

**Arbiters of Ulster's Destiny?
The Military Role of the
Protestant Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland**

by
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INTRODUCTION

May 1974 was a watershed for the influence of the Protestant paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. In association with key workers in the power stations and the manufacturing sector under the umbrella of the Ulster Workers Council, they brought about the collapse of the power-sharing executive which had been set up in the wake of the Sunningdale conference.¹ Paramilitary muscle was in evidence on the streets; formerly clandestine individuals emerged as media celebrities informing the public about the progress of the general strike; effective political power was theirs. The often talked about loyalist backlash had materialized. There was much talk of forming a provisional government and declaring independence, yet the paramilitaries failed to capitalize on their success. Riven by internal disagreement about what to do next, political control soon reverted to Westminster and the campaign by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) continued unabated.

In 1984, the Protestant paramilitaries were still in operation but the intervening decade had been a very difficult one for them. From being recognized as the arbiters of Ulster's destiny, they appear to have gone for a long walk in the wilderness. Their command structure has been ravaged by evidence from informers at major 'supergrass' trials.² Their candidates have been spurned at elections.³ Their ranks have been split by violent faction feuds. Many of their active service units now languish in the Maze prison. They have been criticized for their inability to eradicate the IRA and condemned for widespread extortion and racketeering. Their external support network, based in expatriate communities in Scotland and Ontario, has been infiltrated by security forces. Whereas the IRA has confidently asserted that it goes forward with an armalite in one hand and a ballot box in the other, the Protestant paramilitaries have seemed confused over whether to concentrate on military matters or go further down the political path. This article concentrates on the Protestant paramilitaries' changing military strategies and assesses the viability of their continuation as a potent paramilitary threat.

LIQUIDATING THE ENEMY

The Protestant paramilitaries' main spell of concerted sectarian warfare was 1972-73.⁴ The local parliament at Stormont was soon to be dissolved; the IRA was bombing commercial targets at will and had established no-go areas under their control; and, the British Army did not appear as if it would control events. Many individuals in the Protestant population felt that their existence and that of Northern Ireland was

threatened. Militant loyalists rallied to William Craig and the Vanguard movement which organized a series of mass rallies. At one of these in Belfast's Ormeau Park, Craig declared, "We must liquidate the enemy," though there is no evidence that any of the politicians or paramilitary leadership orchestrated the terror campaign. Indeed, relations were often strained between the two. Many convicted paramilitaries complained about the lack of interest and support given to them by elected representatives. Tommy Herron, then leader of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), viewed his organization as "being asked to lead the March on Rome," while Mussolini, in the guise of William Craig, took the train.

The sectarian attacks were of the most difficult kind to analyse. No one group was responsible, although attention to court convictions shows that elements in the UDA were involved as were fringe organizations such as the fanatical Red Hand Commandos. Sometimes the incidents were purely random killings — hooded bodies were regularly discovered — sometimes they were attacks on known Republican supporters. On some chilling occasions, attacks involved obvious psychopathic elements indicated by long hours of torture. Over these people, the recognized leaders of the paramilitaries had no control. In 1972-73 the Protestant paramilitaries terrorized Belfast, producing an atmosphere of fear which has not been recreated since and showing a feature of their character which they have retained to the present day. That is, they demonstrated the capacity to respond to political events and the campaign of the IRA in a violent manner. The hallmark of their activity was the terrorism of the reflex action, dependent for its level of support on how keenly the Protestant community felt under seige. While there has been a lot of attention focused on the way the two main Protestant paramilitary groups, the UDA and Ulster Volunteer Force, have dabbled to varying degrees with political ideas, it must be stressed that there remains in both a hard core of gunmen, ready to strike back at the IRA and Irish National Liberation Army in a 'tit for tat' fashion. Into this category fall both the Ulster Freedom Fighters and the sinister Protestant Action Force. Though their views are unclouded by any political subtleties, they have strong links with the two main organizations.

