

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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THEY SAID IT

“Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.”

-- President George W. Bush, Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, September 20, 2001

SPAIN AND TERRORISM. Over the last week, Mark and I have read reams of commentaries, explanations, and forecasts dealing with the March 11 al-Qaeda attacks on Spain and the subsequent Spanish election results, and have had many long discussions about the implications of both. What follows is our interpretation of these events, our critique of much of what has already become conventional wisdom about them, and our expectations for how all of this will play out over the next several months.

For starters, it is worth noting that nearly everyone – left, right, and ostensibly impartial – has called the Spanish vote a tactical victory for al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda had previously indicated a desire to separate Spain from America by acts of violence on Spanish soil, and that’s precisely what they did. But some, particularly those on the right, have gone one step further, suggesting not just that the election results are a victory for al-Qaeda, but that they are indicative of cowardice among the Spanish voters and their new political leaders. Yes, al-Qaeda scored a victory, the theory goes, but that victory would have been impossible without the complicity of the Spanish electorate.

Now I certainly agree that this is a victory for al-Qaeda. But blaming the action of Spanish voters on moral weakness is not only unfair but it minimizes a problem with which the United States may have to contend in numerous other countries in the not too distant future. By failing to recognize that the vote was in fact a practical, rational attempt by Spaniards to limit future terrorist attacks on Spain, most observers have entirely misinterpreted the events of the last two weeks and have therefore missed their importance.

It is true that outgoing Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, showed remarkable courage in wholeheartedly backing President Bush and in standing up to the “leaders” of the EU (read: France and Germany) when they tried to convince him to rethink that backing. But that does not

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necessarily mean that Prime Minister-Elect Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and those who put him in office are cowardly simply because they have decided to pursue a different course. It might just mean that they have taken a very different, and in my opinion, short-sighted view of what is best for their country and of the demands that will be placed upon them by both sides in the war on terror, now that there is the impression that negotiation is possible.

Mark and I have both noted numerous times over the last year or so that the world community in the 21st Century will be characterized not by longstanding “friendships” or “alliances” but by pure self interest. I put it this way in the June 9, 2003 edition of the newsletter:

Regardless of what we might wish and hope, the United States has very few “friends” around the world, and often those whom we believe to be our friends will prove otherwise. In most but not all cases (Great Britain and Israel likely being the exceptions), national interest will trump friendship any day.

In Spain, this is exactly what happened. Zapatero ran on the promise of distancing his nation from President Bush and the United States, and after 3/11, a majority of Spanish voters agreed that it would be in the national interest to do so. The Spaniards did not react cravenly, and they did not panic. They simply made what they believed to have been the most rational, self-interested decision they could make. To ignore this fact is to overlook the possibility that other nations may do the same should they find themselves in a similar circumstance.

In the short term, Spain’s decision may prove to have been a good one. Given that al-Qaeda’s leaders want other nations, such as Great Britain, Australia, Italy, and Poland, to follow in Spain’s footsteps and to disengage from the United States, they are indeed likely to reward the Spanish for their actions by halting further terrorist attacks there, at least for the time being.

It is, however, the long term consequences of Spain’s decision that will be the most interesting and important. One would guess that the Spanish leaders hope that by essentially suing for peace with al Qaeda that they and their people will be left alone, permitted to sit out the ongoing conflict much as they did World War II. But the problem with appeasement, aside from the obvious moral concerns, is that it encourages the enemy to demand more. In conceding the Sudetenland to Hitler, for example, the allies merely encouraged him to take all of Czechoslovakia. And by the same account, in showing that they are willing to give an inch, Spain may well have encouraged al-Qaeda to try to take a mile.

One wonders how, for example, Spain will react if al Qaeda’s implicit promise of keeping the nation free of future terrorist attacks is predicated on the use of Spain as a safe haven for its members or a reliable entry point for them into Europe?

Recall that one of bin Laden’s chief gripes against the allegedly decadent West is unwillingness to stand and fight. And since the Spanish have just demonstrated that they want out of the proverbial line of fire, they may well have placed themselves in an entirely untenable position, forced to choose between maintaining their newly won neutrality by conceding ever more ground to terrorist blackmailers and maintaining reasonably decent relations with America.

