U.S. foreign policy yields to forces of history

Nancy E. Soderberg

Nancy E. Soderberg serves as Alternate U.S. Representative for Special Political Affairs, with Ambassador rank, and represents the United States in the Security Council of the United Nations. She assists with the formulation and implementation of the U.S. position on designated Security Council issues. Her primary responsibility is U.N. peacekeeping operations. Prior to her current position, Ambassador Soderberg was Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, the youngest deputy and the highest ranking woman ever to serve on the National Security Council. She has a B.A. from Vanderbilt University, and an M.S. in Foreign Service, from Georgetown University. She is a member of the Council of Foreign Relations.

When the nation's security is threatened, U.S. foreign policy can develop swiftly and purposefully. But there are times, as in the case of Northern Ireland, when foreign policy develops incrementally, driven more by the forces of history, public opinion and a leader's commitment than by national security issues.

Ambassador Nancy Soderberg helped members of the Global Executive Forum trace the events that led President Clinton to do what presidents before him were careful to avoid: intervene in the problems of Northern Ireland, thus risking our friendship with Britain.


Public involved

Unlike past administrations, the American people were willing to get involved.

"As the so-called 'troubles' broke out in the late 1960s, Americans began to take sides," said Soderberg. "The conflict in Northern Ireland divided Irish Americans who were torn between supporting the old struggle against the British and opposing what many saw as an unacceptable use of violence to gain political ends."

The voices of peace would be heard. Soderberg pointed out that with 40 million Americans of Irish descent, many have traveled to Ireland as tourists or as visiting relatives, calling for an end to the conflict. In the United States, Irish American peace activists made a strong and compelling case for U.S. involvement.

Clinton's role

Fate may have tapped Clinton for his role in the peace process back in 1969, when as a young student at Oxford he witnessed the outbreak of the Irish troubles. "He was shocked by the violence and instinctively believed America had a role to play," said Soderberg.

"A quarter of a century later, Clinton would come to power at a unique moment in the history of the conflict and in Anglo-American relations. The international situation would offer him a chance to help change the course of Irish history.

"I honestly believe the peace process would have founderd without President Clinton," said Soderberg. "But I also believe that no president before him could have made much of a difference because the conditions for change did not yet exist."
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Historical forces

At the beginning of the decade, U.S. foreign policy towards Ireland was as stagnant as the peace process itself. Then, in 1993 and 1994, there was a convergence of forces that pushed the opposing sides to the table for serious talks. The aging of the IRA leaders, the end of the Cold War, and the no-win status of the fighting served to create a reality check for all involved, noted Soderberg. Also, the integration of Europe was putting pressure on the prime ministers of Britain and Ireland to solve the problem.

Events now started to break in such a way that caused U.S. foreign policy makers to take a second look at our involvement in Northern Ireland.

Key moments

- In 1993 President Clinton grappled with the issue of a visa for Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA. Linked to terrorist activities, Adams was persona non grata in the U.S.

  However, during the 1992 Presidential campaign, Clinton had promised a visa for Adams, and in the summer following his election, he was pushed by a key group of Irish Americans to deliver on this commitment.

  "They strongly believed that the visa was the key to bringing about an IRA cease-fire, and that it was time for Americans to get involved," said Soderberg.

- While the White House leaned toward granting the visa, the rest of the administration continued to be firmly opposed to such a move. But in the fall of 1993 the White House began to pick up signals that something was indeed changing on the ground in the IRA.

- In September, a group of Irish Americans led by Bruce Morrison and Irish Voice Publisher Niall O'Dowd helped secure a week-long cease-fire.

- The Irish and British prime ministers signed the Joint "Downing Street" Declaration of December 1993, on the question of self-determination for Northern Ireland, which improved conditions for a permanent cease-fire.

  "So you had both Dublin and London reaching out to the parties in Northern Ireland."

- In December, prominent Northern Ireland leaders such as John Hume of the Social Democrat & Labor Party (SDLP) urged the White House to grant the visa, a turnaround from their position just six months earlier.

- Senator Ted Kennedy, long an opponent of the IRA, also pushed for a visa.

  "We were now convinced the time was right to test the IRA," said Soderberg. The question was how?

Key Dates

- Jan. 1994- Decision to grant Gerry Adams, leader of the IRA political wing, a visa to attend a peace conference in New York.
- Aug. 1994 - IRA agrees to a cease-fire
- May 1995 - Pres. Clinton hosts Trade and Investment Conference
- Dec. 1995 - President makes historic trip to Northern Ireland
- Feb. 1996 - IRA deploys a bomb in London; announces end to ceasefire
- July 1997 - Cease-fire restored
- April 1998 - Good Friday agreement signed
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"At first, none of us in the White House thought we should issue Adams a visa for fear it might undermine our antiterrorism stance and make the president too vulnerable. We thought instead about lifting the official ban on contacts with Sinn Fein and mulled over other ideas.

