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# American Diplomacy and Economic Aid in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: A Neoliberal Analysis

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There are no purely military solutions to the myriad of ethnic and sectarian conflicts in the world today. If this is the case, then what are the most appropriate means of intervention? This article focuses on diplomacy and economic aid as means the United States employed to facilitate the achievement and effective implementation of a peace agreement. Most analysis of the Northern Ireland peace process that resulted from the signing of the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement has stressed the political machinations among the local parties to the conflict that resulted in the negotiated settlement. Some analysis has suggested that the US was either misinformed or relatively unimportant in this peace process. Basing my research on assumptions from neoliberal international relations theory, I argue that the US role in Northern Ireland, while not definitive in terms of achieving peace, was important in the complex pattern of mutual influence that made the Good Friday Agreement possible and then assisted in its implementation. The continuing US role in the peace process is illustrative of the role the US is increasingly playing in a world that requires coordinated international action to deal with complex global and regional conflicts.

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As we approach the 20th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (also known as the Belfast Agreement), it is appropriate to look back at what the peace process in Northern Ireland has achieved. The conflict in Northern Ireland was primarily ethno-national (Coakley, 2003; Elliott, 2009; Guelke, 2015; Mitchell, 2006). This type of conflict may be caused by irredentism or a claim for territory by an ethnic group from another (Denny & Walter, 2014; Siroky & Hale, 2017). Northern Ireland fits this pattern well as there were dual claims to the territory of Northern Ireland made by groups with competing ethno-national identities (Owsiak, 2017). The early evaluations of the Good Friday Agreement stressed the political compromise among the parties as well as the learning that occurred in the negotiation process (Hazleton, 2000a; Horowitz, 2002; and Tannam, 2001). The prospect and promise of peace was extremely attractive given the long-simmering, low intensity conflict that defined 'The Troubles' that had plagued Northern Ireland since the late 1960s (Bueno de Mesquita, McDermott & Cope, 2001; Hancock, 2011; Hancock, Weiss & Duerr, 2010). Recent evaluations have stressed the international conditions and constraints in the context of making and implementing the agreement (Pollack, 2017; Todd, 2017). Thus, the peace that has been achieved in Northern Ireland is based on an understanding of the international context which contributed to the peace process and those in the international community that have played leading roles in world politics.

While primary credit for peace should go to the parties, politicians, and people of Northern Ireland, what role did the United States play in this peace process? Some analysis has suggested that the US was either misinformed or relatively unimportant in the peace process (Clancy, 2013). Based on assumptions from neoliberalism, I argue that the US role in Northern Ireland was important in the complex pattern of mutual influence that made the Good Friday Agreement possible, and that the US assisted in the implementation of this peace accord (Ó Dochartaigh, 2015). The continuing US role in the peace process is illustrative of the role the US is increasingly playing in a world that requires coordinated international action to deal with complex global and regional conflicts. This may frustrate President Trump and some in the US who look for easy answers to complex conflicts in the world based on a preponderance of US military power. However, there are no purely military

solutions to the myriad of ethnic and sectarian conflicts in the world (Nye, 2015; Pearson & Lounsbury, 2011). If this is the case, then what are the most appropriate means of intervention for the US? This article focuses on the US capacity to influence a conflict based on its multiple linkages with states and other actors. Scholars stress the multidimensional nature of US power, and this provides the US an ability to become enmeshed in networks of influence with other states like those involved in the Northern Ireland peace process (Gupta, 2017). This focus on networks illustrates the utility of liberal or neoliberal theories of international politics.

### **Liberal International Relations Theory**

Liberal theories of international relations have had periods of support in eras of peace and have waned in the aftermath of war (Carr, 1940). After World War II, for example, liberalism faded as scholars increasingly came to see the world in realist terms. Realism dominated as the preeminent paradigm in the study of international relations until the 1970s when a new era of international cooperation and what Keohane and Nye (1977) called 'complex interdependence' seemed to challenge the assumptions of never-ending conflict that was the focus of realist scholars' analyses. This neoliberal approach to international relations assumed that there were multiple linkages that connected societies across state boundaries. Thus, domestic groups interacted not only to influence their own society, but with individuals and groups in other states who shared interests. States themselves no longer had a simple, single agenda of security, but there was an absence of hierarchy among issues so that some states did not see military security as their sole objective. Hence, the distinction between domestic and foreign policy became blurred. Finally, military force was not an option for states that experienced complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977). In the aftermath of the Cold War and the end of the Soviet-American rivalry, many cited the appeal of liberal theories of international relations (Fukuyama, 1989; Kegley, 1993). Snyder (2013) contends that the end of the Cold War fundamentally changed world politics so that revolutionary nationalists like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Sinn Féin had to become more pragmatic in their ideological goals. Not only did groups like the IRA lose their international support,

