

University of North Carolina at Asheville

American Public Perception of Irish Neutrality During World War II

A Senior Thesis Submitted to  
The Faculty of the Department of History  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in History

by  
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On St. Patrick's Day, 1941 Ireland's President, Eamon de Valera addressed both the Irish people and America in a radio broadcast. de Valera's speech dealt with Ireland's position as a neutral nation with regard to World War II. In his speech de Valera made the case for the continuance of Irish neutrality, "A small country like ours that had for centuries resisted imperial absorption, and that still wished to preserve its separate national identity, was bound to choose the course of neutrality in this war."<sup>1</sup> de Valera's case for neutrality was not only based on Ireland's past history and suffering at the hands of others. Another main reason for neutrality was "the continued existence of partition, that unnatural separation of six of our counties from the rest of Ireland."<sup>2</sup> de Valera made it clear to England that so long as they sought to continue partition Ireland would have no choice but to remain neutral.

de Valera went on to declare that when neutrality was announced by the Irish government it was supported by every political party in their Parliament. Not only every political party stood by and supported neutrality but according to de Valera it was the will of an overwhelming majority of the population. de Valera dismissed the thought that Ireland could or would be used as a base from which to attack England. For de Valera to allow such an action would have been in direct violation of neutrality and Ireland's guarantee to resist any aggression. "It has taken an effort of centuries to win back the independence we have got. We are determined that it shall not be lost again."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eamon de Valera, "Ireland's Position in a World at War," Radio broadcast, March 17, 1941.

<sup>2</sup> de Valera.

<sup>3</sup> de Valera.

Eamon de Valera's speech, as the president of Ireland, came almost two years after war had broken out on the European continent. The speech was to the Irish people but also sought to influence the United States public. His choice of speaking to the United States on St. Patrick's Day insured that he would have an attentive audience. de Valera's speech was an attempt to make the American public, and Irish-Americans in particular, understand the perilous position of Ireland. Their position was unique due to Ireland's geographical proximity to England. The English thought of a neutral Ireland at their back as a threat to their national security in time of war. After the quick fall of France, Irish neutrality became an even greater concern to the English government. de Valera knew that President Roosevelt and many of the American public naturally favored England when war broke out. That was the case despite the many years of United States isolationism. de Valera's speech was a plea for the people of the United States not to dismiss Irish neutrality after two years of war propaganda.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand Irish neutrality during World War II one must examine the myriad of underlying causes of the policy. It was not a clear-cut case of the Irish siding with anyone who was fighting against the English. Neutrality was much more intricate than that. Ireland's unyielding stance also had an enormous effect on United States-Irish relations throughout the war. Those relations became particularly tense the longer the war dragged on. Only with such a basic understanding of causes and events can one begin to examine American public perception of Irish neutrality throughout the war. The majority of Americans, who were not of Irish descent, did not favor the policy of Irish neutrality. While both countries maintained neutrality in the war, the majority of Irish-Americans

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Girvin and Geoffrey Roberts eds., *Ireland and the Second World War: Politics, Society and Remembrance*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 151-179.

were naturally sympathetic to Ireland and supported its neutrality. Irish-Americans changed their attitudes when the United States officially entered the war. The majority of Irish-Americans shifted their position and supported their adopted country through the remainder of the war.

Several prominent historians have examined the subject of Irish neutrality. Some of the earliest scholarly works on the subject dealt with Irish neutrality in great detail. Robert Fisk's *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster, and the Price of Neutrality, 1939-45* contains nearly 500 pages on the subject. Fisk contended that, given the situation in Ireland at the outbreak of war, it had no option other than to seek a policy of neutrality. Ireland had no navy, no air force, and a miniscule army which was under-equipped. Several author scholars wrote similar works all of which dealt strictly with the reasons of Irish neutrality.<sup>5</sup>

T. Ryle Dwyer chose to examine Irish neutrality in a new light with his work *Strained Relations: Ireland at Peace and the USA at War, 1941-45*.<sup>6</sup> Dwyer's thesis was that Ireland had adopted a benevolent attitude towards the Allies and the United States in particular. Ireland's stance went outside the normal bounds of neutrality and so further examination was necessary. He sought not only to outline Irish neutrality but also to give evidence of how it affected the relations between the United States and Ireland.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster, and the Price of Neutrality, 1939-45*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983). See also John Bowman, *De Valera and the Ulster Question 1917-1973*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), Mike Cronin and John M. Regan, *Ireland: The Politics of Independence, 1922-49*, (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 2000), Joseph T. Carroll, *Ireland in the War Years 1939-1945*, (New York: Crane, Russak & Co., Inc., 1975).

<sup>6</sup> T. Ryle Dwyer, *Strained Relations: Ireland at Peace and the USA at War, 1941-45*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988). See also T. Ryle Dwyer, *Irish Neutrality and the USA, 1939-1947*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977).