From a practical standpoint, it seems likely that Spain will seek to maintain some moderation in its position, choosing to disengage from Iraq, but not the greater war on terror. Zapatero is clearly opposed to the war in Iraq and also clearly wants to get his nation back in the good graces of France and Germany.

Indeed, he may well find it in his nation's best interest to pattern his position on the greater war on terror after those staked by France and Germany, choosing to remain nominally engaged on non-Iraq related matters. After all, on the day of his election, Zapatero did indeed declare that it would be his government's "immediate priority to beat all forms of terrorism."

That said, Zapatero may also sense that for Spain, which was targeted by al-Qaeda precisely because they believed it to be weak, such a position may not, as I indicated earlier, be satisfactorily compliant. Though he has vowed to "beat" terrorism, he has also indicated that his beliefs about how best to go about beating the terrorists may be so different from those of President Bush that his "support" would not be just meaningless but harmful.

Last Wednesday, for example, Zapatero declared that, "Fighting terrorism with bombs, with Tomahawk missiles, isn't the way to beat terrorism, but the way to generate more radicalism," which prompted onetime Bush speechwriter David Frum to argue that, in this one sentence, Zapatero "gave the lie to those wishful Americans who have suggested that Zapatero and his voters wished only to appease jihadi terrorism in Iraq while stoutly resisting jihadi terrorism everywhere else." Frum continued:

Note only that Zapatero did not limit his condemnation of "bombs" to Iraq alone. He was endorsing the emerging Euro leftist thesis that the very idea of fighting terrorism is an error. Romano Prodi, the chief of the European Commission, gave utterance to the new doctrine at the beginning of the week: "It is clear that using force is not the answer to resolving the conflict with terrorists." Not "force alone." "Force." Zapatero and those like him are ready to paint their hands white and raise them in the air everywhere, and not just the Sunni Triangle.

If Frum is correct in his assessment of Zapatero, and if Zapatero therefore does indeed second Prodi and does push to disengage from the United States' war on terror altogether, then last Sunday's election results will not go unanswered by the United States, but will be met with a very cold public reassertion of President Bush's post 9/11 statement that the nations of the world need to choose sides, and if they wish to enjoy the benefits of friendship with the United States they'd better choose correctly.

Indeed, President Bush has already begun to rev up this engine. On Friday, in his speech commemorating the anniversary of the start of the battle with Iraq, the President made it clear that those who are not with the United States in this war are against the United States, and he issued a subtle warning of sort to Zapatero. Specifically, he said:

There is no neutral ground – no neutral ground – in the fight between civilization and terror, because there is no neutral ground between good and evil, freedom and slavery, and life and death.

The war on terror is not a figure of speech. It is an inescapable calling of our generation. The terrorists are offended not merely by our policies -- they are offended by our existence as free nations. No concession will appease their hatred. No accommodation will satisfy their endless demands . . . There can be no separate peace with the terrorist enemy. Any sign of weakness or retreat simply validates terrorist violence, and invites more violence for all nations. The only certain way to protect our people is by early, united, and decisive action.

Now President Bush's critics are almost certain to claim that Bush's re-reliance on this bi-polar world view is devoid of nuance, is insensitive to Spain, and is indicative of the mindset that alienated so many erstwhile allies, namely France and Germany, in the first place. Nevertheless, Bush has no choice but to fall back on the original themes of the War on Terror.

To do otherwise would be devastating politically, providing his opponents an opportunity to critique the conduct of the war on terror and to suggest that even the administration now realizes the faults in its "simplistic" good-evil, friend-enemy dichotomy. It would also be devastating morally, since it would further embolden the enemy. And finally, it would be devastating practically. The 3/11 attacks will, after all, almost certainly not be the last such attacks, and the President must use the narrow window between the last attack and the next one to steel the will of our allies in this war, lest they all react as Spain did, seeking individual safety over victory. The President must make it clear that the position Spain has put itself in is an unenviable one and that other allies would be wise to avoid putting themselves in the same position.

