



The Bombing of Omagh, 15 August 1998: The Bombers, Their Tactics, Strategy, and Purpose Behind the Incident

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The purpose of this article is to review the above incident: what happened, how it happened and who did it and why. Also, to place it in the context of the current "peace process," Irish history and the history of Irish Republican violence. In looking at who carried out the bombing there is also an attempt to explain the split between the Provisional and Real IRA, their motives and ideas, the complex relationship between the two and what they hope to achieve. This is then followed by an analysis of the actual bombing, the tactics involved in carrying it out and what went wrong. And finally to look at the after effects of the bombing. In many ways the bombing was not as unusual as portrayed by the media, just a continuation of what had been happening for the last 30 years; thus, it is instructive in itself as an "ideal" terrorist operation.

Saturday, 15 August 1998, saw one of the worst terrorist incidents in the history of the current Northern Ireland troubles. A car bomb exploded in the center of the small County Tyrone market town of Omagh killing 29 people and injuring over 200 others, many seriously and permanently disabled as a result. All of those killed and nearly all of those injured had no connection with the security forces; some were even Spanish tourists. Not only were most of the victims civilians, but a majority of them were Catholics, and some were even active Republicans. This adds a certain degree of irony since the "Real" IRA, who planted the bomb, are an ostensibly Catholic Republican group who espouse a distinctly Catholic form of nationalism.¹

The attack caused deep outrage and shock in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Britain, which was later mixed with a sense of perplexity at what the purpose of such an atrocity could be. After all, the attack came after the Province had decidedly voted in favor of the 1998 Good Friday "peace agreement" in the previous elections of 22 May 1998. This peace agreement was effectively a negotiated settlement between the British government (the sovereign authority over Northern Ireland), the Republic of Ireland (who had a latent territorial claim over Northern Ireland), and the majority of the constitutional political parties within Northern Ireland. The Agreement was to form a power-sharing, devolved government within Northern Ireland, recognizing

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its constitutional position within (and majority support for) the United Kingdom. Crucially, it required that such power-sharing did not imply that any of the participating parties give up their objectives of either seeking to remain part of the United Kingdom (the Unionist Parties) or of aspiring to join the Republic of Ireland (Nationalist and Republican Parties). On this basis the main Republican Party, Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional IRA (the major paramilitary group that had waged a 30-year terrorist campaign against the British State) agreed to call off their "military" campaign, the aim of which was to force Northern Ireland into the Republic.

Views and opinions over whether the Agreement was a triumph or a solution, and for whom and what varied greatly. However, the majority of the Northern Ireland electorate supported the Agreement, as did most of Sinn Fein's electoral supporters. And, quite remarkably, it also saw the situation where the representatives of a major terrorist organization (Provisional IRA) found themselves sitting in constitutional government, holding ministerial offices alongside previously bitterly opposed Unionist opponents. However, Republicans were expected to concede the democratic will of the majority in Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom (something their terrorist campaign had fought against) and the Republic of Ireland gave up its territorial claim over Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile, many ambiguities remained both in the formal wording of the Agreement and in what precisely it meant in overall terms, but such "constructive ambiguity" was hailed by some as part of the Agreement's success, allowing all sides to see in the Agreement what they wanted. Most important was the precise role of terrorist weapons and the vexed question of their decommissioning. A major purpose of the Agreement was to remove the terrorist violence from Northern Ireland's politics, yet that violence had been at the heart of Sinn Fein and the IRA for 30 years. And although that violence had played a major role in propelling a minority party like Sinn Fein into the center of government it had not, as yet, brought about their ideal of making Northern Ireland part of the Republic of Ireland. Thus, although a significant proportion of Unionists had grave doubts about entering government with former, and still armed, terrorists a section of Republican support had equally grave doubts about entering any government but that of a united Irish Republic; for those Republicans the Agreement was a "sell out."²

However, in terms of popular perception, an Agreement had been made that effectively appeared to end 30 years of "troubles" and had led the major terrorist organization involved, Provisional IRA, to at least call a halt to its operations. Sinn Fein had actively canvassed for the Agreement during the elections. And Omagh was something of a Republican bastion as it had not only strong local support but also a Sinn Fein mayor. Consequently, the condemnation of the bombing was almost universal, including not only the Provisional IRA, but the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA, a smaller republican terrorist group), and Continuity IRA (another splinter group from the Provisional IRA).

The purpose of this article is thus to explore the dynamics behind the bombing of Omagh. This will involve a review of the terrorist group involved, namely the so-called Real IRA; who they are and what their purpose is and their relationship to other republican groups. Next, by looking at their choice of Omagh as a target, the intention is to understand their tactics and strategy, what they thought they were trying to do and why. This article will then analyze the bombing operation itself; how the operation was carried out, what actually happened, and what the intention was. Finally, this study will discuss the repercussions of the bombing and how it fit in with the wider political picture within the Province and between Republican groups.

The Real IRA and the Republican Tradition

The Real IRA is a splinter group from the Provisional IRA. The Provisionals, who have waged the main terrorist campaign against the British State for the last 30 years, were in turn the product of a split in 1970 within the old IRA between themselves and what became known as the "Official" IRA. The Officials had majority support within the Republican movement at the time of the split but the Provisionals claimed to be the true spiritual heirs of the Republican movement and the Irish Republic proclaimed by Patrick Pearse during the Dublin Easter Rising of 1916.

