

Paddy Woodworth covered the March 11 Madrid bombings for the Irish Times, the BBC, the London Times, SkyNews, and Irish television and radio. He is the author of Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy (Yale University Press, 2003) and "Using Terror against Terrorists," in The Politics of Contemporary Spain, Sebastian Balfour, editor (forthcoming from Routledge).



Spain Changes Course

Aznar's Legacy, Zapatero's Prospects

Paddy Woodworth

Appearances are sometimes remarkably close to reality. There is a well-known photograph of former Spanish prime minister José María Aznar with President George W. Bush, in which both men are smoking cigars and both have their feet up on the table at which they are seated. Aznar's usually stern features have relaxed into a radiant glow of consummation. He has fulfilled one of his supreme ambitions. He is on homefolks terms with the leader of the world's only superpower.

However, another and more concrete ambition remained unfulfilled. The photograph was taken in Canada at the G-8 summit in June 2002. But Aznar was not there as of right, since Spain does not belong to this elite group of states. He was there simply because Spain held the rotating presidency of the European Union at the time. Aznar had made membership of the G-8 one of his key foreign policy targets, and it must have seemed within his grasp that June day. Like so many of his other aspirations, however, it was ultimately to elude him.

There is another famous photograph of Aznar with Bush, taken nine months later, in which the Spanish premier looks much less at ease, and the usual humorless and painfully watchful expression has returned to his face. The appearance is much more complex here, the reality harder to read. The British prime minister, Tony Blair, is also present, but it is Bush who has his arm on Aznar's shoulder. It seems legitimate to glimpse a touch of uncertainty in Aznar's fixed stare, as he tries to give the impression

of a statesman among equals, looking destiny right between the eyes. This photograph was taken in March 2003 in the Azores. The Portuguese prime minister was the host at the summit, but is the Spanish leader who is standing up front with the big boys, getting ready to go to war with Iraq, regardless of what his European and Arab neighbors, Spaniards in general, or even his own party, the center-right Partido Popular (PP), thought about this venture.

When the new Spanish prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of the center-left Socialist Party (PSOE), wanted to confirm his intention to take his country's troops out of Iraq last April, he referred to this image. Speaking at his investiture debate in the Spanish parliament, he said: "We are going to take Spain out of that photograph in the Azores." Aznar's meticulously constructed reputation, and his prospects for international advancement, built up over 25 years of very hard work, had been shattered in the three days following the March 11 bombings in Madrid. "You and your war!" his prime minister designate, Mariano Rajoy, now leader of the opposition, is said to have yelled at him, banging the table, on Saturday March 13, as a totally unexpected defeat loomed in the next day's elections.¹ In Spain, the occupation of Iraq was not just one party's war. It was one man's war. And now the country he had represented wanted to be cut out of an embarrassing photograph, leaving gaping questions over a legacy that had seemed so secure only a month earlier.

Personality and character are terms that tend to be regarded with suspicion by serious political analysts. They prefer to think that national and global affairs are molded by ideologies, economic forces, emerging productive technologies, or even clashes of civilizations rather than by individual human beings, and they are usually right.

However, there is no escaping the significance of the character of José María Aznar, prime minister of Spain from 1996 until last April. He has been the driving force behind sweeping policy shifts, at home and abroad. Verdicts from diverse sources attest to the extraordinary weight that commentators have given to what we might call the “Aznar factor.”

“He deserves his place in Spain’s post-Franco pantheon. But greatness, which was within his grasp, eluded him,” writes Dan O’Brien, senior Europe editor at the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, who then concludes bluntly: “His character is to blame.”² O’Brien was writing before the Madrid bombings, but after Aznar had fulfilled his promise to stand down as prime ministerial candidate for the Partido Popular after two terms in office.

“His personal authoritarianism has worked well enough to cement the PP together internally,” Soledad Gallego-Díaz wrote in a valedictory piece in *El País*, “but it has also been one of the most criticized aspects of his character outside the party.”³

Such were—and are—the emotions aroused by Aznar’s personality that the same newspaper concluded an editorial last April by making the following recommendation to him on leaving office: “The question which Aznar should ask himself...is why he has finished up being so detested by so many Spaniards.”⁴

He is, of course, also loved, or at least admired, by many others. More than nine and a half million people voted for the PP on March 14, only one and a quarter million fewer than those who voted for the victorious PSOE.⁵ While they had cast their ballots

for a party now led by Mariano Rajoy, every voter knew that the PP had been, and was likely to remain, largely Aznar’s invention.

A Democratic Fundamentalist?

The forging of a successful democratic party to represent the Spanish right, an essential component for a stable democracy, may well be the former tax official’s greatest achievement. The fact that he has led that party in a manner that has left Spain more deeply divided than at any time since the Franco dictatorship is his greatest failure.

In theory, at least, Spain’s transition to democracy after General Franco’s death was based on consensual politics.⁶ The “two Spains,” so chillingly evoked by the poet Antonio Machado at the outset of the Civil War, and which had divided Spaniards into lethally hostile camps for the first three-quarters of the last century, seemed to have found interests, and ideas, in common at last.

Aznar, during his second administration at least, had no truck with consensus. He believed that those who were not with him were against him and came close to saying that those who were against him could not be democrats. In a book published in February of this year, a veteran Spanish journalist and commentator, Juan Luis Cebrián, coined the phrase “democratic fundamentalism” to describe this attitude. “This is a disease which the Spanish right suffers in an extreme form,” he writes. He adds that he considers that other world leaders, and especially George W. Bush, are also infected. Aznar and Bush, he claims, “exploit democracy as a function of their power, and they are inclined to undermine democracy wherever and whenever they can.”⁷

This is a severe charge. To see whether it sticks in Aznar’s case, we need to understand something about his background, how his politics shifted over time, and, crucially, the stark contrast between his first and second administrations.

We should not draw adverse conclusions from the fact that Aznar comes from a family background steeped in the traditionalist religious and political values of the former dictator, Gen. Francisco Franco. It was the aspiration of democrats in the transition period to draw such people into the European mainstream, not to isolate them and confront them. He certainly should not be pilloried because, at the age of 16, he wrote a letter to a local newspaper calling for a return to the “authentic” ideals of the Falange, the radical Spanish fascist organization. After all, many of his future opponents were promoting the *Thoughts of Mao* at the time, and now enjoy unquestioned democratic credentials.

It is more significant that, as a young adult in the crucial years of the late 1970s, while Spain was holding its first post-Franco elections and debating a democratic constitution, he wrote another series of articles for publication that indicate respect for the dictatorship and aversion to democracy. He was especially hostile to the use of the term “nationality” in the constitution to describe the status of the Basques, Catalans, and Galicians. This word, he claimed put “the very essence and concept of Spain in danger.”⁸ It is no coincidence that Aznar has left office with relations between Madrid and at least the first two of these three groups in a worse state than at any time since Franco. It is certainly ironic that he would, as prime minister, sanctify the same 1978 constitution as the last word on Spanish democracy and question the democratic credentials of anyone who wanted to amend it.

Aznar soon shed, or at least buried, the extremist rhetoric of these early articles. As democracy became more firmly established, he settled down with tireless commitment to the daunting practicalities of building a credible right-wing alternative to the ruling center-left. Felipe González, a vibrant young leader who radiated charisma and modernizing efficiency, had achieved a historic absolute majority for the PSOE in 1982. The

first transitional governments had been dominated by the center-right Union of the Democratic Center, or UCD, a coalition of former Francoist bureaucrats, Christian Democrats, and Liberals. Ideological, regional, and personal tensions tore it apart, and its vote collapsed in the 1982 elections. The opposition to González was now led by the wily Manuel Fraga and his Coalición Popular, an unabashedly right-wing grouping also prone to factionalism. It was unlikely that the CP would ever be acceptable to any Spanish majority as the country prepared for modernization, and EU and NATO membership, under the dynamic González administrations. A long period in the wilderness awaited the Spanish right.

