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M. L. R. Smith; Peter R. Neumann

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Motorman’s Long Journey: Changing the Strategic Setting in Northern Ireland

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Operation Motorman – the ending of the ‘no-go’ areas in Belfast and Londonderry – was one the biggest deployments of British forces since 1945, yet few analysts have grasped its enduring significance. This article argues that Motorman helped break the vicious circle of violence and atrocity that characterised the most violent years of the early troubles. In hindsight we can see that the aftermath of the operation irrevocably altered the strategic setting in Northern Ireland that, in time, enabled constitutional unionism and nationalism to slowly become more tractable towards each other. While Motorman can in no sense be regarded as the proximate cause of the current Northern Ireland peace process, it can be argued that in removing the most important factor that made the IRA a potent threat, Motorman shattered the IRA’s military bargaining strategy, the long-term effect of which was eventually to propel the republican movement down a path that would ultimately lead it to question the value of its armed struggle.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; British Government; British Army; Irish Republican Army

Introduction

In July 2002, the thirtieth anniversary of one of the most significant events of the Northern Ireland conflict slipped by largely unnoticed. Under the codename ‘Operation Motorman’, on 31 July 1972 the British Army moved into the Irish Republican Army (IRA) strongholds – known as ‘no-go’ areas – of the Creggan,
Brandywell and Bogside in Londonderry (now officially called Derry City) and barricaded districts of Belfast. The scale of the operation was immense. Some 38 army battalions were involved, including 27 infantry battalions and two armoured battalions comprising 22,000 regular troops, backed up by 5300 soldiers of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). In total, over 30,000 armed service personnel took part, making Motorman not only one of the biggest deployments of British forces since the Second World War but, remarkably, the largest troop concentration in Ireland in the twentieth century (including both the Anglo-Irish War, 1919–21 and the Irish Civil War, 1922–23).

Accounts of that day illustrate the magnitude of the operation:

‘Operation Motorman’ in Derry City was heralded by the arrival of several Royal British Navy battleships in Lough Foyle in the early hours of the morning. The Lough effectively splits the city into two-halves – the mainly nationalist west bank, and the mainly unionist east bank. Heavy amphibious crafts carrying soldiers and equipment disembarked from the battleships and began landing on the western shores of the Foyle. The rumble of heavily armoured Centurion tanks could also be heard moving towards the permanent barricades. In the air the drone of British Army helicopters monitoring operations or dropping of invading soldiers resounded all over the city. By daybreak the west bank of the city was effectively surrounded by thousands of heavily armed British soldiers.

The re-occupation of the republican no-go areas, along with the removal of several barricades in loyalist neighbourhoods, met with little resistance. However, the importance of the operation lies not merely in its scale as a military undertaking, significant though it was. Motorman permanently altered the strategic setting in Northern Ireland in which all parties to the conflict had to frame their long-term political judgements. The full repercussions of Motorman took many years to work themselves through. But the die had been cast. The basis for this claim, and the point of departure for this analysis, resides in a simple statistical observation. An analysis of conflict-related deaths, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, demonstrate a steep assent from 1970, culminating in a dramatic apex in 1972 from which the violence receded sharply thereafter. Despite periodic surges in violent activity in subsequent years, the long-term downward trend is clearly evident. That apex is Operation Motorman.

Evaluating Operation Motorman

The intention of this study is to evaluate the political importance of Operation Motorman. Drawing on contemporary accounts and official records, this analysis examines the political and military environment leading up to Motorman, paying particular attention to British motivations and preparations. Following this, the critical strategic impact that the operation wrought will be elucidated. It is suggested that Motorman’s ‘long journey’ has had an enduring influence on Northern Ireland’s politics.
Before proceeding, it is helpful to reflect on the current state of the literature and public understanding of Operation Motorman. Very few scholars have come to acknowledge the political and military significance of Motorman. In fact, in most of what is currently regarded as essential literature on the Northern Ireland conflict, the operation is rarely mentioned in detail. For example, in the otherwise exceptionally authoritative *Northern Ireland, 1921–2001*, Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson recount the history of the province without noting the British Army’s largest operation in 30 years of conflict. Likewise, in *Explaining Northern Ireland*, Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry refer to Motorman on just a single occasion. Michael Cunningham, who provides a generally comprehensive account of British government

![Figure 1 Monthly Record of Deaths, 1972.](image1)

Source: Elliott and Flackes, *Northern Ireland*.

**Figure 1** Monthly Record of Deaths, 1972.

![Figure 2 Yearly Record of Deaths, 1969–80.](image2)

Source: Elliott and Flackes, *Northern Ireland*.

**Figure 2** Yearly Record of Deaths, 1969–80.
policy in Northern Ireland, fails even to supply the correct date, stating that the no-go areas were entered in August 1972.\(^7\)

In republican accounts, on the other hand, Operation Motorman is given slightly more attention, though many of their assumptions are flawed and — at times — contradictory. For example, while Ciáraín de Baróid maintains that the operation launched ‘a reign of terror unknown since the days of the Black and Tans’,\(^8\) David Reed stresses that Motorman was followed by a period of calm in which the Army attempted to be more even-handed by showing ‘a little less toleration of the activities of loyalist paramilitary organisations’.\(^9\) While both de Baróid and Reed believe, somewhat implausibly, that Motorman had little, if any, impact on the IRA’s capability to attack the ‘British forces of occupation’, de Baróid is fairly sophisticated in explaining the political implications of the event, especially the willingness of Catholic ‘moderates’ to enter negotiations with the British government.

Even amongst military historians with an interest in Northern Ireland, there is a distinct lack of understanding when it comes to the wider implications of Operation Motorman. Thomas Mockaitis, for instance, views the event from a very limited tactical perspective, arguing that the removal of the barricades facilitated the gathering of intelligence.\(^10\) In a similar vein, Michael Dewar goes to great lengths in describing the details of Motorman (such as the names of the regiments that were flown to Northern Ireland, and the number of weapons that were found), but fails to extend his analysis beyond purely operational considerations.\(^11\)

Some interesting background is provided by Desmond Hamill, who maintains that there were tensions between the military and political leaderships leading up to the operation. Whereas the Army wanted to maximise the military gains by preserving the element of surprise, thus allowing for a great number of arrests, the attitude of government ministers was more cautious. According to Hamill, the priority of the politicians was to prevent a public relations disaster, and to limit the number of potential casualties.\(^12\) Likewise, in *The Irish War*, Tony Geraghty emphasises the political risks of the operation, which dominated the minds of the British Cabinet in the days before it was launched. He also asserts, accurately, that Motorman ‘virtually ended the [IRA’s] urban guerrilla warfare’, and that it ‘marked the end of the first phase of the renewed Irish war’.\(^13\) In failing to develop these themes, however, his treatment of the issue remains cursory.