Republicanism is usually a reference to the more militant strand of Irish nationalism, a nationalism that appeals almost solely to the Catholic population of Ireland, Catholics being the overwhelming majority in the Republic of Ireland but a minority in Northern Ireland. This religious difference, along with the economic difference of a largely rural economy in the Republic and a predominantly industrial economy in the North, became the basis for the partition of Ireland into what became the Republic and Northern Ireland (or, according to nationalists, "the North"). It has been this partition that the almost wholly Catholic Republican movement, which is mostly constituted by Sinn Fein and the IRA, wish to end.

The Official IRA had long ago called off its terrorist campaign to concentrate on purely political work and metamorphosed itself into the Workers Party. The Officials subscribed to an openly Marxist analysis (unlike the Provisionals's vaguely socialist ideology). Interestingly, the Officials's Marxist analysis had led them to question the material benefits (for the working class) of a united Ireland and led them to see the Republican terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland as inherently sectarian. They have now become closely associated with the modern school of revisionist history that questions many of the old assumptions of Irish nationalism and the iniquities of British rule.³

To many traditional Republicans the metamorphosis of the Officials and their new revisionist attitudes stand as an example of how politics leads to a compromise, corruption, and loss of ideals. Nonviolent politics, which is explicitly stated in the Agreement as the sole means by which to attain political objectives, as such, equates with a "sell out" in the pure Republican mind. Only violence is pure and uncorrupted and uncompromising. This is a core theme of many nationalist movements.⁴

The Reals, in turn, split away from the Provisionals in protest at the involvement of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the Provisional IRA, in the "peace process." The appellation of the word "Real" is an invention of the press and is based on the tactics that these dissident Provisional members use when recruiting. It was first used in South Armagh, long a center of hard-line Republicanism in the North⁵ by dissident Provisionals who claimed that they were the "real" IRA when out talking to local Republicans who asked them who they were. They attempted to convey the message that the Provisionals were no longer acting in the real spirit of the IRA but that they, the Reals, were the real spirit and embodiment of the IRA; that they were the IRA, in practice, now that the Provisionals had called off the "armed struggle" (how republicans refer to their terrorist campaign).⁶

Essentially, the Reals appealed to those members of the Provisionals who distrusted talk of compromise over the principle of an all-Ireland Republic as the only solution to the "troubles" (the troubles being the local euphemism for the 30-year terrorist campaign that followed the riots and civil disturbances of the late 1960s in the North). This was in response to the Provisionals's apparently growing acceptance of the idea that an interim-type arrangement would be acceptable as the basis for a cease-fire, followed by

a period of power-sharing. In other words, the Reals had a vision or belief in pursuing a “military” campaign until they achieved a united Ireland, whereas the Provisionals appeared to be edging toward an interim compromise of some kind, prompting traditional Republican fears of a sell out.

It should be said that any compromise envisaged by the Provisionals is only regarded as a short- or medium-term one that would presage some kind of transition to an all-Ireland state.⁷ But compromise is always a difficult concept for those having a purist vision to accept or come to terms with and nearly all nationalist and religious beliefs tend to be built on fairly uncompromising premises. Hence Whyte’s observation that “. . . conflicts about religion and nationality are non-bargainable and therefore much harder to resolve.”⁸ Nations and Gods, to believers, either exist and simply are, or they are not. Halfway houses and compromises tend to deny the reality of a nation’s or God’s existence, and such a failure to permit the full being of the reality is often the essence of related claims of discrimination and oppression. That is to say, believers are unable to realize their pure vision in their daily lives and this denies them their true expression and being. It also explains why many sympathizers often become detached from the purist/visionary, as they have to deal with the reality of their everyday lives, which frequently makes compromise a necessity. After 30 years of sustained terrorist activity republicans had failed to shift their opponents or come anywhere nearer success than the Good Friday Agreement offered. By recognizing this reality the Provisionals had made substantial political gains and the bulk of their supporters backed them in compromising with what they saw as reality.

However, it is precisely the visionaries’ and purists’ rejection of what is presented as conventional reality and their search for an alternative higher reality that drives them on. It is an alternative to conventional wisdom and an appeal to higher, “other,” values and goals that they seek; this is part of the very nature of the religious appeal. What is done, religious and nationalist activists reason, is not to be explained in terms of the ordinary and conventional, namely within the confines of the existing state, but by an appeal to a higher authority, the pure ideal, the idealized state. Thus do many writers on nationalism note its conflation with religion and the origins of national identity in religious groups and the religious nature of nationalist violence as sanctifying, purifying, and inspiring; its costs are not to be measured in ordinary mortal and material terms but in idealized terms.⁹ Perhaps the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin was one of the best examples of this, as even those participating knew it to be doomed to failure before they even started. During the rising and in its immediate aftermath, the rebels were ridiculed by most of the population, even most of Catholic Ireland. But what the nationalist rebels themselves saw as their “blood sacrifice,” with all its overtly Catholic religious overtones, came later to be seen as the catalyst for the triumph of Republicanism. The rebels inspired the insurrection of 1919–21, which later paved the way for an independent Republic of Ireland.¹⁰

The question of compromise over pure ideals is something that has split Irish Republicans for much of the twentieth century. This was the principal cause of the Irish Civil War (1921–23), which was even more brutal than the preceding secessionist campaign of the “Anglo-Irish war” between 1919 and 1921. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 that ended the campaign provided a settlement between secessionist Irish Republican forces and the British government. However, the Treaty fell short of republican ideals on two points. First, although offering all the substance of independence it retained the symbolic trappings of the British State as the nominal sovereign authority in Ireland, and second, the Treaty provided for the partition of Ireland into what became the Irish

Free State (now the Republic of Ireland) and Northern Ireland, whose majority Protestant population insisted on remaining an integral part of the United Kingdom, although with their own provincial government in Belfast.