Aznar undoubtedly deserves much, but not all, of the credit for remolding, indeed reinventing, the CP as the Partido Popular, an efficient, disciplined, and smart-looking party capable of winning the confidence of the crucial “swing voters” of the center. Some major hurdles were conveniently cleared before Aznar finally became leader. In the late 1980s, the party dropped any serious opposition to abortion, divorce, or the system of devolved autonomous governments in the regions. Without these changes, quite radical for a party with its origins and ideological inclinations, it is unlikely that the PP could ever have come to power in contemporary Spain.⁹

Aznar rose to prominence in the CP as first minister of one of the autonomous regions, his native and rather traditionalist Castilla y León, in 1985. He impressed party bosses with his efficiency, hard work, and economic liberalism. A “Refoundation Congress” in 1989 changed the party’s name to the Partido Popular. This change firmly associated the grouping with the center-right space occupied by the Christian Democratic parties of the EU, though more rightist ideological tendencies were also acknowledged.¹⁰ Shortly afterward, Fraga conceded the leadership of the party to Aznar. The latter had built up a loyal team of

sober, efficient technocrats within the party—he values the quality of “seriousness” above all others—and they quickly established iron central control over the PP’s regional and ideological “families.” The price for this organizational efficiency was an unprecedented concentration of power in the hands of the leader himself, a grasp that Aznar would tighten further in the years that followed.

González’s Sullied Image

Aznar began his leadership with one huge advantage. The golden image of Felipe González and the PSOE had been sullied by a series of chronic financial and political scandals. Three successive absolute majorities had given the party vast powers of patronage, which were clearly being abused, both widely and at a very high level. Meanwhile, links between the administration and an illegal dirty war against the Basque terrorist group ETA (the acronym stands for Euskadi ta Askatasuna, meaning Basque Country and Liberty), involving 27 murders, several kidnappings, bombings, and torture, were slowly but surely being exposed in a series of headline-grabbing court cases.¹¹ Yet elections in 1989 still left the formidable González with exactly half the seats in parliament, and most of the seats the PSOE lost went to the former Communists on its left. Aznar still had to overcome the Spanish electorate’s deep distrust of any party whose roots were traceable to the Franco dictatorship. To do this, he shifted the party’s discourse further toward the center, while doing his utmost to exploit the scandals afflicting the PSOE.

While he was now the undisputed master of his own party, he still had great difficulty in extending his appeal beyond its own loyal ranks. Compared to González, whose ability to charm even convinced opponents is legendary, Aznar has a huge deficit in the charisma department. His manner is cold, his facial expressions range from impassive to scowling, and his gestures

are more mechanical than merely stiff. None of this plays well in a Mediterranean culture. It often seemed as if the PP’s sojourn in the wilderness might be eternal.

That impression deepened when González, despite a flood of new revelations on corruption and the dirty war, succeeded in winning a relative majority in the 1993 elections. This was the PSOE’s fifth victory in a row, and it sent the opposition, and much of the media, into panicked overdrive, as there were real fears that the Socialist Party, like the PRI in Mexico, was becoming the permanent government in Spain.

The exploitation of the scandalous record of the PSOE passed from the political into the conspiratorial arena. A Byzantine plot involving some of Aznar’s close political and media associates ensued, in which attempts appear to have been made to blackmail the prime minister with leaked documents relating to the dirty war. This was not the PP’s finest hour, but in the public view most of the mud stuck to an increasingly debilitated González.

Indeed, it was at this point that Aznar’s plodding seriousness became an asset, as González’s flamboyance began to become a liability. He was starting to look like a safe pair of hands to those centrist voters anxious for a return to a calm political climate. His declaration that he would step down voluntarily, regardless of circumstances, after two terms as prime minister, added to his growing appeal. This pledge contrasted very positively with the megalomania of which González was now widely suspected.

Then something happened that left a mark on Aznar personally and had a deep impact on a crucial area of his political thinking. On April 19, 1995, an ETA bomb came within a hair’s breath of killing him. Almost miraculously, he suffered only scratches and, with remarkable *sangfroid*, insisted on walking to the hospital from the scene of the attack. From this point on, Aznar understandably saw himself as a victim of terrorism. He seems to have taken this

rather personally, and came to regard negotiations with any terrorist group not only as fundamentally undemocratic, but as an affront to those who had suffered its consequences. Meanwhile, his cool response to this attack greatly boosted his standing with Spanish voters in a culture that still rates physical courage very highly.

The elections of March 1996 at last brought him to power, though even then he was denied an absolute majority, and González was able to step down boasting of a “sweet defeat.” The fact that Aznar now had to seek support from other parties in order to govern certainly conditioned the politics of his first administration, but it is thought that he had always intended to implement his full program in two stages. He was well aware of the deep fears that a right-wing government would arouse, and he is said to have told his inner circle that the first PP administration would tread softly, and only implement rightist policies the second time around.¹²

Basque Honeymoon, Basque Divorce

In any case, he gained not only the support but the admiration of both the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) and the dominant nationalist grouping in Catalonia, CiU. We are thus presented with the paradox that the man who had once believed that the “state of autonomies” undermined Spanish unity had grown into the prime minister who devolved more economic power to these regions in four years than the supposedly federalist PSOE had done in thirteen. This rosy honeymoon would soon lose its gloss, however, especially in the Basque case.

Oddly enough, the divorce from the Basques began with an unprecedented display of democratic unity against ETA. The cold-blooded assassination of a young PP councillor, Miguel Ángel Blanco, in July 1996, mobilized millions of citizens to demonstrate against the terrorists all over Spain, but most remarkably in the Basque Country itself. The PNV actively supported

these demonstrations but quickly began to suspect that the PP was beginning to use the struggle against ETA as a battering ram against Basque nationalism in general. There is certainly little doubt that the PP saw dramatic evidence in the demonstrations that a tough antiterrorist policy would be a magnet for votes. It was also evident that many Spaniards, both intellectuals and ordinary people, felt that Basque nationalism, perhaps the Basque language itself, constituted a social sea in which the terrorists could swim with ease. A young Madrid audience at a concert in commemoration of Blanco booed when a performer sang in Catalan. The stage was being set for a revival of overt Spanish nationalism, which had dared not speak its name for years because of its association with Francoism.

Meanwhile, the PNV, explicitly following the model of the Irish peace process, engaged in secret talks with ETA, which led to the Lizarra Declaration of September 1998. This called for both an end to violence and a Basque right to self-determination. The latter caused outrage in Spain, even though it was quickly followed by the first cease-fire without a time limit in ETA’s history. This was very popular in the Basque Country but regarded with deep suspicion from the outset by the Madrid government. In retrospect, it seems likely that both sides squandered the opportunities offered by the cease-fire, which ETA broke in late 1999.

Aznar’s inflexible response to these opportunities contrasted sharply with that of Tony Blair to the peace process in Ireland. This is remarkable given that the two leaders had become quite close, and saw eye to eye on many issues. But Aznar repeatedly and explicitly ruled out any comparison with British/Irish developments. The Basque Country, he argued, already had more autonomy than Northern Ireland under the Belfast Agreement. This is rather disingenuous because, as he must have known, it was Britain’s recognition of the Irish people’s right to determine their own

future that brought the IRA (Irish Republican Army) to the table, and not the limited powers on offer to the Stormont government. The core issue is really that, while London is now prepared to relinquish control of Northern Ireland, Madrid regards the Basque Country as an essential element in the Spanish nation.¹³

Aznar defined his antiterrorist policy with the phrase, “within the law, but with all of the law.” Having used the PSOE’s dirty-war strategy as a lever to remove González from power, he could hardly countenance illegal methods himself. However, he saw the Basque problem as a purely security and police issue, and denied that there was any underlying political conflict that needed to be resolved. And when all of the law was not enough, he changed the law, banning ETA’s popular political front, Batasuna, and a number of satellite groups.¹⁴

The hardening of Aznar’s policy in this field, as in several others, crystalized in his second administration, after he had won the first absolute majority ever for the modern Spanish right in 2000. But it began in the first. While the PNV had unequivocally condemned ETA’s return to terror, it refused to abandon its aspiration to self-determination, and found itself ostracized by both the PP and PSOE. Both these parties were again losing local councillors to ETA assassins and felt that the PNV, which controls a regional police force, was not really committed to stopping the terrorists.

