On March 7, 2009 two British soldiers were shot while accepting a pizza delivery outside the Massereene army barracks, Northern Ireland’s headquarters for the army’s Royal Engineers, in County Antrim, Ireland. The occasion marked the first death of a UK military soldier in Northern Ireland in the last 12 years. The attack came shortly after Northern Ireland’s police commander, Hugh Oorde, announced that an “elite army unit” which, “specializes in electronic surveillance had begun to help the police monitor IRA dissidents because of growing fears of an attack” (NY Times). On March 9, just two days later, a Northern Ireland Police Officer Stephen Paul Carroll was shot in the back of the head through the rear window of his patrol car in Craigavon, 32 kilometers southwest of Belfast. The continuity IRA claimed responsibility for the killings and in a coded message to the Belfast Telegraph reported that the murder was performed by its North Armagh ‘Battalion’ and warned: “As long as there is British involvement in Ireland, these attacks will continue” (The Age).

Immediately, both Irish and world leaders have come forward to condemn the killings. Irish Taoiseach, or Prime Minister, Brian Cowen stated that Carroll died “serving all the people of Ireland and protecting the peace people now treasure” and that “The people and all of their democratic representatives reject this violence and will overcome the evil and unrepresentative minority who want to drag us back to the past” (the age). Martin McGuinness, Northern Ireland’s Deputy First Minister and Sinn Fein member, went a step further, condemning the murderers as “traitors to the entire island of
Ireland,” saying “They have betrayed the political desires, hopes and aspirations of all the people who live on this island” and that “They don’t deserve to be supported by anyone” (The Age). Gerry Adams, President of Sinn Fein, speaking at Harvard University Kennedy school of Government on March 18 assured the audience that “If anybody is concerned that this is the start of the ‘Troubles’ again, that we are going to step back into war again, that will not happen” (Bloomberg). Adams argues that the times have changed and that violent dissident behavior is no longer the way forward. He claims “We now have in place a political and democratic way forward...when we didn’t have that, I, and I make no apologies for this, defended the use of armed actions against British occupation. But those days are gone.” (Bloomberg). However the situation is a precarious one, and augurs ill for the future of peace in Ireland considering that the IRA officially declared an end to its campaign in 2005.

The history of struggle between England and Ireland is an old and bloody one. In the 16th century England began to tighten its grip over the Irish. Henry VIII proclaimed himself king of Ireland and as a result established the Church of Ireland, a sister to Henry’s Church of England. Any other practiced faith on the island was subject to the penal laws. This suppression of free religion would lead to rebellions and force the Irish to unite in a common cause to restrict English autonomy on the Irish island. With the Local Government Act of 1898, Ireland received more authority over domestic affairs and was no longer subject to the juries of the English landlords. This limited authority that was transferred to the Irish gave rise to the call for full home rule. However the disagreement over whether the Irish should obtain home rule, was not only between Ireland and England, but also, between Ireland itself.
In the late 19th and early 20th century there were many movements to expand the cultural identity of Ireland, one of these, called the “Anglo-Irish literary revival,” was spearheaded by William Butler Yeats (McCartney 246). Other efforts included the Gaelic League, which sought to restore the Irish language to the culture and the Gaelic Athletic Association, which sought to bring the traditional games back and revive Irish culture through a process of de-anglicisation. This was all strategic planning and “According to this new nationalism, politically independent states should be raised up wherever there existed distinct cultural nations. The Gaelic League was demonstrating that Ireland was a cultural nation; therefore, went the argument, Ireland was entitled to become a nation-state” (McCartney 248).

As Home Rule seemed to gain ground, it was met with much resistance. In 1913 the Ulster volunteers were established (armed by guns run from Germany) to take control of Ulster on the day that home rule was enacted. In response the Irish Volunteers were formed in Dublin in November 1913. At the outbreak of WWI in 1914, the issue of Home Rule was put on the back burner. At the time there were no less than five armies on the continent, the official forces, Ulster Volunteers, Irish Volunteers, Citizen Army, and the IRB. John Redmond, leader of Irish Volunteers supported the war “for the defence of small nations” (McCartney 255). The split that ensued over the issue of WWI was evident in the jingle from James Connolly’s newspaper, the Worker’s Republic which read “Full steam ahead, John Redmond said that everything is well and chum; home rule will come when we are dead and buried out in Belgium” (McCartney 256). The Irish
would not wait till the war was over to be heard, and what followed was the tipping point in the fight for full Irish freedom.

The Easter rebellion of 1916 left an indelible mark on the trajectory of Irish history. In the aftermath, England panicked, more individuals were arrested than took place in the rebellion and fifteen were executed without trial. Although it was the beginning of genuine progress, that progress was hard wrought. As Yeats related it in one of his most beautiful poems entitled Easter 1916:

‘I write it out in a verse-
Mac Donagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born’

By the elections of 1918 the demographics had switched and Sinn Fein won 73 seats in parliament, unionists 26, and parliamentary party only 6. Sinn Fein constituted itself as the Dail Eireann. In 1919-1921 the Anglo-Irish war was fought, characterized by “guerilla warfare, ambushes, raids on police barracks, on one side..and the burning of towns and executions on the other.” In December 1921, after months of negotiations, the British and Irish representatives signed a treaty, which was essentially a deficient compromise. The British conceded dominion status to the 26 counties, and the Irish negotiators brought back, not the republic, but ‘freedom to achieve freedom’ (McCartney 258).
People of Northern Ireland were strongly against home rule contesting that “Home rule is Rome rule,” referring to the profound influence of Catholicism in Irish politics. The Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, set up the Irish Free State, which applied to the whole of Ireland; however, Northern Ireland was allowed to opt out and retain its previous status, which it did immediately. Arthur Griffith was a primary supporter of the Anglo-Irish treaty, which divided the free Irish and “looking back, one can only try to imagine what may have been in Griffith’s mind when he accepted the treaty, knowing that it secured less than many Irishmen aspired to” (Lynch 273). Among other stipulations repugnant to the free Irish in the treaty was an oath of allegiance to the British crown.