More recently historians have begun to focus on new methods of examining the Irish experience during World War II. Scholar Clair Wills<sup>7</sup> demonstrated that neutrality did not entirely protect Ireland from all of the war's effects. That neutrality seemed natural and necessary to most people due to Ireland's history and poor defenses. Wills examines Irish neutrality from a cultural perspective on an individual and national level. Wills makes use of political cartoons and other forms of media not used by other authors.

Scholars have not addressed how the American public perceived Irish neutrality and how their perceptions changed over the course of World War II. One scholarly source which came close to assessing the issue was Robert Cole's work entitled *Propaganda, Censorship, and Irish Neutrality in the Second World War*.<sup>8</sup> Cole's thesis was that the propaganda and censorship of the Irish Free State, England, and the United States was used against the people. Cole examines a variety of sources, including newspapers, government documents, and information that was not available to the public at the time. Cole's examined the propaganda works and the degree to which governments censored the press in the three countries. His work did not sufficiently address how the American public felt about the specific issue of Irish neutrality. Cole did not make extensive use of newspaper articles and editorials that dealt with public opinion in the United States. Newspaper articles and editorials can reveal much about American public opinion regarding Irish neutrality.

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<sup>7</sup> Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A Cultural History of Ireland During the Second World War*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). See also Benjamin John Grob-Fitzgibbon, *The Irish Experience During the Second World War: An Oral History*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Cole, *Propaganda, Censorship, and Irish Neutrality in the Second World War*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006).

Less than two decades before the outbreak of World War II Ireland had been engaged in a protracted war with England for sovereignty. Many of those who had fought in that war, including Eamon de Valera, were still alive. The effect that such a recent war with England had on the Irish people was profound. Even worse, the peace treaty had left an open wound in Irish society. The two belligerents came to an agreement in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The majority of Irish counties would be incorporated into a nominally sovereign state known as the Irish Free State. The exception to that were the six Irish counties in the north, which had Protestant majorities. According to the treaty those six counties were not subject to rule by the Irish Free State. They would remain under the control of the English government. The English had partitioned the island with the Catholic majority in a nominally sovereign state while retaining the six Protestant counties. That situation led to a split in those who had fought against the English for independence. On one side were those who accepted the treaty as Ireland's best hope for freedom and sovereignty. On the other side were those who felt that the Irish Free State should incorporate the entirety of the island. Ireland was then plunged into a bitter civil war. The group that supported the treaty, including Partition of the island, emerged victorious in the struggle.<sup>9</sup>

Memories of both the Anglo-Irish war and the Irish civil war were very much in the minds of many of the people of Ireland when war broke out. Those events were especially significant to Eamon de Valera, the President of Ireland. de Valera had been involved in the Easter Rising of 1916, the Anglo-Irish war, and fought on the losing side in the Irish civil war. More tangible than even those powerful memories was the issue of

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<sup>9</sup> Tim P. Coogan, *Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 60-87.

Partition. de Valera's government claimed sovereignty over the whole of the island rather than just the twenty-six counties that the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 provided for. Many of the people of Southern Ireland agreed with the idea that the Irish Free State should naturally include the whole island. The two governments attempted to arrange some sort of defense agreement before war broke out. Such an arrangement proved impossible for de Valera for several reasons. According to historian John Bowman, "No defense agreement would be tolerable to his own extremists, without some arrangement for the termination of Partition."<sup>10</sup> Those extremists were the Irish Republican Army, a group who sought the end of Partition through violent means rather than political. Secondly, the ending of Partition had such a broad basis of popular support that de Valera could not take the risk politically. So many Irish Catholics viewed Partition as the unnatural separation of part of their country. The negotiations for a defense agreement broke down over the issue of Partition. There remained little hope that Ireland would be anything other than a neutral in the coming war.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most important contributions to Irish neutrality in the war was the 1937 Irish Constitution. Certain provisions in the original Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 prevented full Irish sovereignty in some respects. de Valera attempted to eradicate any and all provisions of the original treaty that would prevent Ireland from exerting complete sovereignty from England. In 1937 Ireland passed a new constitution in a nationwide referendum. It was an important first step which would ultimately secure complete sovereignty for Ireland. With the new constitution Ireland could not be coerced

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<sup>10</sup> Bowman, 174.

<sup>11</sup> Grob-Fitzgibbon, 59-85.

into joining the war on the side of England or any other Commonwealth nation.

Consequently, Ireland was in a much stronger position when it went to the negotiating table with the English. Despite his much improved position de Valera could not end Partition.<sup>12</sup> But the negotiations were not a complete failure for de Valera and Ireland.

