Andrew J. Wilson

Ulster Unionists in America, 1972–1985

Throughout the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland, Irish nationalists received vital support from across the Atlantic.1 Leading Irish-American politicians formed a powerful political network that pressured the British government and worked for a constitutional nationalist agenda on Capitol Hill. In addition, millions of dollars and supplies of weapons were channeled to the IRA and played a key role in sustaining its campaign of violence. While this Irish-American connection has been the focus of extensive media and scholarly analysis, virtually nothing has been written about the simultaneous small, but determined, Unionist support network in the United States.

Unlike Irish-American nationalists, Unionists had little constituency from which they could draw support. Although nearly 250,000 Ulster Protestants had crossed the Atlantic in the eighteenth century and initially formed a distinct Scotch-Irish community, the vast majority, over time, assimilated into mainstream American society. Their descendants had little or no interest in the politics of their ancestral homeland—a fact that Unionists in Northern Ireland have sometimes failed to appreciate.

Restrictive immigration laws drastically reduced the numbers of Irish entering the United States throughout the twentieth century. Almost all of those who were able to enter came from the Republic of Ireland or were Catholics from Northern Ireland, driven into exile by the lack of opportunities under the Stormont regime. Ulster Protestants who migrated to North America tended to settle in Canada. For the few who did come to the United States, the Irish cultural and political environment they found was generally a “cold house” for anyone from a Unionist background; many aspects of the “Irish kitsch” in America, from bars to St. Patrick's Day parades, were decidedly nationalist in tone. In this environment, it is hardly surprising that when journalist Wendy Martin

1. The Irish American Cultural Institute of Morristown, NJ, provided support for this article through the Irish Research Endowment given by the Irish Institute of New York.
interviewed Ulster Protestant immigrants in the early 1970s, she found that most hesitated to talk about Irish politics and just wanted to be left in peace.2

Despite these obstacles, a small network of Ulster Protestant and Unionist activists, composed of members of the Orange Order, the Scotch-Irish Society of the United States, and the Ulster-Irish Society, emerged when communal violence erupted in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. They tried to undermine the activities of Irish-American support groups for the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association by launching "information initiatives" that portrayed Stormont as a bastion of equality and good government. Leaders of this network also helped to organize the Unionist Party's first coordinated publicity drive in August, 1969, when Robin Bailie, a member of the Stormont parliament, and William Stratton-Mills, a member of the British House of Commons, traveled to New York as part of a "Truth Squad" aiming to confront Bernadette Devlin, who was then in the midst of a highly publicized tour. The climax of the campaign came with a nationally televised debate between Stratton-Mills and Devlin during which raucous exchanges and scuffles erupted between Irish-American nationalists seated beneath an Irish tricolor and members of the Ulster-Irish Society clustered around a Union Jack.3

The "Truth Squad" initiative convinced a few Unionist Party officials that nurturing a more extensive grassroots support network in the United States could be a useful way to promote their views abroad. Eventually two new groups emerged. In New York, Reverend Charles Reynolds, from a fiercely Unionist background in Belfast, established the Northern Ireland Service Council (NISC). In Los Angeles, Harry Bennison, another Belfast native, launched the Ulster American Loyalists (UAL). Both organizations claimed about one hundred members and followed similar tactics. Reynolds and Bennison led letter-writing campaigns to local and national newspapers, appeared on television and radio to debate Irish-American nationalist leaders, and provided logistical support for visiting Unionist politicians. Their most ambitious initiative, however, was to bring Prime Minister Brian Faulkner to the United States in late June, 1972, shortly after the British government had prorogued Stormont and imposed Direct Rule. Bennison and Reynolds organized a nationwide series of media appearances, public forums, and receptions, at which Faulkner was given

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the opportunity to defend his administration, explain the Unionist case, and attack Irish-American support for the IRA.4

Reynolds, Bennison, and their associates hoped that the “Faulkner initiative” would be the catalyst for a much greater effort by Unionists to conduct transatlantic publicity campaigns. Yet, for most of the 1970s, Unionists did virtually nothing to present an alternative perspective on Northern Ireland affairs in the United States. Within the Official Unionist Party (OUP), only Reverend Martin Smyth and deputy leader Harold McCusker tried to bring their message to America, but their trips were sporadic and given little support from party officials. Even Reverend Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and one of the most widely recognized Ulster politicians in America, usually focused on his pastoral duties when he came to the United States, and rarely engaged in exclusively political initiatives.

Both the OUP and DUP operated on modest budgets, with little cash to sustain ongoing transatlantic publicity campaigns. Leaders of both parties usually felt that their limited resources were better spent on electoral campaigns at home. They also believed that if Unionist perspectives had to be presented outside Northern Ireland, then targeting British officials in London was vastly more important than political leaders in Washington. In addition, many Unionists felt that trying to engage grassroots Irish Americans was a waste of time because of their “closed minds” and “ingrained hostility” to any perspective that was contrary to their “frozen in aspic” romantic nationalism. Appearing at a public forum in any city with a large Irish activist community would have been a daunting prospect for even the most fearless Unionist.5

Perhaps most important, despite frequent policy disagreements, Unionists felt the British government was looking after most of their concerns in America. The British Embassy in Washington and the British Information Service in New York used their considerable resources to counteract the political influence of Irish America. The Anglo-American “special relationship” generally ensured that the United States government kept out of Northern Ireland affairs, while federal law enforcement agencies vigorously pursued Irish-American gunrunners and helped to apprehend IRA fugitives.

With little encouragement from the political parties in Northern Ireland, and few Unionists coming over, the small membership of the support groups in America quickly declined. By the mid-1970s, the Unionist “network” had been reduced to a few individuals mostly operating in isolation. Harry Bennison

continued to appear in West Coast media for a few years, but increasingly devoted his energies to promoting the Orange Order in California. In 1998 he was instrumental in establishing Ulster-Scots LOL 1690 in Los Angeles, the first new American lodge in more than twenty years. Despite the steady decline in NISC membership, Charles Reynolds’s activism never diminished: he maintained close personal ties with leaders of the OUP and in the mid-1970s also began bringing small groups of Americans on tours of Northern Ireland, to expose participants to Unionist perspectives and to “undermine negative Irish-American propaganda.”

