

Spain: How Aznar's lies paved the way for his defeat

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Republican party bigwigs and the US media are falling over themselves to accuse the Spanish people of cowardice and appeasement towards terrorists because they voted out the right-wing pro-Iraq war Popular Party (PP) government of José María Aznar.

The most senior Republican in the US Congress, Dennis Hastert, declared, "Here's a country who stood against terrorism and had a huge terrorist act within their country and they chose to change their government and to, in a sense, appease terrorists."

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, stated, "If you look back through history and you look at situations that require people...to stand up and lead and be counted against various threats, appeasement just hasn't worked.... Weakness is provocative."

The message is repeated ad nauseam by the media. To oppose war against Iraq and the US occupation—and in particular to oppose the Bush administration and its rightist allies—makes you a coward and at best a dupe of Al Qaeda. As Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* in Britain editorialised, "America is angry with Spain. Very angry.... By dumping their Government, the Spanish have given in to the terrorists. They've run up the white flag."

The libel directed against the Spanish people is made all the more disgusting because it comes from the mouths of those whose actions in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere created the political conditions for such terrorist outrages as the March 11 bombings that killed 202 people.

The hostile reaction of the Spanish people to Aznar and the PP is in fact an expression of the rising anti-war sentiment amongst working people the world over. Indeed, the furious response of the US Republicans is due to fear that the American people will see through their own lies and propaganda portraying the conquest of Iraq and ongoing global military aims as a supposed war against terror.

The reaction of the Spanish working class was more politically conscious and developed due in large part to the historic legacy of revolution and counterrevolution in the 1930s and the bitter experience of life under Francoite fascism, which only ended in 1978. Ultimately, these factors are responsible for the pronounced anti-imperialist sentiment and active commitment to defending democratic rights that found expression, firstly, in Spain's overwhelming opposition to the Iraq war; secondly, in the widespread lack of trust in Aznar's PP; and, finally, in the anger that exploded when it was revealed that the political heirs of Franco had systematically lied about who authored the Madrid atrocities in order to preserve their rule.

The PP feared that proof of Al Qaeda's responsibility would tap into the anti-war sentiment that had seen 90 percent of the people oppose Aznar's undemocratic decision to back the Bush administration's

war. Therefore, a campaign was mounted involving the highest levels of the government, with Aznar and other top officials telephoning journalists insisting that the Basque separatist group ETA was responsible for the Madrid bombings.

The speed with which arrests of suspected Al Qaeda sympathisers have been made is an indication of how much was being concealed from the Spanish people in order to perpetuate the PP's claim.

The chief suspect, Jamal Zougam, was well known to the security services. Police had searched his apartment on August 10, 2001, and he and his half-brother Mohamed Chaoui are alleged to have been vouched for by an Al Qaeda suspect in a monitored telephone call. Zougam, Chaoui and another Moroccan, Mohamed Bekkali, were arrested on Saturday, March 13, just two days after the Madrid bombings. Additionally, of six other people being hunted by Spanish police in connection with the blasts, the majority appear to have connections to at least three groups aligned with Al Qaeda.

It is now known that the spies at the National Intelligence Center (CNI) had suspected Al Qaeda from the very start. By 11:00 a.m., on the very morning of the blasts, police had found an abandoned van containing seven detonators and a cassette tape with verses of the Koran recited in Arabic. But despite the wealth of evidence pointing to Islamic terrorists, the government insisted on blaming ETA.

Spanish diplomats even forced through a United Nations Security Council Resolution blaming ETA for the bombings. (Senior European officials have since complained that they felt misled by Aznar's government.)

Javier Solana, Spain's foreign minister under the last Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government, a former secretary general of NATO and now the European Union's top foreign policy official, gave a number of television interviews blaming ETA at the request of the PP.

At an afternoon news conference on March 11, Interior Minister Angel Acebes denounced any suggestion of Al Qaeda being responsible as "a miserable attempt to disrupt information and confuse people.... There is no doubt that ETA is responsible."

Foreign Minister Ana Palacio had telephoned British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to say ETA was responsible. She also sent a letter instructing Spanish ambassadors and embassy personnel that they "should use any opportunity to confirm ETA's responsibility for these brutal attacks."

The extent of media manipulation by the government was unprecedented, but so too was the readiness of the media to comply.

The editor of the Catalan-based paper *El Periodico*, Antonio Franco, said Aznar called twice. He said that Aznar had insisted to him, "It was the ETA. There's not the slightest doubt about that!"

Aznar “courteously cautioned me not to be mistaken. ETA was responsible,” he wrote in an editorial on Tuesday, March 18: “It was then that I, under the conviction that the prime minister of my country was incapable, in the exercise of his duty, to give me assurances about something he was not completely sure about, decided on the headline: ‘ETA’s M-11.’”

