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**IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY BACKFIRE: FACING FACTS AND
DESTROYING MYTHS**

THE MURDER OF ROBERT McCARTNEY
BY AOIBHE TOBIN

Robert McCartney was beaten and stabbed to death when a brawl broke out at a Belfast bar on the 30th of January 2005 in an attack blamed on Provisional Irish Republican Army members (IRA or PIRA). Throughout the year the five sisters of Catholic Robert McCartney have defied the IRA and waged a heroic campaign for justice. They have openly spoken to the media, held press conferences and made personal pleas to Irish people to help stop the IRA's violence and brutality.¹

¹ <http://hereticallibrarian.blogspot.com/2003/03/justice-for-robert-mccartney.html>

According to Robert's family, the fight in Magennis' bar in Short Strand arose when his friend, Brendan Devine, was accused by members of the IRA of making an insulting gesture or comment to a woman in their company.² When Devine refused to accept this or apologise, a brawl began. The IRA men dragged them into Verner Street and beat and stabbed them. Devine also suffered a knife attack, but survived. Robert, aged 33 years old, died in hospital the following morning.

Whenever a powerful group does something potentially perceived as unjust, it uses various techniques to inhibit public anger, which are grouped into five main methods. The first is to cover up the action.³ After the murder the IRA reportedly swept the crime scene for evidence and warned witnesses not to testify to what they had seen. No ambulance was called and film from security cameras was removed and destroyed.⁴ The McCartney sisters insist up to 20 people hold the key to getting the truth about Robert's murder and they want the case to go to court. Paula McCartney told a crowd of one thousand, similar to the number who attended the funeral, at a rally in February:

"We hope and pray over the coming days and weeks that those responsible for the Robert's murder and in the cover and clean-up operation will do the patriotic and right thing and hand themselves over and tell all they know truthfully. If not, they should be pressurised to do so. If these men walk free from this, then everyone in Ireland should fear the consequences. Justice must be done."⁵

Bloody Sunday campaigner Eamonn McCann compared the cover-up in the wake of Mr McCartney's murder to attempts by the British army to cover up what happened on Bloody Sunday. The civil rights campaigner and journalist noted that the murder

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Robert_McCartney

³ Backfire method as presented in a number of articles, including Truda Gray and Brian Martin, "How to Make Defamation Threats and Action Backfire," *Australian Journalism Review* 27 (July 2005): 157-66; Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, "Making Censorship Backfire," *Counterpoise* 7 (July 2003): 5-15; Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, "Exposing and Opposing Censorship: Backfire Dynamics in Freedom-of-Speech Struggles," *Pacific Journalism Review* 10 (April 2004): 29-45; Brian Martin, "Iraq Attack Backfire," *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (17-23 April 2004): 1577-83; Brian Martin and Steve Wright, "Countershock: mobilising resistance to electroshock weapons," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 19 (July-September 2003): 205-22.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Robert_McCartney

⁵ <http://u.tv/newsroom/indepth.asp?id=57231&pt=n>

had coincided with the anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Londonderry during which 14 civilians were shot dead by soldiers.⁶

When the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) launched an investigation they were met with a 'wall of silence,' with none of the estimated 72 witnesses coming forward with information.⁷ However, this is not an unusual attitude in Ireland as there are mixed views of the new police force.

The second method to inhibit outrage from an attack is to denigrate the targets. Mr McCann told the rally: "We were told, and I believe, that some of those directly involved in the murder of Robert McCartney had come from marching in Derry demanding justice for the Bloody Sunday families. How dare they? The hardest thing I can say about them is that they have brought themselves and the organization which apparently some of them were a part, they have brought themselves into the level of the British paratroopers in the Bogside. What an irony that is."⁸ There have been rumours and gossip from Sinn Fein members that Devine was responsible for the brawl in an attack to denigrate them and that the brawl was non-IRA related.⁹

The third method is to reinterpret the action. The PSNI for their part, did state that they did not believe the IRA had sanctioned the killing and that it was carried out by IRA members acting independently of the organization.¹⁰ On March 8th the IRA issued an unprecedented statement saying they agreed with this and had also made an offer to shoot the members involved in the murder, however the McCartney sisters insisted they wanted justice, not revenge. They have publicly denounced the IRA as a terrorist and criminal organization.¹¹

