merit of such a visit would be to make inroads into the “Irish Catholic vote”. Such a trip, it was felt, “if properly thought out, might have very healthy repercussions in favor of the Administration”.

The US ambassador to Ireland at that time, William H. Taft, held the view that “no essential Ireland-United States benefits ... would accrue from ... [such a] visit”, although it would strengthen relations. Nonetheless, Taft thought O’Kelly would jump at the chance to go to the US. However, it was clearly recognised that one of the controversies that could arise from such a visit was partition, although O’Kelly would be expected to be “decorous” and diplomatic on the issue. Chances were that newsmen and lobbyists would not be so circumspect. Throughout the debate over the merits or not of such a visit, State Department opinion held that it would have far more of a domestic impact than a foreign political one. Even so, the Irish penchant for instigating official visits to the United States was remarkable. Unfortunately however, as US ambassador Taft commented in early 1956:

... it would appear that the Government is ... more interested in going to the United States themselves than making the more important gesture of using the President as a spokesman for Ireland.

Indeed, he described the earlier affair surrounding the suggested visit in 1956 as a “three-ring circus”, and remained concerned about the amateurish Irish approach.

Finally, by early 1959, the US State Department and the Irish government found themselves in a position to sanction a visit by the Irish president. Saint Patrick’s Day that year was thus very auspicious for Irish-American diplomatic relations, with O’Kelly visiting the United States at last. Eisenhower made the Irish president welcome with a brief speech of jocular and typical Americana, the US president telling him that:

... as I welcome you ... I find myself in a rather difficult situation, and I am sure that the protocol officers of our two governments wouldn’t know exactly how to solve the problem ... It is this: today everybody in the United States is Irish ... So, I would say that for this day at least, though you come as the official President of Ireland, in our hearts you are President of all of us.

After such a schmaltzy start, O’Kelly responded in kind, remarking that the hospitality he was receiving reflected the “close friendship and mutual understanding which have always so happily existed between Ireland and the United States of America”.

The incident meriting most attention during the visit came later that day at a White
House state dinner, the US president introducing a slight barb into his welcome by saying:

I pay again a tribute to this wonderful feeling of warm friendship that has never been broken between Ireland and ourselves – and incidentally, Mr. President, I have always wondered how you people can call yourselves neutral, you are in every fight there is – and maybe that’s another reason we like you – but in any event ... I ... express that feeling of warm friendship that we know exists between your people and ours, and which we know shall never be broken.51

The Irish president was not going to leave an opportunity to reply pass without making some reference to Eisenhower’s mention of Irish neutrality and he did so in a diplomatically coded, but easily understandable, way. O’Kelly remarked:

The Irish nation, which as you have so kindly said more than once, Mr. President, is among the oldest on the earth – is one of these that has won its freedom in recent times. I thank God that it should have been given to me to witness, though still unfortunately for less than the entirety of our ancient land, the realization of the dreams and the endeavours of many generations of Irishmen, and to have the privilege of playing some part myself ... in that realization.52

Two days later, as the Irish president departed, and in a reminder of longstanding affiliations, Eisenhower said:

In the years that stretch out ahead of us, we must be friendly among ourselves. We must be close to our good friends – and Ireland is among the front rank of our good friends. We must have faith in ourselves. We must have faith in each other – and faith in our God.53

This low-key clash, over the question of neutrality and partition, did little though to detract from a successful public relations exercise all round.

This visit was returned when Kennedy’s last major trip abroad in the summer of 1963 included Ireland. His election had of course caught the imagination of all Irish people, prelates included.54 (see Image 5) His visit to Berlin on 26 June was a political triumph, but his next destination was Dublin. Having made a tremendous impact in Germany, and with that reaction fresh in the world’s mind, Kennedy came to Ireland. Irish ambassador Kiernan disparagingly referred to the Berlin reception as a “fearful affair, like a ritual of handkerchiefs all prepared, and the little white handkerchiefs waving. In Ireland it was entirely different. It was very much grass-roots reception and he realized that”.55 There was certainly warmth and a feeling of homecoming to the Irish visit rather than the nervous tension in Berlin. And right from the rapturous arrival to the sad departure, it befitted an emigrant. This state trip would obviously seem even more significant before the year was out.

