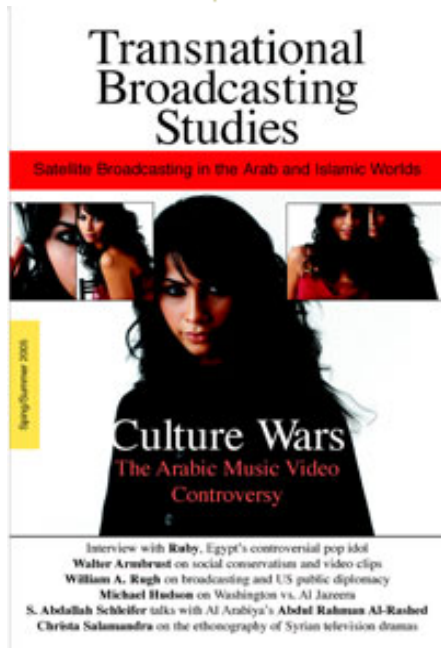


Lawrence Pintak

America, Islam & the War of Ideas

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COMMENT: The terrorists cast their votes

BY LAWRENCE PINTAK

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Terrorism this week won a victory that has potentially disastrous implications for the United States in the coming months.

Monday's defeat of Spain's Popular Party demonstrates that terrorists have the power not only to change lives, but to change governments as well. It is not the first time self-styled jihadis have sought to oust elected leaders. Nor is it likely, in this U.S. election year, to be the last.

As revealed this week by my University of Michigan colleague, terrorism expert Scott Atran, the intention of radical Islamists to use the Spanish elections to prompt a withdrawal of Spain's troops from Iraq was explicitly outlined in a 50-page book published on Islamist Web sites in December 2003. According to Atran, eight pages of the book were dedicated to an analysis of Spanish politics, which concluded: "It is a must to exploit the coming general elections in Spain in March 2004."

The immediate promise by Spain's new Socialist prime minister-elect, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq if the United States does not cede control to the United Nations, underlines the effectiveness of using terrorism as

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The implications for America's other allies in Iraq are obvious. The December document, published by a group calling itself the Information Institution in Support for the Iraqi People, the Center of Services for the Mujahideen, predicted that "the withdrawal of the Spanish or Italian forces from Iraq would serve as a huge pressure on the British presence (in Iraq); hence, the domino tiles would fall quickly."

The attacks of 9/11 caused Americans to stiffen their support for the Bush administration's war on terrorism. But the situation in Europe is very different. Large majorities in Britain, Spain and Italy oppose their government's decision to send troops to Iraq. M/11, as the Europeans are calling it, is seen as, in Zapatero's words, one of the "consequences" of a policy that has proved "a disaster."

George Bush, take note: The confluence of terrorism and election politics in Spain is no aberration. Twenty years ago, Islamic Jihad had this message for another occupant of the Oval Office: "You, governor of the White House, await a painful blow before your reelection." Days later, a suicide bomber destroyed the U.S. embassy in Beirut. It was just two months before the American election. Look for a similar message addressed to George Bush.

The Islamic militants failed to prevent President Ronald Reagan's re-election, but that did not make their victory any less complete. As in Iraq, the goal from the beginning was to drive out U.S. forces. And, like Bush today, Reagan had vowed to stand tall against terrorism after earlier suicide attacks claimed hundreds of American lives. But as the election drew closer and the threats mounted, the White House declared victory, ordered the troops home, and left Lebanon to the Lebanese.

The approach was even more effective against the Israelis. Using tactics being mimicked today in Iraq, the Lebanese Muslim resistance set out to shift the Israeli electorate against the Lebanon occupation by providing television viewers with a steady diet of dead and wounded Israeli troops. The result was the ouster of a hardline prime minister in favor of Ehud Barak, who ordered a withdrawal that gave the Arabs their first victory over Israel in history. In the process, the template for the current struggle against the U.S. occupation of Iraq was laid.

By every measure -- number of terrorist attacks, level of anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world, diverted resources -- the invasion of Iraq has exacerbated rather than quelled the terrorist threat.

But an even greater irony lies in the administration's stated goal of bringing democracy to the Middle East. Radical Islamists have now engaged directly in the democratic process -- just not where or how the administration had intended.

Spain carries two implicit messages for a president who has divided the world into "us" and "them": Radical Islamists have a sophisticated grasp of Western electoral politics. And in a close election, terrorists can now cast the deciding vote.

LAWRENCE PINTAK, a former CBS Middle East correspondent, is the Howard R. Marsh Visiting Professor of Journalism at the University of Michigan. Write to him in care of the Free Press Editorial Page, 600 W. Fort St., Detroit, MI 48226.

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