A Single, Dogmatic Discourse

Conflating Basque nationalism with terrorism was not an approach unique to the PP. Large sectors of the PSOE, and many independent academics and jurists, shared this perception. It was José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, recently elected leader of the Socialists, who persuaded the PP to sign a joint antiterrorist “pact of state,” whose prologue contained a polemic implicitly directed against the PNV and made it impossible for Basque nationalist democrats to subscribe to

it. Under the pressure of ETA’s attacks, which now targeted journalists and professors as well as politicians, commentators in all shades of the Madrid media tended toward a *pensamiento único*, a single dogmatic discourse on all matters Basque.

A joint PP-PSOE campaign starkly failed to displace the PNV from its dominant position in Basque politics in autonomous elections in May 2001. This experience might have provided a lesson in respect for democratic values. But Aznar and his advisers saw that while a “bash the Basques” strategy might fail in the region itself, it was enormously popular in most of the rest of the state. However, Aznar’s Basque policy was based on more than simply vote-getting. One of his senior ideologues has admitted privately that ETA’s attacks actually served the PP’s interests, because if the violence ended, the party could no longer refuse to negotiate a new deal with the PNV. Such negotiations, he said, would undermine the unity of Spain. He would prefer to endure a degree of terrorist activity, he continued, rather than cede any more ground to Basque nationalism.¹⁵ Given that the PP’s intelligence services had riddled ETA with spies at this point, the implications about the government’s relationship with a terrorist organization are very serious indeed. And given the way in which the PP apparently manipulated information about the March 11 bombings in Madrid, the claim that it has played politics with terrorism over a long period gathers weight.

In any case, the 9/11 attacks in New York gave Aznar an opening to internationalize his antiterrorist strategy and simultaneously boost Spain’s international profile. He was second only to Tony Blair in his unequivocal support for whatever response the Bush administration thought appropriate, a position that would finally propel him toward his ill-fated backing for the Iraq war. This was entirely in line with a radical shift in foreign policy that Aznar had already initiated, away from continental Europe, and

toward Britain and especially toward the United States. He had long believed that Spain was punching below its weight internationally. The long-standing Spanish right-wing dream of reviving the country's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century global role lay behind this analysis.

In his first administration, Aznar had developed close links with the Clinton administration, partly through his warm relationship with Tony Blair. Yet again, the PP leader's absolute majority in 2000 marked a turning point. He told his newly appointed foreign minister, Josep Piqué, that the bilateral links with the United States should be at least as strong as modern Spain's traditional links with Germany and France. Piqué duly cultivated Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and the two signed a joint declaration strengthening ties between the two countries in January 2001 in Madrid, shortly before Albright stepped down and Colin Powell took her place in the new Bush administration.

This changeover presented no problems for Aznar, who had already developed personal links with Bush senior during one of his regular hunting trips to Spain. In any case, the Republicans were likely to be more comfortable ideological partners for the PP than the Democrats. However, on George W. Bush's first visit to Spain, in June 2001, the Spanish prime minister found the American to be somewhat disengaged on what Madrid considered a key issue.

Bush, Terrorism, and 9/11

"It was Aznar who had to convince Bush that the U.S. should support Spain in the struggle against terrorism, and that it was necessary to coordinate international action against all types of terror, against nationalist groups like ETA and against international ones like the Islamists," one of Aznar's advisers told Spanish journalist Ernesto Ekaizer.¹⁶ It would take the Twin Towers atrocities to make Bush fully heed Aznar's point. And he would learn that Madrid

wanted something in return for his support: U.S. (and EU) backing for his own policy of closing down all political groups associated in any way with ETA. Again, this was in radical contrast to Blair's inclusive approach to parties linked to terrorism in Northern Ireland, like Sinn Féin.¹⁷

A few days after the September 11 attacks, Aznar made the remarkable statement that "ETA and bin Laden are the same thing." I asked him to expand on this in an interview the following year. "Terrorists of one stripe or another are the same because anyone who murders is not defending ideas, they are just murdering," he replied.¹⁸ This is Aznar in typically black-and-white mode. It is a view that hardly bears close examination if one were to consider the history of the Zionist, anti-apartheid, or Palestinian movements, for example, but it sounds good at a party election rally. In the same interview, he stressed his "deep moral conviction" that terrorism can only be defeated by means that respect human rights, but refused to respond when asked whether Moscow was not flagrantly violating such rights in its "war against terrorism" in Chechnya.

In other circumstances than those of 2001–02, one might have expected that a proposal to ban any political party in a democracy would come under intense scrutiny from the opposition. But the PP's decision in 2002 to pass a law that led to the banning of Batasuna, on the curious grounds that it did not condemn ETA's attacks, had the active support of Zapatero, though he did amend some of its more outlandish aspects. Anyone who opposed the law was likely to be branded as an ETA sympathizer. Fears that the law would make the Basque Country erupt in insurrection proved groundless, but its passage turned the rift between the PP and the PNV into a chasm. As radical Basque nationalists were deprived of political representation, the moderate Basque nationalists became radicalized. The PNV produced a blueprint for a

referendum on self-determination that added another twist to the cycle of polarization. The PP responded by passing a law, opposed as dictatorial by every opposition party, that would have slapped five-year jail sentences on the PNV leader if he went ahead with a referendum. Aznar even threatened to suspend the Basque Country's autonomous institutions, a move that would have removed the whole basis for democratic Basque nationalism's accommodation with the Spanish state since 1980.

Parallel to this vertiginous deterioration of relations with the Basque Country, the PP's discovery of "Constitutional Patriotism"¹⁹ brought Aznar's second administration into sharp conflict with other sectors of Spanish society. The assertion that the 1978 constitution was the *ne plus ultra* of Spanish democracy clashed with the aspirations of the Spanish Left, of Catalan and Galician nationalists, and even of regionalists within his own party.²⁰ It would seem self-evident that a constitution that was drawn up under the shadow of a dictatorship, with the army rattling sabers from the wings, might be in need of reform a quarter of a century later, when democracy had put down much deeper roots. Aznar insisted, however, that any move to seriously overhaul this document would endanger both the unity of the state, and the democratic system itself. As usual, he could see no middle ground, and Spaniards were forced to choose one side or the other of a great divide.

His opponents sensed that he was using the constitutional issue to revive old-fashioned Spanish nationalism, and that this was reflected in his foreign policy shift. The innovation of a monthly ceremony of homage to the Spanish flag, attended by the chiefs of staff and minister of defense, came to symbolize a deepening authoritarian atmosphere.