Like everywhere else, Ireland experienced the effect of the global recession of the 1930s and as a result there was a “resurgence of sectarian strife and a renewal of the campaign of violence” (McCracken 268). The IRA saw its inception in the difficult period of the 1930s. The division between the island was clear when southern Ireland declared neutrality in WWII, although the North was made to sacrifice throughout the war, they reaped benefits of their alliance with Britain afterwards, which caused a significant divide in the prosperity of the two regions. However, this also demanded closer relations between the two over issues such as trade and railway building, prompting Terence O’Neil PM of NI to say in 1965 meetings that “if a spirit of friendship can be established, then I believe that those sterile forces of hatred and violence which have flourished for so long will at last be crushed by the weight of public opinion” (McCracken 271).
In the 1960s Northern Ireland’s economy was improving significantly; however, socially the land was still divided between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority, “the ethnic boundary was maintained by a lack of intermarriage, by separate education and, in some places, by residential segregation” (Whyte 288). In 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was founded, representing the Catholic minority but unlike other groups “it did not challenge the existence of the Northern Ireland state but demanded merely the ending of abuses with it” (Whyte 289). However, the North did not take kindly to this development and “successive demonstrations were broken up by police and harassed by Protestant extremists” (Whyte 290). This eventually lead to a request by the North to the British to send in troops to help maintain stability.

As the situation became more uncertain, the IRA began an offensive in 1971. The Northern Irish had initiated a policy of interment to hold the parties without trial until the troubles had ended. This policy only increased the violence and the recruiting ability of the IRA. It was at one of these demonstrations against internment in Derry on January 30th 1972, that British soldiers shot and killed thirteen people, a day that would forever live in infamy duly dubbed “Bloody Sunday” (Whyte 291). In response, nationalists burnt the British embassy at Dublin to the ground. Violence escalated and the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer forced emerged in response to the IRA. As a result, random murders of Catholics increased in retaliation for the actions of the IRA. One of the worst points would come to be known as “Bloody Friday” July 21, 1972 when the IRA let of a chain of bombs in Belfast killing 9 and injuring 130 (Whyte 292).

The perilous situation in Ireland provided an emphatic demand for diplomatic progress. In 1981 the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council was set up, which
established a forum for dialogue and debate. In August 1994, the IRA announced a “complete cessation of military operations” (Gardham). In 1996, the IRA announced an end to this ceasefire and resumed violence. In 1998 the Good Friday Agreement was signed establishing, among other things, a North/South Ministerial Council and a British-Irish Council. Many developments have occurred since. For one, the IRA has been subject to surveillance by an independent monitoring commission. However, the news has not all been good, and as recently as November 2008 the commission reported that IRA factions were responsible for “a more concentrated period of attack than at any time since we started to report on them four and a half years ago” (Gardham).

When I picked up the newspaper on that March morning and read about the shootings a wave of emotion overwhelmed me. The issue of Irish independence has made me ask myself numerous questions, the answers to which still elude me. I was raised on rebel songs, taught the names of Plunkett, Pearse, and Tone. I have been well informed of the horrible atrocities that have riddled the country as a result of the demand for Irish freedom. If I was living in Ireland in 1916, I could very well see myself taking part in the struggle. The idea that government is only legitimate when it rules by the consent of the governed is something I learned at a young age not from Ireland’s history, but from America’s. Imagine if Washington or Adams had failed to act because they thought their tactics were terrorism. It is unlikely any of us would be sitting here today enjoying this open forum for thought and debate. However, the issue has become even more complex.

Today in the United States we find ourselves embattled in a war against terrorism. The country that’s owes it birth to terrorism is now attempting to eliminate it. When the towers went down in 2001, I felt a similarly strong desire to bring the perpetrators to
justice. I condemned their crime against humanity in the same way that I condemned England’s, but am I not arguing for both sides of the coin? Where and when can we support terror? Is it something that a final stance can be taken on? Given that the nature of global terrorism today is something unprecedented in this world. Today’s terrorism is not based on specific territory, it is impersonal, and it involves massive displays of violence on a global scale. But isn’t based on that same fundamental principle that people have a right to rebel?

I would submit that terrorism is the natural response to tyranny. England treated its subjects in both Ireland in the Colonies in a tyrannical way, which could not continue. But has Al Queda been subject to that same tyranny? It is easy to rationalize both terrorism and the suppression of it when it is in response to injury. The colonies were subject to the king’s abuses so terrorism seemed justified, now we have been attacked so the suppression of terrorism seems equally justified. However, this subjective reasoning produces nothing. There must be objective principles that can be applied. Has the United States become Britain, and is it merely an inevitable consequence of being the world’s superpower?

I am not ready to condemn the murderers in Northern Ireland; however, I am far less ready to condone their actions. If anything it shows us that peace in Ireland is no guarantee. I don’t know how the problem could ever be resolved; I just wish the killing would stop. The Irish have buried too many of their own, shot down on their own soil, by their own countrymen. I can’t begin to convey the whole of the Irish struggle. It is too long a story. A story of hardship and disappointment, that seems to never end. The biggest disappointment however, is how ignorant people are to this history. Children in
the United States, a country full of Irish descendants, no next to nothing about the struggle in Ireland, and the closet they get to “Bloody Sunday” is hearing U2 over the radio waves. If there is to be any solution I think it needs to start there. For the president, our elected officials, and the people of the United States it is time to acknowledge the war on terror is not only being fought in Baghdad. They are dying in Belfast too.

Works Cited


