

The Scourge of the 21st Century: Reflections on Terrorism From The Basque Country To Manhattan

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It might look presumptuous, or even insulting on my part to compare the effects of the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, to those suffered by Spaniards at the hands of the terrorist group ETA (*Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna*, or Basque Fatherland and Liberty) over the last thirty years. At the time I wrote these words, the estimated number of victims killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan exceeded six thousand, and more than two hundred in the attack against the Pentagon and the plane which went down in Pennsylvania. In contrast, the number of people killed by ETA since its appearance in 1969 is “only” eight hundred. So, in the terrible math of death, the terrorists responsible for the attacks of September 11 are infinitely more deadly than the ETA terrorists. And the American people would have the right to claim primacy in the calculation of sorrow: lives lost, families undone, missing friends, material damages, economic catastrophes. Those analysts who draw these comparisons—that is, between ETA, the IRA and Corsican terrorism, or even going back a little further, between the Italian Red Brigades and the German Baader Meinhof, on the one hand, and the effects of the attacks in New York and Washington, on the other hand—are right to draw a difference between what they call a “tactical nuisance” with which the affected people can live and a “strategic disaster” which renews the very organizational basis of society and requires a response that is global, coordinated, and in so far as possible, definitive.

Basque terrorism in Spain

For thirty years we Spaniards have been living with, or rather bearing, the “tactical nuisance” of ETA’s Basque terrorism. If its mad assassins have not managed to alter the substance of our community life, it is not for lack of trying. In the last thirty years in Spain, including the successful transition to democracy under the reign of King Juan Carlos I after the death of General Franco in November 1975, we have often felt the anguish of seeing terrorism seem to reach its objective of altering and destabilizing our national life. There was no assassination of a military figure, or police official, or judge, or politician, no indiscriminate murder of civilians on the street or in a supermarket, that did not have as its end to undermine the foundations of peaceful coexistence and lead the public powers to adopt exceptional measures of repression. All of it was supposedly justified by the refusal of the Spanish administrations to concede independence to the Basque Country, and was accompanied by ideological demands always stemming from a fantasized and

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manipulative nationalism that has never hidden its tendencies toward Marxist-Leninist models which are or have been: Enver Hoxha's Albania, Mao-tse-Tung's China or Castro's Cuba.

It truly inspires admiration to see how, in that painful fight against terrorism, the Spanish people have combined suffering, courage and determination to carry out the fight within the framework of a State of Law, to demand justice and not vengeance and not to let the basic patterns of behavior of Spanish society be affected. Spaniards have never resigned themselves to terrorism and they know that the final victory, however far away it may seem to be, will be theirs, and that is why they have never let terrorism affect their lives more than is absolutely necessary. The Spain which has suffered terrorism for the last three decades is also the Spain that is building and solidifying a strong democracy, the Spain that is regaining its international role through NATO and the EU, the Spain that is successfully building one of the most dynamic economies in western Europe, the Spain which is making massive investments in Latin America, and the Spain which is truly setting an example and spurring on both its own people and others.

But terrorism and its consequences remain with us. And each of us, from the King and the President of the Spanish Government, down to the very last citizen knows this embedded problem of terrorism remains for us to solve. We would have given half of our lives to avoid it. And we will give the other half to help eradicate it and, meanwhile, to feel as our own the pain that terrorism inflicts on other societies.

Terrorism against one is terrorism against all

The attacks of September 11 moved the world. This attack perpetrated against the U.S. revealed a desire among terrorists to annihilate a complete way of life and value system embodied in the advanced industrial democracies. "Our" terrorists share with their Islamist extremist colleagues neither the suicidal impulse nor the terrible technological sophistication. But in everything else—in their empty words, in their desire to destroy, in their historical and ideological simplification, in their irrationality—they are exactly the same. There is nothing more like a terrorist than another terrorist, no matter what the cause they claim to pursue or the socio-political system they confront. What distinguishes one terrorist from another is not the ideal he pursues, but the method he uses. And it is their indiscriminate use of violence aimed at spreading terror, that makes them the enemy not of one regime or another, but of the whole system of civilization based on the dignity and freedom of the human being.

There are many people who still do not share this opinion. They are the nostalgic generation of '68, sympathizers with the "national liberation movements," those who believed and who in part still believe that there is one kind of violence and then there is a different kind of violence, and that sometimes the ends do justify the means. To end dictatorship, for example.