As Reynolds and Bennison struggled to continue their efforts, the more controversial figure of Harold Alexander emerged in the mid-1970s as the most prominent Unionist activist in America. Originally from Belfast, Alexander emigrated in 1963 to work as an aeronautical engineer for Boeing near Philadelphia. He quickly established himself as a leader in the American Orange Order and also formed Ulster Heritage, a group that sought to promote the Scotch-Irish over the Irish-American contribution to the United States.

In 1976, Alexander became the first Unionist to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, and began filing biennial reports on his activities to the federal government. He listed more than ten groups as his “foreign principals,” including the Ulster Unionist Council and Ernest Baird’s United Ulster Unionist Movement. Alexander’s closest ties, however, were with the loyalist paramilitary Ulster Defence Association (UDA). From the mid-1970s onward he played an important part in formulating and promoting the UDA’s plans for an independent Northern Ireland.

The core concepts of Ulster independence emerged from a prolonged loyalist re-evaluation of political options for Northern Ireland. A major step in this process came in 1978 with the UDA’s creation of the New Ulster Political Research Group (NUPRG), a “think tank” that aimed to present a coherent loyalist political strategy. Glen Barr, who had played a leading role in the Ulster Workers Council strike that brought down the Sunningdale power-sharing agreement in 1974, was the central figure in the group. Through his influence, the NUPRG published Beyond the Religious Divide, a thoughtful argument for independence as the best option for ending sectarian conflict.

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Harold Alexander became a passionate advocate of the NUPRG’s ideas and was deeply involved in laying out the political structures of an independent state. He was convinced that the British political model was unsuited for conditions in Ulster; instead, he promoted key elements of American democracy because, he believed, “it has succeeded in integrating perhaps the most diverse collection of ethnic and religious groups that the world has ever seen into one nation.” To promote American political structures as the model for an independent Ulster, Alexander brought Glenn Barr to the United States in the fall of 1977—as part of the State Department’s International Visitor Program—to study federal, state, and municipal government institutions. Consequently, Beyond the Religious Divide proposed a directly elected president, a congressional-style committee system drawn from an elected legislature, a detailed bill of rights, and the suggestion that the administration of justice in Ulster could be initially supervised by a United States supreme court justice. The loyalist leaders also assumed that the United States could provide financial assistance to alleviate the initial economic challenges in the transition to independence.

The NUPRG’s proposals generated positive responses from politicians and analysts from across the political spectrum, and were generally viewed as a sincere and progressive attempt to break the logjam of Northern Ireland politics. In view of the important role envisioned for the United States, Harold Alexander persuaded NUPRG leaders to cross the Atlantic in January, 1979, for a two-week publicity tour. The group, which included UDA commanders Tommy Lyttle, Andy Tyrie, and John McMichael, spent three days on Capitol Hill explaining their ideas to politicians and staffers who had been most active on Irish affairs. They also held a round of press conferences and meetings with senior church leaders, Irish-American activists, and trade union organizations. The loyalist leaders generally left a favorable impression. Many Americans expressed surprise at the disconnect between their image as ruthless sectarian gunmen and the progressive and insightful plans they were presenting for Northern Ireland’s future. Indeed, Paul O’Dwyer—a prominent Irish-American nationalist whose law firm represented IRA gunrunners—was so taken by the group after meeting them in New York that he helped to assemble a com-

10. Harold Alexander to author, 7 February 1995. Barr had previously been part of a joint UVF-UDA delegation that attended an Irish political forum at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in September, 1975. There, he presented one of the first blueprints of the UDA’s vision of Ulster independence.
mittee of lawyers to fine tune the legal and constitutional quality of their independence proposal.\(^{13}\) In turn, Glen Barr praised O'Dwyer for the "great assistance" he had provided and commented that while "he possibly still retains the long term aspiration of a United Ireland" he believes "that if the Protestants of Northern Ireland are prepared to sever their links with Britain . . . then it would not be unreasonable for the Nationalist-minded population to give up their links with Dublin."\(^{14}\)

The NUPRG's willingness to engage Irish-American nationalists, while accompanied with considerable suspicion, was part of a wider attempt to generate dialogue about their independence proposal. The loyalist leaders were even willing to go along with efforts by Father Seán McManus, leader of the Irish National Caucus, and Congressman Mario Biaggi, head of the Ad Hoc Committee on Irish Affairs, to convene a "Peace Forum" at which it was hoped that all the parties to the conflict would meet to discuss Northern Ireland's future. At one point, Andy Tyrie even suggested that Senator Edward Kennedy could play the role of mediator because "the Protestant community believes in his integrity and credibility"—a remarkable statement, considering that only a few years previously loyalists had warned the senator they would kill him if he ever showed up in Belfast.\(^{15}\) Yet, despite the initial positive reactions, NUPRG proposals for negotiated independence failed to attract any of Northern Ireland's major parties. The vast majority of Unionists and nationalists stuck to the historical positions that unity with Britain or the Irish Republic were the only possible options. In addition, when Mario Biaggi finally persuaded a Sinn Féin delegation to meet NUPRG leaders in Belfast in August, 1979, the talks went nowhere and the initiative was abandoned amid acrimony and mutual distrust.\(^{16}\)

\(^{13}\) Ed Moloney, "The UDA Roadshow Returns Home," _Hibernia Magazine_, 22 February 1979. Robert Stitt, one of the lawyers in O'Dwyer's group, had a long family association with the Orange Order; his father had also been a head of the Ulster-Irish Society.


Harold Alexander was deeply angered by the failure of the NUPRG's independence plan to attract a substantial nationalist response. Like most other loyalists, he became convinced that the sections of Irish America that had responded positively to independence were attracted by the belief that willingness to cut ties with Britain could ultimately lead to a united Ireland. In response, Alexander issued scathing attacks against Seán McManus and Paul O'Dwyer, and later wrote an influential guide for future Unionist visitors in which he stressed the importance of avoiding all contacts with Irish-American leaders, newspapers, and social organizations.17

But the negative aspects of the NUPRG’s American tour and the subsequent “Peace Forum” fiasco did little to undermine Alexander’s enthusiasm for Ulster independence, and he continued to push the option throughout the 1980s. He also maintained his links with loyalist organizations, listing the Ulster Democratic Party as his foreign principal in July, 1982, and regularly published articles in *Ulster*, the UDA’s monthly magazine. Alexander also continued his efforts on behalf of the Orange Order, eventually becoming supreme grand master, and, in 2000, following his earlier work with Ulster Heritage, was the driving force behind the creation of the Center for Scotch-Irish Studies in Philadelphia. This organization supports academic symposia and genealogical research, and publishes a scholarly journal devoted to Scotch-Irish culture and history.

