

"Sharp turn on the Rock Road: An Alternate history of Ireland."

They buried Eamonn De Valera on the 1st October 1943, nearly two weeks after the car crash on the Rock Road, Blackrock, which had claimed the life of both the Taoiseach and his Garda driver. Given his iconic status in the political pantheon of the Free State, the Minister for Supplies and de facto successor, Sean Lemass, had delayed the traditional swift burial to allow for a ceremony more befitting "the chief." Over a quarter of a million people turned up to pay their respects as the procession made its way from the Pro-Cathedral to Glasnevin, and two days later, the Fianna Fail parliamentary party met and anointed the young 44 year old minister as Taoiseach.

A week after his election as Taoiseach, Lemass was visited by the US ambassador. The visit was perfunctory, the diplomat visiting to pass on the respects of President Roosevelt. As they spoke, the ambassador, who was well briefed as to the differences in outlook between De Valera and his young protégé, decided to take a gamble. By pure coincidence, he had on his person copies of OSS briefing documents outlining allied intelligence on the concentration camps. Lemass read them, asked questions about their veracity, and then opened a discussion with the ambassador about the post-war situation. The world was waiting for the invasion of France, and that, in tandem with the German reversals on the Eastern front, meant that the war was going to end, and Nazi Germany was going to be defeated. On top of that, it was becoming very clear that the United States was going to be the dominant power in the world. Lemass then changed the subject entirely, spoke about the challenges facing a tiny, newly independent nation like Ireland, and its place in the world.

The ambassador, familiar with the roundabout ways of Irish politicians back home, took the hint, and started to discuss Ireland's strategic importance as the gateway to the Atlantic, and how a US presence in the country would mean a lot of GI pay packets being spent and indeed how the US would have to help its allies rebuild after the war.

Of course, Lemass stressed, there was the question of partition. The ambassador could not commit the US, and was honest about the relationship with Britain, but suggested that a post-war Ireland, prosperous from her relationship with the United States, would be a far more attractive proposition for the unionists in the North. Lemass agreed.

The young prime minister outlined, hypothetically, of course, the difficulties the country would have with fighting alongside British troops. Indeed, given the tiny size of the Irish forces, they would have to serve under another allied command, and the thought of them serving under British command was not a proposition he thought he could sell to his people.

But under US command? The ambassador asked. The Taoiseach filled his pipe. That was a different proposition. There was a special place for America in every Irishman's heart.

The ambassador thanked the Taoiseach for his time, and asked if the Taoiseach would be willing to study a more detailed hypothetical proposal? The Taoiseach smiled. He would always give any request from America his full consideration.

Things moved fast. In late December, the ambassador returned, this time with a senior US Army officer in civilian clothes, who outlined the proposal. Lemass raised certain issues, which the ambassador felt could be addressed, and all three men shook hands, confident that an agreement could be reached.

On Christmas Eve the ambassador returned, this time with a draft document. Lemass reviewed it, expressed happiness with it, and pledged to put it to his government.

The Taoiseach approached his cabinet colleagues individually, and all agreed, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. His foreign minister, Frank Aiken, threatened to resign, angered by his exclusion, but the two men fought it out over porter in front of a fire, and the minister agreed to support the Taoiseach.

On the 1st of January 1944 US fighter aircraft from Northern Ireland began landing in Irish military airfields. A large convoy of US troops, escorted by the Irish army, crossed the border, bringing large quantities of anti-aircraft and radar equipment with them. The same morning, Lemass called in the leaders of the four opposition parties, and briefed them. All agreed with his proposals.

Later that day, the Taoiseach addressed the nation on radio. He told them of the evidence that had been presented to him by the government of the United States which showed that the Nazi Government of Germany was engaged in the mass extermination of hundreds of thousands of civilians. He recognised Eamonn de Valera's wish that the country stay out of the intrigues of the great powers, but pointed out that as a nation that had experienced a similar outcome during the Great Famine, Ireland could not morally stand idly by and let it happen to others if we had the power to act. Therefore, he said, he had instructed the minister for external affairs to inform the German ambassador that this country was now at war with Germany and her allies.