When ETA became active at the end of the 60s and beginning of the 70s, Franco was still alive and its actions, that is, its assassinations were wrapped up with the romantic and heroic halo of the battle against the dictatorship. In 1973, in an astonishing attack in downtown Madrid, ETA killed Admiral Carrero Blanco, President of Franco's government. Many anti-Franco democrats felt it to be a bittersweet

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moment and celebrated the “feat”, thinking that such atrocities would end once Spain became a democracy. Because a democratic Spain, they and we told and tell ourselves, will recognize not only the freedom of all Spaniards, but also cultural, linguistic and regional diversity. And it did. The Constitution of 1978, one of the most advanced in the world, recognizes Spain as a pluralistic society, a country that is federal in everything but name and in which the Autonomous Communities, like the States of the Union, can have greater competencies than any federated European State. Such is the case of the Basque Country. But, with the advent of the Constitution did ETA disappear? Absolutely not. On the contrary, despite the fact that everyone who was found guilty of terrorism prior to Franco’s death was granted amnesty in 1976, between that year and 1980 ETA committed 10 times more murders than it did between 1969 and 1975 while Franco was still alive.

That experience, which has continued until today, and is demonstrative of the radically undesirable nature of ETA and its terrorist activities, brings us to a healthy and definitive conclusion: no one has the right to use terror, much less to try to justify it. And of course that applies to ETA, to the Kurdish PKK, to Hamas, to Hezbollah and to any other form of extremist Islamic terrorism, the Irish IRA, Corsican terrorism or the “Tamil tigers” of Sri Lanka. For ethical, political and practical social reasons, there is no room to legitimize terrorist violence under *any* circumstances. If we do, we shall turn the international stage into a jungle.

It has not always been easy for Spain defend to the world that the intrinsic nature of ETA is criminal and that international solidarity is therefore necessary to fight this terrorism. Whether it be that some doubted our democracy, or for reasons of cheap opportunism, the cooperation we now count on has been relatively late in coming. Many of our closest as well as our most reticent neighbors have finally recognized the reality: terrorism knows no boundaries and to give them refuge in the hope of remaining on the sidelines is a suicidal policy.

We have always defended the idea that it is necessary for the international community to equip itself with strengthened tools of legal and police cooperation in order to be able to effectively carry out the fight against terrorism. Even prior to September 11, that was one of Spain’s priorities as it prepared for the Presidency of the European Union, a position it will hold from January 1-June 31, 2002. After this tragedy, international opinion will allow for no delays and it is obvious that these matters will be dealt with in an accelerated fashion in the EU and its relations with the U.S.

Maintaining democratic ideals in the fight against terrorism

Spain has never used military means in its fight against ETA. No matter how much the terrorists adopt military and warlike paraphernalia, the response they require is sufficient police attention. In fact, in Spain the Civil Guard—a body governed by military discipline but depending on the Ministry of the Interior—has gained much experience and has met with tremendous success. Its painstaking, quiet intelligence and operative work has led to noteworthy successes in the battle against ETA. It is true that the terrorist group is not dismantled, but surely the history of anti-terrorism in Spain has enjoyed more quiet successes on the part of the Civil Guard than it has suffered actions of the assassins. This effort has covered and

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continues to cover the gamut in counter-terrorism, from external support groups to financial investigation and international connections.

It has not always been easy to draw up the legislative measures against terrorism and to maintain civil liberties. Nor was it easy to understand that a State of Law must reject the temptation to be expeditious and use methods of terror against the terrorists—if society does not maintain its moral superiority in this war, it will end up making itself an easy victim of terrorism.

Society's response should start with police successes. Those who collaborate with terrorists, or who closely share their goals, or others whose actions tend to be well-intentioned but poorly informed, may uphold the opposite idea—that terrorism can be conquered through political offers (read negotiation), or through the disappearance of the causes which gave rise to it (read to accept the terrorists' demands as the only way to get them to stop killing). In our experience and in that of so many others, there is nothing further from the truth. There is nothing to negotiate but their surrender, the resulting turning over of weapons and, if it is fitting and the populace accepts it, the granting of individual pardons for those who are repentant. Political negotiation between democratically elected leaders and terrorists would place the whole of society in the hands of the latter.

