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PUBLIC OPINION AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND SITUATION

A NOTE BY THE COLONEL GS (INFORMATION POLICY)

HQ NORTHERN IRELAND

General

1. The influencing of public opinion at home and overseas has been a feature of the Irish political scene for many years. It has always been IRA policy to seek maximum support for their cause through face-to-face propaganda, handbills, posters and through sympathetic newspapers. In recent years radio and television have provided additional means for publicising topics and incidents from which they can gain advantage and public support.
2. Both factions of the IRA aim to achieve one end - the reunification of Ireland. The individual means of achieving the aim and the form of government they seek to impose differ. In simplified terms, the Provisional IRA are attempting to gain political objectives through violence, their declared intention being to demonstrate that Ulster is ungovernable. The Official IRA, though not denying that violence has its uses, would prefer to subvert and undermine government. Both factions further their aims through propaganda and by distorting truth to serve their own purposes. Common to both factions is the way in which this is done.
3. Amongst other objectives both factions are trying to:
 - a. Destroy morale in Northern Ireland.
 - b. Convince the British Public that Northern Ireland is ungovernable and that the efforts of British troops to restore law and order in support of Stormont only make matters worse.

IRA Propaganda

4. The destruction of public morale in Northern Ireland is attempted directly by a campaign of terror. At times it has come close to succeeding. However public morale fluctuates considerably; a week of successes by the security forces, properly publicised, restores spirits that may earlier have seemed nearly broken. Information policy within Northern Ireland must include as priority the need to maintain confidence, which is a joint military-civil information task. It needs to be reinforced from time to time by political reassurance from Westminster that the UK Government is not intending to desert the Protestant majority. UK Opposition attitudes are of course important.
5. IRA efforts to make the British public want to abandon Ulster take many forms. They include:
 - a. Terrorist acts to catch the headlines, which demonstrate a state of chaos which cannot be controlled.
 - b. The murder of British soldiers to bring home the cost of our efforts to control the situation.

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c. The staging of incidents (which can safely be filmed) to provide opportunities to discredit the actions of troops through allegations of brutality and charges of sectarianism, coupled, wherever possible, with implications of ineffectiveness. Examples are charges that troops have shot the wrong person or that their actions have alienated moderate opinion.

d. The campaign against internment, designed to attract support from the left-wing and particularly amongst students including those in universities in Great Britain, to illustrate that the task of imposing control has involved the UK in undemocratic practices. Internment is also presented as an act of violence by the State against the Catholics which has led to, and which justifies, IRA violence. Internment is also presented as an obstacle to a peaceful settlement.

e. Allegations of brutality during interrogation designed further to discredit the Security Forces which are portrayed as violence by the State and therefore provide additional justification for violence by the IRA.

f. The campaign against Stormont and Unionism generally (which had a flying start from 1969) which is attempting to show that the system of government which the UK is supporting is corrupt and incapable of reform and that the Army is a tool of Stormont.

g. The efforts to discredit Stormont take many forms of which the current civil disobedience campaign against payment of rents, rates, licences, etc, is an example.

h. The withdrawal of Catholics from the established political field and refusal to negotiate with Stormont in any way and the refusal to negotiate with Westminster on any terms other than those which are tantamount to surrender, are designed to make Stormont appear to be the stumbling block to peace.

6. As well as these strategic objectives IRA propaganda has tactical aims which include:

a. The inhibiting of any military tactics or action which threatens the IRA:

(1) The anti-interrogation campaign is energetically stepped up whenever important members of the IRA have been "lifted".

(2) Units that "lean" heavily on the IRA are subjected to smear campaigns in the newspapers and subversive literature. Rumours are also deliberately put about.

(3) Internment itself, being our most important weapon, is attacked and made a barrier to any negotiation.

