



The Burning Bush—Online article archive

A view from New York



By *Jonathan Moore*, an Enniskillen man living in New York.

Growing up in Enniskillen during the height of the troubles, I thought I had seen the worst that terrorism could inflict upon the innocent. However, not even the IRA bombing of the 1997 Remembrance Day ceremony in my old home town compares in magnitude to the events of 11th September in my new home city.

Over six thousand people are missing, presumed dead, after the attack on the World Trade Center, which is a number well in excess of the bloody score notched up by the IRA in thirty years of terror. The number of Britons among the dead is believed to be several hundred, more than in any terrorist attack in the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, when it is broken down to the fundamentals, there is essentially no difference in the extent of the evil between that carried out by the terrorists in New York and the actions of the IRA in towns like Newmills and Newtownards. As Frederick Forsythe, the novelist, wrote in the Wall Street Journal recently, while nothing "can compare with the sheer scale of the death toll in Manhattan, the deliberate evil of placing a large bomb in a building or public place swarming with civilians is exactly the same." What is different, though, is the response of elected leaders, not just in the country under attack, but throughout the world.

Across the United States, people have united behind the President and the political leaders in a calm but steely determination that terrorism will not prevail. There is almost universal support for an American attack, not only on the perpetrators of the recent attacks but also on those who harbour them. And, while those reprisals will inevitably themselves lead to the loss of innocent lives, most Americans regard that as a necessary evil in the fight against terrorism. Beyond the United States, politicians from most other nations have pledged their support for such a war on terrorism. Even those who have a track record of submitting to terrorist demands have suddenly started to talk tough, including the United Kingdom's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who declared, "Whatever the technical or legal issues about a declaration of war, the fact is we are at war with terrorism."

Likewise, many fervent supporters of Sinn Fein in the United States, such as Representatives Peter King and Ben Gilman, have finally found harsh words for terrorists. Rep. Gilman, a Republican congressman from New York, declared, "It is long past due for armed action against those who have barbarically attacked our nation. The individuals and the nations involved in this terrorism deserve to feel the full wrath of our great nation, and I am confident they will feel the wrath of the entire civilised world." Fine words from a man who is currently sponsoring a resolution in Congress that recognises "the historical significance of the sacrifices made by the Irish Republican hunger strikers of 1981 and the subsequent political impact their actions had on the Northern Ireland peace process." What Rep. Gilman and others support in terms of action against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban is essentially the same as advocating a bombing raid on Dundalk or west Belfast



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as a reprisal for an IRA attack in the United Kingdom. Innocent people would undoubtedly be killed, but that is something Rep. Gilman is prepared to accept in Afghanistan.

In the same way as Palestinians and Pakistanis cheered when the World Trade Center was attacked, Irish-Americans in bars in Boston and the Bronx have celebrated when the IRA has taken British lives. At least one fugitive IRA terrorist works in a New York bar, and No-raid continues to raise money here. By applying the same logic that Rep. Gilman applies to the attack on the World Trade Center, the Bronx should be a legitimate target in Britain's "war" against terrorism.

Unfortunately for people living in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom government's attitude to terrorism is very inconsistent. For those who have endured thirty years of IRA terror, Mr. Blair's strong words must seem like the height of hypocrisy. After all, it was his government that has orchestrated Sinn Fein/IRA's elevation to the corridors of power in Stormont, the destruction of the RUC, and the early release of murderers. There have been no bombing raids on west Belfast to take out terrorists or their supporters; instead there has been tea at "Number Ten" for members of the IRA army council.

While September 11th was probably the first time many New Yorkers experienced terrorism so close to home, for me it was a chilling reminder of what had taken place for many years in Northern Ireland, yet also the closest I had ever been to imminent danger from an attack. For the past two years I have worked for an investment bank in the World Trade Center complex and had walked through the basement under the Twin Towers virtually every morning at about nine o'clock. Fortunately I was not in the building on that Tuesday and was spared the fate that befell so many innocent people. On that day, I watched in disbelief from a forty-eighth floor conference room in midtown Manhattan, as the events at the World Trade Center unfolded. What originally had looked like an accident rapidly became clear for what it was: a terrorist attack on the heart of the financial center of the United States. The events of that day are undoubtedly familiar to everyone and I cannot articulate the pain, sorrow, and anger sufficiently to do justice to those who suffered at the hands of the terrorists.

There were, and continue to be, many stories of great anguish: the loss of five hundred employees at one stockbrokerage firm alone; the husband who was flying home to be at the birth of his first child only to die on a hijacked flight; the man from Cork who escaped the World Trade Center only to later find out his sister and her child were on the airplane that crashed into the second tower; and the death of conservative commentator, Barbara Olson, who delayed her flight by one day so that she could spend her husband's birthday with him, only to die in the Pentagon crash, after calling him from the plane. On a personal level, the death of several people my wife and I knew stood as stark reminders of how blessed we were to be alive. On the day after the attack, the newspaper reporting the atrocity lay uncollected outside the door of our next door neighbour, a young man who had worked for a stockbrokerage firm on the ninetieth floor of the second tower and who never came home.

Lamp-posts and shop windows carry home-made posters of other people from the neighbourhood who are missing, as relatives hold on to the slim hope that, even at this late stage, their father or sister will be rescued from the rubble. It is a tragedy that has impacted people across all classes. Among those interviewed on one of the many television



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shows about the disaster were a black woman from the Bronx who had lost her brother, a computer technician; a white woman from Manhattan who had lost her husband, a stockbroker; and an immigrant who could barely speak English who had lost his wife, a cleaner.

Bit by bit, New York is trying to get back to some level of normality. The businesses that were in the financial district have scrambled to find temporary accommodation while the recovery effort continues and people have returned, albeit halfheartedly, to their daily routine. But it is going to take a long time to heal the physical and psychological scars of the city. The very visual presence of the army on the streets of Manhattan and the major increase in security measures at office buildings, while something I was very familiar with in Northern Ireland, is a strange sight in "the land of the free."

The immediate future for New York and America at large is uncertain. An already bearish stock market plummeted over fourteen per cent in the week after the attack, bomb hoaxes are a regular occurrence and there is a general uneasiness that any reprisals on Osama bin Laden will result in further atrocities in the United States. There are, however, signs of hope. On the Sunday following the attack, the church we attend was packed half an hour before the service. Beyond the three thousand people inside, a further two thousand were unable to get in. A second morning service was held immediately afterwards, as well as dozens of prayer meetings. This appeared to be more than just an emotional reaction to the attack; for many people it was a stark reminder of the uncertainty of life and the pointlessness of merely chasing riches on earth.

As well as the hope for a spiritual awakening out of this tragedy, there may also be a more realistic political attitude in the United States to Northern Ireland. Even before the attack on America, George Bush appeared less willing than his predecessor Bill Clinton to court Gerry Adams and his entourage at the White House, and that coolness is likely to continue.

Likewise, amongst the general public, hopefully there will be a change in the prevalent romantic view of the IRA as freedom fighters against the British. I have lived in the United States for over four years and it has always been an uphill struggle to explain the complexities of Northern Ireland to otherwise well-educated Americans who have no understanding of the situation beyond the outdated rhetoric of the Irish-American lobby. Perhaps the tragic events of September 11th will create more empathy amongst rank-and-file Americans for those who have suffered at the hands of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

Sadly, it is more doubtful if the attack on America will have any impact on the United Kingdom's approach to terrorists in Northern Ireland, despite Tony Blair's fighting words. His government, ably assisted by those who voted in favour of the Good Friday Agreement, continues to acquiesce to the never-ending demands of Ulster's bearded terrorist and his supporters.