The NUPRG’s effort to promote Ulster independence to American audiences contrasted sharply with the mainstream Unionist parties which, for most of the 1970s, did nothing to present their perspective on Northern Ireland affairs in the United States. This failure, however, did not stop the leaders of both the OUP and DUP from continually attacking Irish-American involvement. The senators and congressmen who were active on Irish affairs were routinely castigated as ignorant of the political realities in Ulster; their efforts to stem the flow of dollars to the IRA received little credit, while their “unwanted interference” in Northern Ireland affairs was portrayed as “cynical opportunism aimed at securing votes from a gullible Irish-American electorate.”18 Unionist outrage reached a crescendo when Congressman “Tip” O’Neill helped to block sales of United States weapons to the RUC in August, 1979. DUP and OUP politicians issued frenzied attacks against the house speaker, while editorials in Unionist news-

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papers lambasted the ban as a “shocking decision” which could only harm the RUC and give the IRA “a powerful propaganda weapon.”

As much as they loathed Irish-American political leaders, Unionists focused their most scathing attacks against the Irish Northern Aid Committee (usually known as Noraid) and other groups that supported the IRA. These “plastic Irishmen” who “drink green beer on St Patrick’s Day,” and “dip obligingly into their pockets when the collection boxes are rattled in front of them,” were deeply despised for what was viewed as their cowardly contribution to the murder of Ulster Protestants from the safety of their homes thousands of miles away from the conflict. Loyalist paramilitaries routinely printed the address and phone numbers of Noraid activists in their newspapers and invited readers to “let them know how they felt about their actions.” More menacingly, loyalists also held news conferences at which they issued assassination warnings against Irish-American republican leaders.

By the late 1970s, steady grassroots pressure grew for Unionist leaders to go beyond the critical statements against Irish-American involvement, and to embark on a more proactive approach. A diverse range of Unionist newspapers, publications, and activists began calling for a major effort to “better inform” Americans about Ulster and to test the possibility of cultivating support from anyone of Scotch-Irish ancestry who might be willing to help the cause. An editorial in the Orange Standard, the monthly publication of the Orange Order, captured the essence of this growing Unionist sentiment:

It is true that in the past decade the whole running has been made by the “shanty Irish” in information and propaganda about Ulster. The Scotch-Irish, an older and more honorable influence on the US, have been particularly muted . . . we have not seriously sought to inform or influence them. The case for Ulster has not been pleaded in America with any enthusiasm. . . . Something more permanent must be added to the verbal and literary pleas for American understanding. There has to be a bringing together of people whose sympathies are with the suffering people of Ulster in such a way that they effectively help Ulster’s cause. I am saying that to send people to explain, honestly and accurately, the Ulster position—that has been done since 1969—is not enough. We have to add another dimension—that of continuing information to groups and individuals who will spread the truth in a way that the individual speaker can never do. The task is

incredibly difficult. It demands in the visitors an ability to speak authoritatively and courageously, to be quick witted and have a ready response to questions. That a campaign like this in America is needed is not to be denied.22

The heightened Unionist alarm at the Irish-American dimension was reinforced by the success of republican publicity campaigns during the Hunger Strikes of 1980–81. Unionists of every persuasion were infuriated by daily media reports describing how American cities were naming streets after dead hunger strikers; how Noraid activists had forced the removal of Union Jacks from all public and commercial buildings in New York; and how many newspaper editors and commentators were supporting the prisoners’ five demands. It was taken for granted that all this would swell the collection boxes and boost the IRA’s ability to prosecute its campaign of violence.

Unionist outrage was further fueled by a widespread belief that British government agencies in the United States, particularly the British Information Service in New York, were failing miserably in their efforts to counteract pro-republican propaganda.23 Andy Tyrie captured the attitude of many Ulster Protestants at the time when he commented,

You must talk to the people in their own language. The IRA does that and the Brits don’t know how. It’s our own fault the United States is badly informed. The IRA puts its case in colorful and romantic terms. The British are so earnest and so humorless they can’t combat it.24

Leaders of Ulster’s Protestant churches were first to respond to these challenges and calls to action. In March, 1981, Bishop Robin Eames led a Church of Ireland delegation to New York and Washington for meetings with senior politicians and religious figures, including Cardinal Terence Cook. Their primary goals were to appeal for “moderation and reconciliation” in response to the growing crisis in the H-Blocks, to urge Irish-Americans not to fund IRA violence and, in the words of one commentator, “to show that Ulster Protestants are not all red-necked backwoodsmen and bigots.”25 During the visit, Reverend John Allin, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States,

released a statement condemning “IRA terrorism” and emphasized that Bobby Sands “was not being forced to commit suicide.”

The Church of Ireland initiative was quickly followed by a ten-member Presbyterian delegation which, according to Reverend Donald Fraser, the group’s information officer, was driven by “profound concern and disquiet at the one-sided, ill-informed, misleading and miscchievous picture of the Irish situation presented by publicists and politicians from the traditional Irish-American community.” Led by moderator Jack Weir, members of the delegation presented their case to church groups and at public forums on the East Coast and in Chicago. Charles Reynolds, who played a leading role in supporting the effort, remains convinced that the group’s most important achievement was holding a press conference in Washington on the day Bobby Sands died at which tour participants focused attention on the destructive aspects of the IRA’s campaign.