Republicans had demanded both an independent republic and a united Ireland and thus its purists became anti-Treaty, although pro-Treaty factions accepted the Treaty as providing the substance of independence (if not all of its overt forms) and the best deal available given the reality of the situation. The pro and anti factions then became locked in the Irish Civil War that ended up killing more people than the insurrection against Britain.¹¹

Once again purist Republicans look over their shoulders at the history of the Treaty and partition. They view it as indicating how once politics and compromise enters into their schema of things the ideal gets lost or forsaken.

Although the anti-Treaty faction lost the civil war they never disbanded and maintained their organization and insistence that they were still the true heirs of the Easter Rising and the true republican authority. As such, although not organizing any campaign against the Free State (restyled the Republic of Ireland in 1949), they did organize insurrectionary campaigns against both Northern Ireland and mainland Great Britain in the 1920s, 1930s, and from 1956–62, “to remove the British presence.” Eventually, all of these campaigns folded for lack of any popular support.

The IRA then reemerged in 1969–70 as a result of the widespread sectarian riots and civil disorder in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. At first they defined their role as mainly defenders of the minority Catholic population, but after a while sought to go on the offensive against Northern Ireland and indeed the British State itself in order to force Northern Ireland into a united Ireland. This caused a further split in 1970, between the Official IRA, who placed material and objective benefits before pure ideals (for example, not only Protestants but Catholics also were much better off materially in a Northern Ireland that was part of the United Kingdom) and the Provisionals who placed pure ideals, a united Ireland, before all else. This ended in bloody feuds and a permanent split, with the Officials stigmatized as compromisers and betrayers of the cause of an independent united Ireland.¹²

Thus, undoubtedly, the Reals look over their shoulders at a history whereby compromises and material deals and calculations lead to splits and to betrayal of the pure ideal (that the pure ideal has invariably been rejected by the popular majority does not inhibit them). This rejection of compromise is also behind the existence of another faction emerging from the Provisionals—“Continuity” IRA. Continuity, whose name, again, is symbolic of fears of splits and sell outs and the need to maintain the pure vision.

Fears of splits within the movement haunt much of Republican thinking and are thus an important factor in all their calculations. However, so are fears of sell outs and compromise, and what motivates most of the splinter groups from the IRA is a fear that any compromise, even if realistic, is a betrayal of all that they stand for and have fought for over the years. Continuity feared betrayal of the cause to such an extent that they were prepared to risk splitting the Republican movement, but also hoped to take enough people with them to become the catalyst of a rejuvenated IRA.

The Reals similarly fear that the talks already represent a surrender, to be confirmed if any weapons are ever decommissioned. Weapons decommissioning has become a major issue surrounding the Agreement. Most people in the North, and outside, assumed that all terrorist weapons would be either handed over to the authorities or destroyed and that this was part of the Agreement that they voted for; Republicans claim that it was not. The Agreement itself is very ambiguously worded¹³ and the last two years have

seen much debate over the issue. But, for many Republicans, the idea of decommissioning any weapons at all has come to be seen as an act of surrender that they will not tolerate, because this would equal the ultimate betrayal.

Security sources claim that the Reals are publicly represented by their political wing, the “32 County Sovereignty Committee.” They are based in the Southern border town of Dundalk, and associated with figures such as Bernadette Sands-McKevitt, whose brother, Bobby Sands, a convicted Provisional IRA terrorist, died on a hunger strike in a British prison in 1981. Bobby Sands became something of an icon for republicans and thus the presence of his sister in any republican organization has great symbolic and emotional power. Both the Reals and the 32 County Committee are believed to operate mostly from the Republic, where they are based, only crossing into the North for specific operations. They are also believed to have recruited very strongly from the old border county areas, picking up strong support from areas such as Fermanagh, South Tyrone, and South Armagh.

Most Reals were—and security sources believe many still are—existing members of the Provisionals, dissidents from within and not a totally new group. As such most Reals would be known to members of the Provisional IRA, just as the security forces know who many of them are. The Reals are not regarded as a shady new group, but a continuance of a hard-line and purist tradition within old-style republicanism.¹⁴

The Reals come mostly from the border counties, which have always been areas of strong republican support and regarded as more militant and less politically sophisticated. Many rural areas in Northern Ireland, particularly in border areas, with long memories of past wrongs and grievances, are predominantly Catholic, smaller, closer knit, and exclusive communities with closer ties to the Republic. This makes terrorist operations easier to plan and execute from just across the border, a short run in and then an easy escape route out, all based on local knowledge.¹⁵ Areas such as South Armagh are colloquially referred to as “Indian” or “bandit” country and are notoriously difficult to police. They have also seen some of the worst terrorist incidents of the troubles, such as the 1976 Kingsmill massacre of ten Protestants coming home from work in a mini-bus or the 1983 Darkley killing of three Protestants at a church service.¹⁶

The border areas contrast with Gerry Adams’s West Belfast heartland. Adams is the President of Sinn Féin, a former Belfast IRA commander, an elected Member of Parliament in the UK Parliament (although he declines to take his seat), and the prime mover in the peace process. His Belfast constituency is more isolated in the middle of a predominantly Protestant city, where even many Catholics are very anti-IRA, and a long way from the border.

