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Did Terrorism Sway Spain’s Election?

CHARLES POWELL

On March 14, 2004, three days after train bombings in Madrid killed 192 people and injured 1,500 others, the Spanish electorate voted out of office a government that was thought to have performed well and had been leading in the polls.

Critics of the outgoing prime minister, José María Aznar, blamed his unexpected defeat on his government’s attempt to pin responsibility for the bombings on Basque separatists, in spite of strong early evidence pointing to Al Qaeda involvement. More likely, it was the connection established by many Spanish voters between the terrorist bombings and Aznar’s support for the war in Iraq that proved his undoing.

SPAIN JOINS THE FRONT

Were it not for the remarkable changes that Aznar introduced in his country’s foreign policies in the wake of his second election victory in March 2000, one would be tempted to argue that Spain was always a likely target for Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Indeed, Arab terrorists had been active in the country long before the birth of Al Qaeda, sometimes with dramatic consequences. In April 1985, militants planted a bomb in an outdoor restaurant near Madrid frequented by US military personnel from the nearby Torrejón air base, killing 18 people, most of them Spanish civilians. More alarmingly, after 9-11 it was discovered that a number of terrorists directly involved in planning and executing the attacks had visited Spain to obtain false documents and other materials from members of Al Qaeda’s so-called sleeper cells.

A month after the attacks in New York and Washington, one of Osama bin Laden’s closest asso-

ciates, Ayman Al Zawahiri, publicly referred to Al-Andalus (the Arabic name given the Iberian Peninsula by its Muslim conquerors) as a promised land that one day would revert to Islamic rule. Factors such as its geographic proximity to North Africa, the presence of a rapidly growing Muslim immigrant community, and the prominence often attributed to Al-Andalus in narratives of the historical and cultural development of Islamic identity had singled out Spain as an attractive terrorist target long before the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Nevertheless, it was the shift in Spain’s foreign policy in relation to America and Iraq that most likely prompted Al Qaeda to target Madrid on March 11, 2004. During his first four-year term in office, Aznar mainly trod in the footsteps of his predecessor, Felipe González, when it came to relations with the European Union and the United States. Changes began to occur after his reelection in March 2000, when his Popular Party obtained an absolute majority in the Cortes, the Spanish parliament, freeing Aznar from having to take into account the wishes of his former parliamentary allies. Even so, subsequent changes in foreign policy were essentially reactive. They largely can be attributed to the inauguration of George W. Bush as US president in January 2001, and, more important, to the terrorist attacks of September 11.

In response to 9-11, Aznar immediately joined other European leaders in condemning the attacks and offering Washington his solidarity and support. Unlike many of his European colleagues, however, the Spanish prime minister fully shared the Bush administration’s diagnosis of 9-11 and its likely consequences—including the need to embark on a global “war on terrorism” that might entail preventive use of force against rogue states. When asked to justify his position, Aznar added a specifically Spanish dimension to the debate, pointing out that since Madrid had often sought (and obtained) external

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support in its struggle against domestic terrorism, it would be disloyal and inconsistent not to join a Washington-sponsored “coalition of the willing” against Al Qaeda. This was so, he insisted, even though the United States had hitherto played a rather modest role in the fight against ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or Freedom for the Basque Homeland), the Basque separatist terrorist group. In the short term, Aznar’s policy resulted in Spain’s sending troops to Afghanistan as part of the war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, in which some 20 other countries were involved, including France and Germany, and which enjoyed the blessings of the United Nations.

For the longer term, Aznar interpreted 9-11 as the beginning of a new post-post-cold war era—an era that offered fresh opportunities for Spain in the international arena. The prime minister believed that his country’s spectacular economic growth in the 1990s, which had allowed Spain to become the eighth-largest economy in the developed world, entitled it to play a more prominent role in international affairs. He also felt this was best achieved by developing a closer relationship with the United States. Furthermore, in the course of his second term, Aznar became increasingly disillusioned with an EU that seemed unwilling or unable to foster serious economic reform in Europe, that had little to offer in the fight against international terrorism, and that failed to come to Spain’s assistance when Moroccan gendarmerie invaded the island of Perejil in the summer of 2002 in an attempt to reclaim the uninhabited Spanish territory.