but the United States became less preoccupied with traditional international security concerns and could focus more on solving regional conflicts like Northern Ireland.

Joseph Nye, Jr., one of the leading liberal figures in the field of international relations, has further developed his theory by developing and applying it to contemporary US foreign policy. Nye (1990) believes that the changing nature of world politics does not necessarily mean American decline because the US is well-positioned to lead in this new era of interdependence. This new era emphasizes growing trade and economic activity as well as patterns of mutual cooperation that make traditional conflicts and wars unlikely among many actors. Despite the dominance that came to the US in the post-Cold War world, Nye (2002) has argued that the US cannot act unilaterally but must lead through multilateral institutions as a means of forging the cooperation necessary to achieve its goals. Neoconservatives emphasize the power of American ideals that Nye stresses but without his appreciation of the need for cooperation, listening, and consensus building. Recently, Nye (2013) has stressed the need for skillful and knowledgeable American diplomacy, one that carefully takes into consideration the local basis of conflict in which the US may intervene. Given the likely response to the US assertion of power in the era of American primacy, it is important for the US to develop policies that will not threaten other states. This requires wisdom, restraint, and a more mature foreign policy from a state that need not be so determined to preserve its primacy that it undermines its legitimacy and friendships in the world (Walt, 2005). Such a foreign policy will rely on effective public diplomacy which integrates new technology. Leaders who can utilize language, argument, and ideals in their communication can impact the foreign policy of other states (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2013). For diplomatic efforts to be successful, the US has to be seen as legitimate with some moral authority, not hypocritical, arrogant, or indifferent to the opinion of others. This is often the key to success in mediating a dispute or regional conflict. In the case of Northern Ireland, the US utilized diplomacy to achieve its objective of promoting peace quite effectively.

Beyond focusing on diplomacy, liberals also emphasize that states are not all identical power-pursuing entities. They differ based on the ideas and ideologies that permeate society and affect the formulation of foreign policy preferences and

choices (Moravcsik, 1997). This includes recognition of diverse groups in society competing to influence the foreign policy of the state. In the case of the US, there have been numerous studies highlighting the influence and power of different groups in society, especially ethnic groups. These ethnic groups, formed from numerous diasporas, have often sought to promote the foreign policy of their new state with that of the state from which they departed (Dewind & Segura, 2014; McCormick, 2012; Newhouse, 2009; Rubenzer, 2008; Smith, 2000).

Liberals have also increasingly emphasized institutions as a means that states can utilize to advance their goals and promote cooperation (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Ikenberry, 2011; Keohane, 1984; Krasner, 1983; Stein, 1982). Liberals believe that diplomatic initiatives that occur through international institutions allow states to create consensus and influence other members of these institutions. These institutions create norms as well as rule-making and enforcement procedures that allow others to operate according to those policies created by the leading states in these organizations (Jacobson, 1984). It is through these institutions that states can seek to gain cooperation from other states to achieve their goals. Slaughter (2009) has stressed that the US possesses a combination of resources in a highly networked world that provides it the ability to uniquely influence world politics. While the US did not always lead these international institutions and commissions formed in the context of the Northern Ireland peace process, they played a supportive role. These institutions have been a critical part of the success in Northern Ireland (Walsh, 2017).