The fourth method is to soothe concern by using official channels that give the appearance of justice but seldom with much substance. The IRA announced that it had expelled three of its members and suspended seven after an internal investigation into the fatal attack on Robert McCartney at the bar in Belfast City Centre. The

⁶ <http://u.tv/newsroom/indepth.asp?id=57231&pt=n>

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Robert_McCartney

⁸ <http://u.tv/newsroom/indepth.asp?id=57231&pt=n>

⁹ <http://news.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2005/02/21/nira21.xml>

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Robert_McCartney

¹¹ <http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/default.aspx>

Provisionals said one of the three had gone to a solicitor to make a statement after the incident while the others had been asked to take responsibility. Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams also said had he been in the bar, he would have gone to a lawyer with information. Yet Sinn Fein have not asked people to go to the police because the party does not support the police service.¹²

The fifth and final method to inhibit outrage is intimidation. Councillor Joe O'Donnell, who called for cooperation with the police and family, commented at the rally that: "People are being intimidated, but I think basically people are angry, people feel let down. They have been under pressure by this gang for a long time and this murder was just the last straw."¹³

Mark Durkan of the moderate nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party claimed that, "The full force of the IRA has been used to intimidate witnesses and prevent the killers from being brought to justice."¹⁴

Overall, the murder of Robert McCartney has had extensive political repercussions for the IRA and Sinn Fein as many people have expressed revulsion to the crime in a way not seen before. The McCartney sisters even travelled to the United States where they were met by George.W.Bush and Ted Kennedy who expressed full support for their campaign for justice.¹⁵ Sinn Fein also lost their council seat in the Short Strand of Belfast in the local elections earlier this year. It is fair to say that backfire to the IRA has been growing stronger over the course of the year due to the consequences of this event.

¹² <http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/default.aspx>

¹³ <http://u.tv/newsroom/indepth.asp?id=57231&pt=n>

¹⁴ <http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/default.aspx>

¹⁵ <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/story.jsp?story=616078>

IRA: NO WAY!

“It’s a disgrace Sinn Fein are showing their faces at the rallies and protests these courageous sisters are holding. The brutal, sadistic murder of this innocent man will make nationalists no longer allow themselves to be policed by self-appointed paramilitaries who think they own the place. Robert McCartney’s family are doing the right thing-for far too long people have turned a blind eye or remained silent when an injustice was committed in nationalist areas. That time is over-real nationalists don’t do pub stabbings or bank robberies. People always trusted the republican movement to be seen to be fair, but not now. Everyone believes they’re looking after their own interest first before that of the community. People no longer believe in them or trust in them and it’s about time. Once seen as freedom fighters, they are now terrorists.”

Concerned from Cork¹⁶

“By not speaking out you become as bad as the people who committed the crime. They then win and go from strength to strength, knowing they can do whatever they like in the name of their justice. At last, organizations such as the IRA are being exposed for the scum they really are. Violence is never the answer, as Martin Luther King, one of the most prominent figures in the non-violent protest movement said, “An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Livid from Limerick¹⁷

“The death of Michael McCartney does not reflect the true nature of the IRA. I refuse to let their name be dragged through the mud on account of vicious rumours and gossip. The fact of the matter is that these incidents happen all over the world. How dare these people let the likes of Patrick Pearse’s death be in vain. Remember, We Ourselves.”

A supporter from Antrim¹⁸

¹⁶ Concerned from Cork is looking at the murder in the context of domestic backfire

¹⁷ Livid from Liverpool places the McCartney murder in the broader context of nonviolence

¹⁸ A supporter from Antrim backs the IRA in a gesture to the country’s martyrs, refers to Sinn Fein

IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY BACKFIRE DIALOGUE

CONVERSATION WITH STUDENT OF STS 390, EBONY PREEN

Ebony: Is there any particular reason why you chose to write about Robert McCartney?

Aoibhe: My Irish heritage is definitely a major factor as I know nearly all there is to know about the country's history. However, I have followed this story throughout the year and could not have chosen a more suitable example of backfire. It has taken many long years for the people of Ireland to finally take a stand against such violence and brutality that is displayed by the Irish Republican Army. I firmly believe they have only ever been a liability to the nation.