Historian Ian McCabe has asserted that the US president’s visit was not singularly on emotional grounds.56 However, the fact that Rusk did not accompany Kennedy to Ireland, but proceeded straight to the UK, clearly demonstrated Ireland’s lack of international importance.57 That Kennedy had a legitimate interest in, and love of, Ireland there is no doubt. The fact that this feeling did not extend to partition or the appointment of particularly suitable ambassadors is neither here nor there. Kennedy was US president and as such

54. Brendan Behan to Kennedy, 15 July 1961, Special Correspondence, Box #28, President’s Office Files, Kennedy Papers, JFK.
55. Kiernan oral history, p.3.
primarily served American national interests. The visit itself was of tremendous political significance in Ireland. It was also being looked upon as a clear “indication that Ireland is in the mainstream of international affairs”, and the Irish clearly appreciated being informed directly of the world situation from the US perspective.58

The visit to Dunganstown, the Kennedy family ancestral homestead, provided some of the most memorable images of the visit. It saw the US president greeted there by his Irish relatives. Outside in the yard, drinking tea and eating salmon sandwiches, the trip came alive across the globe for television viewers, providing a famous photo-opportunity. The most important event of Kennedy’s visit came after he laid a wreath upon the graves of the executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising at Arbour Hill, which itself was noted as being of “great emotional significance” for Ireland. Kennedy was the first visiting head of state to make this gesture. In Leinster House, the home of the Irish parliament, Kennedy delivered the key-note speech of his visit and became the first foreign statesman since the foundation of the Irish state to address a joint session of the Oireachtas (the Irish executive and legislature). It was also the first time that the proceedings of Dáil Éireann were televised by Radio Teilifís Éireann, the new Irish television network. In his address, the US president cited the growing relationship between Ireland and the UK as one epitomising the dictum that “there are no permanent enemies”. While holding that history can teach us vital lessons, Kennedy added that people should not be dominated by, or governed under, that pretext. But, in recognising the bitterness, he felt that Ireland had to live in the present and for the future, rather than the past. Using a quotation to emphasise his point, he said: “The world is large when its weary leagues two loving hearts divide, but the world is small when your enemy is loose on the other side”. In response to the obvious question – what can Ireland do? – Kennedy again used a quotation, as he was apt to do: “All the world owes much to the little ‘five feet high’ nations”. In his view, all that could hold a nation back, no matter whether it was a small power or a superpower, was a lack of imagination.59

Citing Ireland’s position as unique, Kennedy called for even greater efforts toward world peace and justice. Ireland is a mixture of the old and new, he said, a former colony and part of a growing Europe. It thus has “the confidence of both sides and an opportunity to act where the actions of greater powers might be looked upon with suspicion”. However, Kennedy was also interested in another global conflict, the Cold War between East and West, with a “harsh and oppressive Communist system” railing against freedom and self-determination. Ireland, he understood, was not neutral on this issue although it did obviously pursue an independent foreign policy. He knew that Ireland could never again tolerate foreign domination and would fight against it wherever it was seen; Ireland had helped censure the suppression of the Hungarian uprising, he said. He encouraged Ireland to continue using the stage afforded by the UN, his speech in Dáil Éireann making reference to its active and responsible participation in multilateral affairs. Indeed, he said: “The major forum for your nation’s greater role in world affairs is that of protector of the weak and voice of the small, the United Nations”.60 Not surprisingly, Kennedy received a standing ovation. Nevertheless, despite his sentiments, there was some controversy. In his address, he jokingly used a phrase that originated in a letter by Lord Edward Fitzgerald stating that “Leinster House does not inspire the brightest ideas”. When it was written, it referred to the Fitzgerald residence, subsequently that of Dáil Éireann. After the speech, he went to Aras an Uachtaráin (the Irish

58. “Vice-Presidential Security File President Kennedy’s Travel President’s European Trip Briefing Book - June 1963”, Box #3, Vice-Presidential Security File, Johnson Papers, LBJ.
60. Kennedy speech, Irish visit, pp.19-25.
president’s residence) and was rebuffed by de Valera who told him that he “had done no service to Irish politicians by this quotation”. The reference itself was historical in basis, but might have been put in context.61 The rest of the trip passed without a hint of controversy.

The State Department’s frank evaluation of the economic and political situation in Ireland formed an impressive part of the background paper for Kennedy’s trip. His pragmatic approach to Ireland has already been expanded upon and, once he became president, did not need much convincing of where the US stood. This evaluation made some interesting points. The Irish decision to seek membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) was seen as an attempt to break with “insularity”, the Irish government seeking to detach itself from its “nationalistic and protectionist” roots. Despite the EEC’s rebuff of the UK in 1963, and the Irish inability to join on their own, Dublin correctly perceived that the time would come when Ireland would indeed be part of it and thus prepared itself accordingly. Irish economic growth was seen as encouraging and progressive, enabling the government to proceed with its aim of rejuvenating the state. Politically, Ireland was seen as relatively stable. Its policy remained the economic development of the country so that Ireland could compete at a European level, if not globally. Ireland’s yearning to join the EEC was not accompanied though by a parallel desire to join NATO, much to the chagrin of the Americans. Additionally, Ireland continued to display “an independent attitude at the United Nations on such issues as disarmament and the rivalry between the Afro-Asians and the former colonial powers”.62 The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) security paper for Kennedy’s trip also makes interesting reading in that context. The main difficulty in Ireland, as perceived by the CIA, was going to be limited though to the friendly exuberance of the crowds rather than any negative agitation or upheaval. Indeed, Robert Kennedy believed that the European trip was “the happiest time of his administration, particularly his trip to Ireland.”63 Nonetheless, despite events such as visits by heads of state, the reality of Irish-American relations meant that this small power was never unduly influential when it came to its transatlantic neighbour and superpower.

