

Condolences – Irish reactions to John F. Kennedy's assassination

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On the early evening of Friday 22 November a stunned Ireland learned that President Kennedy had been assassinated in Dallas. The President's visit to Ireland only five months earlier had captured the imagination of every man, woman and child in the country. Now their icon was dead.

Taoiseach Sean Lemass's Private Secretary Ronan O'Foghlú found it difficult to draft the telegram of condolence Lemass wished to send to Jackie Kennedy. Through the dark winter evening in Government Buildings, with news from Dallas still coming in, O'Foghlú composed draft after draft. He tried to find the words to convey the loss the United States had suffered.

O'Foghlú's first draft, written as President Johnson and Jackie Kennedy flew in Air Force One back to Washington with Kennedy's body on board, caught in full the immediate horror of the assassination:

I am unable to find words adequate to ~~express~~ describe the ~~shock~~ (horror) with which I heard the news of the President's death. My colleagues and I in the Irish government are shattered by this terrible event.

It was not enough; O'Foghlú redrafted:

I am unable to find words adequate to describe the horror with which I heard the news of the ~~President's~~ outrage which caused the President his life. ~~My colleagues in the Irish government and I are shattered.~~

These drafts capture the atmosphere of these bewildering hours. The words O'Foghlú scored out – 'shock'; 'horror'; 'shattered' - convey the raw emotion of the moment. Eventually O'Foghlú wove personal grief with statesmanly gravitas and Lemass consoled the President's grieving widow that:

It was with profound shock that I learned of the tragic death of the President. The world has today lost a great statesman and leader and the USA its finest citizen.

During his visit to Ireland last June, and my very recent visit with him in Washington I had the privilege of getting to know personally his great qualities, his courage, his integrity and his sense of high purpose.

My colleagues in the Irish government and I, extend to you and to your family our most heartfelt sympathy in your recent tragic bereavement.

Sean F. Lemass

Taoiseach

The telegram was sent at 10.15pm. Lemass then contacted President Johnson, expressing the Irish government's profound shock at the 'passing of an outstanding President, a wise and courageous world leader and a great American'. From Aras an Uachtaráin President de Valera told Johnson that the whole Irish nation was in grieving and sent its sympathy to the American people for the loss of a great leader.

The most intimate of the four official telegrams sent from Dublin that November night was from de Valera to Jackie Kennedy. Its message was personal, almost fatherly:

The whole Irish people mourn in sympathy with you. Their hearts go out to you and we pray that the soul of your husband who had become so dear to us here may now be with God in Heaven and that the Holy Spirit may give you His consolation in this hour of terrible sorrow for you.

Kennedy's assassination was a deeply personal loss for Ireland and over the coming days messages of condolence and support poured out from Ireland to Jackie and the members of the Kennedy family. In his words the ageing Irish President had caught the collective spirit of the Irish people.

As the tricolour flew at half-mast on official buildings across Dublin on 23 November, the Government agreed, on Lemass's recommendation, that, following constitutional practice, President de Valera could leave the state to attend Kennedy's funeral in Washington on 25 November.

It was a full decade before there was a 'government jet' and on the afternoon of 24 November the 81 year-old de Valera flew by a scheduled Aer Lingus flight to New York and onwards to Washington DC.

Seen off by Lemass at Dublin airport de Valera was accompanied by his sons, Vivion and Eamon, and by Minister for External Affairs Frank Aiken and American Ambassador Matt McCloskey. As he inspected the guard of honour and boarded the Aer Lingus Boeing 707 de Valera's mind must have gone back to his greeting President Kennedy at almost the same spot on a sunny June evening almost five months.

Across Ireland sporting and social fixtures were cancelled as a mark of respect in advance of Kennedy's funeral on 25 November. People spoke of little but the assassination. Gloom lay over the land and the nation was in deep mourning.

A solemn requiem mass was held at the pro-Cathedral in Dublin at 10.00am on 26 November 'for repose of the soul of President Kennedy'. Lemass, wearing full funeral dress and top hat, led his government colleagues, members of the Oireachtas, the diplomatic corps and the Lord Mayor of Dublin in mourning. Sinead de Valera attended, in a personal capacity, refusing to take a state car to the pro-Cathedral.

26 November was officially a national day of mourning in Ireland. Lemass had suggested that businesses close that day until 11.00am as a mark of respect. But Cabinet Secretary Nicholas Nolan explained to Lemass that this was an unusual suggestion. He told the Taoiseach that 'we had never done anything like this before on the occasion of the death of a head of State – not even a Pope.' Lemass withdrew the suggestion.

However, business organisations recommended that shops remained closed. Civil servants could attend the masses held in Dublin and across Ireland so long as their offices could be kept functioning. Businesses, schools, factories and shops closed as the people of Ireland mourned their loss. Many were seen to wear lapel badges bearing Kennedy's image.

The US Chamber of Commerce cancelled a lunch in Dublin at which Lemass was to speak. The Licensed Vintner's Association announced that public houses across the country would remain closed until 12.30pm on 26 November.

Seeking to show their sympathy the Houses of the Oireachtas followed the precedent set by the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945 and Pope John XXIII in 1963. On Lemass's initiative the Dáil adjourned on 26 November as mark of respect until following day and Seanad followed suit. They had broadcast live Kennedy's address to the two houses in June 1963, but RTE were refused permission to televise the proceedings on 26 November.

In Belfast the Northern Ireland Houses of Parliament also adjourned to show their respect and flags across Northern Ireland flew at half-mast. Over a thousand men and women queued silently in the rain to sign a special book of condolences opened at US Consulate in Belfast.

Through the shock of his assassination Kennedy brought all Ireland together in mourning, his death crossing boundaries he, in life, could not.