While it was assumed these church delegations might help nurture more understanding of Ulster Protestants in America, some Unionists felt that sending groups of people who had suffered directly from IRA violence would be more effective at bringing home the results of Irish-American financial disbursements and gunrunning. Consequently, John Dunlop, the OUP MP for Mid-Ulster, helped to organize the Loyalist League of Ulsterwomen, a group composed of RUC and UDR widows. In October, 1981, Ruby Speer and Kathleen McCurrie—both of whom had lost their husbands in IRA attacks—embarked on a multi-state campaign describing the horror and suffering that they and other victims had experienced. Harold Alexander and Charles Reynolds organized media appearances and public meetings for the women and helped them to lobby government officials for the removal of the RUC arms ban. Not long after, Georgina Gordon, part of a “Widows Mite” group, delivered heartwrenching accounts to American audiences of how her husband and young daughter were killed by an IRA bomb.

The tours by Protestant church delegations and widows groups achieved little publicity in America, and their efforts made little impact. The frustration this generated among Unionist leaders was accentuated by the experiences of individual politicians who traveled to the United States at this time. Harold

McCusker, in Washington on a State Department-sponsored trip in October, 1981, reported that he encountered a complete lack of understanding of Unionism, and confirmed the charge that British agencies were “failing miserably” in the propaganda war against Irish-American republicans. An increasing number of Unionists began to call for a vigorous publicity drive in the United States to reverse the damage done during the Hunger Strikes.

Throughout the summer of 1981, in response to the calls for an American initiative, a cross-party committee, headed by the OUP’s David Burnside and Jim Allister of the DUP, made arrangements for what they christened “Operation USA.” Their intention was to spearhead the most professional and coordinated Unionist transatlantic publicity drive of the “Troubles.” After promoting the venture in the Unionist press and organizing several fund-raising events, Burnside and Allister announced the mission would be spearheaded by Ian Paisley and his DUP deputy-leader Peter Robinson, and by John Taylor and Reverend Robert Bradford from the OUP. In an intense two-week program, the group planned to inform Americans about the true situation in Ulster, take on supporters of the IRA, and lay the foundation for Friends of Northern Ireland support groups.

To complement the leaders’ presentations, tour organizers produced Ulster: The Facts, a glossy brochure that synthesized Unionist perspectives on American involvement in Northern Ireland. It emphasized the “vital role” played by Scotch-Irish immigrants in the founding and development of the United States, and sharply contrasted Ulster’s importance to the Allied victory in World War II with the Republic of Ireland’s neutrality. The brochure included photographs of Eamon de Valera and Adolf Hitler next to each other and prominent reference to the taoiseach’s 1945 message of condolence to the German ambassador in Dublin after Hitler’s suicide. In addition, the text made copious references to the IRA’s “Marxist philosophy” and its alleged objective of turning Ireland into “Britain’s Cuba.” The booklet also contained a number of color photographs of the charred remains of IRA bomb victims and stressed that significant responsibility for these horrors lay with Irish-American support groups:

Money has come from the US to provide arms and support for the killing of British citizens in Northern Ireland. Those who contribute such money are either people of feeble intelligence who have fallen naively for the lies of Irish republican propaganda or else—and this is a grave possibility—they are enemies

32. For an earlier version of the “classic” Unionist perspective on America, see Ian Paisley, America’s Debt to Ulster (Belfast: Puritan, 1976).
of the American people, of the American way of life and of the Western alliance, who are working as the agents of these alien forces which want to destroy the standards of civilization we in the West have created and are prepared to uphold.\textsuperscript{34}

A key element in the effort to “professionalize” Operation USA was securing the services of the Jack Buttram Company, a prominent public relations firm with offices in Washington. Buttram, a conservative Republican who had worked in the Nixon administration and was a former press secretary for Senator Strom Thurmond, had a wealth of experience as a consultant and lobbyist on Capitol Hill. He was also a fervent evangelical Christian activist and—through his connections as a graduate of Bob Jones University—had met with Ian Paisley and been strongly impressed by his religious and political views. In subsequent years, Buttram traveled to Belfast and was introduced to other prominent Unionist politicians. He was the obvious point man in Washington for distributing Operation USA political materials, organizing television and radio appearances, and arranging meetings with politicians and government officials.\textsuperscript{35}

Just as everything seemed to be coming together, Operation USA was hit by a succession of major blows. IRA gunmen murdered Robert Bradford, on November 14, 1981, at a community center in Belfast. No evidence suggests this attack was aimed at undermining the American publicity initiative but—as he was one of its speakers and driving forces—uncertainty arose over the tour’s future.\textsuperscript{36} After consultations with family members and Operation USA participants, however, there emerged an even fiercer determination to proceed and make the venture a success. Bradford’s widow, Nora, took her husband’s place, while the DUP and OUP released a joint statement emphasizing that “the best memorial the people of Ulster can erect to Robert Bradford” would be to “give support to Operation USA, which was a campaign [he] really wanted to succeed. . . . The American people must be told the truth. The IRA murderers

\textsuperscript{34} Ulster: The Facts (Belfast: Ulster Unionist Council, 1982), p. 30. Eight thousand copies of the brochure were sent to America for distribution by the Unionist leaders to audiences at their presentations. The discovery that one of the photographs in the booklet claimed to be the decomposing body of an IRA victim, was in fact that of someone murdered by loyalists caused considerable embarrassment to the tour organizers. See “Burnside Admits Error,” News Letter, 21 January 1982.

\textsuperscript{35} Jack Buttram, telephone interview with author, 13 December 1994. For additional information on Buttram, see Foreign Agents Registration Act File #3588, The Buttram Agency, 12 January 1984 – 12 July 1987. After the Operation USA initiative, Buttram became the chief Unionist contact in Washington and helped a number of subsequent visits.

of Robert Bradford and thousands of innocent Ulstermen and women are funded and supported by money raised in America.\textsuperscript{37}

Yet, the renewed determination after Bradford’s murder was quickly tempered by a growing Irish-American campaign against Ian Paisley who, from the early 1960s onward, had established close associations with a group of such firebrand fundamentalist preachers as Reverend Carl McIntire, head of the ultra-conservative International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC) in New Jersey, and Reverend Bob Jones, Jr., president of Bob Jones University in South Carolina. Both McIntire and Jones began espousing Paisley’s uncompromising Unionism, often delivering fire-and-brimstone speeches against the NICRA at loyalist rallies in Belfast. They also helped raise thousands of dollars for the construction of Paisley’s Martyr’s Memorial Church and played a catalytic role in establishing a small congregation of his Free Presbyterian churches in the United States.\textsuperscript{38}