In 1938 de Valera and the English government negotiated the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The significance of the Agreement of 1938 was vital to Ireland's ability to remain neutral. de Valera essentially was able to gain English agreement to vacate three Irish ports that the English had held since 1921. The English would also relinquish all claims to military bases in Ireland. Prior to the handover of bases any claim by the Irish to neutrality would not have been possible. For a nation to claim neutrality, while allowing one of the belligerent's military bases on their soil, would have shattered any claim to neutrality.<sup>13</sup> With the three ports securely in Irish hands Irish neutrality was insured.

When war did break out in Europe, following Germany's invasion of Poland, de Valera declared Ireland's neutrality. Ireland's declaration followed similar declarations of neutrality by other nations, namely the United States, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, and others. de Valera was able to keep Ireland neutral because the majority of Irish citizens favored it for various reasons. Those reasons centered on Ireland and England's recent history and the issue of Partition. Partition remained an incredibly inflammatory subject, for all sides in Ireland. Politically de Valera simply could not bring Ireland into the war with Partition unresolved. With the greater autonomy granted to

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<sup>12</sup> Cronin and Regan, 160-179.

<sup>13</sup> Trevor Allen, *The Storm Passed By: Ireland and the Battle of the Atlantic, 1940-41*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1996), 20-35.

Ireland following the passage of the 1937 Constitution de Valera was able to successfully negotiate the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1938. The agreement, which stipulated the removal of English military forces from Ireland was the final step needed to secure for Ireland its neutrality.<sup>14</sup>

When Ireland declared neutrality their problems were far from over. Throughout the war Ireland would come under tremendous pressure from England to join their cause and aid them against the Axis powers. Initially, Ireland looked across the Atlantic to the United States for support. The United States was a fellow neutral in the war and should have felt a certain amount of sympathy towards such a small, recently independent nation. Traditionally, Ireland had enjoyed close ties with the United States, due mainly to the huge number of Irish who immigrated there. The assumption that Ireland would enjoy such affable relations with the United States throughout the war was on shaky ground. President Roosevelt lobbied in favor of entering the war on the English side. He considered the defeat of Nazi Germany to be imperative.<sup>15</sup> As the war progressed the relationship between Ireland and the United States became more and more on edge for various reasons.

From the very beginning of the war the Roosevelt administration was unquestionably pro-British. Roosevelt knew that he did not have the public support in the United States to attempt to bring the country into the war. It was viewed by many as simply another European conflict and had nothing to do with the United States. On top of isolationism; Roosevelt faced powerful, active, ethnic voting blocs. Those voting blocs, namely the Irish, were opposed to United States entry into the war. Roosevelt resented

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<sup>14</sup> Fisk, 10-45.

<sup>15</sup> Wills, 336-361.

the power of the voting blocs at the beginning of the war. Due to political considerations he could not openly anger this group by appearing too pro-British in public. Roosevelt was seeking an unprecedented third term in office in 1940 and needed the votes the group could generate for his campaign. Roosevelt was opposed to Irish neutrality from the beginning of the war. He greatly resented de Valera using the power of the millions of Irish-Americans as a defense against the displeasure of both the United States and English governments.<sup>16</sup>

One of the clearest signs of the strained relationship between de Valera and Roosevelt manifested itself quickly once the war began. In order to let Eamon de Valera know of his displeasure with Irish neutrality, Roosevelt gave de Valera and the Irish the “absent treatment.” The absent treatment consisted of Roosevelt ignoring Ireland, de Valera, and any Irish diplomats whenever possible. On a few occasions when Roosevelt did actually meet with Irish representatives he was unyielding in his stance that Ireland needed to enter the war. On at least one occasion when the meeting took a turn for the worse President Roosevelt ended the meeting abruptly by pulling off the tablecloth and upturning all the tableware.<sup>17</sup>

A further part of the “absent treatment” towards Ireland was deliberately not allowing them to participate in certain programs. Ireland was unable to partake in the United States policies of Cash-Carry or Lend-Lease. The policies were enacted by the United States government after President Roosevelt lobbied robustly for them. They were designed to aid the fight against Germany. Roosevelt advocated that America should

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<sup>16</sup> Dwyer, *Irish Neutrality*, 1-20.

<sup>17</sup> Dwyer, *Strained Relations*, 50-77.

revise its neutrality laws in order to be able to provide weapons and munitions to small nations unable to produce their own means of self-defense.<sup>18</sup> But when confronted with de Valera and his adamant stance on neutrality, Roosevelt quickly forgot his own words and refused to help arm Ireland. President Roosevelt reached that decision despite numerous letters from pro-Irish groups asking for arms and supplies to be sold to Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

When the United States entered the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, United States-Irish relations became even more complex. Roosevelt no longer had to contend with isolationists in government, and the various outspoken Irish-American groups. Roosevelt and Churchill both once again asked de Valera to bring Ireland into the war on the side of the Allies. Again de Valera refused to bring Ireland into the war for any reason. January 1942, saw one of the more important diplomatic exchanges between the United States and Ireland. The United States and English governments came to an agreement that the United States would send three divisions of semi-trained troops to be stationed in Northern Ireland. These three divisions would relieve the same number of English troops who were needed elsewhere. The United States units would then finish their training in Northern Ireland. de Valera passionately opposed the stationing of United States troops in Northern Ireland. The Irish government had always claimed the entire territory of the island to be part of the Irish Free State. Therefore, to de Valera and the Irish, the move by the United States totally and completely violated their neutrality

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<sup>18</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1950 (New York: Random House), 381-386.