Martin McGuinness is the other notable figure in the republican camp and often thought of as Adams’s second in command in Sinn Féin. His base is in the city of Londonderry, where he was known to security forces as the local IRA commander. Although the border is nearby, it has been easier to police and the effectiveness of the IRA has been much reduced. Also, Londonderry has a sizeable Protestant population and contains a substantial proportion of Catholics who do not sympathize with the IRA.

Given the urban and rural nature of the wider republican constituency, the Provisionals have a more complicated reality with which to come to terms. Security sources have long emphasized the difference between the rural- and border-based republicans as compared with their city-based compatriots. These differences are represented in different priorities and tactics required in rural border areas compared with those relevant in an urban and more religiously and ethnically mixed area. Also, a small town and local farming economy compared with a city-based industrial economy with extensive rela-

tions beyond the Province creates different perceptions of interest and reality.¹⁷

Consequently, urban-based republicans found themselves coming to terms with a more complex operating environment with a greater ideological mix than the rurally based Reals. It is easier for the Reals to think like purists in their environment, thus helping to orientate them toward a less compromising outlook.¹⁸

Real IRA also had two additional major factors working in their favor in terms of mounting and sustaining their own terrorist campaign. First, their leading organizer and founder, whose name is well known to the security forces, is reputed to be a former quartermaster-general of the Provisionals who left in disgust at the talks process.¹⁹ As such, he has full knowledge of all the weapons available to the IRA, where they are, and how to use them.²⁰ Second, the Reals have the support of major American groups and individuals who have the ability not only to raise public support for them abroad but also to raise funds. One such individual is the former director of Noraid, Martin Calvin:

. . . who through most of the 1980s and 1990s successfully raised millions of dollars for the Irish Republican cause. He has long been a man of considerable stature among Irish Americans, blessed with a smooth tongue and persuasive charm. And he is openly opposed to the peace agreement.²¹

This contrasts with the Continuity IRA, who have had to rely heavily on bank raids to raise funds for operations and arms purchases, which leaves them more vulnerable to public opprobrium and police investigation. Continuity also lack the leadership of such "big players" as the former quartermaster-general of Provisional IRA or the sister of an IRA hunger-striker. Additionally they are believed to be more of an internal faction of dissidents within the Provisionals who have not formally broken away.²²

At this point the start of the run up to the Omagh bombing can be seen. The Reals had also tried bank raids and robberies as well. It was one of their attempts in May 1998, in County Wicklow in the Republic, that went seriously wrong. Here, an attempted raid on a security van was intercepted and one of their members shot dead. This indicated a serious internal security problem as it followed the interception of an attempted bombing raid on mainland Britain, where a complete bombing squad was intercepted and its members picked up at the south Dublin port of Dun Laoghaire in April 1998. Here a car containing a large viable bomb, primer, and detonator were intercepted.²³

Both of these interceptions were the result of a tip-off and coincided with several other operations in the Newry area of Northern Ireland being interdicted as well. This led to a temporary suspension of operations until the source of the leaks was identified and dealt with. But once this was done, believed to be by July, the Reals were ready to restart their campaign and build heavily on the disaffection of many hard-line Republicans over the May referendum and the political line being pursued by the Provisionals.²⁴

The Reals had also had problems in some of their early bombings. Often they gave what they considered too long a warning time to security forces to evacuate an area. This gave the Army's ATO (Ammunition Technical Officer) the time to move in and disarm the bomb. But by late July they had solved most of these problems and launched a series of devastating bomb attacks in rural market towns in Northern Ireland. The best example was probably Banbridge, County Down, on 1 August 1998, which was devastated when a bomb was successfully placed and detonated in the center of town. The 30-minute warning time proved just adequate to evacuate the relevant area but much too short to permit the ATO to move in. In brief, this became the model for Omagh two weeks later.²⁵

The Reals were now in a strong position to develop the bombing campaign they had started. It should be stated here that after the Omagh bombing itself they were firmly warned off further activities by the Provisionals²⁶ and appear to have heeded this warning, at least until 2000. Presumably they did not feel strong enough to take on the Provisionals in a full confrontation. Current security briefings describe the bulk of those remaining in the Provisionals as cohesive and although there is a critical internal analysis of their progress going on the majority are well enough disciplined not to get involved in any more splits or feuds with other republican groupings.²⁷

However, had the Omagh bomb gone according to plan (that it did not is discussed later) it may well have been a catalyst of some sort. The Reals were beginning to establish genuine momentum, and they were starting to pick up recruits from old and current Provisionals as well as from newcomers. According to security sources they were possibly on the verge of a substantial increase in numbers and could have started to make large inroads into traditional Provisional support. The Provisionals were already hurt by the quartermaster-general's defection, as he not only took weapons with him but support, goodwill, and much infrastructure.²⁸

After Omagh the Reals kept a relatively low profile, as have the Provisional IRA, up to 2000. Since then both the Continuity and Reals have set off small bombs, and both had been foiled in other attempted bombings in the first eight months of 2000.²⁹ What now waits to be seen is whether their intended campaigns will grow into anything more substantial. Arms decommissioning is still an important issue on which major calculations concerning the future success of the peace process and implementation of the Agreement hinges. If nothing else the Reals have sent a clear message of fear and potential trouble if there is any dilution of purist goals, namely, the acceptance of partition, or appearance of surrender such as the decommissioning of terrorist weapons. The calculation that would then arise is whether the Real IRA and Continuity IRA would form the basis for a mass defection from the Provisionals or merely become a catalyst for a purging of the Provisionals leadership.