Some Irish-American nationalists, led by Fr. Seán McManus, were particularly alarmed at Paisley’s proposed visit to the United States because of what they saw as the State Department’s inconsistent visa policy. Owen Carron, who had been elected as MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone following Bobby Sands’s death, was denied a visa in November, 1981, because of his association with IRA violence. Paisley, on the other hand, had been on a number of trips to the United States that year despite making what McManus called a series of “blood-curdling speeches” against the Anglo-Irish summit and appearing at a Protestant “Third Force” militia rally in the Antrim hills at which participants had waved gun licenses in the air.\textsuperscript{39}

McManus, hoping that greater focus on the “hypocrisy” of the state department’s visa policy might ultimately ease restrictions on Irish republicans, persuaded Congressman Mario Biaggi and more than one hundred members of the Ad Hoc Committee on Irish Affairs to write to Secretary of State Alexander Haig calling for Paisley’s visa to be revoked.\textsuperscript{40} On December 8, 1981, Senators Tip O’Neill, Ted Kennedy, and Daniel Moynihan sent a similar request because of what they saw as Paisley’s inflaming of “bigotry and religious hatred in Northern Ireland, his long standing tactics of intimidation and oppression, and his thinly-veiled exhortations to sectarian violence.” The visa revocation was later

\textsuperscript{37} Protestant Telegraph, 3 December 1981.

\textsuperscript{38} For a fuller analysis of Paisley’s connections with American fundamentalists, see Andrew J. Wilson, “Maintaining the Cause in the Land of the Free,” 222-25.


backed by a group of nineteen senators, including Robert Dole, Joseph Biden, and Jesse Helms, who condemned Paisley because he “consistently expressed the gospel of bloodshed in leading mob demonstrations through Roman Catholic areas of Belfast.”

When Paisley heard of this campaign in Washington, he held a press conference at which he casually dismissed the possibility his critics might succeed. He told reporters he had traveled to the United States more than fifty times since 1964, including three times in 1981, without any trouble. Paisley further stated that there was no way the government could exclude both an MP and a Member of the European Parliament. He claimed that Kennedy, O’Neill, and company were, “dead scared at the success of my campaign against the Anglo-Irish Summit and the harm I’m doing their united Ireland cause. . . . Evidently, the united Ireland men in the US are afraid. They don’t want the Unionist case to be made. The truth is going to hurt them too much!” Yet, on December 21, despite this defiance, the state department announced it was revoking Paisley’s visa because his presence “would be prejudicial to the American public interest.” To reinforce the decision, the United States embassy in London sent telegrams to all transatlantic airlines warning of hefty fines if they allowed him to fly.

Not surprisingly, the visa denial sparked an enraged reaction from Paisley. He denounced Deputy Secretary of State William Clark, the focus of his wrath for canceling the visa, because he was a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and, therefore, “inherently biased against Unionists.” Paisley organized protests outside the United States embassy in London and consulate in Belfast, and encouraged his American supporters to use whatever political clout they had on his behalf. Bob Jones responded by orchestrating a letter-writing campaign to senators and congressmen. In a typical correspondence, Rod Bell, President of the Fundamental Baptist Fellowship of America, wrote to Congressman William Whitehurst warning that “the American people will not stand for these men [O’Neill and Kennedy] to spread slanderous attacks against a man like Dr. Ian Paisley. It will cause every Protestant and Baptist in America who loves freedom to rise up in vigorous protest. Dr. Paisley has hundreds of thou-

41. Correspondence from US Senators to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, 11 December 1981. Senator Jesse Helms, often cited as an ally of Paisley, claimed his opposition to a visa was based on a desire not to “import the tensions” generated by the Hunger Strikes to the United States. Later, when he believed these tensions had passed, Helms argued it was “possible to revert to broader principles of free speech and fair play” and allow Paisley back into the country. Jesse Helms to Secretary of State George Shultz, 31 March 1983. Material contained in US Consul General documents, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.
42. Belfast Telegraph, 10 December 1981.
43. Times (London), 22 December 1981.
sands of friends in the US who will not stand still for such Roman Catholic bigotry." In a widely criticized climax to the campaign, Bob Jones blamed the visa denial on "pressure from a Fenian Irish priest" (Seán McManus) and asked his students to pray for the Lord to "smite" and "destroy" Secretary of State Alexander Haig because he was "a monster in human flesh and a demon-possessed instrument to destroy America."

The visa controversy drew major media coverage, and ignited fierce debate among political analysts, editorial writers, and commentators. The press in Britain and Ireland was generally critical of the state department. Some nationalist newspapers suggested the visa denial would make Paisley a martyr and thus enhance his support among militant Unionists. Others, mainly in Britain, lamented that the American public had had for too long been over exposed to the "vengeful and maudlin sentiments cultivated by the descendants of Irish immigrants" and, to appreciate Northern Ireland's complexities, would have benefited from hearing "the accents of unregenerate Ulster Protestantism." Most major American newspapers and commentators saw the visa denial as a dangerous attack on freedom of speech. The Washington Post described the government's action as "shameful" and featured an op-ed piece by Paisley. The Christian Science Monitor demanded "Let America Hear Ulster Voices!" while the Los Angeles Times accused the state department of "harming American traditions" and proclaimed that the "American people would have been able to make up their own minds about Paisley's extremism. Revoking his visa is a form of extremism itself and not worthy of our country."