AZNAR’S U-TURN

Aznar’s closeness to the Bush administration, and his increasingly critical view of Franco-German opposition to an invasion of Iraq, gradually became apparent in the course of 2002. Although the prime minister had first met the new American president in June 2001 in Madrid, and had seen him again in November in Washington, it was in the spring of

2002 that they began to establish a closer personal rapport. Along with US Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Aznar endorsed the idea of seeking an explicit UN Security Council resolution to apply renewed pressure on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to demonstrate compliance with UN resolutions on the destruction of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

But Security Council Resolution 1441, finally adopted in November 2002, was subject to conflicting interpretations, and France in particular did not accept that Iraqi noncompliance should automatically lead to war. Aznar for his part had become increasingly impatient with Saddam. By late December he was in favor of military action with or without a UN resolution in support. Additionally, Spain became a more significant player in January 2003, when it took up a non-permanent seat in the Security Council. Shortly afterward, Aznar inspired the so-called letter of the eight, signed by the prime ministers of Spain, Britain, Italy, Portugal, Denmark, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Published on January 29, 2003, in *The Wall Street Journal*, it argued that “the transatlantic relationship should not fall victim to the current Iraqi regime’s attempts to threaten world security.”

In Spain, however, domestic opposition to war was strong and growing. According to a poll conducted by the Elcano Royal Institute in February 2003, 64 percent of Spaniards opposed any kind of military intervention in Iraq, 27 percent would support it only if it enjoyed the UN’s backing, and only 2 percent approved the use of force with or without a resolution. On February 15, several million demonstrators took to the streets all over Spain to oppose war. This sentiment led Aznar to support Blair’s quest for a second UN resolution that would explicitly condemn Saddam for failing to comply with Resolution 1441 and thereby pave the way for the use of force.

Later that month Aznar joined Blair and Bush in sponsoring a draft resolution, but in spite of Spain’s lukewarm efforts to win over fellow Security Council members Mexico and Chile, support fell far



Under Bush's Thumb?

Bush and Aznar in the Azores, March 2003

short of what was required. Anxious to avoid a resounding diplomatic defeat, the three leaders finally decided to go it alone at a meeting held March 16, 2003, at Lajes air base in the Azores. Two days later, US troops began the invasion of Iraq. In the eyes of many Spaniards who opposed the war, the photographs taken at the Azores, showing President Bush resting his hand on Aznar's shoulder, came to epitomize the latter's foreign policy U-turn and his subservience to the US administration.

Unlike other coalition members such as Britain, Australia, or Poland, Spain did not send troops to Iraq until after the fall of Baghdad, and was therefore not involved in the invasion itself. The reasons for this were mainly political: Aznar had initially toyed with the idea of sending part of the Spanish fleet—including its only aircraft carrier, the *Príncipe de Asturias*—to the region, but was talked out of it by senior party officials alarmed by the approach of local and regional elections scheduled for May 2003. With the elections out of the way, several Spanish support vessels—including a hospital ship—finally landed in Iraq in July once the fighting was over, allegedly to perform humanitarian missions. A more permanent contingent of some 1,300 Spanish troops became fully operational in September, under Polish command.

THE TERRORISTS' TARGET

It is telling that Spanish interests were among the first European targets to be attacked by Islamic terrorists. Contrary to what Aznar's government argued at the time, there can be little doubt that a May 2003 suicide bombing attack on the Casa de España social club and restaurant in Casablanca, Morocco, in which 45 civilians lost their lives, was intended as a warning. Shortly after the deployment of Spanish troops, the Arab television station Al Jazeera in October 2003 showed a video in which Osama bin Laden himself threatened to punish coalition members Britain, Spain, Australia, Poland, Japan, and Italy for backing the Bush administration in Iraq.

