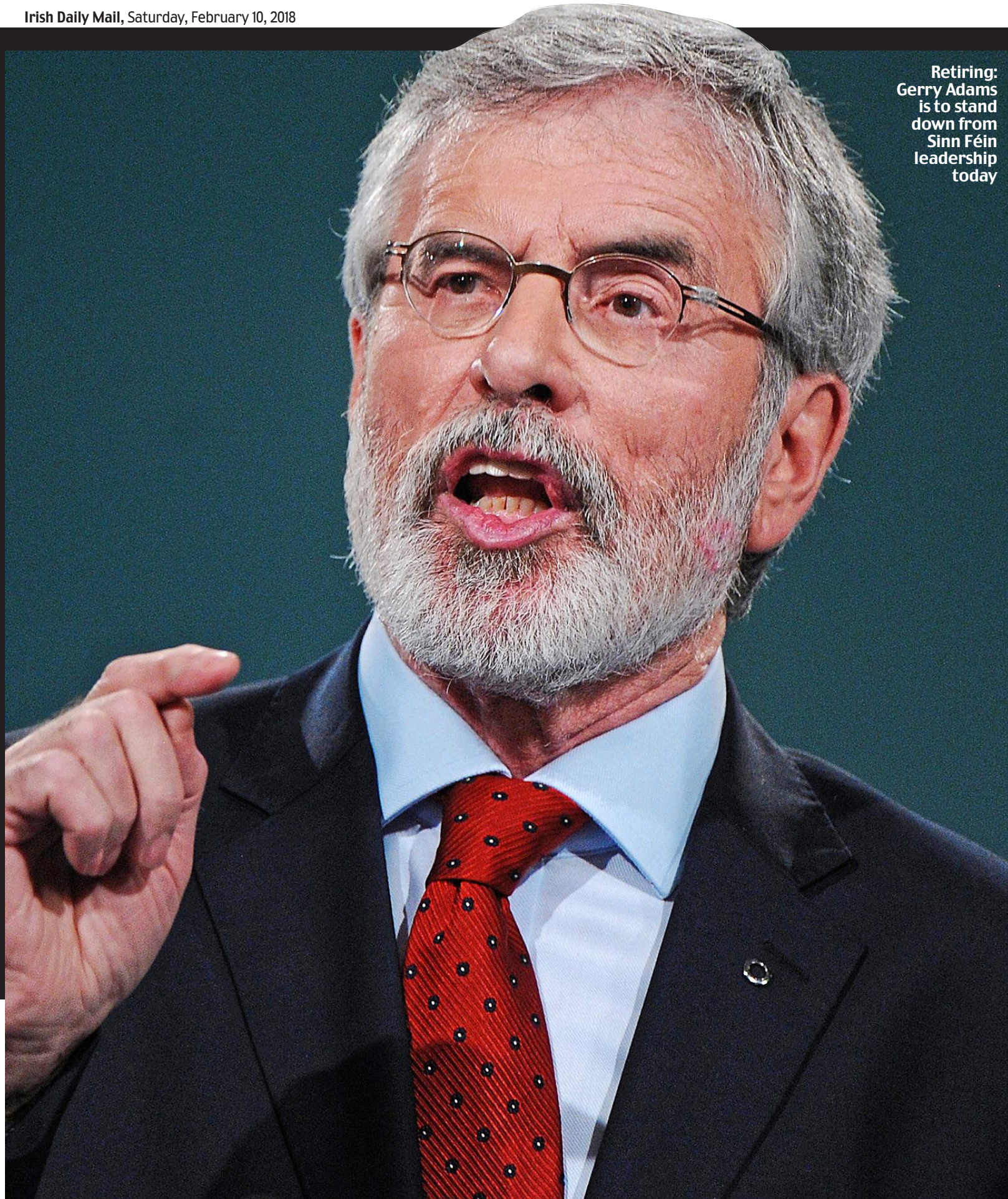


Retiring:
Gerry Adams
is to stand
down from
Sinn Féin
leadership
today



valuable alive, well behind the lines, than out there in the midst of the muck and blood.

Two incidents illustrate Adams' strategic skill. The first happened in the early spring of 1970 when the British Army escorted Orange marchers into Ballymurphy to open an Orange hall. Rioting broke out between the locals and soldiers, so the IRA commander in Belfast ordered a squad of gunmen into the area to engage the troops.

Adams, who was then commander of the IRA in Ballymurphy, found out and ordered the gunmen arrested and held in a house. Rioting then continued for days and weeks and by the end of it, so many local youngsters had been radicalised by their rough treatment at the hands of the troops that the ranks of the IRA in Ballymurphy were bursting at the seams. Had the gunmen got their way, that would not have happened.

As the IRA campaign intensified, it became clear that unionist pressure for internment would grow. But the British had a big problem: the Provisional IRA was full of new recruits and the RUC Special Branch had little idea of who was who. The passage of time would

change that, of course, as Adams realised. And so he urged an intensification of commercial bombing in central Belfast, hoping this would so enrage unionist politicians that the British might be forced to introduce internment prematurely, before their intelligence had improved.

