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Bias in memoirs scores a political own goal

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COMMENTARY
Raymond Seitz fails to appreciate role played by US in Northern Ireland

THE memoirs of the former United States ambassador Raymond Seitz, sections of which were published yesterday, are called *Over Here*. The title suggests his great pride in being a Yank. The extract reveals what looks like an extremely irritated and irritable WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), still raging over President Bill Clinton's decision to grant Gerry Adams a visa in February 1994 in spite of Mr Seitz's express opposition, and that of the US State Department.

Mr Seitz, who now lives in London, was appointed ambassador to the Court of St James by President George Bush in 1991 and retained by Mr Clinton until 1994.

In the extract he attacks Jean Kennedy Smith, Mr Clinton's ambassador to Ireland, as an ardent IRA apologist and as willful and skittish; excoriates her brother Edward Kennedy as an anxious man in the market for

with good judgment. It also shows that he has learned nothing from and forgotten a lot about this episode. It was risky and unconventional for the president to grant Mr Adams a visa when he did, but it decisively aided Mr Adams, Martin McGuinness and others in persuading republicans, with a small "r", that a switch to unarmed struggle would pay political dividends. It helped to pave the way for the first IRA ceasefire of August 1994. Mr Seitz, who reads like a Republican with a big "R", refuses to recognise the ceasefire as an achievement, but then conventional diplomats are not always the best in assisting the resolution of ethnic conflicts.

It was Tony Lake at the National Security Council who advocated, and won, Mr Adams his visa as a carefully calculated risk, demonstrating why American presidents often bypass the State Department's officials, and the manner in which Mr Lake reasoned his case makes Mr Seitz's view of him seem both small-minded and bitter.

Mr Seitz's own intelligence is wrong on crucial points: he takes for granted the Major government's interpretation of the purpose of the Joint Declaration for Peace in December 1993 (seemingly unaware that it was intended by the Irish

favours; and describes a former Kennedy aide and former National Security staffer, Nancy Soderberg, as a dedicated Adams advocate, long submerged in the Irish cause.

He patronisingly dismisses



Raymond Seitz: Wrong on crucial points

Ms Soderberg's then boss, Tony Lake, Mr Clinton's national security adviser. Mr Seitz states that, despite degrees from Harvard and Cambridge and despite having a disciplined ego, Mr Lake has the misfortune of coming from the Wilson-Roosevelt wing of the Democratic Party that has historically opposed colonialism and, for him, no country was more imperial than Britain and no place more colonised than Ireland.

Lastly, Mr Seitz condemns Mr Clinton's decision as either naive, or opportunistic, or both.

The extract reveals more about Mr Seitz than his targets. The man who condemns his opponents for political amateurism on Irish matters was himself unprofessional. He allowed it to be known at the time that he opposed his president's policy on permitting Mr Adams a visa - not something a professional diplomat is supposed to do.

Throughout his ambassadorship he never once officially met the Opposition's spokesmen on Northern Ireland - although that might have been both polite to the Labour Party and a professional way of gathering political intelligence for his employers.

As Kevin McNamara, the Labour Northern Ireland spokesman between 1988 and 1994, said: "Ambassador Seitz never once officially sought to meet me or my colleagues, nor seemed to have any interest in human rights or anti-discrimination issues in Northern Ireland."

Without naming any names, or providing any information, Mr Seitz also asserts that the White House leaked British intelligence data to the IRA - an extremely serious accusation that would require a professional diplomat to contact the US authorities to begin a criminal investigation.

The extract suggests that Mr Seitz confuses conventionality with intelligence, and snobbery

it was intended by the Irish government to facilitate IR and Loyalist ceasefires and to incorporate Sinn Fein into normal politics); he asserts that Tom Foley, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, was the most sophisticated gauge of Irish affairs in Congress, a statement which proves that Mr Seitz was out of touch with his own national legislature; and he asserts wrongly, that Mr Adams has never condemned violence.

US involvement in the current search for a political settlement has been, and will remain, controversial. That is understandable.

However, Mr Seitz's perspective is both politically and personally biased, and prevents him from seeing the positive contributions made by the Clinton White House to current developments in Northern Ireland. Irish Americans, in the corporate world and within organised labour, mobilised to facilitate the peace process and were behind a platform of human rights and anti-discrimination measures.

They wanted the IRA to abandon the use of violence and to promote a negotiated settlement - something that diplomats should approve of. Senator George Mitchell has, at several stages, played a key role in sustaining the political process, something that cannot be said of all senior British and Irish politicians. It was John Major's decision, at the time supported by Tony Blair, to play fast and loose with the Mitchell report in January 1996 that led to the breakdown in the IRA ceasefire at Canary Wharf.

Senator Mitchell has not been the only Irish American who has taken care to be balanced: unionists as well as nationalists, and Loyalists as well as Republicans, have had access to the White House.

Mr Seitz fails to appreciate that his country's special status as a new homeland for both Irish and British people makes it the best source of mediation with muscle in attempting to resolve the Northern Irish conflict. His arguments reflect a cold war mentality in which the Anglo-American special relationship prevented both the United Kingdom and the US from being constructively critical of one another.

His account of being ticked off by Rod Lyne, Mr Major's advisor, will remind many of the kind of American who came to England in the 19th century in search of confirmation of their social status, only to be deeply wounded when they encountered criticism. But that is all speculation. What is clear is that what Mr Seitz says of Ambassador Kennedy Smith applies much better to himself - too shallow to understand the past and too naive to anticipate the future.

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