Even more important, two months later a Norwegian academic came across a text in Arabic on the Internet, allegedly written by a (probably Moroccan) member of Al Qaeda, that carefully analyzed the domestic political situation in a number of coalition states with a view to identifying the most vulnerable. The document dedicated six pages to Spain, which was described as Washington's closest European ally except Britain, and underlined the extent of popular opposition to the government's support for the war in Iraq. The text also noted that as early as March 2003, the leader of the opposition,

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, had promised to withdraw Spanish troops should he win the next general election, which was scheduled for March 2004. In short, Spain was the weakest link in the coalition chain, and if the Aznar government failed to survive a major terrorist coup, its successor would bring Spain's presence in Iraq to an end.

The Norwegian researcher paid little attention to this text until after the events of March 11. There is no proof, furthermore, that its author was directly involved in planning or executing the bombings that shook Madrid that fateful morning. Nevertheless, it shows that Islamic fundamentalists saw powerful reasons for making the Spanish capital a terrorist target. By way of contrast, bombing London—an option that European security services considered more likely at the time—would not have had the same political consequences. The Tory party, which might have replaced Labour in office had public opinion forced Blair to resign, was on the whole favorable to Britain's presence in Iraq.

FOUR DAYS IN MARCH

In the weeks leading up to the general election of March 14, 2004, most political analysts and pollsters predicted a narrow victory for Aznar's Popular Party. This was never an easy election to call, mainly because the outgoing prime minister had decided not to stand for office, later anointing a close colleague, Mariano Rajoy, as his possible successor. Furthermore, this was to be Zapatero's first general election as leader of the opposition, and it was widely felt that he was still a politician in the making. In spite of several highly publicized and potentially damaging setbacks, such as an oil spill resulting from the sinking of the tanker *Prestige* off the coast of Galicia, the government was generally deemed to have performed reasonably well. This was particularly so in the economic sphere, where a period of unprecedented economic growth had sent unemployment levels to an all-time low. Given that the government had fared well in local elections held in May 2003, at the height of the Iraq crisis, it was widely believed that opposition to the war would not have a major impact on the 2004 election.

Even so, government officials' uncertainty about the election outcome may partly explain their behavior in response to the bombs that exploded on three commuter trains headed for Madrid's Atocha railway station on the morning of March 11. To be fair, it is perhaps understandable that, in light of a 30-year struggle against ETA terrorism that had cost more than 900 lives, the authorities should instinc-

tively attribute a major terrorist attack to the organization they knew best. Furthermore, ETA had attempted to plant bombs in Madrid railway stations the previous Christmas, and two of its members had recently been intercepted while driving half a ton of explosives to the capital.

In any case, it was immediately evident to experts and laymen alike that the Popular Party would probably fare better at the polls if the bombings could be attributed to ETA, and would likely be punished by voters if the culprits turned out to be Islamic fundamentalists, since the attacks might be blamed on Aznar's support for the Iraq War. The outgoing government acted accordingly, remaining steadfast in its conviction that ETA was to blame long after foreign intelligence experts and even journalists had come to the conclusion that Al Qaeda was responsible.

By noon on March 11, the government knew that the police had discovered a van containing detonators, explosives, and a tape recording of Koran verses. Aznar, however, personally telephoned editors of Spain's leading newspapers to reassure them that ETA was to blame. Later that afternoon, the foreign ministry instructed Spanish ambassadors abroad to confirm that ETA was behind the attacks, urging them to inform the local media accordingly. The government even insisted that the UN Security Council make an explicit reference to ETA in its official condemnation of the bombings, at a time when most analysts in the United States were working on the assumption that Al Qaeda was to blame, causing considerable discomfort to some of the senior diplomats involved.

In spite of the government's determination to pin the attacks on ETA, police experts had begun to pursue Al Qaeda-related leads almost at once. In the early hours of March 12, the discovery of a bag containing explosives that had failed to detonate, with a mobile telephone connected to them, seemed to confirm that ETA was not responsible. Yet the government did not reveal this news until that evening. That night, an estimated 11 million people (out of a total population of 42 million) took to the streets of Spanish towns and cities to protest the bombings, without knowing for certain who was to blame for them. Early on the afternoon of March 13, the police arrested several Moroccan citizens linked to the attacks, a development formally acknowledged

by the interior minister later that evening, only hours away from the opening of polling stations.