<sup>19</sup> "Gives Thanks for Aid to Eire," *New York Times*, May 24, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), "Arms Urged for Eire," *New York Times*, June 3, 1941. , "Await Ruling on Parcels to Eire," *New York Times*, June 1, 1941 [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

and national sovereignty. While to outsiders the claim might seem ludicrous it was taken quite seriously in Ireland. The situation drove the United States and Ireland further away from each other.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the war Ireland attempted to appear to be a strictly neutral state not favoring one faction or another. In an effort to remain neutral Ireland allowed both the Axis and Allied powers to maintain diplomats and embassies in Ireland. The presence of Axis diplomats in Ireland became a point of contention between the United States and Ireland. The issue came to a head when the Allies began to plan for an invasion in order to liberate France. As the plan to invade Normandy progressed United States officials began to perceive the Axis diplomats in Ireland as a threat to the invasion. They feared that the Axis diplomats would gain access to the plans due to Irish incompetence. It was thought that the Axis diplomats would then be able to transfer the plans back to Germany via a radio transmitter.<sup>21</sup>

Fear of Germany learning of the plan to invade Normandy led the United States to demand that the Irish expel all Axis diplomats. David Gray used the continued presence of Axis diplomats to create a fictional danger to American troops. The United States knew that de Valera could not capitulate to the demand, to do so would do away with his country's neutrality. Gray hoped that the refusal on Ireland's part would discredit the Irish for the remainder of the war. Gray further hoped that the situation would lead to the splintering of Irish-Americans as a cohesive political unit. Plans were made to emphasize

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<sup>20</sup> E.R. Norderer, "Finds Ireland No Longer Fears an Attack by U.S.," *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 1944, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), Hugh Curran. "Fear U.S. Troops May Bring War to Irish Shores: Dublin Observers Explain Reason for Protest," *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1942. [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>21</sup> Carroll, 139-159.

the deaths of Irish-Americans in the coming invasion and place the blame on Ireland and its policy of neutrality.<sup>22</sup>

The stationing of American troops in Northern Ireland constituted the first major diplomatic crisis between the United States and Ireland. It was soon followed by the “American Note,” authored by United States minister David Gray. The “American Note” constituted the greatest diplomatic crisis between Ireland and the United States during the war. The United States attempted to dictate to Ireland what its foreign policy would be. For de Valera to comply it would have been a twofold defeat. Not only would it break Ireland’s stance of neutrality, but it would in effect surrender part of its sovereignty. Gray hoped that either de Valera would comply or that his refusal could then be used against him in the American press. It was a calculated move not only to discredit de Valera and Ireland but also to cause conflict among Irish-Americans. The propaganda campaign that sought to discredit Ireland and its neutrality had been going on throughout the war with various levels of success. The key avenue of propaganda to the United States public was through newspaper articles.<sup>23</sup>

One of the best possible methods to accurately gauge American public opinion during the time period was through newspaper articles and editorials. The two principle means by which the public received its news was from either the radio or the newspaper. The ability of newspapers to reach a wide audience and capture their attention cannot be

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<sup>22</sup> Wills, 380-400.

<sup>23</sup> Bertram D. Hulén, “U.S. Demands Ban: Charges Eire Is a Base for Espionage That Imperils Our Army Note Backed By Britain De Valera Replies That Close Watch Is Kept -- Use of Nazi Radio Denied Eire Refuses Ban On Axis Missions,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1944, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), Edwin L. James, “Our Demand On Ireland Raises Difficult Issue: Dublin's Refusal to Expel Axis Envoys Leaves Wide Open Question as to What We Will Do Next,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1944, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), “U.S. Plea Spurned By Irish: Reject Appeal To Oust Aids Of Axis As Spies De Valera Defends Neutral Policy,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 1944, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

underestimated. The average American during World War II could access either a radio or a newspaper. Newspapers were the place that people could freely express their thoughts and opinions. The influence that articles and editorials had on members in the community could be profound. The newspaper media also became an important way for the United States government to disseminate war propaganda to the public. Public opinion of the United States can be reached through a thorough examination of newspaper articles and editorials, from several different major United States newspapers.