Liberals also stress that economic assistance does not only bring effective leverage on other actors, but can be an effective agent of problem-solving (Anderson, 1999; Fortna & Huang, 2012; Kevlihan, 2013; Savun & Tirone, 2011; Taydas & Peksen, 2012). In the context of Northern Ireland, the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) has been an important collaborative effort developed by the US to assist in the peacebuilding process. This kind of economic aid can be critical to support governments seeking to solve fundamental human and economic challenges. Since the Marshall Plan, foreign aid and assistance has been an important element of US foreign policy. Often, the assumptions and aspirations of foreign assistance have fallen short of achieving the goals that inspired the aid. Nevertheless, the reality that fundamental human challenges can only be achieved through economic assistance provides continuing

motivation for the US and other actors to funnel aid to groups and states that are seen as worthy of support. The best of these efforts provide economic assistance to transform local communities whilst preventing backsliding towards paramilitarism, or activities perpetuating the divisions (sectarian or otherwise) that constitute the underlying conditions for conflict. Thus, along with diplomatic initiatives, economic assistance is an important means by which states can achieve their goals such as promoting peace.

### **The US Role in the Northern Ireland Peace Process**

Historically, the US deferred to the British government regarding the status of and problems in Northern Ireland. Beginning with President Woodrow Wilson's decision not to recognize Ireland as an independent state and continuing as the Troubles escalated in the late 1960s and 1970s, American governments did not interfere with what they saw as an internal British issue. Britain had become a close ally of the US in the 20th-century, and in the context of the Cold War this was especially true in the 1980s because of the special relationship between US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Pressure from Irish-American groups and elected representatives had influenced the US government to side with the nationalist or republican side of the conflict in Northern Ireland during the era of the Troubles. The so-called 'four horsemen' – Hugh Carey, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Tip O'Neill, and Ted Kennedy – played a critical role in promoting an Irish nationalist agenda in US foreign policy. This group came to be important advocates of the peace process once it emerged in the 1990s, advocating American diplomatic pressure on the British government to negotiate with Irish republicans while simultaneously pressing these Irish republicans to cease their use of violence, commit to a ceasefire, and ultimately decommission their arms (Gupta, 2017). Based on effective lobbying by Irish-American groups and political elites, the US government thus became a critic of British policy in Northern Ireland (Tannam, 2013). The important role of interest groups pressuring President Clinton to grant Gerry Adams a visa supports the liberal claim that domestic groups are important in the making of US foreign policy (Lynch, 2003; O'Cleary, 1996; O'Dowd, 2000).

Despite earlier statements of support and concern by Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, US policy toward Northern Ireland changed significantly under President Bill Clinton. The need for the US to defer to the British regarding Northern Ireland receded, as the need for Britain as a military ally was much less important after the Cold War (Dumbrell, 2013). This allowed the US to be a more effective broker in negotiations regarding Northern Ireland. The US under Clinton played a conspicuous role in the peace process, first by granting a visa to Gerry Adams and then actively engaging in the negotiations. Many in the White House during Clinton's first term worked on the Northern Ireland Peace Process. Clinton appointed former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell as his envoy to Northern Ireland, and he mediated the negotiations leading to the Good Friday Agreement. Many have praised the public diplomacy of President Clinton, the skill of the George Mitchell as a mediator, and the great effort made by many others in the Clinton administration to promote peace in Northern Ireland (Cox, 1999; Dumbrell, 2000; Lynch, 2004; Wilson, 1997). Mitchell especially gets credit for creating conditions for negotiations that were inclusive and encouraged all groups in Northern Ireland to participate in the peace process. Clinton himself made several visits to Northern Ireland to support the peace process and was personally involved during the final week of negotiations leading up to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

Not all agree that Clinton and the US were central to the peace process. Hazleton (2000b) tends to downplay the importance of the US role as he depicts the US and Clinton as cheerleaders on the sidelines of the process. Similarly, Paul Dixon (2006) dismisses the role of outside actors, especially the US, arguing that domestic factors were primarily responsible for the peace process. Clancy (2013) contends that Clinton's role in the peace process was based on his erroneous understanding of the Northern Ireland conflict, conflating the racial divisions in the American South to the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland. Lynch (2009) depicts Clinton as willing to ignore the fact that Adams was a terrorist and therefore seemingly rewards terrorism by granting him a visa. Despite these criticisms, most scholars agree that Clinton and those in his administration contributed to the peace process by granting Adams a visa and thereby including moderate



republicans in the peace process; and constantly encouraging the peace process despite the many problems that emerged. As liberal international relations theory would suggest, US policy was highly embedded in a network of numerous states and non-state actors. For example, the granting of Adams' visa was part of a choreographed interaction between the US government and the Irish and British governments. John Hume as leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the principal architect of the Good Friday Agreement played a critical role in facilitating Adams and Sinn Féin becoming involved in peace negotiations. The purpose of granting the visa was to incorporate potential spoilers in the peace process. Republicans historically had been committed to violence to achieve their aims. To convince them that a ceasefire and negotiations could be means to achieve their goal was essential in the peace process, and the granting of Adams' visa was central to that process.