Another cause for concern was the way in which Aznar appeared to be using the judiciary to advance his political agenda. The courts seemed to synchronize their move-

ments with those of the executive to choreograph the banning of Batasuna and its related groups. And once the legislation was in place, judicial oversight of its application looked much more like a rubber stamp than a meticulous legal magnifying glass. Writing of the Constitutional Court's extraordinarily broad interpretation of the 2001 Ley de Partidos, which excluded almost all radical Basque nationalists from running in the May 2003 local elections, Javier Pérez Royo wrote bluntly: "It is shameful that the judges have seen fit to put their names to a text like this. It is a political decision and not a judicial argument."²¹ Pérez Royo is no radical, and has no Basque associations: he is professor of constitutional law at the University of Seville. There were other instances where political interference was widely suspected, including the judicial suspension of a highly regarded Basque newspaper, *Egunkaria*. At an earlier stage, there had been blatant attempts by senior prosecutors appointed by Aznar to frustrate efforts by magistrates like Baltasar Garzón to bring former Latin American dictators and torturers to justice.²²

Shadow of the Dictatorship

The shadow of the past loomed especially large in the PP's negative response to a new movement that sought to lay that past quite literally to rest, once and for all. The Association for the Recuperation of Historical Memory (ARMH) started as a small group of individuals who had lost relatives to the "uncontrolled" Francoist repression in the first months of the military uprising in 1936. The association estimated that about 30,000 people had been summarily executed by the insurgents in many parts of Spain and buried in unmarked graves.²³ It came as a shock to Spanish—and European—public opinion to find that their bodies had still not been excavated, identified, and decently reburied, 25 years after Spain had returned to democracy. It turned out that many immediate relatives were still afraid to do more

than leave flowers, anonymously, on mounds hidden in woods and canyons that indicated hasty mass burials. The association was largely led by the grandchildren of the victims, less fearful than their parents. They tended not to be political activists, and insisted that they did not seek vengeance on the surviving executioners, nor to reopen old wounds, but simply to pay proper respect to the dead. The PP, however, at both the local and national levels, repeatedly obstructed their work.

Something similar occurred when the PP repeatedly voted down parliamentary motions from the opposition parties describing Franco's uprising as undemocratic. It was only in November 2002 that Aznar's party grudgingly agreed to a joint declaration that implicitly condemned the dictatorship and gave explicit recognition to its victims. This ambiguous attitude toward the legacy of Francoism was also evident in a refusal to return looted Catalan archives, still held in Salamanca, which had been used to hunt down democrats after Franco's victory, to their rightful home in Barcelona. The same applies to the Aznar government's decision, post 2000, to grant generous state funding to a private institution, the Fundación Francisco Franco, which is dedicated to cherishing the memory and political ideology of the dictator.

Taken together, these elements justify suspicions that the PP does not fit quite so comfortably as it claims into the European center-right, which in Germany and Italy has long ago unequivocally repudiated the fascist past. They are reminders that, while Aznar and his cabinet colleagues were mostly too young to have been active supporters of Franco, they generally came from families that had benefited greatly from the dictatorship. The former prime minister himself is usually evasive, and at best coy, in his attitude to twentieth-century Spanish history. "We need time before we start looking at our history without excessive passions, with the normality with which others do it," he

told a sympathetic interviewer during his second administration.²⁴ One has to wonder how much more time could possibly be necessary. The feeling that some at least of the PP leaders are still accidental democrats, who under other circumstances would happily serve an authoritarian regime, has some foundation in fact. It is often noted that, unlike France and Italy, Spain has no party of the hard right with parliamentary representation. Some observers would argue that this is because the hard right is hiding, very comfortably, in the bosom of the Partido Popular.

The core recruiting issues for the contemporary European far right are race and immigration. Here, again, we can see a remarkable reversal between the 1996–2000 Aznar administration, and the last four years, when he enjoyed an absolute majority. And here, again, we can see the influence of his own personality.

Race and immigration are in Spain automatically linked to relations with the Arab world in general, and with Morocco in particular. This is not just because Spain is today the European Union's front door—or frontier fortress, depending on your point of view—with the Magreb, and points south. It is also because Spain's history is, uniquely in Western Europe, intimately entwined with Arab culture.

It should never be forgotten that Islamic Arab and Berber caliphs ruled most of Spain (and Portugal) from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, and were not finally dispossessed of Granada until 1492. The gamut of historical opinion on this period runs from a picture of an alien barbarian occupation, reversed by a heroic Christian "reconquest," to a vision of a high Islamic civilization, far superior to contemporary Europe in arts and science, uniquely tolerant of Christian and Jewish subjects, displaced by a regressive and war-mongering Catholic imperialism. There is something to be said for both interpretations, and a great deal for points in between. What cannot be

disputed is the rich, complex, and contradictory legacy that Arab (and Jewish) culture and centuries of intermarriage left in Iberia.

The Spanish right has traditionally looked toward its southern neighbors with a mixture of romantic attraction and racist loathing. Franco belonged to the “Africanist” military elite that was forged in the colonial war against Morocco in the 1920s. During the Franco dictatorship, Spain generally maintained friendly relations with the Arab world, bolstered by Madrid’s non-recognition of Israel. Spain began to withdraw from its Moroccan territories in the 1950s, ultimately retaining only the coastal enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla (and a few assorted rocks and islands). In 1975, Madrid had abandoned the huge but almost empty Western Sahara, which Morocco annexed forcibly from the indigenous and pro-independence Polisario Front over the next four years. Since then, Spain has given nominal support to the Polisario Front’s case in this still-unresolved conflict, which tends to sour Madrid-Rabat relations.

Nevertheless, Felipe González’s administrations managed to deepen and diversify Spanish-Arab relations and at the same time recognize Israel. Indeed, Madrid was the site for the historic Middle East Peace Conference in 1992, which was a springboard for the Oslo peace process. González also put Spain at the forefront of an EU region-building initiative, the Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

The first Aznar administration was perceived as having dropped Arab affairs down the list of Spain’s priorities, as it boosted diplomatic and economic links with Latin America and, especially, the United States. It was also clear that Aznar lacked the personal chemistry that his predecessor had enjoyed with King Hassan II of Morocco. Nevertheless, the succession of the king’s son, Mohamed VI, in 1999, offered an opportunity for a new start, which Madrid attempted to seize only, apparently, to be rebuffed by Rabat, perhaps because of the

Western Sahara issue. But the real deterioration in relations set in, predictably, after 2000.²⁵

Arab Relations: A Downward Spiral

The downward spiral started with rising tensions over increasingly massive illegal immigration from, and through, Morocco. There was a deep contradiction in Spanish attitudes to this phenomenon. On the one hand, the booming Spanish economy, especially the agricultural sector on the southern coast, desperately needed more cheap labor. On the other, the surge in the number of Arab and African faces on the streets of villages and small towns revived atavistic fears about “Moorish” invaders.²⁶ These tensions erupted into a pogrom in the Almerian town of El Ejido in January 2000. For three days, local Spaniards barricaded the area against state police (who made no serious effort to intervene in any case) while they burned down a dozen legitimate Moroccan businesses in the town and hundreds of improvised shanty dwellings on surrounding farms. The pretext was a random murder carried out by a mentally disturbed Moroccan. The PP mayor did nothing to stop the violence and seemed supportive toward its perpetrators, yet the party refused to censure him.²⁷ The first Aznar administration had recently shown its consensual side on this issue, by passing a law that, perhaps as much by technical miscalculation as design, led to among the most liberal regimes for immigrants, including illegal immigrants, in the EU. The party’s ambiguous attitude to the El Ejido events was seen to be popular with voters in the March elections, however, and the PP was no sooner back in office than it replaced its earlier legislation with severe anti-immigrant measures. Aznar’s own comments, in which he freely associated immigrants with criminality, contributed to a perception in Rabat that Madrid was now in the hands of a hostile and even racist leader. His threatening comments during delicate fishery negotiations made things

worse. "The personality of prime minister Aznar...proved a seriously negative factor in the deterioration of bilateral relations with Morocco in 2001–02," writes Richard Gillespie, professor of politics at the University of Liverpool.²⁸

Morocco did not help by withdrawing its ambassador from Spain in October 2001, for reasons that have never been entirely clear. When Rabat rashly stationed police on Parsley Island, an unoccupied rock near Ceuta claimed by Spain, Aznar took the equally reckless step of dispatching paratroops to expel them. Fortunately, there were no casualties, but the consequences could obviously have been calamitous. Significantly, the EU failed to give Aznar the backing he required, but intervention by U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell resolved the crisis in his favor, a development that copperfastened the prime minister's conviction that Madrid should move closer to Washington regardless of the Brussels consensus.