Why Omagh? The Choice of a Target

Omagh stood out as a good symbolic target for the Real IRA. It is an economic, administrative, legal, and military center and thus can be identified with an attack on the British presence and rule as a whole. Like many terrorist bombings it was aimed to send a message of an ability to strike at the heart of its opponents and register ubiquity, as well as simply causing economic, material, and disruptive damage.

Omagh is a mixed Catholic and Protestant town with a small Catholic majority. It is in the county town of Tyrone and thus a local center of administration. It also contains a crown courthouse, thus making it the center of the local judicial system. In addition, for many years it has been a garrison town of the regular army in the Province (as distinct from the locally recruited part-time Ulster Defence Regiment/Royal Irish Regiment who also have a base there). In this way Omagh may be seen as something of a local center for the normal civil and military apparatus of the state. In addition it is also a major market town and consequently a local economic center.

As a center for most of County Tyrone any event occurring there would naturally have greater follow on effects both in terms of practical disruptions of services and in generating gossip and word of mouth propaganda.³⁰ Media reporting would also be relatively easy as it not only has its own local newspaper with all its reporting facilities and links to the national media but also houses local studios of the regional branches of both

national broadcasting organizations (the British Broadcasting Corporation and Independent Television). Propaganda by deed as well as by media was thus ensured.

As a center Omagh would expect to have lots of people coming and going, especially on a Saturday, including a higher number of strangers. The bussle of activity, particularly just prior to the start of a new school year with parents buying items for their childrens' return to school, would also create better cover for the bombers. More people and more activity than normal would help to mask the movements of the bombers and divert police attention from any slightly abnormal events. This helped to provide good cover for a good target.

Omagh also had the advantage, from a bomber's point of view, of providing an ideal location for surveillance and logistics. It is in an area of above-average Republican support where operatives cannot only move easily and without comment but also can find easy and relatively willing popular refuge. The bombers could also rely on a steady stream of locally provided information in addition to conducting their own surveillance without generating adverse attention. Even known terrorists could pass by the security forces without attracting comment as they would be local people. The Provisionals in the mid-Tyrone area have long had an active presence and the depth of their support is indicated in the Sinn Fein mayor of Omagh.³¹

Omagh consequently provided an ideal target in terms of set up and operation, and for similar reasons provided an easy location in which to make good an escape. The risks involved in driving a car bomb in, parking the car, and then walking away were greatly reduced, particularly given the more relaxed attitude to security that existed with the Provisionals cease-fire. And although Omagh is not a border town it is relatively close to the border, so there is neither too great a distance in to it nor out of it (less than half an hour). Omagh thus constituted both a safe target as well as an easy and symbolic one.

On a more speculative level there is also the possibility of some kind of internal logic in the symbolic status of Omagh. That is, because the town does have a Sinn Fein mayor and is a traditional Provisional area of support this made it a target of particular significance for the Reals. In bombing Omagh they were also sending a message to the Provisionals, both "cocking a snook" at them and reminding them of their treachery in dealing with the Brits. A target that permitted an attack on both the British and the Provisionals at the same time could be both good publicity for their cause and a good campaigning call for recruits, a large part of the purpose of their campaign.³²

This line of reasoning would further blend with the fact that Omagh is a mixed town and that, after the cease-fire, Protestants and Catholics appeared to be mixing freely and normally. The fear and distrust that both sides had of each other was being overcome and normality returning. This is not what is needed to mount a sectarian terrorist campaign; what is required is fear and division. The terrorist wants to be able to evoke a sense of threat emanating from the "other" side. This is a major objective of many terrorist tactics. By creating a fear that members of the other community may not only be collecting information on you but actively plotting to harm members of your own community, perhaps even yourself, individuals are discouraged from mixing with others. In this way, distorted images and fears are raised about the other community and they become demonized and feared. From this perspective it becomes much easier to identify the other community as a hated enemy and an oppressor to be fought against while at the same time enhancing one's own community's internal cohesion in the face of a stereotyped threat from the other. As a consequence, different groups are kept apart, as has long been the case in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics. By helping to break down this fear of the "other," as a result of the cease-fire, the Provisionals could

be perceived as undermining the cause of the Republican movement by weakening the communal fears and attachments that help sustain the Republican cause.

By maintaining a separation it is much easier to build up communal images and fears and thus continue the enmity that helps legitimate the cause. An integrated and harmonious Omagh would be the last thing a Republican purist would want, except under their terms and jurisdiction. This helps maintain the momentum of the campaign—you can't trust the other side, you never know when they will bomb you. The free and easy mixing of a prosperous and bustling market town, in which old quarrels and divisions were being forgotten, was just the kind of target to appeal to either Continuity or the Reals.

