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THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

1104B

BACKGROUND BRIEFING
BY SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL
ON IRISH POLITICAL ISSUES

May 21, 1984

Room 450
The Old Executive Office Building

2:55 P.M. EDT

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think everyone received a copy of the Ireland background notes. If they haven't, I have some extra copies here.

In terms of statistics, I would just call your attention to the point on page four where they talk about the number of seats by the varying parties in the governing coalition and under "Political Conditions," the minor party, the Labor Party, has 16 seats instead of 6 seats.

Q We don't have a page 4.

Q We only have three pages.

Q 1, 3, 5.

Q 1, 3 and 5.

Q 1, 3, 5.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Okay. There are some copies here --

Q That have 2 and 4 in them?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That have -- that have -- that are complete.

Let me just say that the President's visit offers an opportunity to continue the dialogue that he --

Q No 4's.

Q What was the correction --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Under "Political Conditions." Do you see "Political Conditions"? The Labor Party should be listed as 16 seats, instead of 6 seats. And that's the minority --

Q Okay.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The trip offers the President the opportunity to continue the dialogue that he started this year with the Prime Minister, Mr. FitzGerald, in March. This was the second Irish Prime Minister to have come to Washington during this present administration. Last year the Foreign Minister, Mr. Barry, visited Washington, so that there has been a relatively steady stream of Irish visitors to the United States.

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The visit itself comes with two events to bear in mind and one is the publication of the report of The New Ireland Forum. It was -- The New Ireland Forum was a process begun by the present Foreign Minister who thought it was high time that varying groups in Ireland get together to talk about the future of Ireland, that is, the entire island, both North and South. It was a process in which the nationalist parties from both North and South participated. The Protestant majority in the North, essentially, did not participate in the process. The report was published on May 2nd. The Irish Foreign Minister, Mr. Barry, was here in Washington to present a copy of the report to the administration. The administration has issued a statement welcoming the report as a contribution to the process of seeking a constitutional settlement of the problems of the island and urging that the process of dialogue continue between the governments concerned and the traditions. Those are the Irish Catholic and the Irish Protestant traditions.

Additionally, the Irish assume the Presidency of the European Community for the second half of the year, the next six months. And so we will be maintaining relatively frequent dialogue with them. So the President's visit comes just prior to the assumption of the Presidency.

The Irish government is a coalition government, made up of the Fine Gael Party and the Labor Party, which is the smaller party and it's a center, left party.

My colleague has already mentioned the question of demonstrations, which are -- from our indications -- seem to be linked to policies in Central America, but will have varying dimensions to them and will bring together a number of different groups with varying points of views.

With that, let me just throw it open.

Q What will be the extent of those demonstrations, as you see --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It's unclear. As I think -- as Mr. Deaver said, the demonstrations take place virtually every place. It's not clear at this point where the -- what the size of the demonstrations is going to be. I would expect some in Galway and some in Dublin and you may also have some members of the Parliament expressing some measure of protest by absenting themselves during the speech to the Joint Session of Parliament.

Q If I could follow up, when President Kennedy went to Ireland, there weren't any protests. In all the ways in which this trip was described to us early on was that this was a kind of a triumphant and happy visit for the President. Do these demonstrations, which appear to have sort of sprung up here, do they mar this visit of his?

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think so. I think the Irish authorities are prepared to handle the possibility of peaceful demonstrations and peaceful protests, and certainly, these aren't something new in the course of the travels of American Presidents so I don't see anything --

Q If I can follow on that. The demonstrations might happen everywhere, but they are new in Ireland concerning U.S. foreign policy. What reason do you see for these demonstrations? Is it some -- are you saying it's something the Jesuits have started or is it wide-spread?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Mr. -- the Vice President was there last year and there were some demonstrations connected with his visit. One of the things to remember is that Ireland has one of the youngest populations in Europe. The average -- 50 percent of the population is under 25 years of age.

Unemployment is relatively high. So you have -- do have sectors of the population which are disaffected. So I think that is the background for some of the circumstances.

Regarding -- the principal issue seems to be Central America. the Irish do have interest in Central America to the extent that there are large numbers of Irish missionaries in Central America, some of whom have differences of view regarding policy in Central America and who are making these points back home, points that have obviously caught the attention of some individuals.

Q Are you saying that you thought that the fact that there was a large number of people under 25 indicated that there are a large number of disaffected people? Are young people disaffected or were you referring that to the unemployed?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: In the sense of the unemployed. There is a substantial portion of the population that is unemployed and this creates a circumstance which can contribute.

Q Correct me if I'm wrong, but the New Ireland Forum recommended eventual unification, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is -- well, there are varying viewpoints. They really talked about three different approaches. The optimal one, and one in which some people consider the only approach. For instance, the former prime minister and opposition leader, Mr. Haughey.

The only solution would be unity. The other two options which are mentioned in the report are some sort of federation and some sort of joint rule or joint authority.

Q But the recommendation that everyone is locked in on is the unification, right?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, certainly the debate that is going on with the -- over the interpretation of the report focused on the unity report. But there are some interesting things in the report, itself. For the first time, the Nationalists have acknowledged that there is another tradition whose interest -- whose consent has to be obtained, and that is the Protestant majority in the North. And so, this is a factor in it. While they talked about unity, there is also this other side of it. How do you achieve that unity given the opposition of 60 percent of the population of the Northern part of the island?

Q At what point does the administration's statement of support for their efforts go to?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: It merely was a recognition of a process that was going on that contributes to dialogue towards a possible resolution in a constitutional manner of the problem.