After getting the IRA to commit to a second ceasefire, reaching an agreement on the institutions that were necessary to bring peace to Northern Ireland required that the US support those moderates who were willing to take risks for peace. The US had long listened to John Hume and had followed his suggestions on how to move the peace process forward. Hume had developed close ties with Senator Ted Kennedy and his staff, some of whom came to work in the Clinton White House national security team. Thus, Hume worked seamlessly with American government officials to bring negotiations to fruition. The US also became acutely aware of the political danger that David Trimble faced as the leader of the moderate unionist Ulster Unionist Party (UUP). Many in Trimble's Party disagreed with the concessions he made in supporting the Good Friday Agreement. Clinton played a major part in convincing Trimble to make the concessions that would bring about an agreement. After the parties finalized the Good Friday Agreement, Clinton continued to press for its effective implementation. In sum, Clinton's endless optimism, positive determination, and ability to empathize and relate to the parties in the conflict allowed him to be a critical actor that supported those who made peace in Northern Ireland (Gartner, 2008).

When George W. Bush became president in 2001, he developed a more detached policy toward Northern Ireland. He was less personally engaged in diplomacy regarding the challenges of implementing the Good Friday Agreement. This provided

his envoys greater autonomy and authority to develop and implement US policy toward Northern Ireland. Soon after his Presidency began, 9/11 became a clarion call for his administration to focus on a war on terror (Clancy, 2007; Dumbrell, 2006; Marsden, 2006; Schmitt, 2008). A month before the horrific attacks of 9/11, IRA training of Columbian terrorists had angered the Bush administration. Lynch (2009) contends that the combined effects of 8/11 and 9/11 reordered American priorities. Security had reemerged as the central concern of American foreign policy, and US tolerance for those who were considered terrorists ended. This meant the Bush administration would place greater pressure on Sinn Féin and the IRA in negotiations, especially in regard to decommissioning.

Bush had appointed Richard Haass as his envoy to Northern Ireland and gave great leeway to him to develop US policy because of his own personal lack of engagement on Northern Ireland. Haass' primary work, however, was in the State Department as Director of Policy Planning; one of the most important positions in the State Department and itself a full-time commitment. Thus, Bush's original envoy necessarily had to see his role in Northern Ireland as secondary to his work in the State Department. Nevertheless, Haass did engage the actors in Northern Ireland periodically. Clancy (2013) suggests that because of their personalities, Haass took a liking to Adams and was quite sympathetic with his arguments. Conversely, Clancy (2013) contends that Haass disliked Trimble due to his more difficult personality, perhaps too much like his own.

In 2003, Haass resigned from the Bush Administration. The decommissioning of paramilitary arms had begun but was not yet completed. The reform of the police in Northern Ireland had yet to gain support from republicans, and the parties in Northern Ireland had not come to an agreement to make the institutions of Stormont operational again. Mitchell Reiss succeeded Haass as US Envoy to Northern Ireland. Clancy (2013) believes that Reiss was a successful envoy because he played the role of 'bad cop', pressuring the IRA to decommission their weapons and assisting in getting the parties to agree to restart the dormant institutions at Stormont based on a power-sharing arrangement between the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin. This required periodic withdrawals or a narrowing of Adams' visa rights to enter the US. Just as the Clinton administration had dangled the opportunity to earn

US entry visas as a carrot to Adams and other republicans, the Bush administration used the diplomatic stick of denying visas as a means of punishing Adams and republicans for their failure to decommission, undermining the peace process from the US perspective. Even though Clancy (2013) depicts the Bush administration as having different priorities and personalities from that of the Clinton administration, the US appears to have had significant influence in the efforts to implement the Good Friday Agreement, and played a constructive role in achieving its goal of promoting peace in Northern Ireland.

