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Spain's New Cultural Revolution –Will America Follow?

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Friday, April 23, 2004

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, Spain's new Prime Minister, is about to launch nothing less than a social revolution. Mr. Zapatero, 43, was sworn into office by King Juan Carlos last Saturday, and he immediately set out to recall Spain's troops from the allied coalition now fighting in Iraq.

Zapatero, whose party won 164 seats in Spain's parliament, had run on a platform of social and national transformation, criticizing the previous government as too pro-American, too conservative, and too Catholic. Even though Mr. Zapatero's socialist party fell short of the 176 seats needed for an absolute majority in the 350-member Cortes [Spain's parliament], the new Prime Minister appears to be riding a crest of public support for his liberal policies.

Prior to his election, Zapatero had promised to bring Spain's troops in Iraq back home, but only if the United Nations did not take control of the peace-keeping effort in the aftermath of the American military action. Once in office, however, Zapatero abandoned his concern for United Nations oversight, and immediately recalled Spain's 1,300 troops, leaving the American-led coalition both shocked and disappointed.

A senior White House Official responded with an unusual rebuke to a European ally, commenting simply, "the President is not happy." Other administration officials were less restrained, accusing the new Spanish government of surrendering to forces of world terrorism. In the eyes of many, the new Prime Minister's approach to foreign policy means that Spain has abandoned the "coalition of the willing" for the "coalition of the running."

Zapatero's actions are all the more important given the tragic March 11 terrorist attacks on railway stations near Madrid. Casting Spain's foreign policy toward alignment with France and Germany, Zapatero appears determined to distance his government from the United States as far as possible. The Prime Minister has pledged to develop a "magnificent" partnership with his favored European neighbors. This must certainly be good news to Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda, as well as their allies in world terrorism. The withdrawal of Spanish troops is far more important in terms of symbolism than military strength, and it sends a very dangerous signal.

Just days before Mr. Zapatero was installed as Prime Minister, a leader claiming to be Osama bin Laden offered European nations a chilling bargain. The tape—believed to be authentic—conveyed a message promising safety and security for European nations, if they would only repudiate or abandon the allied coalition in Iraq. Mr. Zapatero's approach to foreign policy will only encourage terrorists in their efforts.

The new Prime Minister is known to his friends as "Bambi"—a name that seems altogether fitting, given his approach to the war on terror. Unfortunately for Spain, "Bambi" is not exactly the leadership profile needed to meet the challenge of world terrorism.

But while British and American observers were most interested in Mr. Zapatero's views on foreign policy, Spaniards appear to be most fascinated with his social agenda. On the domestic front, Mr. Zapatero is promising nothing less than a revolution intended to transform Spanish society from top to bottom.

According to The New York Times, Mr. Zapatero “thinks his country should have a sexual and social revolution.” Included in his plan is the legalization of gay marriage, the eradication of Catholic teaching in public schools, the liberation of medical research from Christian morality, and an “unceasing fight against criminal machismo.” Even as he was installed in office by the Spanish monarch, King Juan Carlos, Zapatero pledged to eliminate primogeniture, by which the first-born son in the royal family succeeds to the throne. That must have set the table for an interesting debate inside the palace.

In a speech delivered last week to the Cortes, Zapatero declared: “The moment has finally arrived to end once and for all the intolerable discrimination which many Spaniards suffer because of their sexual preferences.” Zapatero went on to promise modifications in the civil code that would lead to full normalization of all rights for homosexuals, granting homosexual couples equal rights with married couples in terms of inheritance issues, workplace rights, and social security.

Apparently, Mr. Zapatero and his party are determined to purge Spain of the residue of both conservatism and the Catholicism that has been its heritage. At the same time, Spain is already a relatively liberal country. Even at the present, prostitution is legalized, and advertisements for explicit sexual services appear regularly in the nation’s newspapers. Barcelona is considered one of Europe’s capitals for the pornography business, and Private Media Group, a company devoted to pornography, is actually traded on Nasdaq. As reporter Elaine Sciolino of The New York Times reports, Barcelona even plays host to an erotic film festival each year. The nation has already legalized almost every vice, and “alternative lifestyles” abound. Sciolino’s article described Spain’s homosexual community as “vibrant, flamboyant, and politically active.”

Sciolino also contrasted Spanish and American views of sexual morality, noting that “Spaniards of all political colorations scoff at the puritan streak in American politics that made the Monica Lewinsky affair such a big deal.”

Ana Botella, an elected official in Madrid’s municipal government and the wife of former Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, said that illicit sexual affairs by politicians are really no big deal. “It doesn’t matter if someone has one or two or three or four affairs,” she said. Responding to his wife’s comments, Aznar replied: “Spain is Catholic, but in its own way. People try to have a good time.”

When Mr. Aznar describes Spain as Catholic “in its own way,” he is merely describing the progress of secularization in what was once considered one of the most Catholic nations in Europe. Recent surveys indicate that only 12% of young people between the ages of 13 and 24 go to Mass every week, even though 94% of its citizens are Catholic. Most Spaniards favor a strict separation between church and state. Even as a majority of Spaniards identify as Catholic, it appears that Catholicism is being redefined in an increasingly secular Spain.

All this goes back to Spain’s civil war, a conflict that divided the nation in the 1930s and continues to effect Spanish politics to the present. An anti-clerical movement grew popular during the Civil War period, and Spain exited that era of national strife with a much looser commitment to the Catholic faith.

Mr. Zapatero’s social agenda is intended to transform the family, and the Prime Minister promised women full equality, even promising to force men to assume more domestic duties. It is unclear just how Mr. Zapatero intends to fulfill that campaign pledge, but it ought to be interesting to watch him try.

His most controversial proposals relate to homosexuality, and the Prime Minister has pledged to introduce legislation that would put gay unions “on the same footing as marriage.” He later commented that “marriage is perhaps not the best word.” Regardless of the nomenclature, the full extent of Zapatero’s agenda is clear. He wants to liberalize Spain’s abortion laws, legalize medical research using human embryos, and terminate Christian influence in the public school system.

Spain was once the most powerful nation on earth, and under the rule of King Phillip II, the nation controlled more of the earth’s landmass than any other world empire. Today, Spain is a prosperous European nation, but has lost its standing on the world’s stage. Nevertheless, Mr. Zapatero’s election sends a signal about the future of Europe and the fragility of electoral politics—and it’s a signal Americans should note carefully.

The March 11 terror attacks in Madrid succeeded far beyond the imagination of al Qaeda and its allies. The attacks apparently frightened the Spanish people into supporting a withdrawal from the war in Iraq—a move that amounts to

surrender in the War on Terror. But Mr. Zapatero's election is instructive in other ways as well, for his social revolution is more than merely symbolic. His social agenda is truly revolutionary, and promises to restructure everything from the courts to the family home. Spanish voters faced a real choice between two very different worldviews in the recent election, and they made their choice.

This is a good point to ponder as American citizens consider our own upcoming presidential election. Like the Spaniards, Americans face a choice between two very different candidates, two very different parties, and two very different worldviews. As in Spain, the choice will make a very real difference.

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