- b. A riot or an atrocity will quickly be arranged to try to restore the "chaos as usual" impression. When it appears that a security force success is likely to capture the headlines. A bombed pub is more dramatic than an announcer saying that the Army has arrested 12 more IRA men. Incidents are often planned to draw journalists away from important press conferences or briefings.
- c. Attempting to lower the morale of troops by using terrorist tactics to inflate casualties and by continuing abuse from civilians, especially women and children.
- d. Using intimidation on the Catholic population to prevent fraternisation.
- e. Encouraging troops to over-react in confusing situations and then publicise "excesses".
- f. Attempting to impose restrictions, or at least hesitancy on reaction by soldiers to violent situations and by bogus concern over the position of soldiers with the law. This is part of the campaign to harness the law to its own destruction.
- g. The campaign against the rearming of the RUC.

IRA Propaganda Organisation

7. IRA propaganda has its base in Dublin where both factions run their own information centres, both with the title "Irish Republican Publicity Bureau". Each has a full time staff and has subordinate directors in Belfast, Londonderry and elsewhere. The campaign is pushed by numerous front organisations and by Republican sympathisers who, having themselves been taken in by the propaganda, are willing to spread the word. These organisations include:

- a. The Association for Legal Justice (which has been the principal agency for co-ordinating the campaign alleging brutality during internment and interrogation).
- b. Republican Clubs (which have always been fronts for the Sinn Fein political party and which now help to disseminate the propaganda of whichever faction they have chosen to support).
- c. The Belfast Central Citizens Defence Committee (once given a cloak of respectability as representative of the Catholic population of the city, but now heavily involved in promoting IRA interests).
- d. The Irish News (a newspaper that has for long represented Republican opinion in Ulster and is now an organ for printing IRA propaganda).
- e. Catholic Ex-Servicemen's Association (is becoming increasingly involved with the IRA as a front organisation).
- f. NTORA (Directed by Kevin McGorry).
- g. Various Relief and Action Committees in Catholic areas.

- h. Minority Rights Association.
- j. Various regional Citizens Defence Committees working to the CCDC.
- k. SDLP.
- l. PD and other "New Left" organisations.
- m. Vigilante or street committees, who organise allegations and fake damage, etc.
- n. University groups and teachers.
- o. RTE and newspapers in the Republic to varying degrees, with the Irish Press particularly active.
- p. Committee for Truth (Fr Denis Faul - brutality allegations vehicle).
- q. Association of Irish Priests (Ulster Branch) (Secretary Terrance O'Keefe, Coleraine University)).
- r. A number of RC priests, but Frs Brady, Faul and Egan are prominent.

8. Thus IRA propaganda can be compared with Esso's simple and successful "Tiger in your Tank" advertising campaign by which thousands of motorists were prepared to carry Esso advertising on their cars at almost no cost to the firm. So long as it appears to the majority of Catholics that the British Army is a threat to their community by acting as an "instrument of Stormont" and is believed by many as being an obstacle to their political aspirations they can be expected to believe most of IRA statements; and, so long as they believe, they repeat. The indigenous Irish, once convinced that their cause is just, possess a breath-taking ability to lie with absolute conviction, not just in support of something they believe to be true, but to put across a story they know very well is untrue. In this way, convincing witnesses can invariably be produced at a moment's notice to sell whatever line the IRA consider to be to their advantage. Members of the IRA and their supporting propaganda agencies have good contacts in high places in the various media, newspapers, radio and television, who can guide them over publicity at short notice. The Irish are also remarkably adept at picking up and repeating propaganda points they hear being expounded by their leaders, both political and IRA, on the radio and television.

