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The Choices Facing Europe

José María Aznar

Former Prime Minister of Spain



JOSÉ MARÍA AZNAR was born in Madrid in 1953. He earned a degree in law at the Complutense University and has held the qualification of Inspector of State Finances since 1975. First elected as a member of parliament in 1982, he became a leader of the newly founded Partido Popular in 1989, and was elected prime minister of Spain as the leader of that party in 1996 and again in 2000. Currently he is the president of the Foundation for Social Studies and Analysis and a distinguished scholar at Georgetown University, as well as chairman of the Partido Popular and of the Christian Democrat and People's Parties International. Under his leadership, Spain enjoyed its first two income tax reductions since becoming a democracy, a 3.4 percent average annual increase in GDP, and was a member of the "Coalition of the Willing" in the Iraq War. Mr. Aznar has written several books, including *La España en que yo creo* (*The Spain I Believe In*) and *Ocho Años de Gobierno* (*Eight Years of Government*). Married to Ana Botella, he has three children and one grandson.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on October 24, 2005, at the Casa Fuster Hotel in Barcelona, Spain, at a dinner preceding a Hillsdale College cruise of the western Mediterranean on board the Crystal Serenity.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, we are not living in the best of all possible worlds. We see violence, terror and fear nearly every day, thanks to 24-hour news coverage. We see poverty and hunger in too many places around the globe. We see acute crises sporadically breaking out between America and Europe. Moreover, we are seeing nature act up in ways unprecedented in modern times.

But despite the Katrinas, Bin Ladens, and Atlantic tensions, I also have to say that we are not living in the worst of all possible worlds. In fact, I'm optimistic. Let me tell you the reasons why.

First and foremost, the world in 2005 is no worse off than it was a few years ago. The opposite idea is widely accepted today, primarily because this is the view promoted by most of the media—media that undoubtedly leans towards the Left. This view is accompanied by the idea that the world is less just today than it was before the onset of globalization, and that the world is less safe than it was before the terrorist attacks of September 11, intervention in Afghanistan, and the downfall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Quite frankly, this view is mistaken.



Those who promote these pessimistic ideas always cite the same examples: the warlords in Afghanistan; the mislabeled “insurgents” in Iraq; the ongoing terrorist campaign being waged by Al-Qaeda; America’s poor image in the Arab world; and disagreements between Europeans and Americans on various foreign policy and social issues. Based on these factors, they hold that the world today is much more vulnerable than it was before 2001, and therefore much more dangerous.

The truth, however, does not reside in a comparison of today’s world with the apparently tranquil world that existed on September 10, 2001. Instead, we should compare the world as it is today with a hypothetical world in which the United States and the international community, instead of reacting as they did, had chosen to do nothing following the Al-Qaeda attacks—in other words, a world that surrendered to the temptation of appeasement of terrorists.

Let’s not kid ourselves. Thanks to the measures that have been taken to fight and defeat terror over the last few years, we are much safer today than we would have been if we had simply closed our eyes to the existing threats and carried on as if nothing had happened. Today, the leaders of Al-Qaeda who have not yet been caught spend much more time trying to stay alive than they do planning new attacks. Far from possessing a safe haven from which to launch their operations, such as Afghanistan under the Taliban, they have been left stateless. They have no base from which to pursue their objectives. What is more, controls of all kinds make it difficult for them to operate.

Am I claiming, then, that Islamic terrorism has been defeated? No. It would be foolish even to imply such a thing. What I am saying is that if Bin Laden and his minions had continued to enjoy a free hand in Afghanistan or in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the world in 2005 would be much worse off than the one we actually have.

Europe’s Misguided Anti-Americanism

Another widely held belief, especially among Europeans, is that the allegedly simplistic, aggressive and imperialist reaction to September 11 by President George W. Bush’s administration has only served to fan the flames of anti-Western resentment and violence. Advocates of this view also believe that poverty is the result of the

American system’s Wild West-style capitalism. What is more, they claim that if the United States had acted with the wisdom and tact that characterizes Europeans—supposedly acquired through centuries of internal squabbling and intrigue—the situation would be better today. These views are also grossly mistaken.

I hardly need to point out the fact that Bin Laden’s crusade dates back to long before President Bush entertained any presidential ambitions, although this matters little to anti-American minds. The current occupant of the White House represents to them nothing more than an evangelical radicalization of Bill Clinton, being the representative of the supposedly ultra-conservative American heartland.