What Happened and What Went Wrong

The bombing followed a fairly conventional pattern for a car bombing in Northern Ireland. The explosive was homemade, based on commercial fertilizer and detonated with the aid of a small charge of semtex. It was loaded into a red Vauxhall Cavalier saloon that had been stolen in Carrickmacross, across the border in County Louth in the Republic, and fitted with false number plates (in this case it was fitted with “ringer” plates, that is, ones that tally with a real car of a similar description). It was then kept in a secluded lock-up garage until the time for the operation, when it was driven over the border by two men to be parked in Omagh. Once across the border the two drivers picked up a local guide to take them to their predetermined destination and place the bomb.³³

The plan was to park the car outside the courthouse, something not possible in the pre-peace days, and then to phone a warning through giving half an hour notice to clear the area. The original plan was not to cause death but mass destruction of property. In particular, the aim was to destroy the courthouse—the symbol of British law and order. However, the car was parked on Market Street, leading down from the courthouse. Sources in the security forces now firmly believe that this was a mistake and that for some reason the bombers panicked or feared detection and deliberately parked the car away from the courthouse.

At this point details become a little murky. Why the bombers panicked is unclear, but what is known is that two calls were made giving coded warnings from telephone boxes in South Armagh. These, it must be presumed, were the result of the bombers phoning some kind of signal back to their base in North Louth or South Armagh. It is unlikely that they would have said “We planted the bomb” or anything similar. Instead, they probably had an agreed signal of letting the phone ring a certain number of times to be repeated another number of times. This would have made it difficult to communicate any change in location.³⁴

However, a warning, using a known codeword, was phoned through to Ulster Television and to the Samaritans, but it was based on the false premise of the original plan to bomb the courthouse. On receiving the warning the police proceeded to clear the area around the courthouse and quite logically directed many of the evacuees down Market Street as an easy escape route and presumed safe area.³⁵

The bomb then went off at the prescribed time, only on Market Street, where a large number of evacuees were surrounding the car containing the bomb, hence the large number of casualties. Many of those killed and most seriously injured were actually leaning against the car or huddled closely around it. This was not the intention, and the police believe it was genuinely a mistake on the part of the Real IRA.³⁶

Up to the placing of the bomb everything had gone well for the bombers and their

tactics are worth noting as being exemplary for this kind of operation. The choice of car was important, a common enough family car unlikely to attract attention on a crowded family shopping day. The car had been recently stolen from across the border and kept concealed until needed, thus limiting knowledge of the stolen vehicle becoming available in the country in which the crime was to be committed. Moreover, being fitted with ringer plates meant that if checked by the police the vehicle would appear to correspond with a legitimate car registration. It was driven in and parked only at the time of priming the bomb and during the early afternoon when the town was likely to be very busy, again limiting the amount of attention a single car would draw. Everything was designed to maximize an image of normality and blending in with the surrounding environment and at a time when most people would be too busy to notice any slight abnormality anyway.

A major cause of the final disaster is believed by the security forces to have been inexperience on the part of the operatives. Although the planning and logistics appear to have had the hallmarks of experienced terrorists the final execution appears to have been the work of novices. Why novices should have been used is an open question but is assumed to imply a lack of experienced operatives in this particular aspect of terrorist operations. This is deduced from the wrong warning being given and the sudden change of plan and failure to communicate it adequately. However, by the time the bomb exploded those who had planted it had been picked up by their getaway and were probably safe across the border in the Irish Republic.³⁷ This more than anything illustrates the effective use of international borders to frustrate the security forces' ability follow up and investigate terrorist acts.

Afterwards

If the intention of the bombers was to make themselves internationally known they certainly succeeded. However, they failed in one of the most important aspects of political–military terrorist strategy; that is, to use just enough violence to be known and feared, but not enough to invoke excessive counter-reaction. The bombers also illustrated the failure of staying within defined limits of violence as set by your own constituency of supporters. As Eamon Collins, a former Provisional IRA operative has stated, the Provisionals:

. . . tried to act in a way that would avoid severe censure from within the nationalist community; they knew they were operating within a sophisticated set of informal restrictions on their behaviour.³⁸

In this sense the Reals “blew it” very badly. They were utterly condemned by every political party in Northern Ireland, the Republic, and Britain, and almost as importantly, the United States. American reaction was especially swift and strong, emotions and sentiment being heightened by America’s own recent experiences of being bombed in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, only weeks before Omagh, with massive loss of life. This represented an unfortunate juncture of the international and domestic for the Reals with their dependence on American support and finance.

At home the Reals also managed, inadvertently, to reconfirm the Provisionals as the Republican authority in Northern Ireland. Abhorrence of the bombing, and outrage at the casualties (particularly Catholic and republican) caused many republican doubters to fall back in line with the Provisionals. Indeed, they almost benefited from it as Gerry

Adams and Martin McGuinness were able to be seen on news reports visiting the scene and comforting bereaved relatives. (Such scenes have been strangely lacking after other bombing incidents.) This helped to foster a statesmanlike image of Sinn Fein, encouraging the view that its peace process policy was based on courage, wisdom, and discipline.³⁹ The bombing also conveyed another unspoken message with which the Provisionals could not have been at all unhappy to see transmitted—"If you don't deliver to us just look and see what mad men you will have to deal with then."

Although no one is suggesting that the entire Omagh bombing was deliberately set up by the Provisionals, the after effects did play neatly into their hands. The horrors of a return to violence were vividly illustrated without them having to initiate that violence themselves and be the recipients of all the related opprobrium. They could even be seen to condemn violence and project a sympathetic image of themselves as the peacemakers.