9. Having appreciated the public opinion situation created by the Civil Rights Movement in 1969 and 70 the IRA apparently believed that they could murder British soldiers and innocent civilians while at the same time continuing to enjoy support and sympathy in the UK press and other media. Once the true nature of the IRA's campaign became apparent many British newsmen have turned against the IRA. The British public itself, while sympathetic towards the Army's role in Ulster and revolted by the IRA's activities, nevertheless is totally confused and therefore unable to sort truth from fiction or to recognise subtle IRA propaganda for what it is. The proposition that an abandonment of internment would somehow end violence and allow our troops to be withdrawn is a particularly seductive ploy. The public also finds it difficult to detect the sinister purpose behind IRA demands for "public inquiries". The purpose of such inquiries would be solely to provide platforms for propaganda; not to get at the truth.

Military Information Policy Objectives

10. Military Information Policy is concerned to:
 - a. Educate all military commanders in Northern Ireland to include public opinion among the factors to be considered in any military appreciation.
 - b. Counter IRA propaganda by ensuring a truthful account of military activities is presented to the media, in such a way that the reasons for action are seen to be sensible and that our policies are leading towards success.
 - c. Discredit the IRA propaganda machine by exposing its aims and methods so as to reduce its effectiveness in future.
 - d. Identify the sources and principal agencies of IRA propaganda with a view to defeating their efforts.
11. In respect of objectives b. and c. the main target is British public opinion with opinion in Northern Ireland a close second. Catholic opinion in the North is an important target but it is difficult to influence it until the IRA grip upon it starts to be loosened. Opinion in the Republic is also difficult to influence at the moment but, if there is truth in the assertion that one cannot fool all of the people all of the time, intelligent people will eventually realise the extent to which they have been deceived by the IRA. They will also recognise the threat to their own society in the Republic should the IRA ever achieve its political objectives in the North. Overseas targets are outside the province of Military Information Staffs and are covered by the FCO.
12. Nothing is more urgent than:
 - a. Educating the British public in the importance of not allowing violence to oust the rule of law in the UK and in the consequences of military withdrawal from Northern Ireland.
 - b. Making the same public understand what the Army in Northern Ireland is doing and why, and to accept the inevitability of continued and haphazard IRA attacks until such time as the Army's tactics pay off.
 - c. Opening the eyes of the British public to the fact that if they support demands for an end to internment before the IRA have called off violence, or for the withdrawal of British troops, they are doing precisely what the IRA wants.
13. The accomplishment of the first task is outside the direct responsibility of military information policy although the point can be offered to journalists for consideration. The second and third tasks are clearly a military responsibility. They will not be done simply by publicising what the Army is achieving: they call for an educative process to show:

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- a. That our tactics are based on attrition of IRA strength by searches, arrests and internment, with the infliction of casualties in gun battles as an important bonus, leading to a collapse of IRA morale and capability.
 - b. That internment is therefore vital to the defeat of the IRA, that it is an humane alternative to relying entirely on shooting it out and that the ordinary processes of law are not a practical alternative because the IRA have deliberately made the law inoperable through intimidation.
 - c. That the men interned are actual or potential killers on whom too much sympathy should not be wasted and that any "mistakes" over internment, a difficult operation in any circumstances, are being rectified.
 - d. That effective interrogation is vital to success, and does not involve brutal or harmful methods, even though it may be unpleasant. In the short term, lives are being saved.
 - e. That there is no direct correlation between the attrition of IRA numbers and the IRA's ability to shoot and bomb. During the crucial period that we and the IRA now face it is obvious that they will go to all lengths to intensify their attacks and, as their real power lessens, so their attacks may become more savage and indiscriminate. Even when the number of terrorists is quite small (as the Angry Brigade have shown) incidents can still be arranged. Nevertheless it is attrition that will finally break the IRA (and hopefully destroy their morale at some point along the path to total elimination) and the public in Britain has a duty to be at least as patient as the Northern Ireland population who are suffering the direct effects of the IRA's campaign.
14. In tackling these tasks the Army must not appear hawkish or opposed to peaceful settlements. It must argue from military logic, within its own terms of reference. Whilst there should be no doubt that the task of overcoming the IRA is a military responsibility, it should always be recognised that the long-term solution must be political.

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