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St. Patrick's Day in the United States

1. Neither the Irish Government nor its representatives will participate in this year's St. Patrick's Day Parade in New York. This was announced following the appointment of Peter King, the Comptroller of Nassau County (Long Island), as Grand Marshall of the Parade . This is only the second occasion on which such a decision was taken, the other being in 1983 when the founder of Noraid, Michael Flannery, was appointed Grand Marshall (see below). King is a prominent supporter of Noraid which campaigned on his behalf for this appointment. He has been quoted as saying "I think that the IRA is the legitimate voice of occupied Ireland" .

2 St. Patrick's Day is an unofficial American holiday on which the descendants of the Irish in the United States celebrate their success in realising the American dream. The large number of parades on the day, their size and their popularity all testify to the impact of the Irish in America.

The parades and all of the associated celebrations present a sentimental expression of the Irish-American experience. As such the picture of the Irish they present is more legendary than real. It is a picture frozen in time at the point of the emigrant's departure and tempered only by his formative experience in the New World.

Because these parades are a sentimental expression of Irish-America and because the sentiment which promotes them is part of the Irish-American sense of identity, the occasions can be exploited by those who could portray the campaign of violence in the North as part of the legendary fight for Irish freedom.

2. Two organisations - NORAIID and the Irish National Caucus - have sought to exploit the St. Patrick's Day parade for propaganda purposes. With varying success they have sought to infiltrate the organising committees of the parades in areas of major Irish settlement. By and large they were unsuccessful in any major way until 1981. Problems had indeed arisen before that with the participation of delegations from both groups in the parades but generally it was possible to handle these problems without undue publicity. However, the hunger strikes provided an opportunity for these two groups, particularly NORAIID, to exploit the outraged sentiment of Irish-America. The promotion of dead hunger strikers as posthumous parade marshals was successful in a number of centres and gave NORAIID the leverage needed to exploit the parades in subsequent years, most controversially in New York.

3. New York

The New York parade is the largest and most important in the US. In 1981, the organising committee alienated much of the Irish-American community when, at the late Cardinal Cooke's behest, it sought to have the parade moved from 17th March to the nearest Sunday in order to lessen public drunkenness. The resultant uproar allowed NORAIID elements to gain crucial influence in the parade committee and they were quick to exploit their opportunity by having Bobby Sands elected as posthumous Grand Marshal of the 1982 parade. NORAIID then consolidated its position and influence in the organising committee and succeeded in having Michael Flannery, the 80-year-old national treasurer of NORAIID, chosen as Grand Marshal for the 1983 parade. Flannery, who admits to having been a gunrunner, had some months previously been acquitted of conspiring to send weapons to the PIRA (see separate note on U.S. Court Cases). The Consulate, on Government instructions, responded to the election of Flannery by issuing a statement (at Annex 1) stating that the Government's representatives would boycott the parade.

Many leading Irish-American politicians in the New York area, including Senator Moynihan and former Governor Carey, supported the Governmnt's stance and boycotted the parade. The late Cardinal Cooke of New York was initially rather cautious in his reaction (due, perhaps, to his difficulties in 1981). Traditionally, the Cardinal reviews the parade from the steps of St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue and the Grand Marshal walks up the Cathedral steps to greet him. In 1983 however, the late Cardinal did not appear on the steps and the doors of the Cathedral remained shut as the parade marched past. In addition, the U.S. Government decided that its military services should not be represented at the parade.

In 1984, Thomas W. (Teddy) Gleason, President of the International Longshoreman's Association was appointed Grand Marshall, after an 'elaction race' involving Peter King. This put pressure on both Gleason to make statements which were anti-British, if not pro-IRA. It was also decided that Michael O'Rourke should be Honorary Grand Marshal. O'Rourke was a fugitive from Irish justice who was convicted on explosives charges.(see separate note on current U.S. court cases of Irish interest). As O'Rourke could not participate in the Parade as he was then in custody in the U.S. . The Irish Government participated as usual in the 1984 Parade. The Minister issued a statement congratulating Mr. Gleason on his appointment (Annex 3) The Minister echoed Mr. Gleason's statement that "the one thing I'm trying not to do is politicise the parade". The Consul-General reviewed the parade but, in keeping with the practice of successive Irish Governments in recent years, he and other official representatives were not present on the Reviewing Stand when any group which supports the use of violence in Ireland marched past.

This year's appointment of a Noraid supporter has meant the Government will again not participate in the parade. Although he did not march in the 1983 Parade, it appears that Senator Moynihan will participate this year although he will avoid any association with Noraid and their supporters. The attitude of Archbishop O'Connor, Cardinal Cooke's successor, is not yet clear although he anxious that the Parade should not be used as propaganda by supporters of violence. This is the first Parade since his inauguration.

4. Other cities where difficulties have arisen

San Francisco

Dead hunger strikers have been chosen as posthumous Honorary Grand Marshals of the parade (Sands was chosen in 1982, Hughes in 1983, McCreesh in 1983) As in New York, Irish representatives attending the parade will leave the stand when NORAIID and INC delegations march past.

Philadelphia

Michael O'Rourke was chosen as honorary Grand Marshal in 1983. (see above). O'Rourke had at that time been in prison in New York for over two years as an illegal alien. Banners calling for support for his release were carried in the parade. O'Rourke was also chosen as Grand Marshal of the parade in Kansas City, Missouri.

Anglo-Irish Section

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