THE UDA: AVOIDING PROSCRIPTION

Recruits join the U.D.A. to get guns,
not for political guidance.³

The UDA remains the largest paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland and the only one not proscribed under Schedule 2 of the Emergency Provisions Act (1978). The major alteration in its military tactics has been from indiscriminate attacks on Roman Catholics to selective elimination of prominent Republican activists. Even after such atrocities as the bombing of the La Mon House Hotel in 1978 when twelve civilians died and the more recent massacre of church worshippers at Darkley Pentecostal Hall in South Armagh, the reaction of the UDA was very muted. A similar pattern occurred during the high tension produced by the IRA hunger strike. The UDA, apart from a few mobilization exercises, stayed

in the wings. Although the hawks within the organization have been increasing the pressure on the leadership for an upsurge in military action, there is still a taboo on pub bombings or doorstep sectarian assassinations. As Alan Murray has written, "the UDA recognized the futility, politically and militarily, of consigning innocent Catholics to their graves" and this feeling has prevailed.⁶ It would be wrong to interpret this as evidence that the organization has gone soft or lacks the will to do any more. Rather, this mood reflects the views of the leadership. A change of direction was expedient both to avoid being banned and also to tie in with the new politico image.⁷ Crucially, it also acknowledges that the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) have retained the capacity to strike back at the IRA. Thus has come about an arrangement whereby the UDA could establish a purely terrorist wing, the UFF, which could then claim responsibility for murders and bombings, while the UDA could distance itself from such events. The UFF first appeared in 1973, organized on a cellular structure to minimize the likelihood of penetration by the security forces and claimed responsibility for attacks under the pseudonyms of Captain Black or Captain White. The population at large did not take long to realize that the UFF was merely a flag of convenience or 'nom de guerre' for elements in the UDA. Press statements from the UFF were even issued through UDA headquarters. One example, the 1980 murder in Carnlough of John Turnley, the Irish Independence Party politician, highlights the interplay between the UDA and the UFF. During the trial in 1982 of four men from Larne, later convicted of the murder, the prosecuting counsel actually stated that one of the defendants was, in fact, the "officer commanding the general wing of the UDA in Larne which assisted the military wing, sometimes referred to as the Ulster Freedom Fighters."⁸ The UDA has refused to acknowledge any duality of membership. Sammy Duddy, their publicity officer, has insisted that

Reports in the media have tied these recent sectarian attacks with the UFF and ultimately with ourselves. This is completely wrong. They are being carried out by a gang of cowboys with no allegiance to any organisation. Spokesmen have given wrong code-names, they do not belong to any recognised force.⁹

More recently, the attempted assassination of Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein M.P. for West Belfast, was claimed by the UFF but those charged in connection with the incident also have known links with the South Antrim brigade of the UDA. There is seemingly no problem in this case with reconciling this sort of attack with the attempts of the leadership to politicize the organization. Indeed, Andy Tyrrie, Supreme Commander of the UDA, positively endorsed the UFF campaign. "So long as they do bomb and shoot only active Republicans, no way would the UDA disapprove of it. We would have no objection to it whatsoever."¹⁰ The UDA has thus maintained a lower military profile while becoming more selective in its conception of what constitutes a legitimate target. This has been most important tactically because the UDA has been concerned to maximize support among constitutional politicians for the

campaign to segregate loyalist prisoners in the Magilligan prison, near Londonderry. This campaign peaked during 1984 with the UDA mimicking the IRA through the use of a hunger strike and by the arrangement of street demonstrations and rallies in support of their demand.

THE UVF — FOR GOD AND ULSTER

The second main Protestant paramilitary organization is the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The original UVF played a prominent part in the opposition to the Home Rule proposals of the British government in the early years of the century. They re-emerged, using the same initials but in a very different guise, in the 1960s as a group centred in the loyalist heartland of the Shankill Road in Belfast and opposed to the reformist tendencies of the Unionist Prime Minister Terence O'Neill.¹¹ As early as 1966 the UVF laid down the gauntlet in a statement to Belfast newspapers, by declaring war "on the IRA and its splinter groups," describing themselves as "heavily armed Protestants dedicated to this cause."¹² Their motto was the clarion call "For God and Ulster."