Equally disappointing is Caroline Kennedy-Pipe and Colin McInnes’ article on the first years of British Army involvement in Northern Ireland. While the two authors dedicate several paragraphs to the event, they claim, wrongly, that it was launched in response to ‘three large bombs’ that had gone off in Londonderry.\(^14\) In doing so, they overlook the crucial influence of ‘Bloody Friday’ in creating the political environment without which a large-scale military operation would not have been possible.

More recent and less scholarly understandings of Motorman are both narrow and increasingly obscured by the passage of time. Contemporary republican recollections are used often merely to reinforce standard beliefs that the operation to ‘smash Free Derry’ exposed British rule ‘once again to the world as a colonial and oppressive
power. Collective republican memory tends therefore to focus on the deaths of the two people who lost their lives during the operation. Daniel Hegarty, aged 15, and Seamus Bradley, a 19-year-old IRA member were shot dead as the Army moved into the Creggan estate in what republicans still consider suspicious circumstances.

Insofar as Motorman is mentioned in public comment elsewhere, it tends to be filtered through interpretations of, or sometimes even confused with, other events of that bleak period. Press coverage of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry related how some witnesses believed the actions of the Parachute Regiment on 30 January 1972, in which 13 civilians were shot dead, to be a ‘dry-run’ for Operation Motorman. Other witnesses to the Inquiry were accused of mistaking Operation Motorman with the abortive Operation Hailstone that was planned (but never implemented) by the Army in mid-1971 with the intention of drawing the IRA out of Londonderry. Meanwhile, during a Parliamentary debate on Northern Ireland in 2000 the Conservative MP, Andrew Robathan, confused Operation Motorman with the introduction of internment in August 1971 (Operation Demetrius). The fact that Hansard’s editors failed to rectify the error perhaps underscores the lack of awareness surrounding these events.

When the thirtieth anniversary of Motorman did approach it was mentioned only in the context of the events of Bloody Friday on 21 July 1972 and, in particular, the bombing of Claudy, Co. Londonderry, that occurred on the same day as the operation itself. Conceived as an act of defiance in response to the Army’s retaking of the no-go areas, the IRA attack on the village of Claudy killed nine civilians, including an eight-year-old girl. The controversy surrounding the bombing has continued to resonate with rumours of a cover-up of the identity of one of the bombers who was alleged to be a Roman Catholic priest. Memories of such traumas, understandably perhaps, overshadow those of Operation Motorman.

The reasons why Motorman has been little studied and often misunderstood are necessarily speculative. Traditional reticence by the British government to involve itself in Northern Ireland’s affairs, viewing the ‘Irish question’ as an unfathomable quagmire from which little good comes, has undoubtedly impacted negatively on public perceptions. The armed forces similarly regard their long involvement in Ulster as often inglorious and even mundane. Arguably, then, official attitudes contribute to a reluctance to study certain aspects of Northern Ireland’s history. Additionally, there is a tendency for commentators to telescope events from 1968 onwards, presenting a seamless narrative up to the current day, which inhibits the attempt to separate out key phases or events of the conflict in order to analyse their specific importance. Such intellectually unpropitious circumstances have militated in particular against a clearer understanding of the conflict’s military dimension.

There may also be other more particular factors that diminish our consciousness of Motorman. The operation was not a battle. It did not culminate in a major military confrontation, and so lacked a sense of drama that might have sustained analytical attention. It took place a long time ago and is thereby occluded with other more controversial events of the time – Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday, Claudy – which
occurred during the darkest days of the Troubles. Few analysts are likely to gain much sense of moral uplift by revisiting these disturbing times.

Above all, the full implications of Motorman can only be realised in longer-term perspective when one pieces together the significant milestones in Northern Ireland’s contemporary history. Seen in isolation, often as a discrete military operation detached from any wider or longer-term political implications, few people would necessarily alight on Motorman as the decisive event in the Troubles. Thus, all these factors combined have until now militated against the evaluation of Motorman’s significance.

Motorman in Perspective: The Political Environment in 1972

Operation Motorman was the culminating point of the most tumultuous period of the Northern Ireland conflict. Although a notable technical undertaking in its own right, its meaning from the viewpoint of this analysis resides in its political impact. Motorman was a symbolic milestone that requires us principally to understand events either side of the operation. In particular, it is necessary to comprehend the dynamics of the conflict in the early 1970s and especially British and IRA perceptions of them. This is important because a close reading of the available evidence reveals, intriguingly, that both sides were functioning in what was essentially a tacit bargaining situation. That is, they were trying to manoeuvre to attain their goals within unspoken but mutually accepted boundaries, as opposed to seeking outright military victory. However, whereas the British seemed to recognise the ultimate limits of these implicit boundaries, the IRA did not.

In considering IRA perceptions in this period we can see how central the no-go areas were to its strategy. During the early years of the crisis in 1969 and 1970 policing in a number of city areas had broken down. Barricades were erected in Catholic areas of Londonderry and Belfast in order to protect these districts from incursions by loyalist rioters and the attentions of what was seen by many residents as an unwanted and discredited police force. Behind the barricades the Provisional IRA was able to build up its organisation, and in due course control these areas. Although not always liked by residents, who had to put up with the IRA’s gun-rule in their neighbourhoods, the Provisionals were nevertheless tolerated because they were seen as an instrument of community defence. As the veteran IRA leader, Joe Cahill, declared: ‘We receive our support from the nationalist people and it is our job to protect them.’ In early 1971 journalists noted somewhat impressionistically, but not without some credibility, that in these city areas the Provisionals ‘enjoy almost total support from ordinary people.’