But, while the American press generally supported Paisley's right to come and be heard, almost every editorial and commentary condemned the role he had played in the Northern Ireland conflict. Any benefit the Operation USA initiative might have received from the publicity surrounding the visa denial was far outweighed by the negative assessments of Paisley. The Chicago Tribune

49. See, for example, Stephen Chapman, "Ian Paisley and Free Speech," Chicago Tribune, 31 December 1981.
described him as a "Catholic-baiting demagogue who seems determined to plunge Ulster into civil war," while the Washington Post, in the edition in which Paisley's op-ed piece had appeared, castigated him for "utterly ignoring his community's role in systematically discriminating against Ulster's Roman Catholic minority over the decades and thereby bringing the whole pot to the boil." Most op-ed pieces and syndicated columnists followed a line similar to that of Colman McCarthy, who described Paisley as a deeply deranged bigot, "one of the West's most fractious dichards," and "irrationally suspicious of the talks between Dublin and London." When David Burnside and Jim Allister realized that Paisley would not be permitted to enter the United States, they contacted Unionist supporters in Toronto and arranged for him to visit Canada instead. Eileen Paisley took the vacant position on the American tour, and brought tape recordings of speeches her husband had intended to deliver. The Operation USA team flew out of Belfast on January 16, 1982, and, after a joint presentation before the National Press Club in Washington, each member embarked on separate publicity drives. John Taylor traveled to Chicago, Dallas, and Boston; Peter Robinson appeared at a number of venues in California; Nora Bradford and Eileen Paisley led a southern campaign, which culminated in a rally at Bob Jones University.

Without Ian Paisley, however, and the likely controversy his presence would have generated, the media showed little interest. No American television crews came to the National Press Club launch, and the scant reports in national and metropolitan newspapers were generally negative, focusing on Irish-American demonstrations against the tour. During one of Peter Robinson's speaking engagements in San Francisco, for example, someone telephoned a bomb threat and the meeting place had to be evacuated. When the four met up again in New York, Noraid protestors picketed their hotel, singing Irish rebel songs and chanting derogatory slogans about Robert Bradford. The Belfast News Letter also carried bizarre reports that the FBI had arrested a man in Brooklyn who had a submachine gun and was alleged to be a contract killer hired to assassinate Peter Robinson.

Ian Paisley's trip to Canada did not go much better. At most of Paisley's public appearances, Owen Carron, along with Sinn Féin's publicity director Danny

Morrison, organized large protests by members of Toronto’s Irish Prisoner of War Committee. The two Sinn Féin leaders disrupted the official launching of *Ulster: The Facts* at the Royal York Hotel, led a raucous picket outside a Free Presbyterian Church at which Paisley was preaching, and deflected media attention from the “Big Man” with their own series of press conferences.\(^{56}\)

When the Operation USA tour members returned to Northern Ireland, they appeared at a round of public meetings to tell supporters of their experiences and to raise funds for the £25,000 that the initiative had cost. As might be expected, the message delivered at these gatherings was upbeat and minimized the difficulties the group had faced. Paisley and the others described their efforts as a “big success,” and declared that they were delighted by the response they received in America and believed they had dealt a major blow against republican propaganda. The group was particularly keen to emphasize the “very positive” meeting they had with Congressman Trent Lott, whom they described as “the right-hand man of President Reagan” and whom they claimed was now “a very open supporter of Ulster loyalists.” At the same time, they derided the “closed minds” of Senator Edward Kennedy and other Irish-American politicians who “pontificate” on Northern Ireland affairs but were unwilling to meet with the delegation to hear an alternative perspective.\(^{57}\)

Privately, however, some of the tour members admitted they were deeply frustrated by their experience in America. John Taylor was extremely discouraged by the scant media coverage they received, and by what he saw as the “pervasive hold of Irish nationalism on those who shape opinion about Northern Ireland.”\(^{58}\) Jack Buttram, in response, complained about the short notice he had been given to arrange an itinerary, emphasized what he saw as the naivete of participants “expecting everyone in Washington to want to hear their message,” and criticized Unionists for not having a longterm strategy for getting their views across in the United States.\(^{59}\) In addition, the Operation USA interparty

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56. Peter Arnls, “Paisley Finds It Hot In Canada,” *Irish People*, 30 January 1982. In the period after Operation USA, the State Department applied an inconsistent policy to Paisley’s visa applications. On 8 September 1982, he was allowed to attend the funeral of Dr. Archer Weniger, president of a Baptist seminary in San Francisco, but just a few months later he was refused permission to conduct the installation of John Greer as minister of the Free Presbyterian Church at Newton Square, Pennsylvania. By October, 1983, however, Paisley not only obtained a visa to visit Reverend Rod Bell’s Tabernacle Baptist Church in Virginia Beech, but was also given the protection of an unarmed bodyguard during his stay. Department of State Telegram. R 131658Z OCT 83. FM AM EMBASSY LONDON TO SECSTATE WASHDC. Material from US Consul General documents, Linen Hall Library, Belfast.


solidarity was strained; some within the OUP felt that linking the initiative with Bob Jones, at a time when his university was involved in a swirl of negative publicity over its discriminatory admission policy toward African Americans, was probably not the best way to win friends and influence people.60

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of Operation USA was its failure to inspire a network of Unionist cells in America. Some organizers had unrealistically claimed the initiative would awaken the “Scotch-Irish sleeping giant” and lead to the creation of support groups that would challenge nationalist propaganda and host a constant stream of future Unionist visitors. At the post-tour public forums, members of Operation USA again gave positive assessments of the steps they had taken toward this goal. Peter Robinson claimed that after his public appearances he was “deluged with calls and messages of support from Ulster exiles telling me to keep up the good work.” He also revealed plans for a major Unionist follow-up campaign to organize these individuals into a nationwide organization of “Friends of Ulster” groups, and told how chapters had already formed in Los Angeles and San Francisco.61 Various Unionist organizations, especially the Orange Order, reacted enthusiastically to these reports and called for a sustained drive to supply the “Friends” with “speakers, continuous information, and informative literature,” warning that otherwise “those who showed an interest will lose it very soon.”62

It quickly became apparent that the post-tour claims about a new and dynamic Unionist support network were wishful thinking. An initial “Friends of Northern Ireland” organization was launched in San Francisco with the intention of establishing affiliates in other cities. But after printing membership applications and publicity fliers stating their goal was “to make the American people aware that the IRA [were] not heroes, but rather butchers and murderers,” the group quickly disappeared.63 With hindsight, Peter Robinson later acknowledged,

What we found was that while there are more Americans of Ulster Protestant descent than Irish Americans, they have assimilated and do not hold old alle-