There is no room for the supposed or real complaints that the terrorists use to try to legitimize their crimes, because again the problem is not the substance of the complaint but the method used to put it forth. In Spain there are people from the Basque Country, and to a lesser degree from Catalonia, who would like to consider independence for their respective regions. There is no limitation on their freedom to set forth their aspirations which have until now been rejected by the majority of the respective electorates. But it is meaningful that even among those who favor independence, violence is emphatically and categorically rejected. Terrorists tend to be left alone holding their diabolical tools of destruction. How can one take their demands seriously? How can one explain these demands as consequence of a preexisting political conflict without the prior solution of which, they tell us, there will be no peace in Spain no matter how much the effects of terrorism are lamented?

Anyone who explains, understands, justifies or legitimizes a terrorist action is on the verge of becoming the terrorist's accomplice. The terrorist will always try to objectify the subjective reasons for his actions and to give them an air of respectability, forgetting that no one has given him the right to snuff out the lives or snatch away the property of the human beings he finds on his path. If we don't want society to return to distant dark times we should always remember that not only the divine commandment "thou shalt not kill", but also all the building of civil society that has been done around that idea and which has led in the 20th Century to the blossoming of more fair, more free and more prosperous societies than have ever been known on the face of the earth.

That, of course, should not translate into complete insensitivity to the problems of the world or into an unreal conviction that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Hunger, poverty, oppression, and marginalization are clearly cultural mediums for instability and tension and it is in the interest of the entire international community to take urgent action to alleviate in so far as it is possible the differences between one world that is dying of hunger and another that is dying of satiety. But to

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interpret the actions of the terrorists as a visible manifestation of the rights of those who have none, of the disinherited of the earth, thereby legitimizing them is as obscene as it is illogical. That is true in the Basque Country, in Manhattan, in Londonderry, in Ajaccio, in Tel Aviv, and in any area of the world.

Battling the scourge of the 21st Century on all fronts

The vast majority of us want to see universal respect for human rights and individual freedoms. We find totalitarianism and totalitarian tendencies repugnant; we would like to see a fairer distribution of the world's riches; we are prepared to fight against corruption, bad governance, extrajudicial executions and torture; we would like to have a truly effective and universal international court; we would like to build a global society united by tolerance and understanding of the vast diversity of human life; and with a greater or lesser degree of success we truly struggle to achieve a society that is more decent, more understanding, more free and more just.

None of those aspirations will ever be found in the explicit or implicit objectives of any terrorist. Rather, the terrorist's actions are dictated by criminal fanaticism that is either religious or lay, it makes no difference. All those who devote themselves to teaching that differences such as race, religion, history or culture are evidence of the supposed superiority of one over another, consequently suggesting that there is reason to eliminate others who are different, are providing fertile ground for the criminal roots of terrorism. We have seen that in some political and educational circles in the Basque Country. And that is also the case in the Koranic schools where Bin Laden finds his suicidal disciples. That is one of the factors to bear in mind in the medium term in the fight against terrorism. Once the leadership is dismantled, it is necessary to put the strength of democracy into preventing the sowing of the seeds of terrorism.

Maybe we can never hope that all madmen and self-proclaimed visionaries will disappear from our society. Maybe perfect security is incompatible with perfect freedom, or simply with freedom. But it is urgent that in addition to meeting the basic needs of all, both within and outside of our societies we advocate educational systems and ways of living together that deepen respect for one's fellow man, appreciation and tolerance of differences, and awareness of peace as the necessary environment for agreement and disagreement. Let us remember that Islamists are not the only ones with fanatical fundamentalists among them: within American society I was stupefied to see the terrorist attacks of September 11 justified and interpreted from a supposedly Christian viewpoint as "the wrath of God", placing responsibility for the massacre on abortion, homosexuals, and feminists. In Spain, ETA terrorists typically give minimum advance warning about the placement of their bombs, so that the police hardly have any time to take precautions and if there are victims, as unfortunately there often are, the assassins' spokesperson lays the blame on the government. Here, as always in matters of terrorism, there are no finer points for debate or interpretation: those responsible for terrorism are the terrorists. Any digression would take us away from the basic goal which is to achieve overwhelming and efficient international action capable of eliminating from the face of the earth what seems to be the scourge of the 21st century—terrorism. At this time everything else is really superfluous.