Q Do you know if there has been a British government

reaction to their --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes, there has been a British reaction. There was a statement by the British government which indicated -- welcomed the report, indicated some areas of difference on it, and suggested that a more thoughtful and more considered response would be forthcoming at a later date.

But it's obviously a subject which I think the Irish will want to raise with the President.

Q Do you know if the President will raise it in any of his remarks?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think my colleague addressed the question already in which he said that he would expect that the Northern Ireland question would arise during the President's visit.

Q Well, in that context then, it could be an issue between him and Mrs. Thatcher as well.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That is always a possibility -- a discussion.

Q Do you expect the President to go beyond this statement that the White House released recently?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't believe so. I think our position has been a position of the United States government, that this is a question which is most properly addressed by the governments concerned and the parties concerned. We hope they will work together in terms of dialogue and seek to resolve what is a difficult situation.

Q So you just expect him to reaffirm what the administration has already said?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: That's correct.

Q Would demonstrations against the policies in Central America, if they were big enough, could they endanger the political standing of the government?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I wouldn't believe so.

There was a debate in the Irish Parliament regarding the invitation to the President and the overwhelming number of members of both Houses voted to reaffirm the invitation of the government to speak at the Joint Session. So I can't --

Q What was the vote?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Pardon?

Q Do you know what the vote was?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think about 20 -- 20 members out of over -- well over 200.

Q Dissented, you mean?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: In both -- there were 166 members of the House and 60 members of the Senate.

Q What were those numbers again?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: 166 members in the Dail, the Lower House, and 60 members, I believe, in the Upper House, which is not a direct election --

Q How many do you expect may boycott the Session?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There may be a small

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number. It's -- a handful.

Q Fewer than 20, I assume.

Q Will they boycott or just get up and walk out?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: You'd have to ask them. I just don't know.

Q He has two major speeches in Ireland? On the honorary degree and --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: There is essentially one major address, and that is the address in the Parliament. There will be some remarks at the time of the --

Q Galway?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Galway presentation.

Q Are those going to be substantive remarks?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Pardon?

Q Are they going to -- deal with substantive issues or --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think the President is still looking at the drafts so it's hard to say.

Q What does he get a degree for? What's the name of the degree?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Just -- it's an honorary degree. I'm afraid I don't know -- University College of Galway.

The President's presence in Galway is connected with the 500th anniversary of the founding of the city of Galway. There may be a Presidential proclamation connected with that also.

Q In what -- what do you mean?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: A Presidential proclamation marking the 500th occasion -- 500th anniversary.

Q Is there any degree to which sensitivities in Ireland would suggest the President soften some of his statements about importance of non-violence in settling the Irish question? In other words, does he have to be concerned about coming across in a lecturing --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Absolutely not. On this question, the Irish government has supported the statements the President has made in recent -- St. Patrick's Day proclamations -- the most recent, or last year and this year, in which he talks about violence. The Irish government, itself, is opposed to utilization of violence to resolve the issue.

Q So there is no reason to think that he would give a very, very strong statement on the subject while he's there?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think you'll find -- as I say, the remarks are only in draft form, but I think you'll find them consistent with what the President has said before.

Q I'm asking about tone and asking preparatory to -- these things come up during the trip and I'd like to be able to know now --

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SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think they will be fully consistent with what he has said before.

Q I'm not asking about consistency. I'm sure they'll be consistent. I'm asking about the tone that he uses, and whether or not there are certain considerations --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would expect no change in tone.

Q If I recall correctly, one of the things that the Irish government has been critical of the U.S. government for is the gun-running from the U.S. to the IRA and other dissident groups in Ireland. Is the President prepared to announce anything in that regard, any new --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, there's no new initiatives. If you look at the record, there has been a substantial decrease based on evidence we have in the flow of aid and guns to those who are involved in these terrorist activities. The FBI has conducted some investigations and there have been some criminal prosecutions along these lines. But I would expect nothing to be announced by the President in the course of the trip.

Q Is he taking any prominent Irish legislators -- Irish-American legislators with him like O'Neill?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Mr. O'Neill was just -- Speaker O'Neill was just in Ireland at the end of April. I don't expect any members of the party.

Yes?

Q What is the significance of going to Galway?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The significance is that he's on the west coast of Ireland and the city is celebrating its 500th anniversary and we were approached by the city authorities of

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Galway regarding the possibility the President might come in connection with that occasion.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

MR. SIMS: If I can -- Before you leave, correct -- and my colleague has done one for my colleague a couple of points. He mentioned the 500th Anniversary. It is of the city, not of the University.

And Pointe du Hoc --

Q Galway is 500 years old?

MR. SIMS: Yes.

Q That makes it pretty young.

Q The charter -- the granting of the charter.

MR. SIMS: Well, 500th Anniversary -- It is a 500th Anniversary celebration. We'll have to get you the --

Q Well, everybody's going to think the city is 500 years old, if --

Q It's not. It's the granting of the charter --

MR. SIMS: It's the granting of the charter.

Q -- I think.

MR. SIMS: Granting of the charter.

Q The city is a lot older than --

MR. SIMS: All right. The anniversary is related to the city, not the University.

And the Pointe du Hoc reenactment is the day before the President's there, not the day he is there.

Q You mean we're going to miss it?

MR. SIMS: I presume you will. I --

Q Any other corrections? (Laughter.)

MR. SIMS: The other corrections -- to correct myself. I want to be sure that you remember there's a 3:30 p.m. briefing tomorrow here, D-Day. Wednesday, 10:00 a.m., White House Briefing Room on trade. And Friday, 10:00 a.m. here, on Treasury issues.

Thank you.

THE PRESS: Thank you.

END

3:13 P.M. EDT