Even so, the IRA was never conceived solely as a Catholic defence force. Its raison d’être lay in its self-proclaimed duty to assert ‘the right of the Irish people to the ownership of Ireland’, which thus dictated ‘the natural and historic right of resistance to British rule.’ According to the Provisional IRA’s first chief of staff, Seán MacStiofáin: ‘As soon as it became feasible and practical, the IRA [would move] from a purely defensive position to a phase of combined defence and retaliation.’ In effect,
the IRA used its popularity gained as a community protection force as a basis for 'all-out offensive action against the British occupation system'.

Using their footholds in the no-go areas the IRA 'shifted to an offensive campaign of resistance in all parts of the occupied area' in October 1970. In 1971 the level of violence rose gradually, with 1756 and 1515 shooting and bombing incidents respectively, resulting in 174 deaths. The scale of the violence escalated dramatically the following year with 10,628 shootings and 1853 bombings. The death toll for 1972 was 467 dead, 208 of whom were the result of known Provisional IRA actions.

Despite the obvious mayhem the IRA's campaign produced, the organisation had to pursue a careful strategy if its violence was to be politically efficacious. This required the manipulation of its military actions to induce a degree of coercive pressure in order to wear down British will to retain Northern Ireland as a constituent part of the United Kingdom. In this respect, the IRA had to recognise that as a small, sub-state grouping it did not have the power to impose its will through force, but could seek only to recast the political atmosphere in which British calculations were made. Although never explicitly stated, it seemed that while the Provisionals accepted that they could not physically defeat the security forces, they felt they could wage a form of limited war 'until Britain is forced to the conference table'. It is claimed, for example, that the IRA leadership had studied British campaigns in Palestine, Cyprus and Aden, concluding that the killing of 36 soldiers would oblige the government to negotiate as that was the number killed in Aden before Britain evacuated the territory in 1967.

Whatever the pretensions inherent in the IRA's military thinking it is evident that some of its central assumptions were, to greater extent, shared by the British government, whose strategy was almost an exact mirror image of that of the republican movement's. Most notably, the government acknowledged – at least in the confidential annex of Cabinet minutes – that it was implausible to speak of seeking victory over the IRA. The position, as articulated by the Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, in March 1972 was that 'it would never be possible by military means alone to prevent individual atrocities or completely root out urban guerrilla warfare so long as a substantial element of the population remained alienated from the forces of law and order.'

Whereas the IRA sought to use the kudos it enjoyed from its position in the no-go areas to sustain and expand its offensive, British policy accepted that there could 'be no prospect of bringing violence to an end ... unless the IRA could be deprived of its base in the minority community.' In a way, British policy facilitated the IRA's strategy as it stressed the avoidance of 'any actions which might be regarded as provocative in predominantly Roman Catholic areas'. This meant refraining from any intervention in IRA-controlled districts because it was seen as 'impossible to mount military operations in those areas without incurring heavy civilian casualties'.

There was, then, a tension in the government's strategy. At one level, the aim was to adopt a conciliatory, non-confrontational approach. Yet, at the same time, this accepted that 'by deliberate policy' certain districts of Londonderry were areas 'where the authority of the Government had virtually ceased to be enforceable'. These areas
existed in open defiance of the law and were the crucible of a campaign of violent subversion against the state. To the majority Protestant community this was especially inflammatory, and raised the spectre that loyalist districts would also begin to sprout their own no-go zones. As David Howell, who in 1972 was the Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office acknowledged, by any objective standard, it was ‘completely intolerable that there should be no-go areas’.

The paradoxical element of self-restraint in the British position was encapsulated by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, who confessed that the no-go areas had ‘not been under the fully effective control of lawful authority for a considerable time’. ‘It is’, he admitted, ‘in the most exact sense of that word, an intolerable situation’. However, he continued:

Of course, a short-term change in this situation could be brought about by an equally ruthless use of force on our part. We have in full measure the means and the capacity to sweep these barricades aside and establish the security forces within these areas in overwhelming strength. But I have avoided, and my colleagues and I will continue to avoid this course, not out of weakness or a desire to appease, but because our aim is not to conquer or occupy the city but to bring it back permanently and with as little rancour as possible in a peaceful and orderly state.

In effect, the IRA was presented with an opportunity to exploit this tension in the British position in order to exert leverage over the government’s policy towards Northern Ireland. ‘The strategic aim’ of the IRA’s military campaign, according to Seán MacStiofáin, ‘was to make the government and administration of the occupied North as difficult as possible, simultaneously striking at its colonial infrastructure’. Nevertheless, to convert its military efforts into political currency it was necessary for the IRA to develop a coherent negotiating position with which to entice the British. Despite a deep-rooted hostility to constitutional politics the IRA leadership recognised that it needed to clarify its political ideas for ending the conflict. The first indication of the organisation’s intent came in June 1971 with the publication of the Eire Nua (New Ireland) programme that put forward proposals for a nine-county Ulster assembly within a federal united Ireland.

The Provisionals’ next political move came on 10 March 1972, with the declaration of a 72-hour truce, accompanied by a ceasefire plan that called, *inter alia*, for the abolition of Stormont and the recognition of the right of the Irish people to self-determination. As Maria McGuire, a high-profile defector from the republican movement, declared of the 10 March proposals: ‘We were by now sure that the British government would be compelled to ask where we stood politically, such was the success of our military campaign’. These manoeuvrings were interpreted as an attempt by the Provisionals to gain political credibility and to pre-empt forthcoming British proposals that were expected to include the abolition of the Stormont government.

The British government’s suspension of the Stormont assembly on 24 March 1972 can be seen as another step in the implicit dialogue between the two sides as the destruction of the Stormont regime fulfilled a key republican objective. However, the
imposition of Direct Rule placed the IRA in a dilemma, and it is from this point that we can see the tacit bargaining process begin to break down. The Provisionals, naturally, claimed full credit for bringing down ‘the puppet parliament in Belfast’. They saw the fall of Stormont as a vindication of their campaign and the prelude to the final phase of the struggle to force Britain out of Ulster.