In reply, I have only this to say, and it is something of which I am entirely convinced: Weakness only encourages terrorists to continue perpetrating their atrocities. And let us not forget, there is no greater success for terrorists than that of being able to continue their operations. The weak responses of the 1980s and 90s consisted of reacting to one Islamic terrorist attack after another with gestures rather than firm measures. We Europeans have always preferred to look the other way, in the false and comfortable belief that Bin Laden and others like him are punishing the Americans for their policies, rather than for what they *are* and what they *represent*. During the Cold War, we told ourselves that if a nuclear confrontation should actually take place, it would pass over our heads and scarcely affect us. Something similar has happened in the case of Islamic fundamentalism: all of its venom is directed against America, so we imagine that we can again sleep easily.

In reality, Islamic terrorism has created a new bipolar conflict: them against us, in a global war in which our very way of life is at stake. On March 11, 2004, Islamic terrorists living in Spain attacked my country; last July 7, and again on July 21, other Islamic fanatics struck at the heart of London. So we can see that Europeans are *not* safe from the terrorist threat. And, to answer those who claim that everything is simply a product of U.S. policies, we should point out that Europe has taken a non-confrontational approach when it comes to handling Islamist radicals, both at home and abroad.

Indeed, far from generating further terrorism, the United States has taken three very important steps: first, it has beefed up national security, both by strengthening its borders and

continued on page 5

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Hillsdale College Distinguished Fellow Victor Davis Hanson speaks at the Torre de Belem fortress in Lisbon.

continued from page 2

by passing the Patriot Act; second, it has brought terrorists to justice, wherever they may be, striking at them in their safe havens; third, it has sought to extend the boundaries of freedom and democracy within the Arab world, which is the best way to alleviate the conditions that encourage fanaticism and terror. These measures have all been strongly criticized in Europe. However, the proposals currently being considered by Tony Blair are not very different. The fact is, there is one and only one strategy when it comes to tackling terrorism: to ensure its defeat.

The foreign minister of an important European country, when asked at the beginning of 2003 whether he favored the United States or Saddam Hussein to win the Iraq War, replied with a resounding silence. Five years on in the war on terror, and three years on in Iraq, we should have learned something—namely, that when it comes to defending their national security, Americans are more steadfast and consistent than we might have thought. The re-election of George W. Bush is another good example of this.

Many Europeans are fond of criticizing Americans, whether it be their food, their way of life, or their foreign policy. They even criticize American films, forgetting that Hollywood is still very much a force to be reckoned with! However, it is wrong to make a habit of such harping. For one reason, those who seek to challenge American hegemony today—*fortunately*—do not have the resources to become a real counterweight. The so-called Paris-Berlin or Moscow-Beijing axes attest to little more than the weakness of European nations. Certainly the anti-American front can hinder Washington's capacity to act abroad. But any attempt to counter the power of America with empty hands is quite simply an act of suicide.

Second, it has been proven time and again that Europeans and Americans have more in common than what divides us. Moreover, when we manage to carry out coordinated policies and joint measures, the results are always much better. The Iran situation is a case in point. Until now, there has been a tacit agreement that the Europeans are the ones who should head talks with the Iranian authorities. However, as it becomes apparent that these negotiations are leading us nowhere, instead of criticizing the Americans for always seeking to wield their "big stick," we should seek out a joint course of action, using all the tools at our disposal.

To ridicule President Bush for stating that no option can be ruled out is to deny the fact that diplomacy works best when words are backed up by the possibility of force.

Two Visions of Europe

Europe is supposed to be enjoying Year One of its Constitutional Treaty. It should also be halfway through the Lisbon Agenda and halfway toward making the European Economic Area the most competitive in the world. But not one of these objectives has been fulfilled. Europe is not in Year One, but in Year Zero. Nevertheless, in spite of what the prophets of doom have claimed, the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty is not the end of the world for the European Union. Quite the contrary, in fact.

It is true that Europe suffers from a problem of trust and credibility. But this is not only due to the enormous gulf of misunderstanding that has opened up between the European bureaucracy and the European Union's citizens. Above all, it is because the Union has progressively acquired commitments that its member states have subsequently been unable—or unwilling—to fulfill.

Donald Rumsfeld has stated that there are two Europes: an Old Europe and a New Europe. In reality, there are two existing visions for a single Europe: one is based on a state-controlled and interventionist approach to economic matters and seeks to create a counterweight to American policies abroad; the other is a free and classically liberal Europe, one that values the idea of being a loyal ally of the United States. These two outlooks became entrenched during the Iraq crisis, and have yet to be reconciled.

Despite the fact that pessimism reigns over Europe today, I believe that there is cause for optimism. This is not only because leaders can change public opinion, but also because the leaders themselves can change. Europe has not simply been paralyzed by voters' rejection of the Constitution. It has also been awaiting the outcome of the recent German elections and—even though the electoral results were not the clear victory predicted for the Christian Democrats—at the end of the day, Angela Merkel is Germany's new chancellor.

