
Book Review

How President Clinton's Special Envoy Found the Path to Peace in No. Ireland

by Michele Steinberg

Making Peace

by George J. Mitchell

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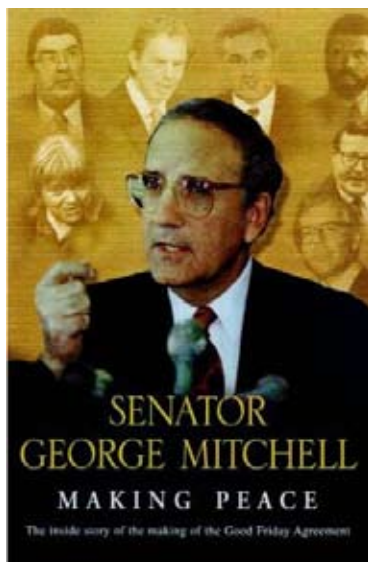
I had never heard of the "Peace Line."

When I went to it the first time, I was taken aback. The Peace Line is a wall that stands up to thirty feet high, is topped in some places with barbed wire, and goes right through the middle of Belfast—through urban streets, even through buildings. It is one of the most depressing structures I have ever seen.... The name, presumably, is born of the notion that peace can be achieved by building a wall between two warring communities....

—Sen. George J. Mitchell

The power of the office of the U.S. Presidency is unique in the world, and can bring about great good—or the greatest disaster. That is a point that Lyndon LaRouche has stressed for several decades, but especially in the current context of the meltdown of the world financial system which is unprecedented in modern times. And nowhere is the uniqueness of that power more obvious than in Southwest Asia, where reaching a permanent peace between Israel and Palestine can only be accomplished if the President of the United States puts his heart and soul into achieving it.

Such an all-out effort was made by President Bill Clinton in 1993, when he began parallel diplomatic efforts in Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland. In September 1993, the United States rejoiced at the signing,



on the White House lawn, of the Oslo Treaty, and when, later that evening, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin proposed a toast to all who participated in the Oslo negotiations, asking that they tip their glasses to "those with the courage to change axioms."

For Northern Ireland, an agreement would not come until May 1998—the famous Good Friday Agreement. In 1994, President Clinton chose as his envoy Sen. George J. Mitchell, who toiled for more than three long years, and spent much of his time virtually living in Northern Ireland, from February 1995 to May 1998—to achieve a victory. Clinton made the decision in

1994 to grant a visa to Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams, to visit the United States—it was not an easy decision, and came with vicious opposition from the British government, and from some members of Congress.

A wise retired military officer of Irish heritage recently told this writer that he followed the ups and downs of those often heartbreaking Irish negotiations attentively, and one thing jumped out. In the most difficult times of the Irish talks, President Clinton was there, often speaking every night by phone to Senator Mitchell, or to party leaders themselves, to do everything he could to make the Northern Ireland agreement possible.

Today, the same retired officer watches Mitchell's deployment as President Obama's Special Envoy on the Middle East more distantly, dismayed at the lack of U.S. response to the Israeli Prime Minister's scornful disregard of the U.S. demand that Israel freeze expansion of settlements.

What is Mitchell doing in the Middle East? Will he resign in frustration? The answer to that, really depends

on whether he has the full support of the U.S. President.

And then, the question: Can anyone really make a comparison between what happened in Ireland and what happened to the Palestinians?

Useful Parallels

Making Peace, Mitchell's "behind the scenes story," is an inside look into a difficult process of negotiations between people who had been in a religious war that goes back 400 years. There were times when British newspapers lied, "Mitchell To Resign Today," or falsely reported that Mitchell's trusted assistant was having an affair with an IRA terrorist. (The British paper had to pay damages.) It tells a lot about the struggle, and about George Mitchell. It also tells you that there are limits to what any American diplomat can accomplish if he does not have his President behind him.

This writer was skeptical that the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland could be compared to the level of bitterness and blood-spilling over the last 60-70 years in Palestine. *Making Peace* is a book that will open many eyes to the fact that there are very useful parallels, and several important differences. But most clear, is that when the people want peace, the leaders must listen.

That is what happened in Eire and London, and Northern Ireland during the time of Clinton's Presidency, and his appointment of Mitchell as Special Envoy in 1994. On the British side, it was Tory Prime Minister John Major, who shouldered the bulk of progress toward the Good Friday agreement. But it was President Clinton's watchful eyes, many thousands of miles away, that made the peace possible through every difficulty.

Ian Paisley, the Protestant religious fanatic minister and head of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and his rejectionists, walked out of the first day of talks, denouncing chairman Mitchell as an imperialist tool, sent to oppress the Northern Irish. Throughout the years of negotiations, Paisley would continue to denounce the Catholics as followers of the "anti-Christ" in Rome. Paisley tried repeatedly to trigger a Protestant revolt against David Trimble, who represented the largest loyalist party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), in the multi-party negotiations. At least three major terrorist actions, from the Republican side, occurred during the long negotiations, each time threatening a failure. But with Presidential backing, Mitchell persevered.

There is no such benevolent leadership today overseeing what Mitchell is up against with Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government.

But this could be corrected, if the leadership team of National Security Council head Gen. Jim Jones, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, have the power to shape President Obama's actions on Israel-Palestine, and if the influence of the insane White House handlers—David Axelrod, Rahm Emanuel, and Larry Summers—is eliminated. And a key to that success, is enforcing the ban on the expansion of the Israeli settlements. The settlements issue is not just one of justice for the Palestinians, but also for the Jewish Israelis. For it was an extremist settler—driven by the settlers' hatred of the successful vote in the Knesset in October 1995 accepting the "Land for Peace" framework for peace—who killed Rabin.