Ebony: I completely agree. I know that I am not too familiar with Irish history myself, but I do know it has a complex past. How does the IRA tie into these issues happening in the country?

Aoibhe: Ireland has had a turbulent and complicated history which has been enlivened by many passionate figures struggling against British imperialism and domination in modern times. This distinct history has been entrenched and embraced by its inhabitants and suffice to say, firmly built on the foundations of martyrdom. These martyrs are immortalised in Irish iconography among the pantheon of patriots.¹⁹ As the old Irish saying goes, "One is never a true Republican until one has died in the Republican fashion."

Ebony: That's an intense statement. Who are some of the martyrs? Does this have anything to do with the formation of the IRA?

Aoibhe: Patrick Pearse, James Connolly and Thomas Clarke are some of the most contentious figures in Irish politics. What emerged from the turbulent twentieth century politics in Ireland after their role in the Easter Rebellion of 1916 was the light destruction of British rule over most of Ireland, establishment of the goal of a Gaelic

¹⁹ Childers, E., 1950, Military Rule in Ireland, Lay and Kneally Printers Ltd, Dublin

Ireland, sanctifying of political martyrdom and violence in nationalist tradition, establishment of Unionist hegemony in the North; the creation of two new states and the more pragmatic and equally formidable willingness to resort to arms in Unionist tradition.²⁰ The aim of these martyrs to establish an independent Irish republic through force was the turning point in Irish history among nationalists.

Ebony: What was the Easter Rebellion of 1916?

Aoibhe: This was a military uprising with the objective of seeking independence from Britain. This insurrection represented the central act in contemporary Irish politics, determining the fundamental break with the compromise of Home Rule and a decisive shift among the Irish towards the determination to achieve full independence. The week-long battle was a failure, played out in the historical streets of Dublin against the background of the First World War. However, Patrick Pearse's subsequent execution, alongside the other fourteen rebels involved, elevated them into the most sacred realms of nationalist mythology.²¹

This signified the ultimate change from non-violent to violent communication against British oppression which gave birth to the Irish Republican Army. Subsequently, the Irish have placed their patriots, leaders and rebels of revolutionary activity on pedestals although this has proven to be a fundamentally flawed legacy.

Ebony: I have heard these martyrs have a cult status of worship in Ireland.

Aoibhe: That's correct. Anything written about these martyrs in Ireland for at least fifty years after their death was designed to prove their sanctity, their vision and the validity of even the wildest prognostications they made.²² I have read an exhaustive amount of material written about these men from many historians and some of the claims made are very far-fetched.

²⁰ F.X Martin, 1967, *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916*, Cox and Wyman Ltd, Norfolk

²¹ Ruth Dudley Edwards, 1977, *The Triumph of Failure*, Lowe and Brydone Printers Ltd, Norfolk

²² G. Dangerfield, 1977, *The Damnable Question*, Constable and Company Ltd, London

Ebony: That must have a huge impact on the people of Ireland. Did you notice that when you were living there?

Aoibhe: Absolutely. Not by everyone, but many people in the Republic or Catholics living in Northern Ireland glorify the martyrs. Any denunciation is seen as being a traitor. And as the centennial anniversary of the Easter Rebellion slowly approaches, Ireland's complicated and diverse past, built on this martyrdom and violent communication, continues to affect its present in damaging and destructive ways. The Irish Republican Army entrench and embrace this history under a political guise. They have a misguided notion of Irish national identity and the best means to achieve it. Although progress has apparently been made, for example with the cease fire of 1997, the murder of Robert McCartney at the beginning of the year overshadows any hope for change within this dangerous terrorist organization.

Ebony: The IRA seems to be a terrorist organization.

Aoibhe: Absolutely. And Sinn Fein is its political wing. The IRA is definitely one of the largest criminal enterprises in Europe. Many people are now openly branding them gangsters and thugs, comparisons to the Mafia were even made by one of the McCartney sisters. Now people are even referring to the IRA as the "RA-fia." Did you hear about the bank robbery in December 2004?²³

Ebony: Yeah, I can't believe that.

Aoibhe: Tell me about it. Also, only recently, three of the IRA men were tied to explosives trade with a Colombian cartel, possibly in exchange for cocaine.²⁴

Ebony: Seriously?

