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The Dynamics of the Northern Ireland Conflict

Steven J. Brams and Jeffrey M. Togman
Department of Politics
New York University
New York, NY 10003

Abstract. After briefly recounting the centuries-old dispute between Great Britain and Ireland, the current conflict over Northern Ireland between Britain and Sinn Féin/Irish Republican Army (IRA) is analyzed as a 2 x 2 game. The unique Nash equilibrium in this game is shown not to predict the recent behavior of Sinn Féin/IRA, which, after declaring a cease-fire in September 1994, resumed its bombing campaign in February 1996. However, these moves are consistent with Sinn Féin/IRA's asserting its threat power, according to the theory of moves, after negotiations with Britain failed to materialize. The mutually beneficial resolution to this conflict seems to lie in the farsighted strategic calculations of leaders who, recognizing that a reversion to conflict is likely to occur if conciliatory behavior is not reciprocated, reward such behavior even if it proves temporarily costly.

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