And this, naturally, brings us to the second likely upshot of the Spanish election, namely the likelihood of terrorist activity geared at affecting the disposition of governments involved in fighting the war on terror and perhaps at affecting the outcome of elections. Most commentators have noted, accurately I believe, that al-Qaeda will be emboldened by the perceived success of the Spanish operation and will attempt to achieve similar ends with similar means in other places.

As many have suggested, Great Britain, Australia and Poland have reason therefore to be concerned about al-Qaeda attacks. But in my opinion (and those of a handful of others) the nation that has the most to fear immediately is Italy. Like Spain, Italy is part of "Old Europe." But because of the singular courage of its head of state, it has broken with the rest of the EU to aid the United States. Also like Spain, Italy's bond with the Americans is relatively tentative, and al-Qaeda cells are known to be active throughout the nation. Finally, like Spain, Italy has an election upcoming.

On June 12 and 13, Italians will vote in administrative elections and for members of the EU parliament. And given that al-Qaeda is apparently fond of attacking on the eleventh day of the month, it would hardly be reckless to speculate that terrorists may try to strike again the day before the elections. Predicting terrorist strikes is next to impossible, of course, but if ever there were a day to expect an attack, 6/11 is that day.

Finally, many observers have suggested that America's impending election, which will pit Bush against a man who believes that terrorism should be treated not as war but as an "intelligence and law enforcement" matter, is itself high on the list of likely targets. As Congressman Chris Cox

(R-CA) put it on Friday, “As a result of the Spanish experience, America’s own election must now be considered a target.”

Of course, Al-Qaeda’s intentions in the United States depend considerably on their rudimentary understanding of American culture and of the differences between it and European culture. If they do indeed sense these differences, then the terrorists will not attempt to affect the U.S. election via terrorism, knowing that their efforts would likely backfire on them by serving simply to intensify the nation’s resolve. It would also likely strengthen President Bush’s position by allowing him to suggest credibly that al-Qaeda wants his opponent to win. And lastly, it would also ensure that the outcome of the election will have little effect on the response to the attack since, even in the unlikely event of a Kerry victory, the nation would almost certainly scream for a response and the President’s hand would be forced.

That said, al-Qaeda has not exactly shown the greatest understanding of the American mindset in the past. Bin Laden and company gravely miscalculated the response to 9/11, and it would be surprising but not entirely shocking if they miscalculated again.

Indeed, I think a strong argument could be made that al-Qaeda miscalculated in attacking Spain. Though the short-term, tactical benefit of the attack is well known, the long term, or strategic impact is yet to be determined. Indeed, when we look back on this in a year or two, it is quite possible that the bombing in Madrid will be seen as a turning point in the War on Terror. In order to win both the election and the War, President Bush must convince (or re-convince) complacent Americans and allies that this is in fact a real war against a merciless enemy. The attack in Spain on a civilian commuter railway nearly two weeks ago, will, I believe, make that task easier. Certainly complacency should no longer be an issue with the American public.

IRAN, SYRIA, AND REGIME CHANGE. Regular readers know that I have long been a believer in the inevitability of regime change in Iran. While it is impossible to forecast something as nebulous as revolution, or in this case counter-revolution, in several pieces over the last year, I have suggested that the Mad Mullahs are likely in their final days. Over the past week or so, there have been further signs of discontent within Iran and further signs of anger with the ruling regime.

The story is much the same in Syria, where the world’s sole remaining Ba’athist dictatorship has found itself under increased public pressure over the last two weeks. The regime of Bashar Assad, a weak and ineffectual successor to his brutal father, is facing a full-scale rebellion from its Kurdish population, and there are fears among the ruling elites that the violence and insurgency may spread to other parts of the country, much as the uprising by ethnic Hungarians enveloped all of Romania, eventually ending the reign of the tyrant Ceausescu.

What’s that, you say? You didn’t know any of this, despite the fact that you’ve been reading the papers and watching the news? That’s because the mainstream American media apparently doesn’t believe either story merits much attention.