The *Washington Post* reports: “The government spokesman’s office at Moncloa, the prime minister’s office, also placed calls to at least 10 foreign correspondents during the day, according to Steven Adolf, a Dutch reporter for *NRC Handelsblatt* and president of the foreign correspondents club here.”

El Pais also received a number of calls from Aznar himself. An editorial published on the day of the election explained: “The prime minister gave his word to the heads of the media so they would present the attacks as the work of the ETA terrorist group.”

As well as the propaganda, there were the outright lies. The government had falsely reported on March 11 that the explosive used was Titadyne dynamite, which ETA used in earlier attacks after stealing several tons of it in France. The explosive used in Madrid, however, apparently came from Saudi Arabia.

Inter Press Services reports: “When the SER radio station, the most popular in Spain, reported that ‘99 percent’ of the evidence found by the military intelligence National Information Center pointed to extremist Islamic groups, the phone immediately rang, and a ‘denial’ came from the director of the Center himself.”

The reaction of the Spanish working class to the lies and dissembling began with spontaneous demonstrations on Saturday, March 13, aimed at the PP and culminating in the record turnout the next day to ensure its defeat in the general election.

Saturday night’s protests were immediately prompted by the announcement of the arrests of the three Moroccans and two Indians, as well as reports of the discovery of a videotape asserting Al Qaeda’s responsibility for the attacks. The simmering mistrust of the government exploded and thousands took to the streets, often as a result of phone calls, e-mails and Internet messages calling for the truth to be told.

Some on the protests carried a banner reading “Your War, Our Corpses.” Others proclaimed “We cannot vote without knowing who are the assassins.” Protesters shouted “Liars, users, murderers, manipulators.”

The foreign press interviewed many demonstrators. Javier Rumbo Ortiz, a 22-year-old student who lost two friends in the bomb attacks, said, “The Iraq war is the reason for all this, and the government has some blame.”

Emilio Jimenez Tomas told the *New York Times*, “The government is hiding information. They think we’re idiots.... Look at this. This is an election and the government pretends that they don’t know anything about who really did it. They’ve been lying to us and we won’t know the real truth until after the election.”

The anger felt towards the government also extended to the state media and the pro-PP press, which had collaborated with the PP’s claims and then either failed to report the protest demonstrations or attacked them as being politically motivated.

The manipulation of state television was particularly sinister for the Spanish people, given their experience with Francoism. A report in the *Guardian* notes, “Searching in vain for rolling news programmes since the bombings, people had found only Lion King cartoons and alien space invaders broadcast on the television.

“How had the spin doctors been able to hijack a national tragedy,

blank out the information services, one woman asked. There was a feeling of panic and desperation.”

By the early hours of the morning, “horrified protesters realised Televisión Española, the state television station, wasn’t showing their swelling crowds at the top of the 6 o’clock news.... ‘Is there something truly horrific being hidden from us which will only emerge on Monday after the vote, when it’s too late?’ asked one woman.”

Noelia Almenaria, an office administrator, told the *Guardian*’s reporter, “Please tell your country there are cartoons on our TV here. They are hiding things from us. It’s like a nightmare in an American film.”

Most significantly, Rosario Ruiz declared, “For Christ’s sake, we’re not stupid.... The People’s Party are fascists under a different acronym. Why don’t they tell us what happened?”

Even now, the fallout from the government’s attempts to censor the truth continues.

On Wednesday, March 17, the Association of Foreign Correspondents in Madrid officially accused Aznar’s government of willfully misleading foreign journalists, and said a number of correspondents received calls on the evening of the attacks with explicit requests to mention that ETA had carried out the attacks.

Employees of the state television network TVE, radio broadcaster RNE and news agency EFE have demanded the resignation of their directors for caving in to the PP and presenting a distorted picture of the attacks. The committee of EFE employees has stated in a press release: “EFE knew, from the very morning of Thursday’s attacks in Madrid, about the existence of a cellphone configured in Arabic and about the van found in Alcalá de Henares, and knew that one of the dead was a terrorist”

However, “Reporting or broadcasting information pointing to involvement by extremist Islamic terrorists that was obtained from primary sources by our national news service writers was expressly prohibited.”

The EFE writers accuse the agency’s news director, Miguel Platón, of imposing “a regime of manipulation and censorship in this company over the last few days, to favour the interests of the Popular Party (PP) with a view to the Mar. 14 elections.”

When the media and the Republican blowhards denounce the Spanish people as cowards, they do so in full knowledge of what actually took place. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has been forced to acknowledge part of the truth of what took place on March 14. In a radio interview, he denounced the government’s information policy, insisting, “It wasn’t the terror attacks themselves, but rather the way they [the Spanish government] dealt with it that cost the government the elections.”

What the Bush administration and its allies cannot admit is that the lies Aznar told were a continuation of those used to justify his decision to support the Iraq war. Indeed, the Spanish people came to the politically mature conclusion that Aznar’s lies on the Madrid bombings had been made necessary precisely in order to conceal the bitter fruits of his earlier crime.



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