It worked like a trick. The August 1971 internment operation was based on RUC Special Branch files that were so out of date that only a handful of the new IRA were caught. As stories emerged from the jails that old men and civil rights leaders had been interned instead of gunmen and bombers, nationalist anger grew, the SDLP led a Catholic withdrawal from public life and the stage was set for Bloody Sunday, five months later. Nationalist alienation was almost complete and it was mostly down to Gerry Adams.

His luck couldn't hold of course. His strategic talents had been recognised by the IRA and he was made commander of the Second Belfast Battalion, in West Belfast, the most active IRA unit in the North. But in March 1972, he risked a visit to his new wife, Colette, a Cumann na mBan activist he had met on republican protests in

Ballymurphy; that night the house was raided by troops and he was interned.

Gerry Adams' life, and Irish history would have been utterly different had he stayed in Long Kesh. But in July 1972, the IRA declared a ceasefire and the British agreed to meet a delegation of its leaders in London. The IRA in Belfast added a condition to the deal; Gerry Adams was to be released and included in the team meeting William Whitelaw, the new Secretary for Northern Ireland.

THE ceasefire came to nothing but it left Adams a free man, ready to rejoin the fight. Within weeks he had become the Belfast commander of the IRA and over the following year he copper-fastened his status as a talented military leader.

In the autumn of 1972 the Belfast command struck a blow against British military intelligence, uncovering a spy unit called the Military Reaction Force and killing at least one of its members masquerading as a laundry worker. During his

leadership the first bombing of London occurred, sending a large squad, led by the Price sisters, to detonate car bombs in the city centre.

But he was also suspected of involvement in planning the disastrous bombings of Bloody Friday, an over-ambitious operation that involved detonating 20 car bombs in Belfast city centre in little over an hour. The emergency services could not cope, warnings were inadequate and nine people were killed, all but two of whom were civilians.

And it was also during his leadership that the Belfast IRA began disappearing people, four of them in 1972; three were IRA members and one, Jean McConville, a widowed mother-of-seven, accused of being an informer. 'The Disappeared', as they came to be known, would return to haunt Gerry Adams and play no small part in his subsequent political failures south of the border.

In July 1973 Adams was back in Long Kesh, betrayed by an IRA man who two years later would be consigned to an unmarked grave in south Armagh. By 1976 the IRA was in shambles, badly divided over the calling of a ceasefire,

facing military defeat. Adams now wore the mantle of leader of the IRA's Young Turks, determined from jail to overthrow the old guard and restore the organisation's fortunes.

The seeds of the peace process were being sown during these turbulent years, although no-one could have guessed it at the time. The IRA was being criminalised, processed through the courts, then imprisoned like common felons. The protests they would launch to restore political status would culminate in the 1981 hunger strikes, which were notable not just for the staggering death toll of ten young men but because they paved the way for Sinn Féin to fight elections.

The resulting ballot box and Armalite strategy was more a contest than a common cause. Either the ballot box could prosper or the Armalite could, but not both together. Planting a bomb in a town centre might challenge British rule but the consequent damage, loss of life and jobs would also alienate voters. Eventually one had to give way and Adams made sure it was the Armalite.

On his release from jail and ascent to the IRA leadership, Adams had a plan to reorganise the IRA militarily and politically. The political change would put Sinn Féin under IRA control (a change that, incidentally, has never been reversed) in order to make the party relevant to the needs of ordinary people. That in turn would supposedly create political support for the IRA and so sustain their struggle. It was wrapped together and packaged as something called 'The Long War'.

That was the theory. In practice it made the IRA just that little bit less resistant to the idea of fighting elections and embracing politics, and thus, indirectly, boosted the still incipient peace process. The question that will puzzle historians in the future is whether this was remarkable foresight on Adams' part or mere serendipity.

AS HE surveys his loyal followers this weekend and welcomes Mary Lou as his successor, Gerry Adams – who continues to the present day to deny he was ever a member of the IRA – can be forgiven for thinking Ireland a tad more than ungrateful for what he has done for the place. His towering achievement was not just to end the Troubles but to undermine the ideological basis for Irish republicanism, something neither the British nor Irish governments could ever have accomplished.

By accepting the Good Friday Agreement and agreeing that it should be endorsed by a vote on both sides of the border, Gerry Adams accepted, on behalf of one of the most violent insurgencies in Irish history, the principle of consent, the idea that the people of Northern Ireland, in practice the unionists or a majority of them, must consent to Irish unity. He did no less than shatter the foundation stone of Irish republicanism. And, he might complain, little thanks he has received for his pains.

So what does Gerry Adams do now? Retire to his Donegal hillside? Take up a teaching post at a women's college in New England? Or hope that Michael D Higgins hangs up his hat?

Even though he has denied that the presidency is on his agenda, I still suspect the latter. Yet even if Michael D obliges, it will still not be an easy task. The Disappeared will continue to haunt Adams, as will other ghosts from the past. And the necessary reconstruction of his image may, in the end, just not be possible.