Relations could only improve after this nadir, though Aznar continued to be viewed in Arab circles as a latter-day Castillian crusader as he drew closer to Bush on the Iraq issue. However, the Moroccan regime is among the most pro-Western in the Arab world, and the Casablanca bombings by al-Qaeda in May 2003, and the attacks in Madrid this year, were dramatic reminders that both administrations face a common enemy. Richard Gillespie argues that, precisely because Aznar himself was so closely identified with a confrontational approach, Zapatero should be able to reverse negative Arab perceptions quite easily, and that long-term damage to Spanish interests south of Gibraltar has not been done.²⁹

Taking on the Unions and Teachers

Aznar cherishes his reputation for refusing to back down once he has taken up a position. There was one field, however, where his confrontational style cut no ice at all. One would expect a leader who subscribed

to economic liberalism to be tough on trade unions, and this was certainly the PP's inclination, but in this instance ideology was shipwrecked on the reef of Spanish realities. Given the pattern of the two Aznar administrations, it is not so surprising that he maintained consensual social partnership arrangements, and gave in to 11 out of 12 key union demands in his first period in office. A strong degree of stability was necessary if Spain was to remain on track and achieve a prime economic objective: qualifying for entry in the first round of the EU's single currency project, the euro.³⁰ Nor was it out of character that, once he had his absolute majority, he attempted to impose a raft of tough labor law reforms by decree, without consulting parliament, let alone the unions themselves.

The latter responded by calling a general strike that attracted massive support, despite being virtually ignored by the major electronic media. (Only Italy's Silvio Berlusconi surpassed Aznar in keeping state television and radio utterly subservient to government interests.) The outcome surprised the labor leaders themselves. Aznar withdrew the reforms, and fired his labor minister. As the *Economist's* Dan O'Brien points out, this illustrates the contrast between liberalizers in the Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean worlds. The former are prepared to face down the unions, and ruthlessly reform the labor market, whereas the latter are still attached to a Christian Democrat vision of social partnership.

Aznar had more success in achieving radical goals in education after 2000. Reforms were pushed through that deeply alienated much of the sector, from influential university rectors to primary teachers, without any pretense at consultation. Not only was public education undermined to finance private schools, but religious education, a touchy subject in a society deeply split between secularists and Catholics, was bolstered. Aznar seemed completely imperious in this and other areas to the depth

and breadth of opposition he aroused, reviving the great Spanish divide between right and left, between the traditionalist “deep Spain” and liberal democrats of all stripes. The climate of public discourse became shrill, polarized, and, ultimately, poisoned.

Hubris toward the End

The last 18 months of José María Aznar’s administration reads, with the benefit of hindsight, like a classic case of political hubris. The inflation of Aznar’s ego became patent in events like the overblown wedding celebration he organized for his daughter, more appropriate for an heiress to the throne than the offspring of a democratic representative. In the same vein, he compared his (undoubtedly laudable) commitment to stepping down after two terms with the voluntary retirement to a monastery of the Spanish king and Holy Roman Emperor Carlos V in the sixteenth century. Aznar is certainly a devout Catholic, but it was common knowledge that a cloistered middle age was not what he had in mind: his ambitions were set on a top-drawer international position, like the mooted new post of EU president, or succeeding Kofi Annan as secretary general of the United Nations.

In fact, his decision to step down probably had a negative effect on his second premiership, as a leading Spanish newspaper pointed out. “The fact that Aznar was not going to have to take direct responsibility for his administration before the voters has accentuated...the egoistic tone of his rhetoric.”³¹

The absolute breakdown of trust between his government and many of the governed was epitomized by the *Prestige* disaster in November 2002. As the oil slicks leaking from the crippled tanker spread from Galicia along the north coast of Spain and as far as France, the PP leadership obstinately refused to take any responsibility for its highly questionable handling of the crisis. Aznar could not bring himself to visit the stricken coastline for several weeks after the disaster

and became the personalized target of a nationwide wave of antigovernment demonstrations that included many PP supporters.³² There was similar anger among a core PP constituency when a rented Ukrainian Yak-42 aircraft crashed in Turkey while bringing Spanish troops home from Afghanistan, at a cost of dozens of soldiers’ lives. It emerged that the defense minister had ignored repeated warnings about the safety of these cheaply leased planes. Again, the PP response was a stonewall denial of culpability and, to add insult to injury, relatives were treated with something close to contempt at a ceremony returning the victims’ coffins.

These episodes, however, paled into insignificance before Aznar’s decision to give unilateral support to Bush and Blair in their plan to invade Iraq. As we have seen, this move was consistent with his radical policy shift of making the relationship with Washington the main axis of Spain’s foreign policy. To do this, he was prepared to forgo Madrid’s traditional EU alignment with France and Germany, and forge a new, untried EU bloc with London, Rome, and some of the EU’s candidate members from the former Eastern bloc, especially Poland. He was willing to risk damaging Spain’s unique role as a bridge to the Arab world for the EU. And he was prepared to fly in the face of Spanish public opinion, and even that of one of his own most trusted lieutenants, his second deputy and economics minister, Rodrigo Rato.³³

As polls taken by his own administration showed opposition to the invasion of Iraq running at between 80 to 90 percent, and numerous PP members joined the massive antiwar demonstrations, the prime minister stood aloof. He was making a radical break with the tradition that major foreign affairs issues should be the subject of bilateral agreement with the opposition. He never paused to reconsider the strategy that led him to that photograph in the Azores, spotlighted as the third man in this extension of the “war against terrorism” by Washington

and London. In June 2002, when Spain held the presidency of the EU, I asked him if the European Union should not act as a moderating force on U.S. policy toward the then recently defined “axis of evil,” Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

His response was characteristically dismissive: “What do you mean by ‘act as a moderating force?’ ...The coordination of policy with the U.S. in these matters is essential for our own survival.”³⁴ As the U.S. stance on Iraq moved inexorably toward invasion, it became clear that coordination effectively meant subordination. In fact, there were moments when Spain seemed more zealous than the Bush administration itself, exemplified by foreign minister Ana Palacio, who, in addressing the U.N. Security Council in January last year, put Washington’s case more passionately than Colin Powell did.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero finally found his voice as leader of the opposition on this issue. He had seemed a prisoner of the PP on the Basque question, and his party had bungled its parliamentary response to the *Prestige* catastrophe. But the PP’s support for Bush gave him a strong platform: “You sir,” he told Aznar in a speech to the Spanish parliament last December 17, “decided to break the consensus on foreign affairs, and change our policy of alliances. You made the relationship with the Bush administration the basic reference point for all foreign relationships with Spain. You sought to establish a common agenda with London and Rome to lead a ‘New Europe’—according to you the good guys—as against the ‘Old Europe’—according to you the bad guys. You fell for the temptation to act as a Trojan horse [in Europe] for one of the most conservative administrations the U.S. has ever known.”