Aoibhe: Seriously. These stories have been given so much media attention this year because people's disapproval and anger are being made clear towards the IRA,

²³ http://brainster.blogspot.com/2005_02_27_brainster_archive.html

²⁴ http://brainster.blogspot.com/2005_02_27_brainster_archive.html

particularly from the Irish community. And a lot of that has to do with the murder of this innocent man.

Ebony: His family have been amazing. How many sisters does he have?

Aoibhe: Five, and you're right they have been because there is a huge climate of fear and intimidation operating in Ireland because of the IRA. People are very afraid of speaking out against them and that's why nobody will. Did you know that most of the 70 people in the bar the night of the murder claimed they were in the toilet when it happened?! This had led for the toilets to be dubbed the TARDIS, after the time machine in the television series Doctor Who, which is much bigger on the outside than on the inside.²⁵

Ebony: Wow. People must really be afraid. I guess that relates to the first and fifth method of backfire, covering up the action and intimidation.

Aoibhe: That's right. But the McCartney sisters are determined to seek justice for their brother's murder and it's an admirable campaign they have been waging. Believe me, in another decade they probably would have been killed though. Yet the IRA are under close public scrutiny at the moment. The McCartney sisters are giving press conferences, arranging rallies and vigils, making personal pleas to people in the streets of where they live to find any information. They have carried banners emblazoned with slogans such as "Murdered-who's next?"²⁶

Ebony: I heard they even went to the United States to talk to the media.

Aoibhe: That was by far the most significant form of backfire to the IRA because there has always been huge support and sympathy in America for them due to heritage reasons. Even Ted Kennedy refused to acknowledge Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams when he was in America later in the year and that was significant because Kennedy has always been a supporter of Adams.

²⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TARDIS>

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Robert_McCartney

Ebony: Well the IRA definitely tried to denigrate the targets and reinterpret the action though.

Aoibhe: Sinn Fein leaders and other IRA members did their best to make excuses about the brawl and subsequent murder. They claimed that it wasn't IRA-related, that Robert's friend who was there was the troublemaker etc. But I think the bottom-line is enough is enough. In the past, the people of Ireland and even the political parties have turned a blind eye to the IRA. But it's been coming for a long time- Ireland and other countries are finally recognising the IRA for what it is. The murder of Robert McCartney just proved it.

Ebony: That's so true.

Aoibhe: There's graffiti on Belfast's streets saying "IRA Scum Out." This would have been unheard of in the past.

Ebony: Nobody is impressed.

Aoibhe: Not at all. And no matter how the IRA tried to soothe concern by using official channels, the fourth method of backfire, everything was just too little too late. They were accused from the very beginning of this murder of being too dismissive yet they were so confident in themselves they didn't realize until too late that support was dwindling for them. The McCartney sisters definitely did the right thing and took advantage of this. Suspending members didn't help, after the McCartney's apparently gave them a list of suspects, some of whom were Sinn Fein members. As SDLP leader Durkan noted, "The real question is not whether people are suspended from Sinn Fein. It is whether or not those responsible for the murder of Robert McCarney are brought to justice. For that to happen, the intimidation that is ongoing has to end- nothing less than that will do."²⁷ Also Sinn Fein lost their seats in the local elections of Short Strand this year.²⁸ They are now under intense pressure to contribute to democracy in the country in a positive way.

²⁷ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4316767.stm

²⁸ <http://today.reuters.co.uk/news/default.aspx>

Ebony: So you found the backfire theory useful when analysing this story?

Aoibhe: Incredibly useful. But I couldn't help but reflect on nonviolent communication theory too. I am a huge supporter of this so cases such as the IRA and various other things happening across the world is quite sad. Violence is never the answer. I find this quote by Cesar Chavez very profound:

“Non-violence is a very powerful weapon. Most people don't understand the power of non-violence and tend to be amazed by the whole idea. Those who have been involved in bringing about change and see the difference between violence and non-violence are firmly committed to a lifetime of non-violence, not because it is easy or cowardly, but because it is an effective and very powerful way.”²⁹

Violent communication, in Ireland and across the world, must end.

²⁹ <http://www.nonviolence.org.au/links.html>