In the case of Syria, for example, the U.S. press has ignored events there entirely. Anyone who happens to be interested in what is occurring in that important nation must read it in the London *Telegraph*. With regard to Iran, the situation is arguably even worse. What little coverage CNN

has dedicated to the events in Tehran, for example, has not just been wrong, but has parroted the Mullahs' spin as well.

Fortunately, even in Iran and Syria, the march of technology cannot be stopped, and a vast array of witnesses to events taking place there have been able, through the wonders of electronic communication, to keep the world abreast of what is happening. Various bloggers, resistance groups, and alternative media – most notably Project Free Iran and the Syrian opposition party – have been publicizing day-to-day developments, making them available to those few American media outlets that care more about reporting the actual course of events in the Middle East than about maintaining reasonable relations with that region's brutal and secretive regimes.

Compare, for example, the difference between CNN's take on events in Iran last week and that of an Iranian blogger whose comments were posted on *National Review Online*. The difference is remarkable. First CNN:

Iranians danced in the street, threw firecrackers and jumped over bonfires Tuesday night as authorities openly tolerated an ancient fire festival for the first time in 25 years.

Halted each year since the 1979 Islamic revolution because hardliners considered it un-Islamic, the Chaharshanbeh Suri, or Red Wednesday, festival was officially recognized in Tehran where the city council set aside dozens of parks for people to enjoy the boisterous celebrations . . .

Unlike previous years, when riot police blocked off streets and hardline Islamic vigilantes beat and arrested many trying to enjoy the festivities, security forces were virtually absent. Old and young reveled in the new-found freedom.

Now the Iranian, whose comments come courtesy of *National Review Online* editor Kathryn Jean Lopez:

I am listening to KRSI (Radio Sedaye Iran) right now. There are many Iranians calling (from Tehran, and Gorgan, etc.). All reports indicate that almost every neighborhood in Tehran is on fire. People are throwing home-made bombs, Molotov cocktails, etc. into the homes of mullahs, and burning pictures of Khamenei in complete defiance of his recent edict to mourn during the month of Muharram.

Background: Khamenei delivered a declaration (not really a fatwa, although some say it was) to Iranians to honor the month of Muharram, which started about two weeks ago, and to mourn and not have any parties of merriment. Well, the problem is that the Iranian New Year (Nowrouz), March 20th (totally non-religious and cultural event -- although Zoroastrian in origin) falls in the middle of this, and Iranians were enraged about this edict.

Tomorrow is the last Wednesday of the Iranian calendar year (called Chahar Shanbeh soori), and traditionally Iranians burn small bonfires and jump over them and celebrate the ending of the old year and welcome the new.

As a measure of defiance of Khamenei's Islamic Rule, and in celebration of ancient (non-Islamic) Persian customs, Iranians have taken to the streets in complete defiance of Khamenei's edict, saying that they will 'burn the mullahs out of their homes'. They are celebrating Chahar Shanbeh Soori. There are huge bonfires, bomb-throwing, merriment and the welcoming of the last days of the mullahcracy. In their own way Iranians are making a huge statement.

You can listen to the news yourself (in Farsi of course) everyone is very happy and celebrating defying the mullahs and burning of Khamenei's picture and trying to burn all mullah's houses. There are people calling from all over Tehran, from Gorgan, and northern provinces . . . It is amazing!

Last Thursday's report on Syria in *The Telegraph* tells another pretty dramatic story that the rest of the mainstream press chose to ignore. To wit:

Thousands of Kurds fought pitched battles with paramilitary police across northern Syria yesterday as rioting, in which at least 30 people have died, worsened for the fifth day in a row. Tanks were reported on the streets of Kameshli, on the Turkish border, where security forces responded with force after rioting broke out last Friday.

The trouble began at a football match at which Kurdish fans waved posters of President George W Bush while being taunted by Syrian supporters with pictures of Saddam Hussein. Syrian troops opened fire during a number of demonstrations by ethnic Kurds yesterday, killing at least seven people in the northern cities of Afrin and Aleppo, according to the Turkish state-run news agency.