In fact, Direct Rule starkly challenged the entire basis of the IRA’s strategy. From London’s standpoint, Stormont’s abolition was not intended to signal to the IRA that it was winning (though it undoubtedly had that effect). ‘The purpose’, according to Cabinet documents, was ‘to seek to deprive the IRA of the support which it enjoyed among a substantial portion of the minority community in Northern Ireland’. Indeed, Stormont’s demise rectified a major Catholic grievance. Along with weariness at the continuing conflict, there was now pressure on the IRA from within the Catholic community to end the violence. The IRA now faced a choice. Did it negotiate or escalate?

In the weeks after the fall of Stormont the British government was detecting ‘the movement of opinion in favour of a search for peace’. It was vital in London’s view to encourage policies of reconciliation in order to end the violence. This was not, though, how the IRA saw things. In MacStiofáin’s opinion, any thought of a ceasefire was to be repudiated. The IRA’s campaign, he declared, was not to ‘grab momentary praise from the media and the middle class. It was to liberate the country and get the British out of it once and for all’. These divergent understandings of the conflict’s dynamics in the wake of Stormont’s termination were to gradually reveal themselves and eventually destroy the tacit boundaries in which the conflict had been contained up to that point.

MacStiofáin was convinced that the British should be forced into a truce: ‘If we could continue to inflict high British casualties and step up the sabotage campaign it would be difficult for them to bear the strain and drain on their economy, and no government could be expected to continue indefinitely in such a situation’. The intensification of the IRA’s campaign appeared to pay off when in mid-June 1972 the organisation’s leadership put forward a set of ceasefire terms to the government. The IRA demanded a meeting with Whitelaw ‘in order to discuss and secure acceptance of the IRA peace plan.’ This encompassed ‘(i) A declaration acknowledging the right of the Irish people to self-determination; (ii) A commitment to withdraw from Ireland by a specific date; (iii) A general amnesty for all political prisoners in Britain and Ireland’. Whitelaw agreed to meet secretly with an IRA delegation in London, and the truce took effect on 26 June.

To the IRA, these events signalled that the British were willing to concede. According to Martin McGuinness, one of the IRA’s delegates: ‘The only interest that we had in going to meet Whitelaw was to secure a binding agreement from the British declaring their intention to leave Ireland at some date in the future’. Moreover, he proclaimed: ‘If the British weren’t going to come up with a declaration of intent to withdraw, then the truce was over’. Yet, from London’s perspective the purpose of meeting with the Provisionals was very different. It is evident that the government
continued to conceive the conflict in terms of a political bargaining situation. Although the British recognised that the IRA’s invitation to ‘enter into discussion of their “terms”’ was ‘cast in the form of an ultimatum’, the British felt that ‘recent developments offered an opportunity for political advance that the Government could not afford to miss.’ Until that point London had rejected any direct analogies with past anti-colonial insurgency campaigns but acknowledged that a political solution could not be reached ‘without some dealings with the leaders of the “Provisional” wing’, admitting further that: ‘In many countries (including Ireland in 1921) it had proved necessary to negotiate with terrorist leaders.’

The government’s intention in meeting the IRA delegation on 7 July 1972 was to see if the IRA could be persuaded that an end to violence could be followed by a relaxation of military activity . . . and the restoration of normal life throughout the Province, including the Roman Catholic enclaves. The Provisionals were outraged at the government’s equivocal attitude towards their demands, and the meeting broke up in acrimony. Whitelaw recalls dismissively: ‘The meeting was a non-event. The IRA leaders simply made impossible demands which I told them the British Government could never concede. They were in fact still in a mood of defiance and determination to carry on until their absurd ultimatums were met’.

It was at this point that the Provisionals took a fateful decision that was to destroy the process of incipient political dialogue. Angered at the failure of the meeting with Whitelaw, the IRA decided to end the truce and again escalate its military campaign.

It was MacStiofáin’s belief that it was essential to prove that the ‘movement was as tough a fighting force as ever and was speaking from strength’. In the three days following the end of the ceasefire nine members of the security forces were killed. As part of the IRA’s renewed offensive, on 21 July 1972, 21 bombs were planted in Belfast city centre. The intention was ‘to impose a sudden and severe load on the British and Unionist system’. Nine people were killed on that day, which came to be known as ‘Bloody Friday’.

The atmosphere in the city that afternoon was described in press reports: ‘It was impossible for anyone to feel perfectly safe. As each bomb exploded there were cries of terror from people who thought that they had found sanctuary, but were in fact just as exposed as before.’ Public opinion was appalled at the carnage. One woman at the scene said: ‘This is the end. Mr Whitelaw should take his coat off and mop up the blood.’ In one sense it was ‘the end’. Bloody Friday removed the basis of self-restraint in the British position. The government decided to move in and retake the no-go areas.

**British Motivations and Preparations**

Because Operation Motorman constituted an explicit British decision to alter the dynamics of the conflict, it is necessary to probe the government’s thinking and motivations that were to lead to this decision. In London’s view, the replacement of the Home Rule parliament at Stormont with Direct Rule from Westminster was never
thought to be a long-term solution. According to a confidential review of government strategy in May 1972, it was meant to create ‘a limited breathing-space’ in which to calm down the violence whilst the British government would attempt to mediate a more equitable constitutional arrangement amongst the political parties from both sides of the sectarian divide. Despite the expectation that this objective could be achieved in a relatively short period of time, senior British politicians always understood that there were considerable obstacles in the way. In fact, in British government thinking, the intransigence of constitutional leaders, the continuing violence, and the persistence of republican no-go areas in Londonderry and Belfast were all considered to be related problems.

Regarding the no-go areas, the British government was in no doubt that the existence of safe havens from which to organise and operate without outside interference presented the IRA with a considerable military advantage. However, in a wider political sense, senior Cabinet members like Whitelaw also recognised that the no-go areas were a symptom of Catholic alienation. At the same time, Whitelaw saw that the no-go areas were the primary reason for the loss of confidence in government policy amongst Protestants, remarking that they represented ‘a target of Protestant anger [and] a symbol of weakness and failure in British rule’. There is even some evidence that British politicians appreciated the adverse dynamics of violence, and that they had understood the central role of the no-go areas in this process. In a BBC Panorama interview shortly after the conclusion of Operation Motorman, Prime Minister Edward Heath stated:

> What had been happening … was that one community had been saying ‘We can’t talk about a political solution because there is a “no-go” area there’, and then they say, ‘Well, we must have “no-go” areas as well’, and then the other community says, ‘Unless they get their barricades down, we can’t talk.’