He informed the country that the United States had agreed a treaty with the Irish Free State, the Treaty of Dublin, to enter into a mutual defence pact with the United States, and that US air and land forces were now entering the state to set up defences. Finally, he pointed out that the Free State would raise two divisions of volunteers, equipped and trained by the United States, and serving under US command. Lemass finished by stressing that he, as a veteran of the GPO in 1916, had always hoped that he would have been able to steer Ireland away from war, but that the defence of civilised Christian values was not a task that Ireland should shirk from.

The responses were mixed. The German government declared that the declaration confirmed their belief that Fianna Fail was a Jewish front, a concern echoed by the lone voice of Oliver J. Flanagan TD. The British government expressed disgust at the actions of a Nazi and British government been given moral equivalence, and Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy took particular pleasure in carrying the US response

to Churchill. In Ireland, US forces moving south were stunned to be met by cheering crowds not akin to those expected from a liberation. US Navy vessels steaming into Cork harbour were met by cheering crowds waving US flags. In Boston, New York and Chicago, Irish flags went up alongside US flags in Irish-American neighbourhoods and impromptu parties broke out, celebrating the old country's entry into the war.

Two nights later, US Army Air Force fighters put up a solid defence of the ports of Waterford and Cork, inflicting heavy casualties on a German bomber force. But some did get through, killing over three hundred civilians in both cities. Surprisingly, the reaction of the populace was a muted acceptance.

As part of the Treaty of Dublin, the US agreed to release Irishmen currently serving in the US forces, if they so desired, to return to Ireland to serve in the Free State forces, an action they would have taken anyway to ensure that the new force had some injection of experienced soldiers in it. The British, under huge pressure from Washington, reluctantly agreed to do the same.

By May 1944, over 42,000 Irishmen, including 4,000 US citizens, passed out from the Curragh camp as the 1st and 2nd Irish Free State divisions. Lemass, standing with President Hyde, took the salute as the forces marched by, indistinguishable from US forces save for the tricolour and Saorstat Eireann shoulder flashes.

On June 6th, 1944, boys and men from Brooklyn, Belmullet, Chicago and Clonakilty died on Omaha beach as the allies delivered a hammer blow to Hitler's Atlantic Wall. Irish forces, gradually coming under the command of Irish officers receiving battlefield commissions, fought in Operation Market Garden and the Battle of the Bulge. One of the more notable features of the Irish contribution was the effect of serving in US forces had on the Irishmen. Washington had integrated the two Irish divisions to such an extent that the Irish soldiers were trained and paid the same, as well equipped and well fed as US forces, which caused considerable jealousy from British forces. The Irish soldiers also found, through their Catholicism, a kinship with Italian and Polish American troops, all sharing the same padres. Indeed, when the inevitable brawls broke out in mess halls with British troops, American troops waded in on the side of the Irish. Such was the integration that Irish troops requested, and were granted, the right to wear US flags alongside the tricolour on their uniforms.

When Germany surrendered, Ireland celebrated with the rest of the allies. Ireland benefited greatly from the munificence of Marshall Aid, which Lemass was adamant about targeting specifically towards transforming the country into a modern industrialised nation. Although the sprawling US training base in the Curragh was scaled back, President Truman was adamant that the US Air Force base in Shannon, and the huge naval base in Cork were both, along with various coastal installations, vital to western defence of the North Atlantic. Lemass, aware of both their strategic significance and indeed the substantial financial contribution the various bases made to the economy, agreed, and Ireland accepted the invitation of the United States to become a founder member of NATO in 1949.

By the late 1950s, Ireland was booming. The Irish-American "special relationship" was sneered at by the British, with some of the Tory right referring to Ireland as the US's poodle in Europe. It was certainly true that the US regarded Ireland as its most openly loyal ally, and US businesses found in Ireland a competitive English-speaking base from which to access into the emerging European market. In the Fianna Fail government, re-elected in 1948 at the head of massive investment from the US, it found a party not dissimilar to the Democratic Party at home, pragmatic and willing to work with business to enhance prosperity. Marshall Aid spending on infrastructure was planned in tandem with American companies, allowing them to place manufacturing facilities in ideal locations such as brand new port facilities for shipping to the continent and the UK.