What is also interesting in the aftermath of the bombing is that no one has yet been convicted. This is strange since most of the Reals are known to be former Provisionals. Moreover, the names of the suspected bombers are known not only to the security forces but also to the Provisionals, including Sinn Fein.⁴⁰ Indeed, shortly after the bombing representatives of the Provisionals visited prominent members of the Reals and reminded them that ". . . they were in violation of IRA rules. Some were reportedly told that they would be shot if they continued their activities."⁴¹ Whatever the new Provisional stance on constitutional politics it certainly does not seem to extend to providing information about serious crimes to either the British or the Irish police.⁴² And although the Provisionals gave an excellent impression of condemning that particular act of violence they carefully avoided condemning the use of terrorist violence *per se*. Indeed, the message they seemed to send was that they reserved to themselves the exclusive right to use political violence on behalf of the Republican constituency. In this way the Provisionals used the situation to reconfirm their own discipline and control while at the same time maintaining an air of moral indignation on behalf of an outraged citizenry. But at the same time they did not alienate their wider constituency of support by "shopping" fellow republicans to either the British or Irish authorities.

The Provisionals played the situation with consummate skill and turned a tragedy into an useful platform to both play the international press and politicians and also to reestablish their hegemony over the Republican movement. Sinn Fein could now portray themselves as serious men of peace by condemning and restraining the Reals for what the Provisionals had been doing for 30 years, and without giving up a thing.

There is even a school of thought among some security analysts that Omagh may have helped to solve a rather awkward problem for the Provisionals. This school regards the Reals as having been a useful adjunct for the Provisionals. The Real IRA's bombs helped to exert a violent threat to the State, during the peace process, that the Provisionals could not themselves exercise directly since they were on cease-fire, which was part of the condition for their inclusion in the peace process. The Real IRA's bombs had all the required effect of the Provisionals's own bombs but could be disowned and allow the Provisionals to continue in the talks as peaceful participants. There are conspiracy theorists who think that the British and Irish governments may have colluded in this by not acting on intelligence reports that suggested that the Reals may have had tacit support from the Provisionals. The Reals could be publicly disowned while working within a Provisional plan to maintain the violent pressure on government while at the same time negotiating under the guise of a cease-fire.

The reasons for thinking this are not just political calculation but also consideration

of the Reals's sphere of operations in North Louth in the Irish Republic and South Armagh in Northern Ireland. This area is the home territory of the Provisionals's chief of staff, recently named in a Dublin court case and book as Thomas "Slab" Murphy.⁴³ That the Provisionals would not know what was going on their own patch and allow it to happen without their tacit approval beggars belief.

Further, when the quartermaster-general left the Provisionals to form the Reals and took all his knowledge, skills, and materials with him he was in contravention of the IRA's "Green Book," and its general order 14.⁴⁴ This order states that to use knowledge, skills, and stock gained while in the IRA for the benefit of any other organization will lead to a court-martial and if found guilty the penalty is execution. Nearly all of the Reals's acts have used IRA weapons stocks and techniques. Yet no Real has as yet been tried or executed, not even following Omagh.

For the Provisionals the Reals were becoming an increasing problem, for, although serving a useful indirect purpose their very success was leading them to get out of control. However, to formally pursue any Real meant disciplining and probably executing men, often former colleagues, for doing what the Provisionals had been doing for nearly 30 years. There were also quite a few Reals with a much larger well of sympathy among republican supporters. Any disciplining acts could have led to major splits and recriminations, even an internal war. Yet at the same time the Reals were starting to pose a serious challenge to the Provisionals's hegemony over militant Republicanism. Omagh solved the problem nicely, if by accident. It enabled the Provisionals to resume control while only having to issue threats against the Reals.

To summarize, there is a strong suspicion that the Provisionals knew all about the Reals and their campaign, although they might not have known that Omagh was a specific target. Before the bombing there was probably a fine calculation for the Provisionals as to whether they were prepared to let the Reals continue with their campaign, weighing up the advantages of the campaign and the costs of stopping it. When the bombing went so disastrously wrong it provided the Provisionals with the pretext and opportunity to decisively step in and reassert their authority. However, whether the recent upsurge in the Reals's campaign in 2000 falls within the same category of Provisional "proxy bombing" is less certain, but so far there have been few signs of the Provisionals actively discouraging the Reals.

Following the Omagh bombing, constitutional politicians on both sides of the border expressed outrage and used the opportunity to push through new antiterrorist legislation, although to little immediate effect. But, given that the bombing could have been used to great advantage in pressurizing terrorist groups to decommission their weapons, one may be a little surprised at the speed with which the whole issue appears to have been forgotten. If it has not been forgotten it is certainly not being publicized. Indeed, beyond the victims of the bombing there is an awful sense of Who remembers Omagh? now starting to emerge. The outrage felt at the time has quickly been superseded by other events, with the Omagh bomb becoming just another atrocity in the long catalogue of the "troubles."

Meanwhile, security briefings have continually suggested that both the Real IRA and Continuity IRA were just biding their time until enough of the dust had settled on Omagh to start up again. After that, the Provisionals might not be far behind. Given that most serious and authoritative security analysts doubt the sincerity of their commitment to the peace process, the current phase of the Provisionals's strategy can be seen merely as an integral, and continuing, part of their long-established strategy of "the armalite and the ballot box."⁴⁵

Notes

1. *Sunday Times* (London), 16 August 1998; *Independent on Sunday* (London), 16 August 1998; and *The Independent* (London), 17 August 1998, all provide detailed reports of the bombing.