Yet, while it was obvious that the no-go areas had to end for political progress to be achieved, it was equally important for the British government to ensure that the way in which its authority was restored made a positive contribution to the realisation of its objective. The government was aware that the introduction of internment and Bloody Sunday had provided the IRA with substantial support, and that the use of violence against the ‘British forces of occupation’ was now seen to be justified by a significant proportion of the Catholic community. After the introduction of internment, the General Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland, Harry Tuzo, stated that ‘half the Catholic population sympathises with the IRA, and up to a quarter – that is, about 120,000 people – is ready to give the organisation active support’. Under these conditions, it seemed likely that any military operation against the no-go areas would be resisted by the IRA, thus producing another traumatic event that would have worsened the government’s credibility amongst Catholics. Indeed, in a speech to Scottish Conservatives in May 1972, Whitelaw explained that taking the no-go areas by force would ‘cause a bitterness which would not be redeemed for a long time, if ever’. 
Given the perceived impossibility of a ‘military solution’, it is understandable why
the government saw fit to attempt to resolve the issue by direct negotiations with the
republican leadership. The opportunity for doing so was provided by the IRA ceasefire
of 26 June. Three days later, Whitelaw informed his Cabinet colleagues that ‘officials of
his Department would shortly enter the Bogside and Creggan districts of Londonderry
in order to discuss with the leaders of those communities the first steps towards a
removal of the barricades and a restoration of normal conditions of life’. However,
like the wider project of ‘politicising’ the republican leadership, the idea that the IRA
would simply give up the no-go areas displayed, in the words of Bew and Patterson, ‘a
mixture of wishful thinking and an incapacity to understand the dynamics of
republicanism as an ideology’.

In reality, the attempted rapprochement between the IRA leadership and the British
government simply heightened the fears of the Protestant community, which
perceived the secret dealings between London and the IRA leadership as signs of an
impending sell-out. Following the revelation of the secret meeting between the
republicans and a British government delegation in London, the Ulster Defence
Association (UDA), now numbering some 43,000 members, sealed off Protestant areas
across the province on an almost daily basis. Likewise, following the breakdown of
the ceasefire on 9 July, the IRA resumed its military campaign, including major gun
battles in Belfast and the bombing – and almost complete destruction – of
Londonderry’s commercial centre. The Economist concluded, accordingly, that
‘Ulster is now as close to civil war as it has ever been’.

The seriousness of the situation was not lost on the British government. By mid-
July, the mood within the Cabinet had reached the lowest point since the abolition of
Stormont. At the meeting on 13 July, members even seemed to contemplate the
practical implications of a British withdrawal from the province:

In discussion it was suggested that the two communities in Northern Ireland might
prove to be permanently and irretrievably irreconcilable. If the breakdown of the
‘ceasefire’ proved irrevocable, we might therefore have to face a state of armed
rebellion in Ulster, backed by at least the acquiescence of a considerable section of
the population. We might then have to choose between launching military
operations on a very formidable scale indeed and embarking on a fundamental
reconsideration of our responsibilities towards Northern Ireland. One hypothetical
solution, which might on examination prove to be within the scope of the pledges
which successive British Government had given to the majority of the people of
Northern Ireland, might be the establishment of an independent state within the
Commonwealth.

The reason for this pessimistic outlook was that – despite rising levels of militancy on
all sides – the nature of London’s dilemma had not changed. As long as the no-go
areas continued to exist, there was no chance of a political settlement. Any military
operation to bring down the barricades, however, would produce a significant number
of civilian casualties, thus making it even more difficult for Catholic politicians to
participate in any scheme proposed by the British government. Although Whitelaw
had publicly promised ‘sterner security measures’, most Cabinet members were
convinced that there was no choice but to continue ‘a policy of political and military
restraint’ whilst hoping for another IRA ceasefire.77

Against this background, it becomes obvious how critical the Bloody Friday attack
was in affecting developments. At Cabinet level, there was an immediate realisation
that the event had the potential to fundamentally change the political and military
parameters within which British strategy operated. Whilst noting that Bloody Friday
had provoked Protestant anger on an unprecedented scale, Whitelaw was keen to stress
that the bombings had ‘aroused feelings of extreme revulsion... in the Roman Catholic
community also’.78 In other words, it now appeared as if there was a chance for the
British government to untie the Gordian knot that had hampered the realisation of its
political objective ever since the abolition of Stormont. As Whitelaw pointed out: ‘The
present climate of public opinion, while the events of Friday 21 July were still fresh,
was opportune for the Government to take action, as was its duty, to show that it could
no longer tolerate the existence of barricaded areas to which the security forces had
only limited access’.79 These comments demonstrate that Whitelaw clearly appreciated
the profound political significance of any operation to this end. In fact, he made it
explicit that ‘its successful execution could produce substantial political advantages
and help to open the way for political discussions’.80

The fact that Motorman was guided by the essentially political imperative of
facilitating constitutional talks – rather than any desire to inflict a military defeat
on the IRA – explains why much of London’s efforts prior to the operation were
put into conveying the impression that it was to be even-handed. From a purely
military point of view, this made little sense since the Protestants had firmly
indicated that their barricades would be taken down as soon as the Catholic ones
ceased to exist. Still, Whitelaw emphasised that ‘all barricades ... whoever put
them up, Protestant barricades, Roman Catholic barricades, all of them, the whole
lot, must come down’.81

More importantly, though, the political imperative demanded that civilian
casualties needed to be avoided at any cost. Instead of relying on the element of
surprise, the government therefore issued several public warnings prior to the launch
of the operation, thus allowing IRA members to escape arrest by fleeing across the
border. Officials at Whitelaw’s department had been specifically authorised to make
phone calls to local priests, hoping that they would pass on information about the
extent of the British deployment, and the government’s determination to exert
control.82 According to the Cabinet files, all this was done, quite deliberately, ‘in the
light of its possible effect upon casualties... [and to] encourage the more responsible
elements to keep the streets clear’.83 Considering the strong sense in which the
formulation of military strategy had been informed by political imperatives, it was
therefore hardly ironic when – in the wake of one of Britain’s largest military
operations since the end of World War II – Whitelaw asserted that the purpose
of Motorman had been to provide a foundation ‘on which a political solution can
be built’.84
The Strategic Impact of Motorman