Membership of the UVF has been illegal for most of the period since 1966 to the present day, although it did flirt with the political option through the formation of the Volunteer Political Party. The UVF has had sporadic bursts of enthusiasm for socialist ideas and ideological *tête à tête* with the official IRA. Throughout the troubles, its support has been concentrated in Belfast, East Antrim and North Armagh. It has been characterized by its openness to the influence of charismatic personalities. The most important of these were Gusty Spence, who shaped UVF philosophy throughout the early 1970s, even after his life imprisonment for murder, and Lennie Murphy, the alleged mastermind behind the notorious 'Shankill Butcher' gang, responsible, during their reign of terror, for twenty assassinations in North and West Belfast.¹³

The UVF has regularly tried to increase its level of foreign support and funding. Since they are seen as defenders of the *status quo*, they do not hold any appeal for the international left-wing terrorist network. As a result, the UVF has ended up with some strange bedfellows, ranging from a neo-Nazi group in Belgium to the racist National Front in mainland Britain and even including a bizarre 'Arabian Nights' expedition to Libya. The only concrete development was the growth of what could be called the Belfast-Glasgow-Toronto axis. In 1971 leading loyalists, worried at the surge in contributions to the IRA by American-based groups such as NORAIID, visited Toronto. Since then, attempts have been made to utilize this Canadian 'window' with weapons being purchased in the United States, posted to Glasgow (where the UVF has had two active units in Maryhill and Bridgton) for safe keeping and then eventually sent to Belfast by one of the ferry routes where police surveillance was low. The UVF have often been derided for their lack of sophisticated military hardware and their reliance on home-made or very old guns but, through this expatriate connection, they are believed to have received a consignment of Ingram sub-machine-guns and the new 'Saturday Night Special' .22 handguns. However, the connection was severed in 1981 when a delivery of "car spare parts" from the Old Mill,

Pontiac Buick Company, Toronto, was intercepted in a post office in Glasgow, resulting in the conviction of key members who had been organizing the transactions.

This was not the only factor which reduced the ability of the UVF to undertake retaliation. In April 1983 on the evidence of Joe Bennett, a "converted terrorist" to use the government euphemism, fourteen of the top ranking members in Belfast were given long prison sentences. An atmosphere of paranoia has prevailed within the organization since. There has been almost a continuous shuffling of personnel among the brigade staff and the UVF is currently in a period of reorganization. Consequently, military activities have been curtailed and energy directed into campaigning for the welfare of members in prison.

Two controversial aspects of the UVF's activities must be considered. First, there has been an increasing number of cases where duality of membership has been discovered, that is, membership in both the UVF and the regular forces of the state, namely, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR).¹⁴ The Chief Constable of the RUC, Sir John Herman, stated baldly that there were bad apples in every barrel and pledged to deal with them. Nonetheless, infamous cases, such as the shooting of members of the Miami Showband near Banbridge by members of the UVF who were also serving in the UDR, adds grist to the mill for Republicans who argue there is little difference between the official arm of the state and the unofficial. It has not helped in the battle for the hearts and minds of the Roman Catholic population. Many have become alienated from the UDR, viewing it essentially as a Protestant militia.

The second matter of contention is the way, almost identical to the UDA, that the UVF has established a sister organization, known as the Protestant Action Force (PAF). This group is the naked face of loyalist terror; their purely military approach makes no concessions to, or has no pretensions toward, a political role. In 1974 they issued the grim warning that they would not cease murdering Roman Catholics until every Provisional IRA member was eradicated from Ulster. They certainly could not be accused of making hollow threats. In 1975 after murdering nineteen Catholics in less than a year it was announced that they had become a battalion of the UVF with their militants operating in the Tiger Bay area of Belfast, the large public housing estates of Newtownabbey and in what became known as the "murder triangle" encompassed by Dunganon, Armagh and Portadown.

The PAF appeared back in the headlines in 1982-83 when they claimed responsibility for a series of attacks in County Armagh. A police spokesman cast doubt on their identity when he claimed "Protestant Action Force is a blanket convenience for whatever section of the loyalist paramilitaries ... [is] doing the killings."¹⁵ He was proven right in the most dramatic of circumstances, and in the most embarrassing way possible for the government, when seven serving members of the Ulster Defence Regiment in Armagh were charged in 1984 with commission of the murders.

