

Commentary No. 134, April 1, 2004  
"Spain, Europe, and Mr. Bush"

On Thursday, March 11, 2004, in the early morning, bombs exploded almost simultaneously in several Madrid train terminals. Over 200 people were killed, and many more hurt. It was a terrible, cruel disaster and there was instant shock and grief in Spain and around the world. The first question of course was, who did it? The Spanish government immediately accused ETA, the Basque independence movement which has engaged in various attacks for several decades now. Within hours, however, many persons, including police agencies in various other countries, began to say that it was an al-Qaeda-linked group and not ETA. That same day, ETA, directly and through political groups sympathetic to it, denied the accusation strongly (whereas, in past ETA attacks, ETA had always claimed responsibility). Despite a growing sense that it was clearly not ETA, the Spanish government insisted that ETA was the prime suspect. The Spanish Foreign Minister ordered all ambassadors of Spain to proclaim this. Over several days, the Spanish Prime Minister, José María Aznar, personally telephoned the editors of all the major Spanish newspapers, insisting that ETA was to blame. Finally, the Spanish Minister of the Interior admitted that there was a possibility that it might be an al-Qaeda group. By Sunday, the whole world seemed to agree that it was not ETA, but al-Qaeda, although Sunday morning, the Foreign Minister was still insisting on television that the prime suspect should be ETA.

How do we account for such extraordinary misreading, if not deliberate misinformation, on the part on the Spanish government?

To understand this, we must go back to the roots of the Spanish government's policy, and of course remember that there were Spanish legislative elections scheduled for the Sunday following the bombings. In the post-Franco period, Spain had moved towards a basically two-party system akin to that of most of the Western world: a left-of-center Socialist party (PSOE) versus a conservative party, called the Partido Popular (PP). In addition to the usual left-right issues that divide such parties, they were divided both on foreign policy issues and on how to deal with the demands of various regions of Spain for autonomy (if not independence) - first of all Catalonia and the Basque country, but also Galicia, Andalucía, Valencia, and the Canary Islands.

In the arena of foreign policy, the Socialists, who controlled the government under Felipe González from 1982-1996, pursued an active effort to integrate Spain into Europe and to play a prominent role in European institutions. The Socialists also were an important force in trying to bring about a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. In internal affairs, the Socialists pressed for considerable devolution of the constitutional structure, although no doubt less than regionalist parties hoped to obtain.

When the PP came to power in 1996, they shifted the focus radically. They sought to move closer to the U.S., especially in any issue in which there was conflict between the U.S. and western Europe. This became dramatically clear after George Bush became the U.S. President. Spain became a very active supporter of Bush's Iraq policy. As a member of the Security Council, it co-sponsored the U.S.-supported resolutions, and it sent troops to participate in the invasion of Iraq. In questions related to Israel, Spain allied itself with Sharon. As for regionalism, Aznar argued that the Socialists had been far too soft on "terrorists," and in particular on the ETA (although González had certainly pursued an unremitting struggle against ETA). Even vis-a-vis the so-called moderate regionalist parties,

Aznar was not ready to make any concessions. The PP was heir to the Franquist tradition of acute hostility to regionalism in any form. As for Europe, just last fall, Spain had been, along with Poland, the hold-out state that made it impossible to agree on the new constitution for the European Union - a constitution strongly backed by France and Germany, the two states that had been most hostile to Bush's Iraq policy.

One week before the elections, all the polls showed that Aznar's party would win. Its majority would be reduced but it would surely form the next government. Then came the bombings. We know now that, within hours, the Spanish police had told the government that, based on the discovery of one bomb that had not exploded and an analysis of its composition, it was almost certain that it could not be ETA which was responsible but rather an al-Qaeda-linked group. The government suppressed this information and proceeded on its claim that ETA was responsible. The politics of this is clear. First of all, Aznar and the PP have been as obsessed with ETA as George Bush and the neo-cons have been with Saddam Hussein and Iraq. Neither Aznar nor Bush wanted the prime spotlight to be on al-Qaeda. Furthermore, Aznar was aware that, with elections coming in three days, were it to be thought that the bombings were caused by al-Qaeda, the Spanish voters might feel this was payback for Spain's involvement in the Iraq invasion, especially since the overwhelming majority of the voters (including PP supporters) had made clear in 2003 that they were opposed to Spain's involvement in the war.

So, Aznar played the big lie, and he did so personally. By Friday, however, the Spanish police was threatening to expose the government, since they did not wish to be blamed for incompetence. Thus, the Interior Minister had to cede ground, and suggest that the government was pursuing all possible perpetrators, even if it continued to believe that ETA was the most probable perpetrator. But the contrary evidence was mounting. And by Saturday, there were demonstrations all over Spain denouncing the government for misleading the people. Various editors of newspapers said they personally regretted editorials they had written the day before. They said they had been deceived by Aznar. And on Sunday, the government was roundly turned out of office. The Socialist leader, José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero, immediately announced that he would fulfill his electoral promise (made long before the bombings) to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq on June 30. It is expected that the new government will resume discussions about further devolution within Spain, especially since the regionalist parties also profited from the reaction to Aznar. And the future Spanish Prime Minister immediately flew to Paris to discuss with President Chirac Spain's wish to reintegrate Europe and to proceed with the new constitution for the European Union. It took another two weeks until the Interior Minister admitted that there was no evidence whatsoever of ETA involvement.

The Spanish bombings became the Spanish bombshell. Various small Latin American countries suggested they would follow the Spanish example in withdrawing their troops from Iraq (Honduras was the most explicit). And Europe was now dramatically back on the tracks. The Poles indicated they could not be the sole holdout and would revise their position. The Bush administration supporters started their usual smear campaign. The Spanish, they said, were being cowards, giving in to terrorism. This scarcely impressed people in Spain or elsewhere in Europe, since it was so manifestly at odds with the Spanish reality.

The irrelevance of this smear campaign was especially patent since, in the week following, the Bush administration came under a parallel attack for deliberate misperception of the world situation, and thus misleading the American people. Richard Clarke, who had been the chief

anti-terrorist person in the Bush administration (as he had been in three previous administrations), denounced Bush and his key colleagues for deliberately ignoring al-Qaeda in 2001 in order to pursue their policy of focusing on Iraq as the problem, and this in the days both before and after the attack of September 11. Bush and Aznar are birds of a feather, and the two situations are remarkably parallel.

Clarke's accusations will not go away, and they are stirring up the kind of voter unrest that undid Aznar, all the more so since his charges have been seconded by a series of other persons who were in a position to know what was being said in the high councils of the Bush administration in 2001 - two former deputies of Clarke; former Secretary of the Treasury Paul O'Neill; Gen. Donald Kerrick, former deputy National Security Advisor; and several others in key positions. The vote on Bush's re-election is not days away but months away. So Bush may have time to recoup. But on June 30, when the U.S. hopes to install a sovereign Iraqi government, the U.S. will probably not be able to bring home the many troops it had hoped, and thus fail to gain the electoral credit such a move might bring. And Europe is not about to be more accommodating to the Bush obsessions. Bush might do well to take to heart what the first Republican President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, famously said: "You can fool all of the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time."

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