Despite the mainstream media's virtual blackout of these stories, they are extremely important. Iran and Syria are the largest and most "generous" state supporters of Islamic terrorism, and the demise of either or both regimes would mark significant progress in the war on terror. Moreover, the collapse of these two regimes would validate the Bush administration's much-maligned plan to conquer the terrorists by promoting freedom and liberty in Iraq in the expectation that they would eventually be spread around the region.

As I noted at the top of this piece, I believe that in Iran in particular, regime change and a subsequent end to sponsorship of terrorism are a matter of when, not if. Given the media's apparent disinterest in these stories, though, I suspect that that change, or a similar one in Syria, will be greeted by most Americans with total shock. Watch these pages.

END NOTES: A Truly Unhealthy Obsession. Several weeks ago, we ran an article detailing some of the obvious problems with the Democratic Party's strategy for wooing voters. Among other things, we noted that the Baby Boomers who have dominated the Party leadership for better than a decade now, are fixated on the Vietnam War and on the alleged lessons that were learned from the war. We also noted that in this sense John Kerry is the perfect Democratic nominee, in that his obsession with Vietnam is borderline unhealthy, and we predicted that this obsession would become almost farcical before the campaign was over.

Well, last week, in response to a Humane Society (Humane USA) questionnaire that asked “Do you have any pets that have made an impact on you personally?” Kerry answered with the following entirely implausible story, which is not only the stuff of dreams but is further proof of this guy’s weird obsession. As it turns out, even this guy’s favorite pet was a vet. Kerry wrote:

When I was serving on a swiftboat in Vietnam, my crewmates and I had a dog we called VC. We all took care of him, and he stayed with us and loved riding on the swiftboat deck. I think he provided all of us with a link to home and a few moments of peace and tranquility during a dangerous time. One day as our swiftboat was heading up a river, a mine exploded hard under our boat. After picking ourselves up, we discovered VC was MIA. Several minutes of frantic search followed after which we thought we’d lost him. We were relieved when another boat called asking if we were missing a dog. It turns out VC was catapulted from the deck of our boat and landed confused, but unharmed, on the deck of another boat in our patrol.

We know it’s a little unfair to pick on the mentally ill, but Kerry’s got some real issues to work through. If Vietnam were a woman, she’d have more than enough evidence to get restraining order against this stalker.

Shocker: Clinton’s Guy Breaks Bad on Bush. For most of this week, the Democrats and their media allies will be abuzz with tales of the Bush administration’s negligence on terror and preoccupation with Iraq. This is all in response to allegations leveled last night on “60 Minutes” by former White House terrorism advisor Richard Clarke. Note several things about Mr. Clarke as you read his allegedly “damning” accusations: He was Clinton’s “Terrorism Czar,” a virtual cabinet-level position, but was demoted by President Bush. He has a new book to sell. And, among other things, he complains that Bush et al. were obsessed with Iraq even on 9/11 and that he advised the administration to get over Iraq and focus on the real problem in Afghanistan, yet he never quite explains where the “crime” in all this is, since they obviously heeded his counsel.

Why Cheney Stays. A couple of weeks ago, we dismissed rumors that President Bush would replace Vice President Cheney on this year’s ticket, saying that Cheney is far too important to Bush and this administration ever to be thrown overboard, no matter what his alleged political liabilities may be. Over the past week or so we’ve been reminded of that importance, as the Cheney took on a very visible role in the re-election effort. John Kerry criticized the President this past week for unleashing his “attack dog” Vice President on him, and we suppose he has a point. Cheney is an attack dog, and a good one at that. It is, in our opinion, unlikely that George W. Bush would have won in 2000 without Dick Cheney on the ticket, and he’ll be better off in ’04 because of him, alleged political liabilities notwithstanding. Cheney has a knack for making clear, well-reasoned arguments, for delivering those arguments without the usual political sugar-coating, and for doing this all while sounding like your calm, kindly grandfather. And so to re-emphasize our point: Don’t throw away your Bush-Cheney bumper sticker and lapel pin.

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