Most Americans naturally supported neutrality when war broke out given the government's policy of isolationism. They were able to support the government's policy while remaining sympathetic to the English cause. Many Americans did not understand why Ireland was determined to remain neutral while England fought in the war. Many Americans considered England and Ireland inextricably linked. For hundreds of years Ireland had been part of the English empire, albeit reluctantly. Americans could be forgiven for not understanding why Ireland refrained from entering the war beside England. Some Americans thought that if people of Irish descent were threatened in England or America then Ireland should react in their defense. Whether it was through misunderstanding or they were genuinely pro-English, the typical American was against Irish neutrality before the United States entered the war.<sup>24</sup>

One important American raised his voice in defense of Irish neutrality. In early 1941, the former United States minister to Ireland, John Cudahy, wrote a *New York Times*

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<sup>24</sup> George Gallup, "72% of Irish in U.S. Want Bases in Eire; 56% in Gallup Poll Favor Joining in War," *New York Times*, February 22, 1942, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), Hevlyn D. Benson, "Irish Ports and Allied Navies" *New York Times*, March 15, 1944, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), "Bases in Ireland: Their Use Seen as Guarantee of Ireland's Future," *New York Times*, May 25, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

editorial supporting Irish neutrality. He asked Americans to examine the issue from the Irish position and realize what they had at stake. Cudahy commented on the issue of whether or not the English should confiscate Irish ports. "In my opinion, the Irish would oppose British seizure of their ports... and the gains to Britain would not be commensurate with the losses."<sup>25</sup> He warned that public opinion in the United States would not stand for such a move; moreover, there would be another guerilla war in Ireland against the English similar to the one that existed from 1916-1920.<sup>26</sup> To have a former United States minister to Ireland speak out in such a public and forceful way in support of Irish neutrality was incredibly important. The one man in the United States who truly knew the situation in Ireland had supported their neutrality in no uncertain terms.

Many Americans lacked an understanding of Ireland's position. It was a complex subject and the United States government made matters more confusing with their propaganda. Members of the United States government created "Irish-American" groups whose members were not of Irish descent. The purpose of the groups was to spread government propaganda for the war. The groups were able to operate with greater freedom than the government at times, due to its policy of neutrality. The main objective was to influence the United States public in general, but in particular, to attempt to influence Irish-American opinion.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John Cudahy, "Cudahy Supports Ireland on Bases: Former U.S. Minister There Believes She May Be Able to Maintain Neutrality Cites Woes for Invader Says the British Would Lose a Major Food Source -- Nazis Would Have Supply Problem," *New York Times*, February 2, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>26</sup> Cudahy, John. "Cudahy Supports Ireland on Bases."

<sup>27</sup> A.F., Dana, "Fifth Column Words: Bases in Ireland," *Chicago Tribune*, January 6, 1942, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), "Wheeler Blasts Irish-American War Propaganda: Exposes U.S. Officials as Group's Organizers," *Chicago Tribune*, November 11, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

The government's attempt to influence Irish-Americans against neutrality was somewhat successful. A group of prominent Americans of Irish descent sent de Valera a message requesting that Ireland aid England. Most importantly, the group urged that Ireland surrender the controversial military bases back to England. The group was comprised of 129 individuals who felt that the only hope Ireland had was the defeat of Germany. For Germany to be defeated England had to stay in the war, which she was doing alone after the fall of France. But, England's supply lines were slowly being strangled by German submarines. The English government thought the only way they could protect their shipping and their supply lines, was for the Irish to give up their ports. At the time England was suffering desperately from attacks on its shipping, and was in very real danger of being cut off.<sup>28</sup> The message indicates an important split within the Irish-American community on what was "best" for Ireland. Although the group was comprised of only 129 individuals, their occupations and places in American society gave their message a certain amount of clout. The 129 individuals were former United States representatives, university chancellors, judges, university professors and lecturers, and the former police chief of New York City.<sup>29</sup>

Another subset of Irish-Americans could have been said to be simply anti-English at any opportunity. Those who were anti-English were sometimes blinded by hatred and could not see past it in any situation. Those who truly hated the English would sometimes support anyone who fought them. Such was the case with the IRA in Ireland, who favored the Germans simply because they were fighting the English. One Irish-American,

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<sup>28</sup> Allen, 37-46.

<sup>29</sup> "Eire Aid to Britain Asked by U.S. Group: Letter Recognizes Empire's 'Past Crimes,' but Warns Bases to England May 'Hang Separately' Letter Recognizes Past Crimes of Empire, but Warns That Freedom Is at Stake," *New York Times*, March 10, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

James Joseph Burke, wrote into the *Chicago Daily Tribune* with an editorial that was stunningly anti-English. Burke spoke out against the English for various reasons, often referring to the English as “blighters,” and warned, “Our sentiment will rapidly become pro-German instead of pro-British as it now seems to be.”<sup>30</sup> That was just one voice out of many Irish-Americans who were anti-English. When the English government hanged two young members of the IRA for bombings committed in 1939, Irish-Americans raised their voices in protest. The most notable group that protested the hangings was the Irish-American National Alliance, which was made up of eight different Irish-American societies. The group severely criticized the English government for the continued Partition of the island.<sup>31</sup> Between Burke and the Irish-American National Alliance one gains an impression of just how anti-English some Irish-Americans were.