The day following Motorman’s initiation, the Northern Ireland Minister Paul Channon announced to the House of Commons that ‘last night’s military operation was by no means an end in itself. There can be no military solution to the complex problems of Northern Ireland’. He continued: ‘We are trying impartially to restore order in all parts of the community and to restore their normal civil rights, to free them from the intimidation of terror and the gunman under which they have laboured far too long.’ As Channon’s statement indicated, although Motorman was to prove a turning point, it was never conceived as a decisive act but was intended to redraw the political boundaries of the conflict. In this regard, in discerning the strategic significance of the operation it is necessary to disaggregate the immediate military after-effects from the longer-term political ramifications that Motorman portended.

Militarily the results of Motorman were soon evident in the following weeks. In the three weeks before and after Operation Motorman there was a sharp fall in the number of bomb attacks from 180 to 73, shooting incidents declined dramatically from 2595 to 380 and the number of British Army personnel killed decreased from 18 to 11. Plainly, the scale of violence in Northern Ireland remained at a relatively high level for a modern democratic society. Crucially, though, the rate of violence was to decline in absolute terms over the next decade and beyond (see Figure 1). Whatever the ebb and flow of the turmoil in the province, the violence was never again to exceed the levels of July 1972 (see Figure 2). In pure statistical terms Motorman was the pinnacle of the conflict.

The military repercussions were to signify a profound change in the political dimensions of the conflict, both in the short and long term. The most obvious short-term impact was that the loss of military momentum was to shatter the IRA’s bargaining strategy. We can discern that the republican movement grasped the logic of coercive dialogue from MacStiofáin’s explanation for the attempted escalation that led to the Bloody Friday bombings, when he claimed that the ‘feeling was that if the offensive could be maintained in sufficient strength it could lead to renewed contact regarding a solution’. However, the attempt to intensify the military campaign merely provoked the British to remove the most important factor that made the IRA a potent threat.

The loss of the no-go areas broke up the hard core of IRA operatives in Belfast and Londonderry and severely eroded the organisation’s operational capacity. These areas were the IRA’s most vital military asset. They provided safe havens from where it could plan attacks while remaining effectively immune from the security forces. Further, these districts were also used by the Provisionals to foment a constant level of rioting and sniping that did much to keep urban areas in a state of disorder. At a stroke, Motorman eradicated much of this activity, as well as depriving the IRA of an important propaganda symbol. As one contemporary journalistic account made clear, ‘the Provisionals’ leaders were no longer to be found haranguing the press at their
headquarters in the Londonderry gasworks, or leading a march of their sympathisers down Lenadoon Avenue [in Belfast].

Most importantly, the IRA had sought to exploit their freedom of movement in the no-go areas to sustain a high level of military activity, which had been the key to maximise the psychological pressure on the British to respond in ways they could hope to gain politically. Most Provisionals knew that in military terms the British were far superior. But they made the assumption that British will to hold the province was faltering and that any increase in IRA violence would merely strengthen the desire for withdrawal. Myles Shevlin, the republican lawyer and member of the IRA delegation that met Whitelaw stated: ‘They [the Provisionals] can, of course, be beaten. If the British Army put the boot in they could be flattened. But will they do it?’

In a measured way, the British Army did indeed put the boot in. The assumption that the British would never attempt to retake the no-go areas revealed the solipsistic nature of the IRA’s thinking. The objective of the increase in violence was to reopen negotiations with the British in the belief that one final push would seal victory. But by refusing to show any sign of compromise with Whitelaw and considering the escalation of its campaign only with regard to the intended effects on its own position, the Provisionals overestimated the potency of their strategy. Here, the IRA seriously misread British perceptions of the conflict. Following Bloody Friday, Whitelaw recounted that all his government colleagues ‘now agreed with my own view that a tough security response was essential to send an unmistakable message to the IRA and to both communities in Northern Ireland.’

Ultimately, the British saw the IRA as an anti-democratic challenge to a freely consenting part of the realm. The surge in its campaign merely convinced the government that the IRA was being sufficiently obdurate to warrant the physical denial of the no-go areas, which until Motorman it had enjoyed without hindrance. By doing so, the government had been able to shift the strategic dilemma from itself to the Provisionals. It was now they who were scrambling to regain legitimacy. The truth was that the IRA had wrecked its most advantageous position created by its military efforts.

There was no way back for the Provisionals. The IRA had fought against a superior opponent to a point where it might have had a crucial influence in shaping future British policy towards the province. But through a lack of understanding of the limits of its strategy it had ruined its best political opportunity. After Bloody Friday the IRA was reduced to a pariah. Whitelaw vowed never to meet the Provisionals again. Press comment at the time made the point: ‘Talking had been tried, and talking had failed. But the fact of its having been tried made the military offensive an easier one to justify.’ The claim was underlined by Whitelaw in his memoirs: ‘As it turned out, by returning to violence … they [the Provisionals] presented me with a considerable advantage. They proved that they were intransigent and it was the British government who really wanted an end to violence.’

In retrospect, the overall military consequence of Operation Motorman was to deliver Northern Ireland into a two-decade-long period of stalemate. The security
forces were not able to eliminate all IRA violence. At the same time, IRA violence was not able to attain the political objectives of forcing a British withdrawal. It was, however, the long-term effects of this protracted stalemate that foreshadowed the most significant political repercussions wrought by Motorman. The Times editorial the day after the operation presciently caught sight of the new political dynamic, declaring that ‘effective action against the IRA is the first condition for a negotiated settlement’. The analysis stated here expressly denies any teleological thesis that suggests Motorman was the germinal of the current peace process and that subsequent events contained an inner logic that worked towards an inevitable conclusion. It can be plausibly argued, however, that while Motorman was certainly not the direct cause of the peace process, it did at least represent the beginning of a very long road that was, eventually, to reach the Belfast Agreement of 1998.