Pessimism should be overcome. It is not too late to change gears in Europe. Immobilism and

soft or “decaffeinated” leaders are the worst possible prescriptions for Europe right now. Europe is under existential pressures—from the threat of terrorism, to the risks of economic decline and the perils of a demography characterized by an aging population and an insufficient birth rate, to the persistence of bad ideas about how to face our future. And Europe must find a way to cope with these pressures.

To me, the roadmap for a better future is simple and clear: We must recover our principles, the deepest roots of Europe—for example, our Christian roots, our *own* cultural beliefs, setting aside the enormous error of multiculturalism. And we should revive a strong will to strengthen our alliances and our commitments to our like-minded friends. We also need to increase the influence of Europe by promoting policies favoring reform, flexibility, and openness. And lastly, we need to decide how to define Europe as a power alongside the United States, as a strong part of the Western world, but not a counter-power to the U.S. It would be foolish to play the game of dividing the Atlantic world.

A Six-Part Program

This can be translated into specific policies, a program for a new Europe:

First, define the limits of the European Union. Europe is not infinite. At some point on the map, we have to draw the line. It is essential that we build a feasible Europe, a workable Europe. If one of the questions that needs to be addressed is Turkey, then we should talk about Turkey, with all of its advantages and disadvantages. This is even more important, now that the European Union has just decided to move ahead with Turkey’s membership negotiations.

Second, respect the current institutional model. The Treaty of Nice is the expression of a consensus that made it possible to carry out the enlargement of the EU, as well as necessary institutional reform. It would not be serious leadership to approve a treaty aimed at defending a consensus, and then a mere two months later to say that we have a new idea—that the Treaty of Nice is in fact inconvenient, and that we should come up with yet another internal distribution of power in Europe. Respecting agreements, honoring one’s word—that’s serious policy.

Third, keep pushing for new economic reforms. Europe needs more liberalization, a

stronger single market, more openness, more flexibility, lower taxes—in other words, it needs to recover the Lisbon Agenda, the only way to make Europe competitive in economic terms.

Fourth, re-establish the Stability Pact. The Stability Pact is one of the most important foundations for the credibility of Europe. In my view, the Pact is necessary, in the medium-term and even the short-term, to reactivate the economies of Europe. It is not serious leadership to establish a pact aimed at guaranteeing stability, and then for those who designed it to fail to honor it.

Fifth, define new policies in two essential areas: terrorism and immigration. Regarding terrorism, there are three things that we must do. One is that we must accept the fact that we are at war, a war declared against us by Islamic fundamentalists. Another is to make it clear that we have the right and the duty to defend our societies. And finally, we must do this in collaboration with our allies. In other words, we should not only talk about a community of beliefs, but also a community of coordinated action. Regarding immigration, I would say that the multicultural experiment has failed. We should defend the idea that all citizens are equal before the law, and that the law is the same for all. This is the true expression of tolerance: equality under the law. But we should also remember that the March 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid, and the more recent attacks in London, were perpetrated by people who had lived for many years in our countries.

Sixth, strengthen the Atlantic relationship, particularly through two specific initiatives. One is to reform NATO, in order to better guarantee our security, our freedom, and our prosperity. The other is to create a great Atlantic Economic Area, to ensure our ability to face the future of a globalized world. Forget the ambition of some to create a Europe that is a counterweight to the U.S. Following that path, Europe could only become a dead weight. The only area of healthy competition must be the global economy.

I believe that all of this is urgently needed. I believe that we need to get serious about Europe once again, that we need to honor our word. To get to work, to strengthen our alliances, to defend our principles, to reform our societies—that is good policy. It is well worth trying. More so now that Angela Merkel is going to be in command of the German locomotive. Now there is a chance for Europe to forge ahead in the right direction.

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continued from page 6

It is often said that Europe always leans towards the soft option because it lacks the military power to do otherwise. The truth is that, at some recent point in our history, Europeans in general have chosen, either consciously or unconsciously, to separate diplomatic from military means, favoring conciliation over pressure and force. We refuse to call things by their proper names; we refuse to accept that there really are people prepared to die in order to kill us; we refuse to recognize our enemies, both at home and abroad.

We are engaged in a battle of civilizations against an emerging, assertively political Islam, all over the world. To make ourselves weaker is the best recipe for disaster. Another recipe for disaster would be to distance Europe from the United States.

Dear friends, I have described the current situation as I see it now, at the end of 2005. There is much that the United States and Europe could do together. I would even go so far as to say that there is a great deal we *must* do together in order to defeat the threats to freedom that currently hang over us.



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