By no means were all individuals or groups of Irish-Americans so blatantly anti-English. Many simply sympathized and supported Ireland and its pursuit of neutrality. One such individual was Martin Conboy, who spoke at a forum of the National Democratic Club the day before St. Patrick’s Day. Conboy spoke out that the Irish people did not want to risk their recently won freedom in the war. Nor did they want to see the destruction of their nation which would certainly follow their entry into the war. In a plea for Americans to understand Ireland’s position Conboy stated, “It took Ireland centuries to do what was done here during the seven years of the American Revolution.”<sup>32</sup> Another

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<sup>30</sup> James Joseph Burke, “Voice Of The People,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 10, 1940, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>31</sup> “Irish Cry Out In Anger and Grief At 2 Hangings: Vow ‘British Aggression’ Must Be Ended,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 8, 1940, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>32</sup> “Irish Neutrality is held Justified: Martin Conboy Says People Do Not Wish to Risk Freedom by Entering the War Position of U.S. Similar St. Patrick's Day Speech Heard at Forum of National Democratic Club Here,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

similar message was delivered by Father Flanagan at a Catholic Mass commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Father Flanagan made many of the same points as did Martin Conboy, with regard to the destruction that would be visited upon Ireland if she entered the conflict. More importantly, the one mass in New York City was attended by 1,500 men, women, and children.<sup>33</sup> Such a display of support for Irish neutrality, at one mass, in one city, speaks volumes for the popular support of Irish neutrality felt by Irish Americans.

One such example of Irish-American support came when England proposed instituting the draft in Northern Ireland. The proposal was immediately followed by widespread protests in Ireland. Those same protests were echoed in the United States by Irish-Americans. The fears of both groups were that the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland would be inordinately affected by the draft. The draft was an issue because it once again demonstrated the affects of Partition on Irish society. An Irish general, Frank Aiken, spoke to members of the New York state convention of the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic. General Aiken was adamantly opposed to the draft. In his speech he likened the proposed draft in Northern Ireland to a foreign nation drafting Americans.<sup>34</sup> The plea was obviously not intended to resonate with just Irish-Americans but with the American public in general.

One of the most important and influential Irish-American groups organized after war broke out were the American Friends of Irish Neutrality. The group was based in

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<sup>33</sup> "Irish Here Offer Prayers For Peace: If Forced Into War Eire Would Become 'a Mass of Ruins,' Father Flanagan Says Easter Rising Marked Tribute Paid to Those Who Took Part in It -- 1,500 Attend Service in This City." *New York Times*, April 20, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>34</sup> Hugh Curran, "Irish Parliament Meets To Oppose Draft In Ulster: De Valera's Statement to Outline Stand," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

New York City and quickly became a powerful force within the community and nation. Shortly after the group was organized a meeting was called in New York City protesting any aggression against Ireland. Almost 6,000 people attended the meeting and passed a resolution to that affect. The group also sent protests to the German embassy about the repeated bombing of neutral Ireland by Germany. The group was also steadfastly opposed to the idea of Ireland surrendering her ports. General Frank Aiken spoke to an audience of 4,500 on the subject of Irish neutrality and the leasing of ports. The American Friends of Irish Neutrality played a significant role in the organization of the event. Individual members of the organization often wrote articles in newspapers attempting to persuade Americans to support Irish neutrality. For a newly formed organization to be able to draw thousands of supporters to a protest and then sign a resolution, send a protest to the German embassy, and attempt to influence American public opinion speaks volumes for the power, influence, and organization of the American Friends of Irish neutrality.<sup>35</sup>

The American Friends of Irish Neutrality played a significant role in supporting Irish neutrality in almost every conceivable way. In order to reach as many people as possible the group not only held public meetings and wrote newspaper articles but they also used the Catholic Church to great effect. The group received a radio communication informing them that in every Catholic Church in Ireland masses were being said to preserve Ireland from invasion. The group set about to organize a similar event in the

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<sup>35</sup> "Eire Will Stay Firm on Refusing Bases to Britain, Envoy Says Here: Gen. Aiken Tells Rally There Is No Chance of Changing Attitude -- Despite Need for Food He Sees No 'Bartering' of Neutrality," *New York Times*, April 26, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), "Irish Here Denounce Willkie's Proposal: Neutrality Advocates Term It a Violation of Freedom," *New York Times*, July 12, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), "Irish Here Send Protest: Societies Decry Bombings in a Telegram to Reich Embassy," *New York Times*, January 4, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) "Irish Neutrality Lauded: Meeting Here Protests Any Attempt to Jeopardize Nation," *New York Times*, December 9, 1940, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), Thomas Fingal Healy, "Policy of Neutrality Regarded as Set by Her Own People," *New York Times*, June 1, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