60. Bob Jones University’s tax-exempt status had been removed in 1976 because of its policy against admitting African Americans. However, after pressure from Senator Strom Thurmond and Congressman Trent Lott, the Reagan administration announced it was lifting the ban. In 1983 the issue was settled by the Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of the IRS policy of denying tax-exemption to schools that practiced racial discrimination.
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giances. So there was no popular base to launch support groups. There were many individuals who support us, and we still receive contact from them, but there is no Ulster Protestant community over there.64

Instead of a vibrant Unionist support network, what emerged after Operation USA was the continuation of the situation: a few isolated individuals tried to do what they could with little support from Northern Ireland. One of the most prominent and articulate of these new activists was Bill McGimpsey (a cousin of UUP leaders Chris and Michael McGimpsey), originally from Newtownards, County Down, who had moved to New York in 1979. Advocating a moderate Unionism, he was usually the sole dissenting voice at the ongoing circuit of public debates and forums on Northern Ireland affairs in New York. McGimpsey recalls that as a new immigrant he was “very much intimidated by the Nationalist/Republican presence” and, “like most of my kin, was tempted to dissolve into the masses and only whisper my views to trusted friends.” His eventual activism was sparked by what he saw as the “vindictiveness” of New York’s Irish republican leaders whose depictions of “people from my heritage as prejudiced, gerrymandering, mean spirited, bigoted, colonialists, made me too angry.”65 Outraged, McGimpsey started showing up at Noraid meetings and confronting leaders Michael Flannery and Martin Galvin. He recalls,

My only pitch to them has been to stop supporting the violence and use the democratic process. I never tried to sell them on other solutions, it would have only alienated them and would have been a waste of time anyway. If, however, they asked my views, I always gave them both barrels, right between the eyes. They hardly winced and those who asked always seemed glad to come up against some firm opposition.66

McGimpsey’s willingness, as he puts it, “to go into the lion’s den and take them on, face to face, on their own turf,” earned him a degree of respect and a genuine welcome from the most ardent supporters of the Provos. Over time, he believes the engagement and exchange of perspectives has been productive and feels, “I learned a lot from them and their views and they learned a lot from me.”67 Along with his appearances at public events, McGimpsey became a regular Unionist commentator on local and nationally syndicated television stations. He also helped to form an influential discussion group, which held “brainstorming sessions” with a wide spectrum of Northern Ireland political leaders whenever they came to Manhattan.

64. Peter Robinson, interview with author, 28 May 1992, constituency offices, Newtownards Road, Belfast.
In Philadelphia, a stark contrast to McGimpsey’s approach and philosophy emerged after Operation USA in a small cadre of loyalist supporters inspired by Harold Alexander. Annette Ravinsky, an Italian-American Jew, was the most outspoken of these activists. She claimed her group, American Aid to Ulster (AATU), was mostly composed of “Americans of non-Ulster or Irish extraction” who were driven by a hatred of the IRA’s “communist ideology” and its links to “Palestinian terrorist organizations.” In regular articles printed in both the UDA and UVP’s monthly newspapers, Ravinsky called on Protestants to physically resist the IRA or else they would be “butchered . . . like 1641 all over again” and become “the Vietnamese boat people of Western Europe.” She also launched scathing attacks against Unionist politicians, contrasting their “sunshine patriotism” to loyalist prisoners “in the infamous hell-holes of Magilligan, Crumlin Road and Long Kesh,” whom she described as “men of the highest quality who have given their all for Ulster.”

Yet, aside from the stream of militant loyalist articles, the activities of Ravinsky and the AATU were extremely limited. They staged a small protest demonstration during Philadelphia’s 1982 St. Patrick’s Day parade in opposition to Bobby Sands being named honorary grand marshal. Later, Ravinsky traveled to Belfast to experience her first “Twelfth” and met with a number of loyalist leaders. After this, however, the group seems to have quickly faded from the public radar; Ravinsky’s columns stopped appearing by the mid-1980s.

Undoubtedly the most controversial of the handful of Unionist activists to emerge in the early 1980s was David McCalden. From a working-class background in Belfast, McCalden moved to Los Angeles in 1978 after attending Goldsmith’s College in London. He was immediately incensed by Noraid campaigns in California and by what he saw as the pro-nationalist local media coverage during the Hunger Strikes. In response, McCalden set up the Ulster-American Heritage Foundation (UAHF) in late 1981. With a small band of expatriate supporters that included Peter Peel, a history professor at Cal State University and relative of the founder of the British police force, McCalden led a campaign of continual letter writing, debating Irish-American republicans,

71. David McCalden, telephone interview with author, 7 July 1990.
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and occasionally staging kamikaze-like counterdemonstrations during Noraid protests in Los Angeles.72

Shortly after forming the UAHF, McCalden began publishing the quarterly Ulster American Newsletter, which he claimed had a mailing list of nearly 500 readers.73 It became the principal means for the dissemination of his maverick brand of Unionism, which could be as scathing in its attacks on the IRA as it was in deriding what he described as “the quiche-eating liberal bourgeois Unionists of the North Down ‘Gold Coast.””74 McCalden was convinced that the people of Ulster were a distinct cultural and ethnic group who were entitled to self-determination—a right that “IRA Chauvinists” were trying to deny through a campaign of “ethnic cleansing.”75 He advocated a “shoot-to-kill” policy as the best means of defeating the IRA and suggested that those captured during military actions should be “put up against a wall and shot.” As a committed atheist, McCalden not only attacked what he saw as the theocratic power of the Catholic church in the Republic of Ireland but equally vilified the “bible-thumping Paisleyites of the Ballymena bible-belt.”76

Despite his radicalism, even some of McCalden’s most implacable enemies acknowledged he was “intelligent and witty” with a “great sense of humor.” By 1983, he was making regular appearances on national network television channels as a combative opponent of Irish-American republicanism.77 Yet, whatever benefit he brought to the Unionist cause was completely negated when McCalden’s involvement with right-wing extremist groups became known. In Britain, he had been a leading figure in the neo-nazi National Front and a founder of the British National Party, before his racist views led to his expulsion from the National Union of Journalists and prompted his move to the United States. Shortly after arriving in Los Angeles, McCalden helped to establish the Institute for Historical Review to organize conferences and publish works on