That same evening, authorities found a videocassette near the central Madrid mosque, on which an Al Qaeda spokesman claimed responsibility for the bombings and justified them as punishment for the Spanish government's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. By that stage feelings were running high among some of the government's more vocal critics. Many who demonstrated noisily outside Popular Party offices throughout the country were veterans of the massive antiwar rallies held the previous year.

BOMBS AND BALLOTS

As could be expected, the relationship between the terrorist attacks of March 11, 2004, and the outcome of the elections held just three days later became a hotly contested issue. The Popular Party argued that, however narrowly, it would have won had it not been for the train bombings, both because of the wave of antiwar sentiment they provoked and, more controversially, because of the manner in which this sentiment was supposedly manipulated by sectors of the media traditionally hostile to Aznar and his policies.

The Socialists, for their part, claimed that they would have won the elections regardless, and that it was in any case the government's heavy-handed attempt to withhold the truth about the bombings that backfired, providing hundreds of thousands of voters with fresh reasons for wanting to oust the conservatives from office. According to one survey, 59 percent of respondents believed the government had misinformed the public; 30 percent denied this was true.

In the March 14 balloting, the Socialists won 11 million votes. The Popular Party received 9.7 million. A postelection poll by the Center for Sociological Research found that 28 percent said the bombings had influenced their decision. Given that a total of 28 million Spaniards voted, this would mean that the bombings affected some 7.4 million people. In most cases, the killings simply reaffirmed a decision to vote for the party that voters had already thought of supporting before March 11. However, 22 percent of those who admitted having been influenced by these events—in other words, some 1.6 million citizens—claimed that they had originally intended to abstain, but had turned out to vote in response to the train bombings.

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In addition, another 13 percent of those who claimed to have been influenced—about 1 million voters—admitted to having changed the party of their choice. The Center's poll unfortunately did not ask respondents to identify the parties affected by this decision. However, more than 9 percent of those who had voted Socialist cited the events of March 11 as the main reason for doing so, while only 1.5 percent of Popular Party voters mentioned this. In all likelihood, the government's handling of the crisis was an important additional factor in encouraging many left-leaning potential abstainers and first-time voters to react in this manner.

While it is impossible to rule out a Socialist victory had the attacks not taken place, it is reasonable to conclude that the killings mobilized potential abstainers and undecided voters—resulting in a 77 percent turnout, the third-highest in Spanish voting history since the return of democracy in 1977. Voters came out in force to punish the departing Aznar government. This interpretation is borne out by an Elcano Royal Institute poll carried out in May 2004, according to which 64 percent of respondents believed that the bombings would not have taken place had Spain not backed the United States in the Iraq War, a causal relationship questioned by only 23 percent of those interviewed.

THE AFTERMATH

The events of March 2004 in Spain were subjected to close scrutiny throughout the world because of their complex and worrying implications. In the first instance, they gave rise to an interesting debate—about the nature of public opinion, terrorism, and democracy—that far transcended the Spanish environment in which the events took place. For many politicians, analysts, and journalists in the United States (but only a handful of their brethren in Spain and elsewhere in Europe), the election results represented a triumph of terrorism over democracy: an intimidated public opinion had buckled under the impact of a daring strike in the nation's capital; the electorate chose the party that had promised to withdraw troops from Iraq on the understanding that this would radically diminish the likelihood of further terrorist attacks. (It should be noted in this regard that 49 percent of Spaniards, according to an Elcano poll, believed troop withdrawal would make Islamist attacks less likely, while 43 percent doubted this would be the case.) According to this view, bin Laden, rather than Zapatero, won the Spanish elections.