In looking back on the role of the US in Northern Ireland, it is noteworthy that without any threat of the use of force, the US was able to engage parties diplomatically with which it shared interests, especially the British and Irish Governments; John Hume; and to a lesser extent unionist and republican leaders. The US directly contributed to negotiating the Agreement in 1998 through the skillful diplomacy of George Mitchell and was critical in supporting the implementation of the agreement. While President Clinton was more directly involved, Bush's envoys had more autonomy to make policy: in particular, Reiss played an important role in promoting decommissioning and in helping achieve a power-sharing arrangement in 2007. The effective role the US played in promoting peace in Northern Ireland was highlighted in 2013 when the political parties in Northern Ireland asked Richard Haass to mediate again and chair inter-party talks on flags, parades, and reconciliation. While Haass proved unsuccessful in developing a consensus regarding these issues among all the parties, the fact that a previous US envoy was seen as someone who the leaders of Northern Ireland sought to facilitate the development of a consensus in Northern Ireland on these issues highlights the continuing influence the US has in this conflict, and how the US can continue to play a role in promoting peace in Northern Ireland.

Beyond focusing on the diplomatic efforts of the US government in promoting and helping to implement the Northern Ireland peace process, the US also attempted to promote the peace through a program of economic assistance. Since 1986, the US has utilized the IFI as a means of promoting the US and other states to assist in the peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts in Northern Ireland. These funds are

intended to empower citizens, provide jobs, and alleviate the social and economic conditions that promote paramilitarism and violence. The key to the success of the IFI has been its adaptability, independence, flexibility, and the efforts it has made to be effective in local communities (Buchanan, 2014). Thousands of people across Northern Ireland and border counties have participated in peacebuilding programs funded by the IFI. While one should not exaggerate the role of economic aid, it has clearly been successful in some local communities, linking grassroots peacebuilding efforts with the resources needed to transform neighborhoods and communities.

## **Conclusion**

The realities of complex interdependence and liberal assumptions about the nature of world politics are useful in explaining the role of the US in the Northern Irish politics in recent decades (Gillespie, 2014). In this era of increased skepticism regarding the utility of US military power—especially regarding ground forces in the context of nation-building—scholars and policy-makers may want to consider what can be achieved through diplomacy and economic assistance. If the US can develop close diplomatic relations with states and parties, it can become an important player in resolving conflicts and building peace as the Northern Ireland peace process demonstrates. However, the Northern Ireland case also illustrates that the US cannot impose solutions on conflicting parties. When Richard Haass left Northern Ireland at the end of 2013, he attempted to force upon the parties his vision of a fair negotiated settlement. While the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Féin endorsed Haass' final offer, the Alliance Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) all rejected the offer. While his offer may have furthered the negotiations between the parties, Haass' role was not facilitating the parties to come to an agreement as George Mitchell had in his role in 1998. Instead, Haass tried to impose a solution. Haass' failure and the success of Mitchell highlight both the possibilities and limitations of diplomacy and the ability of the US to influence events in contemporary world politics. When so many different actors are needed to cooperate in order to achieve success, like coming to a peace agreement

or attempting to implement it, there is no way even a great power like the US can orchestrate all of the different actors. Instead, it can use its influence to push, nudge, cajole, and demonstrate its commitment, but it cannot offer 'final' solutions. In an age where the US has recently used much of its hard power, it may be time to more humbly approach its role in world politics and the limitations that its seemingly great power status provides.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### Author Information

Timothy J. White is a Professor of Political Science at Xavier University and has previously held research positions at the National University of Ireland-Galway. He has written and published widely on the Northern Ireland peace process. His work on the policy implications of the Northern Ireland peace process includes the edited volume, *Lessons from the Northern Ireland Peace Process* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2013). His theoretical work includes editing *Theories of International Relations and Northern Ireland* (Manchester University Press, 2017) and publishing a number of chapters on the peace process examining and utilizing theories of consociation, civil society, and cooperation. He is currently working on a project with Mary C. Murphy on the role of third parties in peace processes and a project with Emily Pausa on the history of the US role in Northern Ireland.

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