We know that this road followed a tortuous route and there is no need to rehearse each twist and turn. What we can say is that Operation Motorman resolved the essential security dilemma in Northern Ireland. Prior to the operation, each side had been trapped into a destructive cycle of mutual suspicion and hostility, where each act of violence and atrocity merely dug inter-communal trenches deeper and, as expressed in Cabinet documents, fuelled the genuine ‘fear of imminent civil war’. Motorman broke that vicious circle by reasserting British will to govern the province, and by bringing down the level of violence to a point which enabled the attitudes of constitutional unionism and nationalism, we stress again over the long term, to slowly become more tractable towards each other. This new atmosphere, we know too, was initially to lead to the abortive Sunningdale Agreement in 1974 in which much of the political architecture that was to feature in the Belfast Agreement was originally constructed.

The basis of asserting Motorman’s importance resides in a very modest claim that does not wish to exaggerate its historical magnitude. We are not implying that Motorman was the essential turning point of the conflict, merely that it was one of a number of important events that we can now more clearly identify in hindsight as altering the political atmosphere inside the province. What this analysis does suggest is that in any review of Northern Ireland’s political development the significance of Motorman has been overlooked. In this respect, we know that Motorman must have rendered a long-term impact in changing the strategic setting because the empirical evidence – the statistical data – is irrefutable: before Motorman the violence reached the highest levels recorded in the conflict, after Motorman, a vastly reduced and decreasing level of violence. Looking back we can try to discern the various elements of the historical jigsaw that was to eventually culminate in a peace process, and Motorman was one of those bits of the jigsaw.

Perhaps the most significant influence of the post-Motorman context, though, was how it affected political calculations within the republican movement itself. It was the shift in the IRA’s position away from a stubborn refusal to entertain the prospect of an internal compromise that arguably provided the decisive element that enabled the main parties to reach the 1998 agreement. It is possible to gain an insight into the
The evolution of republican thought towards constitutional participation if we begin from
the premise outlined by Professor Paul Bew in 2002, who noted that Gerry Adams, the
current leader of Sinn Féin – and long suspected of being a key IRA commander in
Belfast during the early 1970s – was 'the republican leader who realised a long time
ago that the traditional republican project in Ireland was unattainable and had to be
quietly buried'. If we determine the traditional republican project to be the
unification of Ireland through force of arms then we can ask ourselves how did Gerry
Adams and his confre`res who control the movement come to this realisation?

No doubt there were multiple influences that impinged on the movement's decision
making from the 1970s onwards. Although it is not possible to analyse the workings of
the IRA's inner counsels with any precision, it is reasonable to infer that any judgement
about the declining efficacy of military action to obtain republican goals must have been
affected by the material conditions that indicated severe problems in the republican
strategic construct. What seems clear is that from mid-1992 republican rhetoric was
beginning to acknowledge that armed struggle was not necessarily either the only – or
the best – method that should be used to achieve the movement's political goals. For
example, in March 1992, Adams argued that the movement's established policy of the
'ballot box in one hand and the armalite in the other' was an 'outdated' slogan. Later in
September 1992, Sinn Féin press officer Richard McAuley admitted: 'We are not going to
realise our full potential as long as the war is going on in the north and as long as Sinn
Féin is presented in the way it is with regard to the armed struggle'. From such statements it was evident that, as Adams accepted as far back as 1990,
there was a 'debate going on in Sinn Féin and among republicans in general ... about
the 'ongoing struggle, about policy matters ... and, most importantly, about the
process by which peace can be established in this island'. The debate over the most
appropriate means to achieve republican aims was to eventually work itself out to a
definitive position that Adams enunciated during his address to Sinn Féin's annual
conference in 1994 when he stated: 'Irish republicans, by ourselves, simply do not
possess the political strength to bring about these aims. While that situation obtains, it
must continue to influence the political and strategic thinking of Irish republicans'.
The emphasis of republican politics, in Adams' view, should now concentrate on
'trying to reconstruct a broader, deeper, sustainable Irish political consensus'.

In long-term perspective one might surmise that the declining utility of physical
force after Operation Motorman contained a slow-burning but remorseless political
dynamic. The logic of new situations and ideas often takes a considerable time to
become accepted and internalised. Likewise, the full implications of the changed
strategic setting after Operation Motorman took many years to permeate. The loss of
the IRA's military pre-eminence after the summer of 1972, it can be contended, did
contain an innate logic that must have played some role in ultimately moving the
republican movement down a path that would lead inexorably to the questioning of
the viability of its armed struggle. This could be witnessed first in the trade-off
between the military campaign and electoral politics through the adoption of the
'armalite and ballot box' strategy in 1981. In time, this gave rise to a politically
conscious section of republicanism that was far more sensitive to the limits of violence and aware of the need to fashion a realistic political platform in order to strike deals with the Irish government, and eventually, the British themselves. This necessitated enhancing republican political strength through the formation of informal alliances with mainstream constitutional nationalist parties north and south. The price of this consensus was the cessation of the IRA’s military campaign in August 1994.

To reiterate, all this is not to imply that Motorman was the single most important event in the Provisional IRA’s strategic history. The evolution of Irish republican strategic thought is one that is moulded by a complex amalgam of events and circumstances. However, Motorman did happen. In reducing the level of violence from its absolute height in July 1972 (a level which was never again surpassed), the prima facie case exists to demonstrate that the operation irrevocably changed the strategic context in Northern Ireland. It is, therefore, reasonable to infer that it registered an enduring influence that constituted one factor in shaping subsequent republican thinking. The only contention being advanced here is that Motorman constitutes one, hitherto neglected, factor amongst many that shaped future events and this should not be misconstrued as advocating that it was itself the proximate cause of the peace process or the final arbiter of the Irish republican decision to question the instrumentality of its violence.

In any case, it is unlikely that republicans would ever articulate the course of their political thinking in these terms. To acknowledge that they were responding to a British military initiative 20 years before would come uncomfortably close to an admission of strategic failure. But all political actors must to some degree be influenced by changes in the strategic setting. They would not be rational actors if they did not. That it took a 22-year stalemate for the IRA to accept that its military campaign had run into the ground and to discover that republicans could forge links with constitutional nationalism to push forward a common agenda is testament to the long-term political impact of Operation Motorman.