United States. The group asked a total of 11,000 clergymen throughout the country to have the rosary said for Ireland at their masses.<sup>36</sup>

One month later in New York City the American Friends of Irish Neutrality organized a parade and a mass to be held for the peace and welfare of the Irish people. The organization called on other pro-Irish groups to send representatives to the mass and parade. In total 3,000 people marched in the parade representing thirty Irish organizations. Those represented included organizations from all twenty-six counties of the Irish Free State and all six counties of Northern Ireland. It was estimated that 5,000 people watched the parade along the procession, and that 2,000 more congregated around the cathedral. Fully 6,000 people attended the mass supporting the Irish people. Two of the more prominent members of the congregation that day were General Frank Aiken of Ireland, and John Cudahy, former United States minister to Ireland. The parade was not only a display by Irish-Americans of pride in their ancestry and support for Irish neutrality. In an intelligent political move the American Friends of Irish Neutrality used the occasion to display their patriotism to America. American flags were prominent and the two men holding the organization's banner were dressed as Uncle Sam. The desired outcome was that the event would influence Americans not of Irish descent that one could support Ireland and neutrality while remaining patriotic to America.<sup>37</sup>

The American Friends of Irish Neutrality organized a dinner for General Aiken before he departed the United States. His purpose had been to purchase arms and food for

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<sup>36</sup> "Ireland to Pray for Safety." *New York Times.com*. May 5, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>37</sup> "Cathedral Filled For Irish Service: Crowd Hears Spellman Praise Nation for Its Gift of 'Faith, Hope and Love' Wish For Peace Stressed Colorful Parade Down Avenue Includes Representatives of All 32 Counties," *New York Times*, June 16, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), Rachel K. McDowell, "Mass For Ireland At St. Patrick's: Special Service Tomorrow to Be Preceded by Parade of Irish Groups to Cathedral," *New York Times*, June 14, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

Ireland, which desperately needed both. General Aiken gave a speech where he reiterated Irish neutrality and the will of the Irish people to not be dragged into the war. The dinner was a great success for the American Friends of Irish Neutrality. Those attending the dinner included representatives from cities all across the nation. Such a wide representation of United States suggested that the American Friends of Irish Neutrality as a group had enormous drawing power all over the nation.<sup>38</sup>

The single greatest demonstration of the power of the American Friends of Irish Neutrality as a group came as a result of a petition asking the United States government to supply Ireland with military and other supplies. The American Friends of Irish Neutrality were able to obtain two million signatures on the petition, an incredible feat of organization. To have obtained two million signatures many Irish-American groups and societies had to have been involved and lent their support. The petition marked a victory for Irish-Americans and the American Friends of Irish Neutrality in particular, and their ability to appeal to the American public.<sup>39</sup>

The greatest turning point for American public perception occurred on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1942. The event was the Japanese bombing of the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Following the attack President Roosevelt delivered a speech to the nation, along with a request to Congress to declare war. With Congress' assent the United States entered the war and the American public was fully behind it. That included even Irish-Americans. They had up until United States entry, been entirely supportive of Irish neutrality. But with America's entry Irish-Americans switched their priorities and joined

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<sup>38</sup> "Aiken, Irish Minister, Is Honored At Dinner: At Farewell Fete He Repeats His Country Will Stay Neutral," *New York Times*, June 24, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>39</sup> Cole, 73-97.

in the war effort. “Irish American support for Irish neutrality also evaporated after Pearl Harbor.”<sup>40</sup> While that was true for the majority of Irish-Americans a minority still retained private sympathies for Irish neutrality. Those public events that were held by Irish-Americans and Irish societies emphasized the part Irish-Americans played in the war effort and Irish American heroes.<sup>41</sup>

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor the State Department issued a recommendation that all Americans should be concerned with their own country’s war effort. Furthermore, the State Department added that Americans should not serve on committees representing the political interests of other countries. The first major shift in Irish-American groups was seen soon after the Pearl Harbor attack and the State Department’s recommendation. The executive council of the American Friends of Irish Neutrality dissolved the organization the day after the State Department’s suggestion. The immediate dissolution of the American Friends of Irish Neutrality was the single most dramatic message as to how Irish-Americans completely shifted their aims once the United States was attacked and entered the war. Their every effort was then to be devoted to the prosecution of the war in which their country found itself.<sup>42</sup>

Another way in which to examine the overall shift in the Irish-American community was to examine how many Irish-Americans served in the United States armed forces during the war. Examining just one newspaper article from the *Chicago Daily Tribune* gave an idea of just how dedicated Irish-Americans were. The article examined

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<sup>40</sup> Neville Wylie, *European Neutrals and Non-Belligerents during the Second World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 291.