Courting Washington, Spurning Paris

Aznar, however, was absolutely convinced that this shift in policy would be his most significant political legacy. His belligerent

stance was based on the belief that Spain’s neutrality in both of the last century’s world wars had cost the country its rightful place, high at the top table in global politics. Participation in the Iraq war would put that right. He also believed that, far from subordinating Spain to Washington, it would liberate Madrid from subservience to Paris. “Spanish decision-making in foreign policy,” he told the *Washington Post* in January, “has been subordinate to France [since the nineteenth century], which is no longer the case. Some are happy, others are not. I’m happy for Spain to be making its own decisions. All of a sudden, we find ourselves at the forefront.”³⁵

Aznar did not hesitate to belittle France in America. He told an audience of business people in Washington this past January that “French culture is being defeated, it is in decline.”³⁶ This was a remarkable attitude to adopt in public toward a country which is not only a powerful and immediate geographical neighbor, but is also Spain’s main trading partner, and its front-line ally in the struggle against ETA’s terrorism.³⁷

The prime minister’s confidence at the turn of the year was understandable, however, given the remarkable results he achieved in the local and regional elections of May 2003. The street demonstrations over the *Prestige* oil spillage, the Iraq war, and the negative opinion polls had suggested that Zapatero should comfortably deliver the first PSOE victory in ten years. And so he did, but by a mere 200,000 votes. What’s more, with a rise in participation, the PP actually improved its own performance in terms of votes cast, no doubt assisted by a dynamic campaign in which Aznar unashamedly played on the Spanish right’s traditional fears of an allegedly resurgent “Red” left, and Basque and Catalan “separatism.”

The apparent success of the war on Iraq had, in any case, rather put the issue on the back burner in Spanish politics. Aznar had wisely made sure that the few Spanish

troops he committed prior to the official coalition victory stayed safely among the rearguard, since returning body bags would undoubtedly have done him severe damage.³⁸ Nor did the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq cause him much embarrassment. His parliamentary spokesman on foreign affairs, Gustavo de Arístegui, came to speak at the Instituto Cervantes in Dublin shortly after the fall of Baghdad, and made a cogent defense of the war on the grounds of eliminating the tyranny of Saddam Hussein. De Arístegui is one of the sharpest minds in the PP, and very well informed on Arab issues. Curiously, he went on to say that the greatest threat to the success of the Iraq enterprise came from “the extremists among our allies,” citing Richard Perle, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney. It had already become apparent on a number of occasions that Aznar wanted to distance himself from the full-blown neo-conservative agenda. It was Spain that sent an emissary to cool emotions in Damascus when the United States seemed briefly intent on extending the war to Syria.

The biggest challenge facing Aznar in late 2003 was to ensure a smooth transition to an appropriate successor when he made good his promise to step down from office. In this, he was very successful in his own terms, preventing any factionalized debate—indeed, any debate at all—within the party, and handpicking the loyal and experienced Mariano Rajoy as the next prime ministerial candidate, while retaining his own position as PP leader until after this year’s elections.

The PP did badly, and the PSOE did well, in regional elections in Catalonia in November. However, this setback proved a blessing in disguise, because the ensuing coalition between the Socialists and the ERC (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya), a party that aspires to Catalan independence and whose leader advocated talks with ETA, provided a very useful big stick for Aznar

to beat the opposition with at the national level. As the March elections approached, opinion polls consistently indicated that the PP would coast back to power, though it would probably not repeat its overall majority.

The scene was set for a triumphant exit for Aznar. He had taken big and risky bets, and they seemed to have paid off very well. He had banned Batasuna and, far from the Basque Country exploding, ETA’s terrorism was at its lowest level in 30 years, with the police reporting major successes almost every week. He had turned Spain around to face Washington and shown its back to “Old Europe,” and the sky had not fallen. All that would change on Thursday, March 11, at 7:30 A.M.

Bombs and a Bizarre Fixation

The dozen bombs that ripped through three Madrid commuter trains almost simultaneously that morning killed almost 200 people, and injured more than 1,000. This was the biggest postwar terrorist outrage ever on mainland Western Europe. But it need not have spelled political disaster for Aznar and the PP. What destroyed the party’s election prospects over the next three days was not the attack, but the government’s response to it.

From the first moment, Aznar’s interior minister, Ángel Acebes, insisted that the bombs had been planted by ETA. There were certainly good reasons to include the Basque group among the prime suspects. They had bombed Madrid many times, and had indeed been caught attempting to do so only ten days earlier. Yet there was also much to suggest that ETA might *not* be responsible. While these terrorists have treated civilian lives with reckless contempt in numerous past attacks, they rarely, if ever, have deliberately set out to massacre noncombatants, and never on a scale comparable to the Madrid attacks. Moreover, the group appeared to be at its weakest point in 30 years, totally lacking the infra-

structure to carry out such a sophisticated operation.

One would have expected, therefore, that a government facing such an unprecedented attack would keep its options open about the culprits, at least until significant hard evidence was available, or a credible claim was made by a terrorist group.

Instead, Acebes displayed a bizarre fixation about ETA's responsibility for the bombings. Moreover, he used extraordinarily offensive language about those who suggested other explanations: they were *miserables*, despicable wretches. The PP's habit of demonizing those who did not totally accept its viewpoint began to seem almost pathological. It was, however, more probably a calculated strategy rather than a psychological aberration.

The PP knew that the Spanish people would rally behind it in the face of an ETA attack. But if the attack came from an Arab source, then the electorate might well punish the party severely for leading the country into a conflict most of the people felt was unjustified, even unethical.

By the evening of the eleventh, so much material evidence pointed to an al-Qaeda link (and none at all to ETA) that Acebes was forced to concede that "all hypotheses" were now "under consideration," though he would continue to point the finger at the Basque group. Meanwhile, Aznar had been telephoning newspaper editors he had not spoken to in years, giving them his "personal assurance" that ETA was to blame. Foreign Minister Palacio was instructing the entire diplomatic corps to use every opportunity to tell the world that the bombers were domestic terrorists. She even told Spain's U.N. representative to insist, against the advice of Spain's allies, that only ETA should be mentioned in a motion condemning the attack.

With Friday night's enormous demonstrations, the government found that rage against its handling of information about the bombings was palpable. People were not demonstrating against ETA, they were chant-

ing, "Who was it?" and then, "Your war, our blood!" Among the thousands of messages left at the bombing sites and at town halls, many blamed Aznar personally for the attacks. On Saturday the thirteenth, the police arrested five Moroccan suspects linked to an al-Qaeda cell. An hour into election Sunday, Acebes told the press that a video claiming the attack for Islamists had been found in Madrid. Yet at lunchtime that day, Palacio still was telling the BBC that the trail to ETA remained hot.

This was a government that was clearly outraged that the opposition media, the international press, and even its allies in the United Nations, did not accept its increasingly incredible assertions without question. And when these assertions were shown to have no foundation whatsoever in fact, they seemed equally outraged that anyone remembered them, and had the temerity to ask why they had made them in the first place. The words "we were wrong" did not seem to have a place in the PP lexicon.

That night, in the biggest electoral upset in Spanish history, the opposition Socialist Party emerged as the clear winner, contrary to every opinion poll prior to the bombing. The prime minister-elect, Zapatero, announced he would withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq, as he had always promised in his election program.

There is no categorical evidence to support the view that Aznar and his ministers deliberately lied to the public about the attacks for electoral reasons. In an interview with the London *Times* in April, the outgoing prime minister said, characteristically, that it was an "infamy" to suggest that he had played politics with terrorism. Yet it is actually hard to read any other interpretation into the government's management of the crisis. A majority of Spanish voters certainly read it this way, and Aznar's place in history is likely to be greatly diminished as a result.

There are, however, some positive conclusions to be drawn from the whole de-

bacle. The first is the maturity of the Spanish electorate, which responded extremely quickly to a fast-changing and complex crisis. Those who say Spaniards voted out of fear simply do not know Spanish democracy, which has not been intimidated by 30 years of bombings and shootings by ETA.

Secondly, the Spanish police and intelligence services did not let themselves be misled by the declarations of their political masters, and quickly and professionally tracked down the most likely culprits.

