



## Madrid through American Eyes<sup>±</sup>

*Robert Matthews\**

In the election after the terrorist atrocity of 11 March, Spain's people rallied against government lies and bad anti-terrorist policies. An American scholar in Madrid compares the American reaction to 9/11 and asks whether his compatriots can learn from the Spanish example.

Through a haze of early morning sleep on Thursday 11 March, I heard the National Public Radio announcer intone the words "terrorism", "tragedy", and "Spain" on my clock radio in Brooklyn. Ten bombs had exploded on four commuter trains approaching Madrid in a spectacular act of terrorism.

Three days later, I found myself in Spain fulfilling speaking commitments made several months before with the Peace Research Center in Madrid. During those two weeks in Madrid and Córdoba, in a strange atmosphere of sadness and political excitement, I reflected on how differently our countries responded to the two attacks, 911 days apart.

There was a curious asymmetry between the reactions of Americans and Europeans, and I believe the difference is symptomatic of a failure of US citizens (at least until now) to convert historical trauma into multi-class alliances and political energy in the way that Spaniards did.

If the United States and Europe are to be "together" in the fight against terrorism, as John Hulsman beckons in his article on openDemocracy, the US needs to watch and learn how Spanish citizens responded to their government after the attack.

Rallying around the president, as Americans did after 9/11, is not sufficient to tackle terrorism. "This is about al-Qaida", says Hulsman. But it is also about citizens asking critical questions of their governments in difficult times and demanding the truth.

### The word on the street

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<sup>±</sup> This article was published by Open Democracy Online on April 30th, 2004.

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Three days after the attacks, Spanish voters turned out in record numbers (79%) to repudiate the government party and elect the Spanish socialists to lead the country again after eight years in opposition.

The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major US dailies duly covered these events - but mostly in terms of their effect on US foreign policy. Serious analysis of the political dimension of an event like 11 March was overshadowed by apolitical coverage of the attack.

Typical of this approach was the US edition of Newsweek who did a cover story on the Madrid with the US-centric title: "Europe's 9/11", but never so much as mentioned the election or speculated on the possible political consequences of the attack. It was as if the event had occurred in a bubble unrelated to Spanish policies or politics. In the following week's issue there was no mention at all of the election outcome.

What often passed for political observation was in the form of predictable dismay from the right at Spanish "appeasement of terrorism" for voting out the party of pro-Bush prime minister José Maria Aznar.

Surveys indicate that the large margin of victory for the socialists was both due to the way in which the government had entangled Spain in the Iraq war (and by extension left the country less secure), and the fury that ensued when the Aznar administration was found to have lied, blaming armed Basque separatist group ETA for the attacks.

It is ironic that this reasoning is derogated in Spain at the very moment that Richard Clarke, US counter-terrorism chief for ten years, has levied similar criticisms at the Bush administration for its handling of terrorism. Far from appeasing terrorism, the Spanish voted against a politicised and unproductive counter-terrorism policy and in favour of a strategically sound one.

### **More than an ocean divides us**

Both 9/11 and 3/11 were attacks of historic proportions. While the immediate responses of citizens in both the US and Spain were admirable and inspiring, there were key differences between the responses of European and Americans in the aftermath.

One day after the tragedy, 11 million Spaniards, a quarter of the entire population, demonstrated in Madrid and around the country in solidarity against terrorism. Across Europe, citizens paused to remember Madrid's victims.

The US response was more muted. One Newsweek letter to the editor on 5 April 2004 captured an all-too-common, insular American view:

"I don't think it was right to compare what happened in Spain to what occurred in the United States on 9/11. The Spaniards may have lost several hundred people in the

train bombings, but next to the destruction we suffered as well as the number of lives lost, it pales in comparison.”

Immediately after 11 September, a pall of sorrow and an inchoate sense of solidarity did settle briefly over New York City. But this sentiment, the memorable demonstrations of support and the acts of generosity from around the country soon morphed into an overarching and individualised patriotism. US flag lapel pins and decals sold briskly as personal declarations of patriotism, and the flags that sprouted from family homes on my block in Brooklyn are still flying.

None of this translated into grassroots political expression. Perhaps the American population was too stunned; perhaps there is less political consciousness here. And maybe we simply have a less developed culture of community. But what spirit of resistance and unity there was after 9/11 was quickly overwhelmed by a surge of militarism and a willingness on the part of many to accept the abridgment of citizens’ rights in the name of a new war on terrorism.

Even more important, was the pervasive desire for revenge, a circumstance masterfully exploited by the Bush administration in a campaign that succeeded in selling war with Iraq as retribution for 9/11. As a neighbour explained to me when I asked why he supported a war against Iraq: “It’s payback time.”

### **Vacuum packed politics**

After 11 September, there was no immediate political fallout, no debates between Democrats and Republicans as to why and how the attack could have occurred, nor was there any public outcry when the Bush administration resisted the creation of an investigative commission and then stonewalled its efforts. The US response to terrorism was visceral, not political. And it created a political vacuum, which the Republican right quickly filled.

In a broad sense, the electorate (and the Democratic opposition) did not only rush to support the “commander-in-chief” at a time of national emergency, but continued to surrender to the bold, right-wing tack of the Bush administration for two years.

Columnist David Brooks wrote admiringly in the New York Times on 16 March that if terrorists were to strike in America on the eve of an election, he had no doubts that the American electorate would rally around the president.

Maybe we would and maybe we wouldn’t. The reaction of the media, the American public, and both major parties post-9/11 does not inspire confidence that we would resist this naive but emotionally satisfying response.

If we did circle the wagons around the president, it would not be because we are more patriotic, or tougher on terror than Spaniards. It would be because as a society we have become fearful of thinking through the complex problem of terrorism, and of making the necessary political choices to implement effective measures.

One hopes that the accumulating evidence of the naiveté, ideological rigidity, lies, and sheer incompetence of the Bush administration as regards the war on terrorism will act as a school for understanding scandal. In that case an awakened electorate will come to its senses in November 2004 and, like the Spaniards, vote out a government that has betrayed the public trust and the national interest.

If we do not, it will not be al-Qaida that divides Europe and the US, as John Hulsman suggests, but Washington's unapologetic unilateralism in the service of a failed policy on terrorism. If we do, then we may achieve the European-US unity to which Hulsman rightly summons us. As a friend of mine said when I left Madrid, "We have done our job now; it is up to you to do yours."