



VISIT: Then US president John F Kennedy acknowledges the cheers of the crowd during a visit to New Ross, Co Wexford in June 1963

Actions of US can have implications for us all

PRESIDENT John F Kennedy visited the town of New Ross, County Wexford, on June 27 1963.

Having flown in from Dublin by helicopter, he addressed the wildly enthusiastic crowd of more than 10,000 people at the quay where his great-grandfather Patrick Kennedy had left for Boston via Liverpool in the previous century.

In his speech, the president said: "It took nearly 115 years to make this trip – and 6,000 miles and three generations."

There's a statue of JFK on the quay now and a Kennedy Summer School normally takes place in New Ross every year. It was put on hold in 2020 due to the pandemic but the event resumed last weekend, subject to the usual Covid precautions, as well as being streamed online.

Panel discussions on issues of the day were at the core of the proceedings.

A wide-ranging session on Irish politics consisted of four first-time TDs, all of them women, with political journalist Mary Regan of RTÉ in the chair.

Northern Ireland featured in a separate discussion on the Dublin government's Shared Island initiative and, in a Saturday morning symposium, academics discussed the centenary of Ireland's partition.

There was an interesting example of role-reversal when Bertie Aherne interviewed Tommie Gorman, former RTÉ Northern Editor, about the latter's life and career. The ex-taoiseach was well-prepared and showed considerable skill at asking questions: Oprah Winfrey might have serious competition.

The school gives close attention to US politics and two of the sessions were devoted to the state of play on the American scene. What happens next after the Afghan debacle is a question on a lot of people's minds, because actions or the lack of them on the part

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of the world's leading superpower can have implications for us all.

The ousting of Donald Trump from the White House generated a sigh of relief in many quarters and this feeling was confirmed by the terrifying attack on the Capitol Building in the dying days of the Trump administration, which had the hallmarks of an attempted coup.

His successor comes across as quite a restrained individual on a personal level, but perhaps not over-endowed with charisma: the words famously used in the 1988 US vice-presidential debate by Democrat Lloyd Bentsen against Republican Dan Quayle might also be applied to Joe Biden: "You're no Jack Kennedy."

Since JFK was cut off in his prime by an assassin's bullet only five months after visiting New Ross, we can't say for sure

(assuming he was elected to a second term in office) how he would have responded to the developing situation in Vietnam, which had similarities to later events in Afghanistan. On balance, his approach might not have been very different from that of Joe Biden.

Given the horrors of 9/11, it was inevitable that a full-on manhunt for the ruthless terrorist mastermind Osama Bin Laden would take place. A US Navy team ended his life on May 2 2011, although he was unarmed and Amnesty International said that, if he posed no immediate threat, he should have been brought to trial.

However, the continuing presence of US troops in Afghanistan seemed to be achieving little and it's hard to disagree in broad terms with Biden's decision to pull out, although one wishes it could have been done with fewer casualties and a greater number of at-risk Afghans enabled to leave the country.

Could we be on the verge of another period of isolationism whereby the US sought in the past to avoid getting involved in foreign disputes that could result in war? There are more than enough issues to be dealt with on the US domestic scene to keep a President busy.

On reflection, it was probably beneficial from Biden's point of view to withdraw from Afghanistan before the looming 20th anniversary of 9/11. Had he waited, there might have been increased pressure to remain, in order to ensure that the group known as ISIS-K didn't develop the capacity for something similar to what Al-Qaeda did at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The more you think about it, the impression grows that our own peace process was among the relatively few overseas activities in recent times where US involvement contributed to a broadly-successful outcome. So far anyway.

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ON THIS DAY

SEPTEMBER 8 1921

Peace Under Threat at Inverness

MR LLOYD George, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland [Lord Fitzalan], the chief secretary [Sir Hamar Greenwood] and Mr Winston Churchill [Chancellor of the Exchequer] have arrived in Inverness. A whole batch of Cabinet Ministers will reach the Scottish town early this morning and the stage is set for what may well prove to be one of the most momentous Cabinet meetings in the history of the British Empire – a meeting which may cast the dye which shall determine the issue of continued peace or a renewal of war in Ireland.

The situation is grave and none realise its gravity more than the Ministers themselves. But, even now, 'irrevocable' is a bad word to use. The open door may be kept ajar but the prospects are not rosy. Government circles say that several at least of the Ministers take the view that a point has been reached at which essay-writing, which leads to no practical results, can be no longer tolerated and their attitude can be summarised in this way: 'We have endeavoured to meet Ireland in a conciliatory and reasonable spirit and we regard our offer [of Dominion status for 26 counties with partition] as the limit of possible concession. There must be an end to so-called negotiations which lead to nothing beyond the dictation of terms which neither this nor any other British government can possibly accede to.'

In an interview yesterday, Mr de Valera [President of Dail Eireann] said: 'It seems that it is a grievous political sin these days to keep one's eyes open... British imperial salesmen, trying to sell Ireland a second-rate political margarine, are very angry because we do not accept the "butter" label they have put on... The English press ask, "Have we the will to peace?" Yes, we have and an ardent desire... If England is issuing an ultimatum, let it be an ultimatum. Brute force, naked and unabashed, has been used against small nations before.' (Already on August 2 1921 as the truce continued, the Dail Cabinet had rejected Lloyd George's proposals. In his reply to Lloyd George, de Valera described the British offer as 'illusory' in view of the geographical proximity of Britain, restrictions on Irish trade and defence and the eternal fact that Sinn Féin could not 'admit the right of the British government to mutilate our country'. In the end the British decided to send the Republican government a fresh invitation to a conference in October without preconditions. This the Irish side felt able to accept.)

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