Strictly speaking, this conclusion was as absurd as it would have been to claim that the US presidential election in 1980 was won by Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and not Ronald Reagan, who ran successfully against Jimmy Carter, the incumbent who came to political grief at the hands of the Iranian revolutionary leader. What is more, given Spain's considerable experience of terrorism over the past 30 years, it was unfair to accuse public opinion of being faint-hearted in the face of adversity, particularly if one considers the personal courage and sang-froid displayed by ordinary citizens in the aftermath of the March 11 attacks. Given, as well, the US administration's failure to establish a strong link between Saddam's regime and Al Qaeda, popular Spanish opposition to the war in Iraq could hardly be interpreted as evidence of a lack of determination—let alone capitulation—in the struggle against international terrorism. Bin Laden did not win the Spanish elections, nor was the new Socialist prime minister another Neville Chamberlain.

Whether or not they were right to do so, a significant number of Spanish voters assumed that the bombings in Madrid were related to the Aznar government's support for the war in Iraq, and reacted to them by seeking to vote his party out of office. The war had been perceived from the out-

A Current History Snapshot . . .



"Never was a war so righteous as is the war against Germany now; never any State in the world so clamored for punishment; but be it remembered that Europe's quarrel is with Germany as a State, not with the German people, with the system, not with the race.

The older tradition of Germany is a pacific, civilizing tradition. The temperament of the mass of the German people is kindly, sane, amiable. Disaster to the German Army, if it is unaccompanied by such a memorable wrong as dismemberment or intolerable indignity, will mean the restoration of the greatest people of Europe to the fellowship of the western nations."

"The Fourth of August—Europe at War"
Current History, December 1914
 H. G. Wells

set as unlawful, unnecessary, and illegitimate by a majority of Spaniards, including many Popular Party voters and the Catholic Church, and it is not surprising that the bombings sparked more votes for the party that had opposed the war most consistently. Furthermore, Zapatero's decision to withdraw Spain's troops by June 30, 2004, unless the United Nations became responsible for the military and political situation in Iraq (carried out earlier than initially expected and completed in May), enjoyed the support of 78 percent of the population, according to one poll. From this point of view, the elections could be seen as a spectacular triumph for democracy—and a salutary reminder to democratic leaders that, even when they enjoy comfortable majorities in parliaments, they may still pay a high political price for pursuing policies strongly opposed by the vast majority of the electorate. Consequently, though undoubtedly significant, the impact of the bombings on the elections cannot be said to have diminished or undermined the legitimacy of the outcome.

The events of March 2004 also triggered a debate about the way foreign policy should be conducted by Western democracies in the early twenty-first century. Until World War I, foreign policy had been the private domain of governments and their diplomats. This situation began to change in the interwar years and even more so in the aftermath of World War II, which awakened elites to the importance of linkages between domestic and foreign policies. Although the advent of mass media (and television in particular) forced governments to acknowledge the importance of public opinion, the view that foreign policy was less vulnerable to scrutiny than other areas of government activity, supposedly because it was too complex and alien to their everyday lives for regular citizens to understand, remained current. The Iraq conflict, however, underlined the extent to which globalization in the political and media domains was making it difficult for democracies to act abroad without the consent (if not support) of their citizens. In the Spanish case, in spite of the relatively modest number of troops deployed (about 1,300) and casualties incurred (less than a dozen), involvement in Iraq aroused the determined opposition of significant sectors of the electorate, which the government ignored at its peril.

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The events of March 2004 in Spain also attracted interest throughout the world for other, less academic reasons. Above all, there was the immediate concern that, if Al Qaeda interpreted the Popular Party's defeat (and the resulting withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq) as a victory, terrorists might be tempted to reproduce the Madrid bombings in other countries about to hold elections, including the United States. Furthermore, although Spain's military contribution to the pacification of Iraq was relatively modest, Washington feared that Zapatero's decision to withdraw troops might weaken the resolve of other coalition members, most notably Italy and Poland. In fact, the evidence suggests Spain's impact on events in Iraq has always been relatively modest, both before and after the March elections.