PAISLEY AND THE THIRD FORCE

One of the main problems experienced by the UVF and its fellow travellers is lack of acceptance within the Protestant community. At times the terrorist fish has had a very small reservoir of support in which to swim. The Protestant paramilitaries often claim they are only turned to in times of crisis and are viewed as a last resort in the event of a doomsday situation, that is, if the British government announced an intention to withdraw from the province. It would be very easy then for the paramilitaries to pose as the saviours of Ulster. In reality, however, their attempts to establish themselves as a credible political alternative have failed and an analysis of their relationship with the elected representatives of the Protestant community and in particular the Reverend Ian Paisley and his Democratic Unionist Party,¹⁶ proves informative in this regard.

Paisley, as have most other leaders, has found it advantageous to court the paramilitaries when he thought it expedient but has disassociated himself from their excesses. A favourite complaint of the paramilitaries is that these armchair generals make inflammatory remarks about the need to wipe out the IRA and then ignore those volunteers who set about the task. The UDA has bitter memories of its embarrassing liaison with Paisley when trying to enforce the 1977 strike which singularly failed to recreate the halcyon days of May 1974. Relations were further strained by Paisley's creation, in 1981, of the Third Force, which appeared in a series of nocturnal rallies on remote hilltops in Ulster, culminating in a mass demonstration in the Protestant stronghold of Newtownards. Speaking for the UDA, Andy Tyrie derided the force as the 'Third Farce' and labelled Paisley the Grand Old Duke of York, marching and marching to no effect at all. Paisley was seen as trying to take over the paramilitary domain while lacking the will to mobilize his members in any of the main combat zones. All the area commanders were leading figures in the Democratic Unionist Party and they could not be classified as an active paramilitary force. The only conviction, related to such activities, which was incurred involved three men in the border town of Enniskillen being charged with intimidation during the loyalist day of action which was called after the assassination of Unionist M.P. Robert Bradford.

On certain occasions there seems to have been a consensus between Paisley and the paramilitaries. In the village of Sixmilecross in 1981 Paisley stated "We have a choice to make, shall we allow ourselves to be murdered by the IRA, or shall we go out and kill the killers?"¹⁷ This is very much the same tenor as Andy Tyrie's celebrated remark on BBC radio that "We must terrorise the terrorists."¹⁸ The unresolved question was who would do the job? The Third Force proved that Protestant militancy was not a monolith. As an almost exclusively rural body, the Force, or at least many of its adherents, regarded the UDA/UVF as a group of urban gangsters, while, for their part, the established organizations saw these intruders as 'cocktail' terrorists looking for some cheap excitement.

CONCLUSION

Frank Wright has written "Loyalism today implies determination not so much to defend the U.K. link, as to prevent any move which hastens the day that Ulster is included in the Republic."¹⁹ This has been the *leitmotiv* of the Protestant paramilitaries throughout the present conflict. They are prepared to be the last-ditch troops. For all the attention paid to political manifestos and community workers, most of their members feel more at home in the combat jacket than at the conference table. Disillusioned by the number of "housing activities and social workers," the more hawkish paramilitary members may decry the lack of "hit-men." Since they do not form a credible political force, they must retain a credible military stance; otherwise, they would play no role at all and might sink into obscurity. Only when the paramilitaries have exercised their power of veto over initiatives, as in 1974, or when they have shown they were not mere paper tigers, has the British government or the IRA paid attention. The UVF campaign of 1975, for example, forced the Provisionals to agree to a truce regarding the bombing of civilian targets.