Thirdly, the PP itself, despite some ugly initial wobbles, finally accepted a painful electoral result in a democratic fashion. The authoritarian culture that reemerged in the second Aznar administration has been found wanting by the voters, and the party will have to abandon it definitively if it is to stand much chance of returning power in the near future. Mariano Rajoy is held in much higher personal regard, even by his opponents, than many of Aznar's ministers, and if he can distance himself from his predecessor, he has a good opportunity to re-vamp the party from the opposition side of parliament.

Zapatero's Daunting Challenges

The big question, of course, is how Zapatero will cope with the enormous responsibility that has landed on his shoulders. The challenges he faces are daunting, and his track record before taking office, especially on the vexed Basque question, did not suggest a man of inspired political imagination. Power can reveal positive as well as negative qualities, however, and the new prime minister has grown remarkably in stature with his first decisive steps, under very difficult circumstances.

It is important to understand that he was totally committed by his election program to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. Yet he faced a dilemma that would have tested a much more experienced statesman on election night. If he reneged on his promise, or prevaricated even, his credibility

with voters would have been shattered at the outset of his premiership. Neither could he ignore the radically changed context created by the Madrid bombings. To withdraw the troops after such an atrocity could well be read by al-Qaeda as an act of weakness, and encourage Islamists to target Italy or Poland in the hope of achieving a similar result.³⁹

Zapatero also had to consider the consequences of causing great displeasure to the United States. He must have known, though, that if he gave the impression of bowing to pressure from Washington on election night, it would be twice as hard to buck that pressure the next morning. So he made his victory speech a reaffirmation of his commitment to withdraw troops. Suddenly, the man whose nicknames, "Bambi" and "Little Slippers," suggested he was too nice for so tough a job, looked as if he could fill a leader's shoes.

He has since proceeded firmly and swiftly with the withdrawal, and it has emerged that he has support among senior serving officers, who had become deeply uneasy with the aggressive strategy adopted by their American colleagues toward Iraqi opposition to the occupation.⁴⁰ He has dealt diplomatically with the Bush administration's concerns. And he has shown al-Qaeda that Spain is still in the forefront of the fight against terrorism by committing more troops to Afghanistan, a theater where the Spanish public sees good reason, and a legitimate mandate, for military force.⁴¹ The subsequent torture scandal in Baghdad makes it harder for either domestic or international critics to undermine him on the Iraq issue. If Old Europe is looking for a new leader, Zapatero might just fit the bill.

Of course, the international situation remains explosive, and domestically Zapatero must also traverse a minefield. ETA may be the least of his problems. The group is likely to call a cease-fire, since the Madrid bombings have shattered most of whatever support remained for "armed struggle"

among Basque radicals. The new prime minister's real problem will be to engage with the demands of democratic Basque and Catalan nationalists for some form of self-determination, without giving the PP an opportunity to launch a populist crusade for Spanish unity from the right.

Again, his first steps have been sure-footed. He has opened channels for dialogue with the PNV, and the tone of his investiture speech blew fresh air through a parliament that had grown stale with rhetoric and mutual denunciation. Addressing the radical Catalan deputies of the ERC, he said he hoped that his vision of a "plural Spain" would enable them to "resist the temptation of independence." This good-humored and inclusive language is a world away from Aznar's strident warnings about the break-up of the nation. Of course, fine words butter no parsnips in such contentious matters. Zapatero still has to prove that he can turn dialogue into broadly acceptable agreements.

There is good reason, however, to think that his rather lackluster record in opposition may continue to be a poor guide to his performance as prime minister. The PSOE is a notoriously fractious party, and its barons would have stepped in quickly to squash any major innovations by Zapatero—until he had won a general election. His victory on March 14 gives him the authority to step out from the long and rather dark shadow still cast by Felipe González and his cronies, and renovate his party from the government benches. The fact that he rapidly implemented another election promise—to fill half his cabinet seats with women—suggests that Spain may be in for a dynamic and refreshing phase in its consolidation of democracy. ●

—May 14, 2004

Postscript—

It is traditional in Spain, as elsewhere, to give a new prime minister a grace period of 100 days. The unprecedented, bloody, and

bitter context in which José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero came to office, and the radical decisions he has taken since then, have thrown that tradition out the window.

As I write this postscript, his predecessor, José María Aznar, has just launched a ferocious attack on the Zapatero administration. Stating baldly that the change of government represented an unqualified success for the terrorists behind the March 11 bombings, he continued that the PSOE's only policy "consists in the systematic and deliberate destruction of everything that has made Spain a strong and prosperous country."

Yet the previous weekend, Zapatero had emerged from the PSOE's thirty-sixth congress with a party more united than at any time in its history, having tightened his control over his own organization. Three weeks earlier, the Spanish public had given the PSOE another vote of confidence, with a slightly improved percentage in the European Parliament poll over the March general elections, despite the massive abstention that now characterizes such EU contests.

The PP, however, also reclaimed ground in that campaign, closing the gap between the parties from 5 to 2 percent. Assuming that many conservative voters share Aznar's catastrophist view of the new administration, the only consensus on the current Spanish political condition is that the country remains very deeply divided. The major points of friction so far are:

● *Iraq:* Zapatero insists that "not a single Spanish soldier" will return to Baghdad, despite his support for U.N. Security Council resolution 1546 (recognizing the interim government), and the new consensus in NATO on this issue. This proves to the PP that he is as inconsistent and irresponsible as he is inexperienced in foreign affairs. Some initial prevarication about the promised compensatory commitment of troops to Afghanistan strengthened the PP case. However, that commitment now seems firm. And Zapatero insists that his refusal

to send troops back to Iraq is entirely consistent, because foreign soldiers dispatched there remain under U.S. rather than U.N. command.

•*The March 11 bombing investigation:* Leaked documents suggest that this parliamentary commission will find that the gap between what the security forces told the PP about the bombings, and what the PP told the public, was even wider than had previously appeared. The PP argues, not very convincingly so far, that the opposite conclusion will be reached. Meanwhile, the government has faced both ways on the issue of releasing intelligence agency reports to the commission. This apparent lack of transparency, coupled with an alleged PSOE-PP secret pact that would exclude both Aznar and Zapatero from questioning by the commission, has been the target of hostile criticism from the smaller parties. On the whole, though, the investigation is likely to continue to hand the government more sticks with which to beat its predecessor. So, too, are sensational new revelations about the PP's bungling of the Yak-42 tragedy.

•*The EU constitution:* Zapatero's acceptance of a reduced weight for Spain in the revised European institutions was greeted with relief in most EU capitals, and was crucial to the remarkable progress made on this thorny issue under the Irish presidency of the union. Aznar, however, accused him, in characteristic language, of relegating Spain from the "grown-ups' table" to the "children's table, where no decisions are taken." Rajoy dismissed his negotiating style as "irresponsible, giving out smiles as presents and getting nothing in return."

•*The future shape of Spain:* As we have noted, the new prime minister has had soft words for the Basque and Catalan nationalists who were ostracized by the PP. This won him important support from their parties in the Senate, which greatly facilitates his ability to legislate effectively. But relations with the Basques, in particular, remain a minefield. It is not just that ETA's predicted

cease-fire has failed to materialize. Zapatero remains implacably opposed to the PNV's referendum on Basque sovereignty, due early next year, which leaves him on a collision course with the Basque government. And even on less contentious issues, the PNV has accused him of "acting exactly the same as the PP, just with a smile on his face." He has, however, reopened active dialogue on several significant questions. Differences within his own party on the status of Catalonia have been papered over but will certainly reemerge. The future shape of Spain is a thankless conundrum for the PSOE. The PP is already accusing it of "breaking up the nation" by even discussing further concessions to Vitoria (the Basque capital) and Barcelona, while the appetite for self-government of the Basques and Catalans may well be insatiable.