72. In February, 1983, for example, McCalden and Peter Peel appeared at the British Consulate in Los Angeles to spar with and “brave the derision” of a crowd of about 75 Noraid supporters who were protesting a visit by Queen Elizabeth to the city. See Paul Wilner, “No, not everyone loves the queen—or her country,” Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, 28 February 1983.
75. For details of McCalden’s views and activities, see issues of the Ulster-American Newsletter, Summer-Fall 1982-Spring 1988, in the Northern Ireland Political Collection of Belfast’s Linen Hall Library.
76. Undated UAHF subscription appeal, What is the Ulster American Heritage Foundation? in the possession of the author.
77. Herb Brin, “The Death of a Revisionist,” Heritage, 26 October 1990. For an example of McCalden’s television confrontations with Noraid leaders, see his “debate” with Martin Galvin on CNN’s “Take Two” coverage of the 1983 New York Saint Patrick’s Day Parade, March 17, 1983.
holocaust revisionism. He was frequently involved in confrontations, both with fellow revisionists and with leaders of such Jewish organizations as the Simon Wiesenthal Center and Jewish Defense League. For example, in June, 1989, he showed up at Congregation Mogen David in Los Angeles for a debate on anti-Semitism "with the smell of whiskey on his breath." After allegedly making a series of racist comments, McCalden was physically ejected from the synagogue and was "injured falling through a louvered window, cutting himself on the head with broken glass."78 Criminal charges of assault with a deadly weapon and trespassing had been filed against McCalden just before his death of AIDS in October, 1990.79

McCalden became an enigma for both Unionist activists in America and for the Unionist political leaders in Northern Ireland who met him. While some admired his voracious attacks on Irish-American republicans, they also knew that his right-wing extremist views were damaging and repulsive. American Unionists were especially outraged by pamphlets McCalden produced that drew favorable comparisons between the Ulster Protestants and Nazi Germany, and praised the fact that a disproportionate number of holocaust revisionists were Ulster-Scots.80 Most activists, such as Harry Bennison of the UAL, quickly cut ties with McCalden after receiving furious calls from leaders of Jewish organizations, and Unionist politicians made sure to distance themselves from him if they were ever in California.81 Peter Robinson, whom McCalden claimed was an old acquaintance from school days in Belfast, stated the obvious when he observed, "we have a hard enough job getting our views across out there without the additional problem of association with such inflammatory ideas."82

From the mid-1970s onward, Unionists viewed the Irish-American dimension to the Northern Ireland conflict in overwhelmingly negative terms. British

78. "Holocaust Denier Faces a Year in Jail Over Synagogue Melee," B'hai B'rith Messenger, 1 December 1989. In explaining his involvement with holocaust revisionism, McCalden once acknowledged, "I find Jews clever and witty—especially the Woody Allen variety. My interest in the Holy Hoax is just that I am a contrary son-of-a-gun who doesn't like being lied to; lies offend me. . . . I resent taboos, and feel that the 'Six Million' and Jewish-power in Hollywood/Washington etc are subjects that one must never talk about . . . so I do!" David McCalden to Bill McGimpsey, 10 December 1987, provided to author by McGimpsey.


security forces claimed, in 1977, that nearly 80 percent of the IRA's weapons were coming from the United States. In addition, in 1979, Irish-American political leaders, blocked sales of American guns to the RUC and helped push the British government into a political initiative that had been demanded by constitutional nationalists. Unionist alarm about these developments was accentuated by the massive rise in Irish-American activism during the Hunger Strikes.

Unionists launched Operation USA as an unprecedented bipartisan effort designed to present their viewpoint to Americans and lay the foundations for a support network that could counteract pro-nationalist sentiment. But, despite the considerable input of resources, Operation USA attracted little media or political interest. Tour participants quickly discovered that there was no basis for a Unionist support network, and, in the few cases where new activists emerged, such as David McCalden, they were as much of a liability as an asset to the Unionist cause.

The project's failure had a significant impact on Unionism during the early 1980s. OUP and DUP leaders were deeply conscious of the menace posed by Irish-American gunrunning, and by the political clout of Senator Edward Kennedy and his associates. Yet, the failed initiative brought home the stark reality that there was little they could do to counteract these threats. To make matters worse, after 1983 the British Information Service and the British embassy—agencies that Unionists had long felt were incompetent in countering IRA propaganda—began actively working against Unionist interests by promoting the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Unionist attacks against Irish-American involvement grew particularly intense in the period after Operation USA. Congressman Joseph Kennedy, for example, was subjected to a firestorm of Unionist abuse after his verbal confrontation with a British soldier during a 1988 trip to Northern Ireland. And, in 1984, Unionists were sent into an apoplectic rage by Martin Galvin's defiance of an exclusion order against him, and by the subsequent botched RUC attempt to apprehend the Noraid leader that led to killing of a Catholic civilian, Seán Downes.

In addition to these "traditional targets," Unionists also began venting some of their anger at the United States government. The Reagan administration received widespread condemnation for supporting the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and the International Fund for Ireland was initially rejected as "blood money" designed to induce Unionist acceptance of the new political arrangements. The most controversial line of attack, however, was advanced by OUP leader James Molyneaux and Enoch Powell, MP for South Down. Both supported a con-

83. For details of this initiative, led by Northern Ireland Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins, see Wilson, Irish America and the Ulster Conflict, pp. 159–65.
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spionage theory alleging CIA involvement in the killings of Robert Bradford, Lord Louis Mountbatten, and Airey Neave, the Conservative Party’s shadow Northern Ireland secretary. The secret goal, according to Molyneaux and Powell, was to remove obstacles to a united Ireland as a first step in the process of encouraging the Irish Republic to join NATO.84

While the response from their Unionist colleagues was understandably skeptical, the fierce debate that Molyneaux and Powell’s conspiracy theory ignited served to illustrate the level to which anger at the American involvement in Northern Ireland had risen. When combined with other factors, particularly the perceived unreliability of successive British administrations, the American dimension contributed to a general belief among Unionists that they were an embattled community with few friends outside Ulster. This, in turn, reinforced a sense of Unionist insecurity, which undermined confidence to engage with their political adversaries in finding a solution to the Northern Ireland problem.