REJOINING EUROPE

Events in Spain may, however, have modified the existing balance of power within Europe away from Atlanticists and in favor of the more "Eurocentric" nations, a cleavage that largely coincided with the separation between intergovernmentalists and integrationists within the European Union. Although in the past Spain had generally sided with the latter, and had been quite content to operate under the Franco-German umbrella, Aznar had become increasingly independent and critical of the status quo during his second term in office, and tended to find himself in the company of Blair and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The Spanish leader was unimpressed by the European Convention's efforts to draw up a draft constitution for the EU, and regarded the result with suspicion and distaste, not least because it deprived Madrid of the institutional power in EU decision making it had been awarded by the Nice Treaty in December 2000.

The Zapatero government, which came to office in April 2004, argued that, having pulled out of the "Azores coalition," Spain would be free to return to its supposedly influential role at the heart of Europe, acting in full agreement with France and Germany. This goal appears to have been popular with public opinion at large, unaccustomed as it was to seeing Spain in the somewhat unlikely—and not always reliable—company of Britain. It soon became apparent that proposed constitutional changes to voting powers in the EU remained

a point of contention. Nevertheless, France and Germany accommodated Spain's demands somewhat, thereby rewarding the young Socialist leader for having removed Spain from the Azores coalition and returned to the Eurocentric fold.

Spain has undergone very significant changes in the past decade. Its citizens were reminded of this somewhat abruptly when they awoke to the fact that one in four victims of the Madrid commuter train bombings was foreign, many of them immigrants who had entered the country illegally. What was recently a highly homogeneous society, both in ethnic and cultural terms, has rapidly joined the European mainstream of diversity. Indeed, one of the most significant domestic consequences of the March killings, which are thought to have been carried out by Moroccans, may turn out to be an increase in xenophobic sentiment, a trend that was already visible in recent years. (Between 1996 and 2004 the proportion of Spaniards in favor of expelling Moroccans tripled from 7 percent to 19 percent, and that of people who would refuse to marry Moroccans rose from 39 percent to 52 percent.) Fear and rejection of Muslim fundamentalism may provide new depth and breadth to more traditional forms of anti-Arab racism. Also, for the first time in recent history, a majority of ordinary citizens no longer regard ETA terrorism as the most serious threat to their security.

The longer-term consequences of the events of March 2004 for Spain's role in the international arena are not easy to predict. Many Spaniards clearly believed that the election results would allow a return to the more familiar relationships and alliances of the past. According to his critics, by siding with the United States and others over Iraq, Aznar had broken with several decades of domestic consensus on foreign policy issues, leaving Spain isolated and exposed. Within the EU, this departure had led to an open confrontation with France and Germany, something Spain could ill afford given its continued reliance on the EU's Common Agricultural Policy and substantial regional subsidies.

Further afield, Aznar's support for the Bush administration had allegedly undermined Spain's role as a bridge between Latin America and Europe, as well as its prestige and credibility in the Arab world. Justified or not, these views were in keeping with results of the Elcano Royal Institute poll, according to which a majority felt that the withdrawal of troops from Iraq would improve Madrid's relations with France and Germany, the Arab world, and Latin America. Most of those polled also believed that withdrawal from Iraq would hurt Spain's relations with the United States, but by the same token, the government's decision seems to have been welcomed as a sign of autonomy and self-respect.

A NEW FOREIGN POLICY

Significantly, and contrary to what some had argued in the wake of the March events, this same survey found 74 percent of respondents in favor of Spain's playing an active role internationally. A majority of Spaniards apparently agreed with Aznar's diagnosis of his country's need to become more of a protagonist in world events. They simply saw his way of going about it as misguided and counterproductive.

In September 2004, Zapatero hosted a mini-summit in Madrid for President Jacques Chirac of France and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder of Germany, thereby confirming Spain's return to more EU-friendly positions. Only weeks later, the prime minister called for an "alliance of civilizations" between the Western and Arab-Muslim worlds in an address to the UN General Assembly, while at the same time stressing his support for multilateralism and international law. Additionally, the Spanish leader called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq, a gesture that did little to improve already badly strained relations with the Bush administration. Taken together, these initiatives added up to an almost complete reversal of the foreign policy priorities of his predecessor. ■