Zapatero has repeatedly demonstrated the decisive streak evidenced by his stance on Iraq. He has boldly risked regional unpopularity on complex issues like the national water plan, and embraced a referendum on the EU constitution while other European leaders run for cover. The sins of the PP, which have now been shown also to include gross inefficiency in areas like immigration, continue to be a dark background against which it is easy to shine. But, sooner rather than later, the new administration must be assessed on its own record alone. Ambiguous positions on issues like the release of intelligence papers already jar with the prime minister's promise of a transparent government that listens to the people and acknowledges its own errors. Distrust from the smaller parties, whose passive support is essential for effective legislation, is already evident. It is too early to judge whether Zapatero's much vaunted *nuevo talante* ("new character" or "new mood") really is a substantial break from the legacies of Aznar and González, or merely, as his critics claim and many of his supporters fear, just a change in political style.

—July 5, 2004

Notes

1. A senior member of the Spanish judiciary, and an astute observer of Spanish affairs, assured me shortly after the elections that this story was true. Even if it is apocryphal, it illustrates how Aznar's style of leadership could rebound against him.

2. Dan O'Brien, correspondence with this writer, April 2004.

3. Soledad Gallego-Díaz, "Historia de un presidente satisfecho," *El País*, January 26, 2004.

4. *El País*, April 14, 2004.

5. Several million others, of course, voted for smaller parties. And it says a lot about the polarized condition in which Aznar left office that not one of these parties voted for the PP in the investiture debate.

6. The transition is generally dated from 1976, when King Juan Carlos appointed the reformist Adolfo Suárez as prime minister, to 1986, when Spain became a member of the European Economic Community (now the European Union).

7. *El Fundamentalismo Democrático* (Madrid: Taurus, 2004).

8. The term "nationality" was a compromise, typical of the transition, between those who would have preferred the term "nation," within a federal state, and those who had difficulty in recognizing that these regions should have any special status. Among the other gems of Aznar's early polemics is an attack on the people of Guernica (now Gernika) for withdrawing the "honors" that an undemocratic town council had bestowed on Franco, after he had used the Nazi Condor Legion in the Civil War bombing of the town immortalized by Pablo Picasso.

9. Gallego-Díaz, "Historia de un presidente satisfecho."

10. For a detailed account of the transformation of the CP into the PP, see Sebastian Balfour, "The Reinvention of Spanish Conservatism," in *The Politics of Contemporary Spain*, ed. Sebastian Balfour, forthcoming from Routledge.

11. See Paddy Woodworth, *Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

12. See Gallego-Díaz, "Historia de un presidente satisfecho."

13. "The Basque Country is not just part of Spain, it is the heart of Spain," Jaime Mayor Oreja,

PP leader in the Basque Country, told me in 2001. See also, Paddy Woodworth, "Why Do They Kill? The Basque Conflict in Spain," *World Policy Journal*, vol. 18 (spring 2001).

14. Batasuna had generally received about 15 percent of the Basque vote.

15. This is based on a firsthand account of this conversation from a reliable source, who asked not to be named.

16. "Del Cénit de las Azores a la Derrota del PP," *El País*, April 18, 2004.

17. With remarkably little public discussion, both the EU and the U.S. State Department duly categorized Batasuna, which has a deputy in the European Parliament, as a terrorist organization.

18. "Aznar Says EU Must Combat Terrorism and Illegal Immigration," *Irish Times*, June 7, 2002.

19. The phrase is borrowed from the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas.

20. The decline of Aznar's once relatively warm relationship with Catalonia can be measured by the collapse of the PP in the region in the March 2004 elections, and the meteoric rise of a leftist pro-independence and anti-monarchist group, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), which rose from one to eight seats in the Madrid Congress, making it the fourth largest parliamentary group in the state.

21. "Callejón sin salida," *El País*, June 17, 2003.

22. The separation of powers between executive and judiciary had also come under question during the González administrations. See Woodworth, *Dirty War, Clean Hands*.

23. There were, of course, also thousands of victims of summary execution by undisciplined Republican units during the Civil War. But the Francoists had naturally gone to great pains to rebury them with due honors after their victory. And after the first months of the war, while repression actually intensified in the Francoist zone, it did at least become institutionalized, so that victims and their burial places were mostly officially recorded.

24. Cited in Balfour, "Reinvention of Spanish Conservatism." Balfour argues cogently, however, that "features of the old regime also endure in the PP not as ideology but as mentalities and cultures."

25. See Richard Gillespie, "Between Ambition and Insecurity: Spanish Politics and the

Mediterranean,” in Balfour, ed., *Politics of Contemporary Spain*.

26. The term *moro* is an ambiguous one in Spanish, but its use usually carries pejorative and racist connotations. One of Aznar’s deputy foreign ministers, Ramón Gil Casares, told me in an interview in 2003 that one of the mistakes the British were making in Gibraltar was that “they have let it fill up with Moors.”

27. It should be said, however, that this is a deep-rooted problem, and PSOE politicians in the region have also succumbed to anti-immigrant populism.

28. Gillespie, “Between Ambition and Insecurity.”

29. Correspondence with this writer, April 2004. Gillespie also notes, in “Between Ambition and Insecurity,” that Spanish-Moroccan trade was never seriously affected by diplomatic tensions between 2000 and 2004.

30. Aznar has tried to claim the credit for this achievement, and for the subsequent strength of the Spanish economy, which continued to enjoy low interest rates and significant growth during his tenure. Economists like Dan O’Brien (in “Spain After Aznar” *Prospect*, April 2004) qualify this claim very heavily. The PSOE’s relentlessly liberalizing policies had made early entry to the euro zone feasible, though much remained to be done. Aznar was fortunate in that the economic cycle favored the significant deficit reduction achieved after he took office. O’Brien adds that Aznar failed to deal with the two major structural flaws of the Spanish economy, barriers to job creation and an endangered pensions system, despite the latitude conferred by an absolute majority.

31. “El balance de Aznar,” *La Vanguardia*, April 19, 2004.

32. A favorite rhyming slogan suggested that Aznar’s much caricatured moustache should be used to sweep the oil from the beaches.

33. Rato made his opposition to the war clear by failing to speak in its favor, and lost his place in the succession stakes to Aznar as a result. Ironically, this spared him the humiliation of defeat in the March elections, and he is no doubt happy with his new position as the managing director of the International Monetary Fund.

34. “Aznar Says,” *Irish Times*, June 7, 2002.

35. See Gallego-Díaz, “Historia de un presidente satisfecho”; and Nora Boustany, “The View from Spain,” *Washington Post*, January 14, 2004.

36. See Peru Egurbide, “Golpe de timón hacía Washington,” *El País*, January 28, 2004.

37. France had certainly been culpably slow to cooperate against ETA in the post-Franco period, but relations had improved dramatically since the mid-1980s. Ironically, French-Spanish police coordination was never better than during the Aznar years, and it yielded numerous significant arrests and seizures of arms. All this was put at risk by Aznar’s international stance over the last two years.

38. Spanish casualties in Iraq were light over all, the worst single incident being the deaths of seven secret service agents in an ambush south of Baghdad on November 29 last year. There were only three other fatalities.

39. There is a further twist to this dilemma: if you have taken a decision on principle, and a terrorist group then puts you under great pressure to implement that decision, should you rescind it? If so, it seems that the terrorists would be in a win-win situation.

40. See Xavier Vidal-Folch, “El informe de un alto mando militar en Irak precipitó la decisión de Zapatero,” *El País*, May 11, 2004.

41. Al-Qaeda immediately recognized the significance of this decision and responded by threatening more bloody attacks on Spain. See Jorge A. Rodríguez, “Los suicidas amenazaron con más atentados por la política de Zapatero sobre Afganistán,” *El País*, April 14, 2004.