But the real challenge to Ireland came in 1957, as the nations of Europe came together to negotiate an economic community. The British had decided not to participate, but Ireland, rapidly becoming one of the more prosperous nations in the post war, was encouraged by the US to join.

Lemass regarded the decision as equal in importance to his decision to enter the war. To go into Europe without the British was a massive step, given the British market's importance, but he also believed that the British were making a mistake, and would eventually have to follow Ireland in. The French expressed concerns, especially as to the possibility that Ireland would be "Washington's Man". But that was a proposition that appealed to the Germans and the other countries, eager to anchor the US in Europe, and so in 1957 Lemass signed the Treaty of Rome, making Ireland one of the seven founding members of the European Economic Community, and despatching the experienced Frank Aiken to Brussels as Ireland's first commissioner.

The 1960s brought continued economic progress to the Irish Free State, with many emigrants returning from the United States and Britain. Such was the demand for labour in the south that workers from Northern Ireland began to seek employment in the south, an event which Lemass marked by pointing out that companies that discriminated against Northern protestants would find getting government contracts "a challenge", an action which did not go unnoticed amongst unionist circles.

The 1961 visit of prime minister Macmillan and his chief EEC negotiator, Edward Heath, was covered widely in the international press, as they sought the help of the Irish government to enter the EEC. Lemass was cordial and positive, but stressed that Britain would have to take action to ensure that Catholics were not discriminated against in the North, a matter which the British government acted on in legislation before Ireland positively supported UK membership, despite the eventual French veto.

President Kennedy visited in 1963, and addressed the Dail where he reminded the house that "like us, you come to war reluctantly, and sometimes late, but like us, you fight twice as hard when you are there."

In January 1965 Captain Terence O'Neill, prime minister of Northern Ireland, visited Dublin, where he was warmly received by crowds and the Taoiseach, and where journalists were stunned to hear Lemass announce a contract for Harland and Wolff to build two warships for the Irish Navy, a corvette and a diesel powered submarine. The submarine was to be named after a master of secret warfare, the LE General Michael Collins, and the corvette was to be named after a prominent Dubliner, the LE Edward Carson. O'Neill was pleased to inform Lemass that, due to the economic opportunities in the south, and anti discrimination legislation on both sides of the border, he believed that a new era in cross border co-operation was possible. Both men issued a joint statement which recognised the differences in policy, but accepted that any solution must be solely by peaceful means, and that cross-border co-operation on the basis of mutual respect was the way forward.

In November 1966, following the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising, and the parade of US, Free State, French and West German troops past the GPO a poignant reminder of Ireland's place amongst the nations, Lemass stepped down after 23 years as Taoiseach, and was replaced by Jack Lynch.

Lemass died in 1971, just before Ireland, acting as a broker for the British, helped negotiate British entry into the EEC. The policy was supported by all the Dail parties save for Sinn Fein which had reinvented itself as an ardently European federalist party, and opposed British membership because of partition and also because of a fear that Britain would block the emergence of a United States of Europe.

The main concession the British had to make to Ireland was for Britain to agree to the introduction of a single European currency. That policy was wholeheartedly endorsed by the Ulster Unionist/Social Democratic Labour Party coalition in Stormont, who wished to attract investment from the South.

A secondary concession was British support for the appointment of the first Irish President of the Commission. Although the nominee was only a first term opposition TD, Lynch was adamant that the candidate proposed was what the country needed, a man of calibre in Brussels, regardless of party affiliation. The government toured him, accompanied by the urbane young foreign minister, Charles J. Haughey, around Europe, where both men impressed the leaders of Europe, Haughey with his charm, the nominee with his intellect.

On the 6th January, 1973, the European Commission was nominated by the council of ministers, and the first Irish President of the European Commission was appointed.

The 46 year old deputy for Dublin South East, and son of parents whom had both fought alongside Sean Lemass in the GPO, Dr. Garrett Fitzgerald, took the oath.