<sup>41</sup> Wylie, 286-298.

<sup>42</sup> “War Relief Groups Switch Activities: Act on Recommendation That First Concern of Americans Should Be U. S. Effort,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1941, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

five street car drivers in Chicago, four of whom were born in Ireland and came to the United States and the remaining man was born in the United States to Irish parents. Between the five men they had twenty sons fighting in the military. Their sons served in the army, army air corps, the navy, and the marines. Those five men were extremely proud that their sons were serving their country during its time of need. Indeed, some of the men had even more sons of fighting age who were expected to be drafted. The article went on to state that of the 870 men who worked on the street car line 750 of them were Irish. That signified a significant Irish population in Chicago, many of whom had sons fighting in the war.<sup>43</sup> The shift in the Irish-American community did not deal only in sending off their sons to fight in the war.

Efforts were being made to emphasize the parts played by Irish-Americans in the war. Suddenly, every Irish society in Chicago was participating in an Americanism rally. An estimated 20,000 Irish-Americans gathered in Harms Park to celebrate those serving in the war. A special tribute was also paid to mothers of men who had distinguished themselves in the war. The rally served to emphasize their pride in their ancestry, while simultaneously showing how loyal and patriotic Americans of Irish descent were. Several months later, another rally was held in Harms Park. The rally was organized by the Ancient Order of Hibernians, an Irish-American group. 10,000 people gathered for the rally, the purpose of which was similar to the other rally. The rally's speaker, Joseph E. Kerrigan, highlighted the record of patriotism and love for America that Irish-Americans had. The two rallies both emphasized the ancestry of Irish-Americans and how proud they continued to be of it. But, the significant difference was that those rallies occurred

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<sup>43</sup> "Five Street Car Veterans Have 20 Fighting Sons: Five Street Car Veterans Keep Home Fires Blazing as 20 Sons Go to War" *Chicago Tribune*, August 23, 1942, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

after the United States entered the war. The purpose was to show just how much Irish-Americans contributed, their loyalty, patriotism, and love of country. Prior to United States entry into the war the rallies would have been much more likely to support Irish neutrality.<sup>44</sup>

One of the best methods of tracking American opinion was through opinion polls. George Gallup, the director of the American Institute of Public Opinion conducted several such polls throughout the course of the war. More importantly, Mr. Gallup conducted a poll in 1941 and 1942 involving both Irish-Americans and Americans not of Irish descent. The poll examined the public opinion on the matter of Irish neutrality. In order to be counted in the poll the person first had to exhibit a certain amount of knowledge of the subject on Irish neutrality. The survey took a sampling of the continental forty-eight states in proportion to each state's voting population, in order to get the most accurate view as possible.<sup>45</sup>

The first question asked of participants was should the Irish Free State allow use of military bases along the coast to the Allies? Of the regular Americans asked ninety percent said yes, five percent were opposed, and another five percent were undecided. Of Irish-Americans questioned seventy-two percent answered yes, twenty-one percent said no, and seven percent were undecided. The same question had been asked in a similar poll one year earlier by the same institute. The difference in opinion for each group was significant. Of regular Americans sixty-three percent said yes, sixteen percent were against it, and twenty-one percent were undecided. Forty percent of Irish-Americans said

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<sup>44</sup> "Honor Heroes at Irish-American Patriotic Rally: Boys' Mothers Also Get Tribute," *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1942, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com), "Tells How Irish Aided In Building And Saving U.S.: Hibernian President Is Heard by 10,000," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1942, [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>45</sup> Gallup, George. "72% of Irish in U.S. Want Bases in Eire."

yes, fifty-two percent said no, and eight percent were undecided. The poll showed a dramatic shift in the opinions of Irish-Americans after the United States became involved in the war. Before the United States entered the war a majority of Irish-Americans supported Ireland's policy of neutrality, but within a year the majority no longer favored it.<sup>46</sup>

In a world at war, Ireland's leaders felt that they had no choice but to adopt a position of neutrality. They made this decision based on their recent history and the continuing internal problems they faced. Their position of neutrality led them into conflict with the United States government throughout the war. Through the examination of the news media of the time American public opinion can be found. While most of the American public was against Irish neutrality, Irish-Americans actively supported it. They represented an active and powerful minority voice within the nation and they were determined to be heard. The Irish-American voting bloc was used to influence the American government into positions favorable to Ireland. The mobilization of such support in America on behalf of Ireland marked an important moment. It was especially significant because the extent of support lasted only a few short years. It was only after the United States entered the conflict that Irish-Americans stopped actively supporting Irish neutrality. For most Irish-Americans their loyalty to the United States outweighed any feelings of loyalty to Ireland.

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<sup>46</sup> Gallup, George. "72% of Irish in U.S. Want Bases in Eire."

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