Conclusion

The basic official British position towards Northern Ireland from the early days of the civil strife, certainly from early 1972 onwards, remained remarkably consistent. The aim was to reach an internal accommodation between the conflicting parties. A top-secret Cabinet memorandum from the Home Secretary of 3 March 1972 made it very clear that the government recognised that the ‘two communities were poles apart’ and that it was in ‘the nature of modern urban society that you cannot entirely eliminate the bombings and the shootings however effective Army action may be’. From that point on it was never part of British policy to return to the status quo ante. The Home Secretary stated in forthright terms that ‘I do not believe there is any possibility of persuading Catholics to go back to the old system’. A future settlement, the memorandum reiterated, must be ‘just and equitable between the differing factions’ and that meant: ‘Any proposals for a solution must lie somewhere in the ground between them’.
During the early years, the IRA understood that it was involved in a bargaining process of sorts and could seek to use its military campaign to manoeuvre within the self-imposed restraints set by the British, especially the reluctance to do anything to provoke Catholic/nationalist opinion, to place itself in a politically advantageous situation. As the conflict spiralled towards the chaos of mid-1972, it became evident that the IRA possessed only a partial comprehension of the informal boundaries in which the British were prepared to tolerate its violent activity. The IRA, it seemed, could only conceive the process of violent dialogue as one-way traffic to communicate its threats to the government without any sense that it, too, was also subject to constraints. When the organisation rashly escalated its campaign, culminating in the Bloody Friday outrage, the government initiated Operation Motorman to contain the conflict within acceptable boundaries. In doing so its fundamental negotiating agenda was in due course to prevail.

We can see, then, how integral Motorman was to the establishment of the overall strategic setting that informed the backdrop which ultimately led to the Belfast Agreement. As has been emphasised throughout this analysis, it would be simplistic to attribute all subsequent events in Northern Ireland to the effects of this operation. Motorman is no doubt only part of a very complex picture. But it is a part that has been overlooked. Using the available material this analysis has endeavoured to understand its significance. In doing so, this study has sought to provide another part of the jigsaw in order to piece together the puzzle as to how Northern Ireland’s politics have evolved – one that gives Motorman its proper due. By evaluating the political and military circumstances both pre- and post-Motorman we can discern with clarity the conflict dynamics between the main protagonists. In particular, we can see how the IRA’s campaign was contained at a lower level of violence, which we may deduce impacted on its future judgements about the efficacy of its armed struggle.

Anyone familiar with the course of events after 1998 would understand that the so-called peace process has often been an extremely fragile construct. The Belfast Agreement did signify the end of the systematic military campaigns by the major paramilitary organisations. However, with continuing high levels of paramilitary activity and the persistence of deep divisions between the two main communities, few can pronounce with certainty that the conflict is over for good. If, though, we can one day look back and declare that the 1998 agreement was indeed the foundation of a stable settlement in Northern Ireland, then we shall be able to say that – 26 years after its departure – Motorman did finally arrive at its destination.

Notes
[1] For the composition of forces see ‘UDR – The Early Years’. Available from www.ulsterdefenceregiment.fsnet.co.uk/early.html; INTERNET.
[8] de Baróid, Ballymurphy, 137.
[9] Reed, Ireland, 199.
[20] The thirtieth anniversary of Bloody Friday occasioned a statement in which the IRA expressed 'sincere apologies' to the families of the victims and the 'acceptance of past mistakes and of the hurt and pain we have caused to others': Statement signed 'P. O'Neill', Irish Republican Publicity Bureau, Dublin, 17 July 2002.
[21] It was alleged that the former Parish Priest of Cullion, near Desertmartin, Father James Chesney, had confessed to his part in the bombing before he died in 1980. It was further alleged that both Cardinal William Conway, the then Archbishop of Armagh and high level security force personnel had colluded in spiriting Fr Chesney out of Northern Ireland to a new parish in Co. Donegal in the Irish Republic, thus avoiding a formal police investigation into his activities. Two theories have been advanced to explain these allegations: first, that Fr Chesney was allowed to escape prosecution in order to sustain a wider cover-up that the British intelligence services were bugging confessional boxes; and, second, that any revelation of the priest’s involvement with the IRA would further inflame sectarian hostilities. See Ted Oliver and Jonathan Petre, 'Priest “Confessed to Being IRA Bomber”', The Daily Telegraph, 19 September 2002 and Rosie Cowan, 'Does This Letter Prove a Priest was Behind IRA Bombing', The Guardian, 21 September 2002. The circumstances surrounding the Claudy bombing are now the subject of formal investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.
[22] Neumann, Britain's Long War, 17–24.
[24] For a theoretical exposition of this concept see Schelling, Strategy of Conflict, 5.
[26] Quoted in Cronin, Irish Nationalism, 204.
[27] 'The IRA versus the Provisionals', The Observer, 14 February 1971.
[28] Interview with Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, This Week, 16 August 1970.
[30] Ibid., 147.
[32] Figures for shooting incidents and bombings, including devices defused, compiled from Irish Information Agenda, Table B7i. The figures for conflict-related deaths are drawn from Table B1vi and from Table 1 in Flackes and Elliott, Northern Ireland, 411.
[34] McGuire, To Take Arms, 74–5.
[38] PRO, CAB 128/48/3, Confidential Annex, Northern Ireland Secretary [William Whitelaw], 13 April 1972.
[41] Interview with Lord Howell, 6 March 2001, House of Lords.
[51] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 261.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 295.
[63] Simon Winchester and Simon Hoggart, ‘11 Dead, 100 Hurt in an Hour of Bombs’, The Guardian, 22 July 1972. Initial reports put the number of dead at eleven due to the difficulty of counting the remains of bodies.
[70] PRO, CAB 128/48/3, Confidential Annex, Northern Ireland Secretary, 29 June 1972.
[71] In Cabinet, Whitelaw hinted at ‘the possible emergence of political personalities closely linked with the IRA but sufficiently separate from them to have a possible role in future political discussions’. See PRO, CAB 128/48/3, Confidential Annex, Northern Ireland Secretary, 22 June 1972.
References

Bell, Martin. ‘Garrison City’. The Listener, 10 August 1972.


