Micheál Martin heads to the White House soon, in the aftermath of the Trump-Vance-Zelensky Oval Office bust-up. As a diplomatic disaster, the Ukrainian leader’s recent visit to Washington would be hard to surpass. Yet eighty-four years ago, as World War II raged, a similarly explosive blow-up allegedly occurred in the same venue between Irish and American representatives.

The occasion was the visit to the United States of Irish Minister for the Coordination of Defensive Measures, Frank Aiken. In the midst of an [ever-tightening British supply squeeze](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ireland-During-Second-World-War/dp/1784992496), Taoiseach Éamon de Valera dispatched Aiken to America in the spring of 1941 to gain moral and material support for Ireland’s neutrality policy.

Although a stalwart of de Valera’s cabinets, Aiken, a physically imposing ‘big man’ of the revolutionary period, was on one level an odd choice of envoy. The Armagh native had [issued the cease-fire order which effectively ended the Irish Civil War in May 1923](https://www.rte.ie/history/the-end-of-the-civil-war/2023/0221/1357935-the-cease-fire-that-ended-the-civil-war/), but he was hardly renowned for his diplomatic finesse, dubbed [“the iron man with the wooden head”](https://www.irishacademicpress.ie/product/frank-aiken-nationalist-and-internationalist/) by contemporary wits.

The trip started off well. In Aiken’s original account of the trip, now held in UCD Archives, he recalled arriving in New York on 18 March, where the mayor of the city, [Fiorello La Guardia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiorello_La_Guardia), placed his car at his disposal. The following day Aiken was joined by Robert Brennan, the Irish Representative in Washington. Amid the warm welcome from Irish-American organisations, the trip was even leant an air of Hollywood glamour by the presence of actress [Maureen O’Hara](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maureen_O%27Hara) – then enjoying fame as ‘Jane’ in the *Tarzan* movies – who had heard that ‘General Aiken’ was Stateside and visited him.

But then things started to sour considerably, eventually leading some amongst the Irish delegation to conclude that they were the victims of something of an ambush orchestrated by the US State Department.

Aiken’s first meeting was with Sumner Welles, Head of the State Department. After listening to Aiken outline Ireland’s neutral position in the war, Welles told him bluntly “England should win” with, Aiken noted, “great emphasis and significance”. Aiken’s response was to cite Britain as an “active aggressor” in Northern Ireland, a view which Welles dismissed. The meeting ended acrimoniously, but given what was to follow when Aiken was received by US President Franklin D Roosevelt, this was very much the calm before the storm.

Next, Brennan was suddenly informed that Roosevelt was cancelling their scheduled meeting because he was leaving Washington for a fishing trip “for a week or ten days”. With the best part of a fortnight now to kill, Aiken and Brennan set about lobbying Congress and Senate.

Finally, two weeks later, the meeting with Roosevelt took place. According to Brennan’s original report, pleasantries were short, with the President requesting they speak frankly before asking Aiken why he had said Ireland had nothing to fear from a German victory. Aiken emphatically denied that he had said this and, as FDR went on, became increasingly frustrated by his inability to get a word in, finding that he had to “keep talking against his attempts to interrupt me in what would be a boorish way in dealing with an ordinary individual”.

Roosevelt promised Ireland much-needed supplies only if Britain consented. Aiken instructed the president to “use his own initiative and save the British from their folly”. Roosevelt was not used to being talked to like this. The sparring continued and a meeting scheduled to last ten minutes drifted into three-quarters of an hour (according to Aiken) and an hour and fifteen minutes (according to Brennan) as the Irish Minister held out against the constant attempts of the President’s aide-de-camp to interject.

The meeting was “finally terminated in the presence of four or five negroes who entered and placed the president’s lunch on the table” wrote Aiken who, before he left, asked the President if he would support Ireland in “our stand against aggression”. “German aggression, yes” replied Roosevelt. “British aggression, too” retorted Aiken, and the meeting drew to a stormy close.

Or so the official report claimed. In a newspaper piece published by the *Irish Press* years later, in 1958, Brennan alleged that the meeting had in fact spun out of all control at this point. When Aiken had replied “British aggression too” Roosevelt, Brennan claimed, lost control of his temper in quite spectacular fashion. Roaring “nonsense!”, Brennan recalled that America’s wheelchair-bound president had pulled the tablecloth from the table, sending cutlery and food flying around the room.

Understandably, perhaps, the sensational detail of the president’s upended lunch did not appear in either Aiken’s or Brennan’s original reports of the trip, although Brennan’s 1941 memo to Secretary of the Department of External Affairs [Joseph Walsh](https://www.ria.ie/2019/02/13/new-exhibition-on-joseph-walshe-1886-1956-the-founding-father-of-the-irish-foreign-service/#:~:text=He%20was%20Secretary%20(we%20would,Irish%20Biography(link%20is%20external)) does have Roosevelt bellowing “preposterous!” “ridiculous nonsense!” and “absurd nonsense!” at Aiken after he sought assurances of US support against British aggression.

While Roosevelt’s outburst must be contextualised against the backdrop of total war, the prevailing anti-partitionist Irish political culture of the time, and the Machiavellian behaviour of America’s top diplomat in Ireland, [David Gray](https://www.dib.ie/biography/gray-david-a3590), it goes to show that Trump-Vance-Zelensky was not quite as ‘unprecedented’ as has been claimed. But on the other hand, as Micheál Martin will be well aware, angry exchanges like Roosevelt-Aiken - complete with raised voices, histrionics, and the alleged flying knives and forks - used to strictly happen only behind closed doors.