The Roman Catholic population is most critical of the activities of the IRA precisely at those times when the Protestant paramilitaries have shown they are not bluffing and will make retaliatory strikes. John McMichael, a leading spokesman for the UDA, commented "The UDA has a million faces, not all of them violent,"²⁰ and yet, as this brief article has indicated, those violent faces are the very ones which have counted in the past and which will really count in the future. For the Protestant paramilitaries the political road has proved a disappointing blind alley.²¹ The IRA will not be challenged at the ballot-box but in a terrorist war of attrition. Andy Tyrrie presents the final say regarding why the Protestant paramilitaries will continue as a military rather than as a political force:

It's all right talking about compromise, but we can't compromise. We have nothing to compromise with because every move we make in the sense of compromise is a step nearer a united Ireland. We won't be bought by anyone. We feel that it's going to be necessary to have our army so we can say to the British government — 'Don't forget about us.'²²

Footnotes

1. For a full account of the events in May 1974, see Robert Fisk, *The Point of No Return: The Strike which broke the British in Ulster* (London, 1974).
2. James Robbins, "Supergrasses in Northern Ireland," *The Listener*, 11 August 1983; Eamonn McCann, "Tainted Witnesses," *The New Statesman*, 23 July 1982; and, for the background to the government's decision to shift toward this policy, David Simpson, "The Informers in Northern Ireland," *New Zealand Herald*, June 1982.
3. For a detailed analysis of their performance see Arthur Aughey and Colin McIlheney, "The Ulster Defence Association: Paramilitaries and Politics," *Conflict Quarterly*, 2 (Fall 1981), pp. 32-45.
4. A graphic description of the period of sectarian assassinations is Martin Dillon and Dennis Lehane, *Political Murder in Northern Ireland* (Harmondsworth, 1973).
5. David McKitterick, "The Class Structure of Unionism," *Crane Bag*, vol. 4, 2 (1980), p. 31.
6. Alan Murray, "Little Loyalist Counter Terror," *Fortnight*, December 1983.
7. Demands for the banning of the UDA are made regularly by the Catholic Social Democratic and Labour Party and by the non-sectarian Alliance Party, but the most recent survey, conducted by Sir George Baker, of legislative provision in the province urged that they not be declared illegal.
8. Report of Proceedings in Belfast Crown Court, *Belfast Telegraph*, 5 February 1982.
9. *Belfast News Letter*, 17 October 1982.
10. Cited in Adrian Guelke, "Loyalist and Republican Perceptions of Northern Ireland Conflict," paper presented to the IPSA Conference, Rio de Janeiro, August 1982, p. 16.
11. David Boulton, *The UVF 1966-73* (Dublin, 1973).
12. Cited in Sarah Nelson, *Ulster's Uncertain Defenders — Loyalists and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1984), p. 61.
13. David McKitterick, "Murphy said to be prime mover in butcher death," *Irish Times*, 17 November 1982.
14. On this topic, see Martin O'Hagan, "Loyalist-Military Link in North Armagh," *Fortnight*, March 1984, pp. 5-6; Duncan Campbell, "Victims of the Dirty War," *New Statesman*, May 1984, pp. 8-10, which includes allegations of collusion between the Special Air Services and the UVF made by Captain Fred Holroyd, a former intelligence officer in Northern Ireland. The most controversial claims are made by Nick Mulcachy in "Sodom and Kincora," *The Phoenix*, vol. 1, no. 1, January 1983, where he concludes that the British MI6, influenced by Frank Kitson's work on counter-insurgency, was operating pseudo-gangs under names such as the Red Hand Commandos and also blackmailing leading members of the extremist Protestant group, Tara.
15. "The PAF returns to murder," *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 October 1982, p. 4.
16. On the changing strategies of the UVF see the chapter "The UVF, From Soldiers to Politicians and Back" in Sarah Nelson, *Ulster's Uncertain Defenders*
17. *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 July 1981.
18. *The World This Weekend*, 1 February 1981.
19. Frank Wright, "Protestant Ideology and Politics in Ulster," *European Journal of Sociology*, 14 (1973), p. 235.
20. Speaking on BBC "Spotlight" programme during the height of the 1981 IRA hunger strike.
21. One indication of changing perceptions among the established groups is the announcement by Andy Tyrrie of the existence of the Ulster Defence Force. This organization intends to have "eyes and ears" in every important industry and government department and has a very different structure from the large-scale Protestant mobs which appeared in the 1970s.
22. His most recent interview with Andy Pollak in *Fortnight*, May 1984, p. 5.