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Last rites for the Bush doctrine

Events in Spain have intensified the ideological war in America

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Thursday March 18, 2004

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When terrorist bombs exploded at Atocha train station in Madrid on March 11, a date that resonated like a European September 11, politics on both sides of the Atlantic were thrown into turmoil. The ruling conservative Popular party and the Bush administration instantly staked the Spanish election on the presumed identity of the terrorists.

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The Spanish government had supported Bush's war in Iraq against the overwhelming opposition of Spanish public opinion. March 11, therefore, must not be September 11. The culprits must be Eta, not al-Qaida. The then prime minister, José Mariá Aznar, repeatedly called Spanish newspapers to insist that Eta was responsible. Within hours of the attack, George Bush and his secretary of state Colin Powell helpfully pointed their fingers at Eta. A day before the election, however, alleged terrorists linked to al-Qaida were arrested. The credibility of the government was in tatters and it suffered a shattering defeat.

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatera, the new Socialist prime minister, immediately pledged his commitment to the war on terror, while calling the war in Iraq a "disaster" and, for good measure, announcing: "I want Kerry to win." John Kerry, for his part, called for Zapatera to reconsider his decision to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq. Each statement reflected a complex reconfiguring of politics after March 11. The crisis in the western

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alliance, a reaction to Bush, is a new peril to be navigated by Kerry.

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On the eve of the Spanish election, Bush's first wave of campaign spots on television - featuring a flag-draped coffin at Ground Zero - had failed. By more than a two-to-one majority, voters felt the ad was inappropriate and it was hastily withdrawn. Bush replaced it with a more menacing commercial. The ad claimed (falsely) that Kerry had a plan to raise taxes by \$900m. Then came a triptych of rapid images: a US soldier - was he patrolling in Iraq? - a young man looking over his shoulder as he runs down a city street at night - was he a mugger or escaping an attack? - and a close-up of the darting eyes of a swarthy man - was he a terrorist? The voiceover: Kerry would "weaken America".

The images were racial and subliminal, intended to play upon irrational fear. A Bush spokesman explained that the generic olive-skinned figure was a hired actor and wasn't an Arab. Through this literal-mindedness the Bush campaign tried to deflect criticism as it sought to sow apprehension about Kerry.

Though Kerry is the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee and has served in the Senate for 19 years, he is not well known. Yet he is even with or ahead of Bush in the polls. For Bush, the next 60 days may be decisive. The elder Bush, lagging in 1988, waited until after the Republican convention in late summer to paint his opponent as a soft liberal, somehow unamerican. This President Bush cannot wait.

On every issue of domestic concern, Kerry defeats Bush. Only on foreign policy does Bush hold sway, so he must heighten and reinforce that difference. Kerry must be weak, Bush must be strong. Thus a new Bush ad: jets take off from an aircraft carrier, a female soldier hugs her family, and the voiceover: "Kerry ... wrong on defence." The ad claims that Kerry voted against an \$87bn post-Iraq war appropriation, failing to note, of course, that he had proposed linking it to rescinding Bush's tax cut for the wealthy.

After the Spanish election, the White House that had insisted that it was Eta and not al-Qaida pivoted its argument. The Spanish vote was not a triumph of democracy, a revulsion against the political manipulation of terror. Instead it is being construed as a victory for al-Qaida, a blow in the "ideological war on terrorism", as Anne Applebaum, the neoconservative editorial writer of the Washington Post, put it.

The Bush doctrine has evaporated. Whether it was ever a doctrine rather than a rationale for an already decided upon invasion of Iraq is questionable. Certainly, the war in Afghanistan was a response to an attack on the US, not a pre-emptive strike. Rejected now by a member state of Nato through its democratic process, the doctrine per se has no practical future as an instrument of foreign policy, if it ever did.

But the consequences of Bush remain centre-stage. As the arrogance of power increasingly leads to the dissolution of power, the "ideological war" becomes more furious. For the neoconservatives, the political meaning of 3/11 must be forced into the Procrustean bed of Bush's 9/11. Bush's campaign, after all, turns on the pre-emptive strike.

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