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COMMENTARY

A Spanish Surrender?

By CHRISTOPHER COX

Have terrorists succeeded in changing the course of Spanish democracy?

The revelation that al Qaeda was likely behind the Madrid slaughter of hundreds, just prior to Sunday's elections, is widely viewed as the reason for the Socialists' upset victory. The result, it is said, reflects voter backlash against Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's strong support for the global war on terror.

If so, it also reflects terrorist backlash against Mr. Aznar's staunch support for American efforts to destroy al Qaeda. "This is an answer to your cooperation with the Bush criminals and their allies," was the message on the purported al Qaeda video that blew open the Spanish elections. "This is an answer to crimes that you committed in the world, notably in Iraq and Afghanistan."

The Socialists' 11th-hour campaign theme, and the terrorists' rationale for their bloody retribution, thus coincide. It was the Spanish government's willingness to stand with America in taking the fight to the terrorists -- notably, according to the tape, in Afghanistan as well as Iraq -- that both the Socialists and the terrorists claim made Prime Minister Aznar himself culpable for the deaths of 200 of his countrymen.

On election day in Madrid, thousands of demonstrators yelled, "Aznar -- your war, our dead." Pre-March 11 polls had favored his ruling Popular Party to win handily. But voter sentiment was heavily swayed in the final hours by a widespread sense that Mr. Aznar had needlessly dragged Spain into America's fights, earning Spaniards the bloody retribution of al Qaeda.

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Indeed, the explicit claim of the Socialists over the weekend was that if al Qaeda were to be proven responsible for the railway bombings, Mr. Aznar would bear responsibility for having provoked them. The Socialists' alternative policy would be dealing with terrorists through "all available means" -- including dialogue and negotiations.

Certainly, this represents a stark difference. Prime Minister Aznar never saw it as an option for

Spain to sit out the post-9/11 war on terror. Spain's history of terror at the hands of ETA, the violent Basque separatists, had made him keenly aware that civilization must be on offense against terrorism. He also knew that Spain needed international cooperation in its fight against ETA. When 3,000 innocent civilians were murdered in New York, Washington and Shanksville, he knew instinctively that his nation and America faced a common challenge.

By Sept. 11, 2001, Mr. Aznar had already resolved the dilemma of whether to fight or flee in the face of terrorism. But much of America, and most of Spain, had not.

In the days after the World Trade Center and Pentagon air strikes, millions of Americans were in anguish over whether the grisly deaths of so many must inevitably be followed by more violence. On Sept. 29, just two weeks after 9/11, thousands rallied in Washington, San Francisco and Barcelona to discourage armed retaliation. If George W. Bush had not broken decisively with such sentiment by taking the war to Kabul, the irresolution might have lasted much longer.

It is of course a natural response to such horrific violence that -- if at all possible -- we bring it to an end. Mightn't we, for example, take no aggressive action and hope the terrorists don't strike again? Why risk further provoking them? Besides, many rationalized in the wake of 9/11, it's really a Mideast problem. If only we stop supporting Israel, then they'll leave us alone.

Such desperate rationalization is now under way throughout Spain, but as in America, it will likely give way to a harder-nosed realism. It has doubtless been a comfort to those grieving the loss of loved ones to imagine that, by sheer act of national will, further violence might be stopped. The same fond hopes that tempted many Americans after 9/11 undoubtedly underlie the sudden rush of support for the Socialists' policy of withdrawal from Spain's unstinting alliance with the aggressive anti-terror policies of America.

There is, however, a significant difference between the 9/11 bombings in America and the 3/11 bombings in Spain. Unlike the al Qaeda attacks in America, last Thursday's terror attacks in Madrid occurred three days before the nation's elections. The effect was profound. The apparently successful use of terror to alter the course of the Spanish election -- achieving precisely the hoped-for result announced in the terrorists' own video, the rejection of the pro-America policy of Prime Minister Aznar's party -- teaches a dangerous lesson. The terrorists will be convinced that their violence worked.

The lesson, once learned, can hardly be limited to Spain. Now terrorists need not limit themselves to intimidating individual politicians or judges with violence. In the minds of al Qaeda's adherents, the population of entire nations, if subjected to suitably horrific carnage just prior to an election, might now be manipulated into voting for governments that disavow armed opposition to terrorism. As a result of the Spanish experience, America's own elections must now be considered targets.

The Spanish electorate -- and even more pointedly, their new Socialist government -- now faces a long national reconciliation with the new reality they have unintentionally helped create. Spain's new prime minister, Jose Rodriguez Zapatero, will have to decide whether "dialogue" in the war on terror is really possible. More fundamentally, does he really believe that his predecessor needlessly dragged Spain into a fight it could have avoided?

Spain's rank-and-file Socialists may not wish to acknowledge the depth of their nation's infection with al Qaeda. Mohamed Atta held top-level meetings in Madrid to plan the Sept. 11 attacks.

Several al Qaeda cells have been discovered in Spain; more than 30 al Qaeda operatives have been arrested there. It is against this backdrop that last week's train bombings, apparently the work of a multinational cell of al Qaeda loyalists, must be understood.

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For years, many European nations have honored a silent pact with Islamic militants, allowing them to move safely so long as those nations were not themselves attacked. This might now become Spain's new policy. If, as Edmund Burke famously said, the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing, then Spain's Socialists surely will have the opportunity to hand al Qaeda a victory with enormous implications for America and our allies.

But there are also early signs that Mr. Zapatero understands the implications of the extraordinary events that have so improbably catapulted him into the center of the world's attention. On the night of his election, he announced that his government's "immediate priority" will be "to beat all forms of terrorism." If, against election-eve expectations, he determines that Spain must continue to be a stalwart in the global war on terror, then the terrorists will have failed -- both in changing the course of Spanish democracy, and in their ultimate aim to force the world's democracies to capitulate to their cruel and indiscriminate violence.

Mr. Cox, a Republican congressman from California, is chairman of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security.

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