



An Electoral Trifecta

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So it turns out Madrid was the exception, not the rule. On March 14, 2004, the party of Spanish prime minister José María Aznar was defeated at the polls after an al Qaeda attack in Madrid and after a campaign in which the opposition fiercely criticized Aznar for Spain's involvement in the war to remove Saddam Hussein. In the wake of its electoral victory, the new leftist government withdrew Spain's troops from Iraq.

The question, a year ago, was this: Was Spain a harbinger of electoral defeat for the other democratic leaders of the war to liberate Iraq?

Some hoped it would be, and have been severely disappointed. President Bush did not flinch in Iraq and was reelected with a stronger showing than four years before. Australia's John Howard, a steadfast supporter of the war in Iraq, was reelected to a historic fourth term as prime minister with an increased majority. And last week Britain's Tony Blair won a third term, the first Labour prime minister ever to do so.

Blair won with a diminished majority, to be sure. Yet the main opposition party, the Tories, supported the war as well. So roughly 68 percent

of the British electorate voted for parties with pro-war leaders. The Liberal Democrats, critics of the war who pledged a quick withdrawal from Iraq, did increase their vote by about 4 percentage points, but still received only 22 percent of the vote.

The electorates of the major democracies--at least the English-speaking ones--have thus shown a willingness to support the leaders who took them to war. This despite the fact that no operational weapons of mass destruction were found, and despite the difficulties of the last couple of years in Iraq. In the cases of Howard and Bush, the victories were particularly impressive since they preceded the remarkable January 30 elections in Iraq and subsequent positive political developments there and elsewhere in the Middle East.

What is striking about the British campaign is that no one vigorously argued the case that the war was justified. Blair thought it to be in his interest simply to stipulate that there had been disagreement about Iraq, but that it was now time to move on. This was understandable given the problem his pro-war policy created within his own party. But the result, when combined with the Conservatives' assault on Blair's honesty in making the case for war, was that no one in the general election campaign reiterated the argument for the war. As William Shawcross pointed out, "listening to the tone of the debate, you would think

that there were no Iraqis out there, and that 'Iraq' was merely a code word for some appalling new kind of politically incorrect abuse." Whatever effect this had on the election results, it probably does have the unfortunate implication that any future British government, whether under Blair or his likely successor Gordon Brown, will hesitate to be as bold and as staunch an ally as Blair was with respect to Iraq.

But British policy over the next few years will not be decisive in making the world a safer or more dangerous place; U.S. policy will be. In this respect, the more worrying result last week was not the British election but a USA Today survey of Americans. Only 41 percent of Americans now say "it was worth going to war in Iraq"; 57 percent say it was not. This is down from 73 percent who said the war was worth it when Saddam's regime fell in 2003, and 48 percent who said the war had been worth fighting in February.

The decline from 2003 is understandable, but the decline since February is puzzling. After all, despite the continued violence in Iraq, developments over the last three months have been quite positive. What has changed? Perhaps most striking has been the silence of the Bush administration in explaining the significance of the developments in Iraq and in the Middle East, and more broadly in explaining the degree to which we are making progress toward the president's vision

of a foothold for democracy in the Middle East.

The Bush administration has much more to do in the Middle East and the world over the next three and a half years. The administration does not have to keep making the case for its foreign policy at the same pitch it did during the campaign or during the dramatic weeks before and after the Iraqi election. But it cannot simply go silent and expect to have po-

popular support for controversial and difficult decisions--whether diplomatic, economic, or military--with respect to Syria, Iran, North Korea, or other parts of the world. Ultimately, George W. Bush's presidency will be judged by the success of his foreign policy. That success requires not just sound decision-making at the top but domestic understanding and support. It might be a good time for the administration to reengage the public for the sake of refreshing that understanding and rebuilding that support.

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