"But for Adams, the bar for the test of our willingness to engage him had long ago been set as the visa, and it was too late to change the rules."

While Soderberg and the rest of the White House were debating the pros and cons of the visa, the distinguished National Committee on Foreign Policy set up a peace conference in New York for mid January and invited Gerry Adams.

"We were kind of stuck because it was hard to oppose a conference on peace. So that really forced our hand."

However, the State Department argued strongly against a visa, a sentiment echoed by the FBI and by the Justice Department.

"Ultimately, the president decided to issue the visa because he felt the risk was worth it if we could advance the cause of peace in Northern Ireland."

Soderberg explained: "That Oxford student's instincts were still there 25 years later. In the end, the choice was a win-win situation. If we issued the visa and the IRA declared a cease-fire, great. If it failed to do so, we would then be in a much stronger position to isolate and squeeze the IRA and to call on Irish America to do the same."

The visa was granted in January 1994; eight months later, on Aug. 31, 1994, the IRA declared a cease-fire.

The hard part

The cease-fire did not mean an end to centuries-old hatreds, nor did it put an end to U.S. involvement (see sidebar below). In fact, the work had just begun. With the cease-fire on shaky ground, Clinton made a historic trip to Northern Ireland in December '95, receiving a hero's welcome in Belfast. As Soderberg tells it, "People poured out to see President Clinton. Children ran along beside our motorcade and crowds surged through barricades to catch a glimpse of him."

But a couple of months later, on Feb. 9, 1996, peace took an almost fatal hit when the IRA detonated a bomb in London. The cease-fire was over. "It was a "devastating blow, but it galvanized us to not let the hard-liners kill the peace process." The team worked hard through the next few months to engage Adams and get him back to the negotiating table.

The cease-fire of Aug. 1994 was ultimately restored July 20, 1997, and Sinn Fein was invited to participate in the all-party talks that began that fall. Under George Mitchell's leadership and the continued engagement of President Clinton, the talks were kept on track and resulted in the Good Friday agreement of April '98.

Said Soderberg, "Intervention by a U.S. president and a willingness to take risks for peace can make a real difference."
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Strategy targeted root causes of conflict

The peace strategy was clear: First, find ways to address the root causes of the conflict; second, put the enormous political, moral and economic weight of the United States behind efforts to alleviate them, said Soderberg. Add to this a never-give-up attitude and you have the beginning of a win-win course of action.

Similar strategies have been used in Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo and elsewhere.

ESTABLISH CREDIBILITY with both sides. In Northern Ireland this means the unionists - the majority, a mostly Protestant community that wants to maintain the current union with Britain; and the nationalists - the more militant, mostly Catholic population seeking unity with Ireland.

Granting a visa to Gerry Adams created serious problems with the unionist community, said Soderberg. The solution was to develop a policy of parallelism.

"For instance, when we reached out to Adams, we also reached out to the unionist leaders. If IRA folks got visas, so did the militant activists of the loyalists. If Adams got a meeting with Tony Lake or Vice President Gore, so did the unionist leader Jim Molyneaux and his successor David Trimble."

Soderberg recalled a 1995 St. Patrick's Day party at the White House which was attended by loyalist Gary McMichael and his foe Gerry Adams. She asked McMichael why he wasn't afraid of major problems arising from being in the same room with Adams. "He just smiled and said, 'You watch; next year, everyone will be here.' And they were."

MAKE PEOPLE FEEL THEY HAVE A STAKE IN THE PROCESS. Poverty and high unemployment were two of the root causes of the troubles. A major deterrent to investment was violence. "A zero-sum mentality prevailed; people believed one community could only advance at the expense of the other," said Soderberg.

In an attempt to spur investment and create jobs, Clinton named George Mitchell as his Special Adviser for Economic Initiatives in Ireland. In May '95, the president hosted a Trade and Investment Conference, bringing the two sides together for the common good. By the end of 1998 unemployment had dropped significantly and investment is now flowing in.

GET THE MOST POWERFUL MAN on earth involved. Prior to the president's trip to Northern Ireland in December '95, "we made it clear to both London and Dublin that the president wanted results before Air Force One landed," said Soderberg. What ensued was a series of frantic behind-the-scenes calls between London, Dublin and the White House. Prime Ministers Major and Reynolds agreed only hours before AF1 touched down, that there would be a twin track - simultaneous talks among the parties on the unresolved issues.

"As Prime Minister Major put it, the President's visit had a way of 'focusing the mind.' "

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