2. For a discussion of the “peace process,” sometimes also referred to as the “talks” and the negotiations leading up to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement; see Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, and Paul Teague, *Between War and Peace* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), part III; Arthur Aughey and Duncan Morrow, *Northern Ireland Politics* (London: Longman, 1996), postscript; and Jonathan Tonge, *Northern Ireland: Conflict and Change* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall), chapters 9–11. For the Good Friday Agreement see *The Agreement* (Belfast: HMSO, 1998).

3. For an introduction to the revisionist debate see Virginia Crossman in *Ireland in Proximity* (London: Routledge, 1999). For the full range of the debates see D. George Boyce and Alan O’Day, eds., *Modern Irish History* (London: Routledge, 1996) or Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994).

4. See Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983) for the application of this in Ireland or Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) for its application in nationalism generally.

5. For a history of the IRA in South Armagh and the origins of the Reals see Toby Harnden, *Bandit Country* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999).

6. Security briefing. This term, both here and in later notes, refers specifically to interviews with either members of the local police (Royal Ulster Constabulary, the RUC) or members of the armed forces serving in Northern Ireland. Invariably such briefings are confidential and “off the record” and given by personal contacts who agreed to speak on the basis of private contacts and relationships built up over a period of years. Although this is obviously unsatisfactory from a purely academic point of view, in terms of referencing and validation, it is often the only way in which contemporary events can be effectively recorded and reported. Because of the legal, operational, and security problems involved in responding to a contemporary terrorist campaign (in whose midst both the author and informants have to live) and the political calculations of governments, much of the relevant information and intelligence exists only in the nonpublic domain. Access to relevant information is thus often restricted to what can be gleaned from personal contacts who will only agree to discuss matters on the basis of complete confidentiality. However, every attempt to verify such briefings is made, via reference to previous incidents, known strategy and tactics, using more than one contact, and finally via discussions with other academics and journalists working in the same area.

7. During the whole of the peace process, Provisional IRA have constantly reiterated their commitment to an united Ireland—2016 being the target date, to coincide with the centenary of the Easter Rising.

8. John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 192.

9. See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) or Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993); Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (London: Penguin, 1991).

10. See MacDonagh, op. cit., chapter 5 and M. L. R. Smith, *Fighting For Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement* (London: Routledge, 1995), chapter 2.

11. Smith, op. cit., chapter 2; and J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1989), part 1.

12. See Smith, op. cit., pp. 87–90; Thomas Hennessey, *A History of Northern Ireland, 1920–1990* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan), chapter 4; and Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1989), chapters 18 & 20.

13. *The Agreement*, op. cit., p. 20.

14. Security briefing.

15. Harnden, op. cit.

16. Harnden, op. cit., pp. 185–190 on Kingsmills and Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles* (London: Random House, 1995), pp. 278–279 on Darkley.
17. See James Dingley and Michael, Kirk-Smith, “How Could They Do It? The Bombing of Omagh, 1998,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* (Spring 2000), pp. 105–126.
18. Security briefing.
19. Security briefing.
20. See John Horgan and Max Taylor, “The Provisional Irish Republican Army: Command and Functional Structure,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9(3) (1997); for an explanation of who does what in the IRA.
21. *The Independent* (London), 5 September 1998, p. 4.
22. Security briefing.
23. *The Independent* (London), 3 April 1998, p. 1.
24. Security briefing.
25. Security briefing.
26. *The Independent* (London), 9 September 1998.
27. Security briefing.
28. Security briefing.
29. The most recent bombing operation undertaken by the Reals at the time of writing (25 August 2000) was an attempt to plant a 500 lb bomb in Londonderry, probably aimed at an Orange parade in the city. It was intercepted before it could be planted. See *The Independent* (London), 12 August 2000, p. 1. For other bombings or attempts see *The Independent* (London), 7 February 2000, p. 1; 26 February 2000, p. 2; 17 March 2000, p. 2; and 17 April 2000, p. 2.
30. David Rapoport, “Fear and Trembling in Three Religious Traditions,” *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984). This article particularly stresses the assassinations carried out in Biblical and medieval times, whose very openness appears to be a deliberate attempt to publicize the acts. Media relations appear to be a very old aspect of terrorism.
31. *The Economist* (London), 22 August 1998, pp. 21–22.
32. See Dingley and Kirk-Smith, “How Could They Do It?” for a discussion of the bombers’ emotional and symbolic motivations.
33. Security briefing.
34. Security briefing.
35. For reports on the bombing in detail and how the police responded to the warning given see the *Sunday Times* (London), 16 August 1998, p. 1 and *The Independent* (London), 17 August 1998, p. 1.
36. Security briefing.
37. Security briefing.
38. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (London: Victor Gollanaz, 1998), p. 164.
39. *The Independent* (London), 18 August 1998, p. 4.
40. Security briefing.
41. *The Independent* (London), 9 September 1998, p. 1.
42. This point was recently reconfirmed by Martin McGuinness on a BBC TV interview (14 May 2000) in which he stated that he could not ask any of his community to cooperate with the police given the way they are currently constituted.
43. Harnden, op. cit., writes extensively on the role of “Slab” Murphy in both South Armagh and in the IRA.
44. The Green Book is the IRA’s formal statement of aims and objectives, plus its standing orders and commands; codes of practice; and punishments.
45. Smith, *Fighting for Ireland*, pp. 172–178.