

The Real Lesson of Madrid

(written for *The Yorkshire Post*, 25 March 2004)

Last week I was London, launching a book on 'Blair's War.'. I have never known the city so nervous. People were waiting for a second Madrid: staying off the underground, keeping their children back from unnecessary trips to town, watching their mayor and police chief publicly conceding the inevitability of an attack.

That same week, the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives accused the Spanish people of appeasing terrorism, and the leader of the Opposition in the UK joined him in that view. The White House has so far been publicly more diplomatic in their reactions to developments in Spain; and many pro-war voices in Europe have chosen to criticize the tone of the new Spanish Prime Minister's initial remarks rather than their content. But they too have insisted that, in the wake of the Madrid bombings, to oppose the war in Iraq is to weaken the war against terrorism.

For those who have long been opposed to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the question to be faced now is whether their critics are right. Did the appalling carnage in Madrid so alter the terms of reference of the debate as to now require their silence?

The argument that it did has come in a number of forms, some focused on Spain, some on the anti-war movement more generally. The Spanish electorate, by rejecting a government that had put Spain alongside the US and UK at the heart of the 'coalition of the willing', stands accused of validating al-Qaeda's belief that the West can be bombed out of Iraq. That election result, so the argument runs, will give terrorists a green light to bomb electorates in other coalition cities. Rome, Warsaw, even London itself; and when those bombs come, responsibility for the ensuing deaths will lie not with the initiators of the invasion but with their critics.

The only way to avoid that fate, we are told, is to support the invasion of Iraq. Now is precisely not the time to change either policy or personnel. For even if there is good reason for those changes, to make them now would look like weakness and the politics of fear. Instead Europe must unite in outrage against the terrorists. It must look forward, not back. Europeans must concentrate all their energies and support on the rebuilding of Iraq and on the creation of a democratic future there.

The message is therefore clear. Those who really care about defeating terrorism must stop attacking the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

But is clarity here matched with accuracy? Is the message right, in whole or in part? In part, yes. In whole, No.

It is certainly true that the Spanish election result will be seen by al-Qaeda as a victory, and will presumably tempt them to try again. But it is also true that, as prime minister-elect Zapatero said in the immediate wake of that election, the Iraq war has fuelled rather than abated terrorism, and that it will go on doing so until the foreign military presence in Iraq is internationalized under UN control. The issue is how to square those two truths.

The best way is to insert between them an observation not much mentioned in discussion in recent days: the degree to which the bombings in Madrid show the self-fulfilling nature of the arguments that took us to war. Bush and Blair went to war claiming that a strong link existed between al-Qaeda and Iraq. There is now overwhelming evidence that the claim was false. That Madrid now shows the existence such a link is testimony to the degree to which the invasion actually created the linkage it was supposed to destroy. Al-Qaeda bombed Madrid, and Bush and Blair's supporters now say 'we told you so'. To which the response must be. It is not that you 'told' us so. It is that you 'made it' so.

The invasion of Iraq has definitely linked the presence of foreign troops in Baghdad and Basra to the wider war on terrorism; and we all have to live with that linkage and its consequences. The linkage wasn't there a year ago, but it is now. But the way to weaken that linkage again is not to give unambiguous if retrospective support to an illegitimate invasion. It is to press firmly for a proper exit strategy from the cauldron that is post-Hussein Iraq.

We have once more to decouple the invasion in Iraq from the wider 'war on terrorism'; and we have to do that in ways that make it crystal clear – to al-Qaeda as well as to the rest of the world – that this decoupling is driven by principle, not by fear, that its roots lie back at the start of the invasion, and are not a panic reaction to the Spanish consequences of that invasion. We have, that is, continually to repeat the truth of the Zapatero position: that the opposition to the Iraq adventure is so intensely felt by many of us precisely because of our parallel commitment to an effective 'war on terrorism'.

It is entirely unacceptable to blow commuters to bits. That it was Spanish commuters who were blown to bits this time was a product of the previous Spanish government's involvement in the invasion of Iraq. By voting as they did, and by marching in their millions against terrorism, the Spanish electorate has given us the real lesson of Madrid. Al-Qaeda has been strengthened, not weakened, by what happened in Iraq a year ago, and can best be opposed by refocusing our efforts on undermining terrorist networks, not by invading a string of rogue states. It is a lesson that the US and UK governments now need to learn, before one European tragedy is followed by another.