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Irish express love, and anger, toward the United States

Why are we so comfortable disregarding opinions of our near kinsmen, the Irish?

By Susanna Ashton

The taxi driver taking me from the airport to my new home in Cork City in the Republic of Ireland was delighted to hear that I was an American coming to teach at University College Cork for a year.

"We don't get many Americans looking to live here," he laughed. "We're usually sending people over there!"

When he heard that I had family in New York, he stopped laughing and told me about his brother-in-law, Donal, who had started a small and informal memorial to the firefighters killed on 9-11. Donal was a firefighter, too, I found out, and he had started a small sculpture garden in his yard in the nearby town of Kinsale, County Cork, to show how much the heroism and pain of that day meant to him. Donal had been stunned to find that word-of-mouth had quickly spread about his informal backyard memorial, and for the past few years, people had been showing up in Kinsale, leaving candles, flowers and notes expressing their sorrow and their solidarity with the United States.

I was touched by the sympathies of those people stopping by a back yard in the tiny town of Kinsale — thousands of miles away from the tragedy — who nonetheless identified so strongly and with such love for our country. I thought of these people often as, throughout my year in Ireland, I listened to Irish people express their fears, fury and love toward the United States.

I was in Ireland on a Fulbright fellowship — a program founded by the late Arkansas Sen. J. William Fulbright in the wake of World War II to foster international cooperation. Indeed, while I was sent to Ireland as a specialist in American literature and culture, not international politics or global development, the Fulbright program has shown over the decades that international cooperation is often based upon sharing the ways in which we imagine the world — ways often better understood through the arts than through politics. So I taught American literature but I also worked hard on just listening — a hard task at times but one I felt I was there to do.

Teaching in Ireland was a joy in many ways — as a specialist in American literature I found great commonality with my students as we compared ways in which Irish writers had sought to get free of British traditions, in much the same way that American writers had sought to carve out a new national identity. The ferociously

GUEST COLUMN

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lively, charmingly informal and often hilariously skeptical nature of the Irish people made me feel welcomed and at ease. Many times I felt like I was back in Clemson.

While other Europeans certainly share values with Americans, the Irish have a special shared history with us in terms of immigration, battles against the British Empire and a profound commitment to democracy. Ireland is truly our 51st state. Indeed, virtually every Irish person I met had a close relative living in the States. And when I'd let people know that I lived in South Carolina, I was often surprised and touched to find them smiling and talking about how they knew well of our region because it had always been so densely settled with Irish families.

Yet in spite of the strong spiritual and blood ties between Ireland and the United States, it was not many weeks into my yearlong sojourn that I started to speak more softly as I ordered a pint in a Cork or Dublin pub. Often, when an Irishman or woman heard my American accent, I would be confronted, often angrily, for explanations of U.S. foreign policy. Shortly after the start of the war in Iraq, Irish citizen after Irish citizen expressed shock over President Bush's preemptive action.

As I diplomatically attempted to walk them through the reasoning that had led us to sending our young men and women to Iraq — some my own students from South Carolina — I personally experienced the way our nation's actions can impact our international standing in a deeply troubling way. If the Irish, our near kinsmen living in what is virtually our 51st state, could not support us in war, I thought, we need to reflect upon why we are so comfortable disregarding the opinions of not just our friends but our closest relatives.

Perhaps the "global test" we need to imagine in these tough times is a test not for what the world thinks of us, but for how we want to think about the world.