A Middle East expert who has been involved in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations since the late 1980s has compared the issue of stopping the settlement expansion to what Mitchell did in the Northern Ireland negotiations. In Ireland, Mitchell chose one issue—the end of all terrorist violence—as the fulcrum of success. He established a principle of non-violence and democracy, and required that all parties agree to those. Anybody who would agree, could be party to the talks. And the violation of non-violence meant immediate expulsion from the talks. It happened more than once.

The freeze on the Jewish settlements is that kind of litmus test. The United States has made it very clear that a "total freeze" on settlement expansion is expected from Israel. It is a tiny thing in the scope of the many travesties that Israel has carried out against the Palestinian people during the occupation, especially in the years of the British domination of U.S. policy since the George W. Bush Presidency.

But the settlement issue *is* a direct blow to the "Eretz Israel," ideology, and a message from the U.S. to the Israelis that, no, this time, on this one point, you will no longer get away with violating international agreements, from Oslo to the Road Map, to countless UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions.

Judging by his record in Northern Ireland, Mitchell will not back down. But will Obama?

The Courage To Stand

The following excerpts come from the chapter titled, "Sinn Fein Comes In." The time is September 1997, and Ian Paisley and the extremist allies of the DUP have walked out. Mitchell had been chairing the multi-party talks for well over a year. They have been suspended many times over violence and terror attacks, first by the

IRA, and then by splinter groups. For years, Sinn Fein, though formally a party to the talks, was kept outside the gates by the rules of the Northern Ireland government. Finally, progress is at hand.

“It took three long and turbulent years for [Gerry] Adams to get to the negotiating table. But finally, there he was, sitting with the British and Irish governments and many of the political leaders of Northern Ireland....

“London and Dublin had, on August 26, signed an agreement for the establishment of an Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. This was part of the governments’ scheme which had been rejected in July. Although the unionists had voted against the proposal, they strongly supported this provision. So the governments, in a continuing effort to accommodate to the unionists had agreed to form the commission....

“Another problem greeted me when I arrived at Stormont the next morning, in the form of a letter from Ian Paisley, demanding on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, that Sinn Fein be expelled from the talks ... [so there was] a discussion on whether the DUP had legal standing to bring such a charge. It had left the talks in July.... The other parties present challenged Sinn Fein on the IRA statement. Adams repeated his denial. Sinn Fein spoke for Sinn Fein, not the IRA. Sinn Fein had committed to the Mitchell Principles, and it intended to honor that commitment....

“We worked all Tuesday morning to satisfy the concerns of the UUP [Ulster Unionist Party] over decommissioning. Good progress was being made.... But just before noon a bomb destroyed the center of the [Protestant] town of Markethill. When I heard the news my heart sank and I thought, Oh God, this is so difficult! Every time we’re on the verge of progress, a bomb goes off or someone is shot....”

“The UUP then challenged Sinn Fein’s participation, and Trimble walked out. But on Sept. 23 negotiations resumed, and Trimble returned, backed up by two of the other loyalist party leaders from the PUP and UDP.

“To no one’s surprise, the governments rejected the UUP’s request that Sinn Fein be expelled from the talks. So long as the IRA was on cease-fire, Sinn Fein could remain.... [and] there was no evidence to link the IRA to the Markethill bombing....”

Determination To Succeed

Compare that determination to continue negotiations and not allow the minority “extremists” who carry out terrorism to determine the future, to the miserable

history of the Bush-Cheney Administration’s treatment of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, who was repeatedly punished by the Anglo-Americans for violence not carried out by the PLO or the Palestinian Authority. The Anglo-American faction has so castrated American foreign policy since George W. Bush came in, in January 2001, that even now, the U.S. will not recognize Hamas, despite *its* abandoning of suicide bombings and terrorism since 2005. And against many hopes in the 2008 election, the Obama Administration has held on to that folly of not talking to Hamas.

The patience, fairness, and hard decisions that Mitchell describes in the Northern Ireland negotiations inspire hope, where there is little in the Middle East.

The arguments are often deafening that Northern Ireland cannot be compared to Israel and Palestine. Those arguments come from dinosaurs whose propaganda that Muslim extremism and “jihad” (as misdefined by the warmongering neo-conservatives) will never allow peace. That is a vicious myth.

The truth is that the peace process in Israel-Palestine was destroyed by assassination by a Jewish extremist—a settler extremist—of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. It is impossible to overstate the significance of that assassination. And it is with great sorrow to Israel and the world that no statesman of Rabin’s courage has emerged to fill his shoes.

When the pro-British Paisley and his Unionist extremists walked out of the peace negotiations, Mitchell and Clinton kept the negotiations going. (The inside story of that process is still not told.) There was no forced, artificial timetable; and the channels of discussion inviting Paisley et al. to return to the talks were not closed down. The breakthrough for an agreement came on April 10, 1998 (Good Friday), endorsed by the British and Irish governments, and supported by most Northern Ireland political parties. It was backed by the voters of Northern Ireland in a referendum on May 23, 1998. Ian Paisley—as bad as Bibi Netanyahu or Avigdor Lieberman—and his DUP never rejoined the talks, yet peace was made.

As the UN General Assembly approaches in the next week, there has been massive pressure on Senator Mitchell from the White House to stage a meeting among Obama, Netanyahu, and Palestinian Authority Interim President Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas). Such a meeting would sow the seeds of failure. Only the kind of patience and honest treatment of all sides, which Mitchell showed in Northern Ireland, will succeed.