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be reiterated that, by its very nature, this chapter is restricted. By dealing with these four areas within the Irish-America relationship, rather than just by giving an overview, some questions regarding bilateral relations in the two decades following the Second World War will have been raised. The significance of diplomatic appointments should not be underestimated, but whether it was in the multilateral arena or in bilateral relations, the reality of relations was grounded more in symbolism than reality.

In the case of Ireland and the US, bilateral ties are characterised by networks and relationships that are both deep and wide. Throughout the period under examination, indeed to the present day, Irish-American links remained strong, whether in terms of Ireland’s basic western orientation or via emigration. Thus, the US State Department has asserted that:

US relations with Ireland are based on common ancestral ties and on similar values and political views.

61. Seán Lemass oral history transcript, JFK, p.6.
62. “The President’s European Trip”, Vice-Presidential Security File, Box #3, Vice-Presidential Security File, Johnson Papers, LBJ.
The United States seeks to maintain and strengthen the traditionally cordial relations between the people of the United States and Ireland. The appointment of businessman Dick Egan as US ambassador to Ireland in September 2001 under the George W. Bush administration is however a further illustration of Dublin’s relative position in the diplomatic scheme of things. The reality of this bilateral relationship remains some distance from fulfilling the aspirations of successive Irish governments or, indeed, of the Irish-American diaspora. But this is surely to be expected, even if the history of the first two decades after the war indicate that a greater degree of consideration by both sides would have been helpful in order to develop positive bilateral relations. At the same time, they amply demonstrate the relative strengths of a superpower and small power within the context of transatlantic relations.

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American Ministers

Frederick A. Sterling 1927–1932
William Wallace McDowell 1934 (He died during the banquet on the evening he presented his credentials.)
Alvin M. Owsley 1935–1937
John Cudahy 1937–1940
David Gray 1941–1947
George A. Garrett was appointed as Minister in 1947 and made Ambassador on April 18, 1950.

Former Ambassadors

George A. Garrett 1950–1951

Francis P. Matthews 1951–1952
William Howard Taft III 1953–1957
R. Scott McLeod 1957–1961

Matthew H. McCloskey 1962–1964
Raymond R. Guest 1965–1968
• **Image 2:** “If he’s shifted to Dublin it’ll certainly be a McLeod off my mind ...”, *Irish Times*, 29 March 1957.
September 23, 1957
1:04 p.m.

TELEPHONE CALL FROM AMB LODGE

L said the FM of Ireland is going nuts - he is going to support the Red China item despite what we were told.
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL
WASHINGTON

November 2, 1950

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT:

At its 70th Meeting, at which you presided, the National Security Council and the Secretary of the Treasury adopted for your consideration the statement of policy contained in the attached report on "The Position of the United States Regarding Irish Membership in NATO and Military Assistance to Ireland Under a Bilateral Arrangement" (NSC 83/1).

The National Security Council and the Secretary of the Treasury recommend that you approve this statement of policy and direct its implementation by all appropriate Executive Departments and Agencies of the U. S. Government under the coordination of the Secretary of State.

JAMES S. LAY, JR.
Executive Secretary

APPROVED:

/\HARRY S. TRUMAN

Date: Nov. 3, 1950

• Image 4: James S. Lay to Harry S. Truman, 2 November 1950, National Security Council Meetings, Box #209, President’s Secretary’s Files, Truman Papers, HST.
• Image 5: “I think the following anecdote about the 15th century head of your maternal clan might interest from a genealogical point of view: Mac Gearailt, Iarla, Fitzgerald, Earl of Kildare, poet, soldier known as the Mac Gearailt Mór or the Great Fitzgerald was summoned to Rome to explain his conduct in burning the Cathedral. The Pope asked why he had committed this enormous sacrilege. His lordship replied: ‘I declare to Jesus, Your Holiness, I would have never have done it but I thought the archbishop was inside.’” Brendan Behan to John F. Kennedy, 15 July 1961, Special Correspondence, Box #28, President’s Office Files, JFK.