



**NATIONAL**

# **THE BETRAYAL OF THE SPIRIT OF ERMUA\***

**José María Aznar, President of the FAES foundation**



María del Mar Blanco presents the 10th Miguel Ángel Blanco Award to José María Aznar (12 July 2007)

Every Spaniard remembers what they were doing on that day in July. We will never forget those days of horror which shook the moral and civic conscience of all decent Spaniards.

We shared in his family's distress. We shared in the pain and anxiety of his colleagues, of my colleagues, in the Partido Popular in the Basque Country, who were nonetheless determined to go on standing up to the terrorists.

Literally side by side, we shared in the demonstration in the streets by a whole nation to assert its freedom, its rights and its dignity.

We also shared in the civil reaction which made the moral baseness and cowardice of the terrorists, their accomplices and their political and economic beneficiaries, even more despicable; in short, the moral baseness and cowardice of that huge collective murderer who acts on the orders of a criminal organisation and who has once more become ensconced within the Basque Country's very institutions owing to weakness and opportunism.

The demonstration which I took part in set off from very near here, to demand in vain that the murderers cease doing what they do, at least for an instant; that same kind of instant in which they consummated their hatred by shooting Miguel Ángel Blanco.

I wanted to be in Bilbao that day. It was where I just had to be and I still remember, not without emotion, the grateful reaction of many citizens in the Gran Vía who felt supported by the institutions whose duty it was to defend them.

The President of the Basque Government at that time also asked me to come, and then we saw the first signs of what was to come when the nationalist representatives rejected that we should walk together in opposition to the announced murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco.

Two of the murderous trio who kidnapped and killed Miguel Ángel Blanco are left and fortunately they are in prison. Let us name them here and let us not forget that two individuals, one by the surname of Gallastegui and another nicknamed "Txapote", are still alive and that they will not have the chance to repeat their crime against another innocent person.

Let us pledge our dignity and our word to guaranteeing by all legal means (and we have never used any others) that Miguel Ángel Blanco's killers complete their sentences right up to the very last day, without any other prospects, so that they remember their crime with every single passing day, but behind bars.

They do not know (and it seems that a lot of other people do not either) that those who hold out always have the final say; those who know that there are unshakeable principles and values to observe if we are to continue to live in freedom. The final say is for those who spare no effort in rising to the demands one has to be prepared to take on to defend life and freedom. The last word is for those who do not ask themselves "Why me?".

The last word is the one that pronounces truth, generosity, dignity and decency. That word of truth, generosity, dignity and decency was not snuffed out with Miguel Ángel's life. He lives on through his parents and his sister, to whom I am eternally indebted in terms of gratitude and admiration. I will never forget their steadfastness and their comprehension, which over those days allowed us to face up to the challenge that the terrorists had thrown down before us.

Those were days of deep bitterness and sadness, which come back to haunt us today.

But let nobody imagine that our pain is their victory. The fact that we still grieve for the loss of Miguel Ángel does not mean that we are not mindful of our pledge and all that it stands for.

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One year ago, on this very day, as I was remembering him at the Foundation of which I am president, I stated with total conviction what duties his memory means for us. I would like to recapture those words now:

“As citizens and friends of Miguel Ángel Blanco, as colleagues of Miguel Ángel Blanco, neither will we tolerate his memory being scorned nor will we allow everything that his sacrifice meant to be brought to an end by the demands of a terrorist organisation.

It will not be us who stir up lies, even less so if such lies are concocted and put about in the name of peace. We will not call things what they are not; we will not aid and abet for terrorists to flout the law. We will not lend our ears to those who speak of forgiveness when what they actually mean is impunity. We will not forget that Miguel Ángel was innocent; he was completely and utterly innocent. Nor will we forget that the full and sole responsibility for this crime lies with his murderers and their accomplices.”

Well we have honoured what we pledged in remembering Miguel Ángel. You, who day after day remain in the front line in this long battle for freedom, know better than me what the price is for speaking up and saying that “the emperor has no clothes”. That what he tells us is not true, that at the end of the road we are tempted to walk down we will find not freedom or justice but instead we will see our hopes evaporate like some cruel illusion.

You have experienced the feeling of loneliness when it dawns on us that the pleas for peace are little more than siren songs which should not fool anyone anymore.

Yet you do what you do, and are right to do so. And they might accept many things, but the fact that you are in the right, politically and civically speaking, is more than their strength can withstand. Today is a good day for them to understand that we are not going to take lessons from them easily, not through arrogance but through experience and sacrifice.

Over those days the terrorist group knew that it might be defeated. The reaction by citizens was the genuine expression of the pluralism that exists within Basque society. People could no longer put up with the complicity which made possible crimes such as the one we had just lived through.

Miguel Ángel Blanco's killers could see that their fears were fortunately justified, because the rule of law, along with all its apparatus, international cooperation and the reference point represented by victims was spurring us on our arduous but effective course towards the defeat of ETA.

The terrorist organisation has, however, been lucky. I say this even if it may seem disheartening. But it has been lucky. Because every time it has been pushed to the brink of defeat, a host of highly unscrupulous opportunists has emerged to rescue it from its plight, always believing that they might be able to get something out of the situation that could be of benefit to them and preventing defeat from being consummated.

This happened in 1998 with an unutterable agreement whereby the nationalists made the terrorist group's political objectives their own strategy. These objectives and, to give you the whole story, the coercion which ETA wanted to see imposed on the non-nationalists. Or did anyone really believe at the time that the undertaking agreed upon with the terrorists to brush aside the Partido Popular and the Socialist Party from public life could be achieved without coercion and threats?

And this has just happened again. It is certainly true that those who were the protagonists of such an indecorous act nine years ago can claim that there was no betrayal, because they had never been loyal. They had already told us that they would never accept any Spanish constitution.

That same "spirit of Ermua", which filled the hearts of millions of citizens with hope, has been betrayed twice in a row. First with the Estella Agreement in 1998; and the second time....what date can we put on that? It is hard to know. It was some time shortly after the signing of the Agreement on Liberties and against Terrorism, when one of the two signatory parties began to hold secret talks with representatives of ETA and its political arm.

Ten years and just a few hours after a murderous bullet was shot into the nape of a young man called Miguel Ángel Blanco, I ask the question “Why has the ‘spirit of Ermua’ been betrayed?”, “Why have people also sought to stifle the hope of winning over terrorism?”

And this I say too: in spite of these two betrayals, the ‘spirit of Ermua’ lives on. And it is where it was before: in the hearts and wills of millions and millions of Spaniards. Spaniards from Bilbao, Barcelona, Madrid or the Canary Islands.

Because we, politicians, were never the protagonists of the ‘spirit of Ermua’ but rather, it is the people. The Spanish people, united and determined not to go down on their knees. The ‘spirit of Ermua’ is still there and surfaces every time someone addresses citizens directly and asks them if they want to surrender or still want to win.

The reply is still the same. That is why it has been necessary to pretend so much and deny the fact so many times that the Government is willing to accept negotiation and therefore defeat.

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I stress the point that it has happened again. Once again ETA has seen an escape route open up before it to avoid defeat thanks to opportunistic and deceitful calculation, though this is not by a party which defines itself as extra-constitutional, but instead the nation’s own Government.

And again we have concealment as the inevitable outcome of the desire to keep up a process of negotiating with the terrorist group which leaves the response by the rule of law at a record low ebb.

They had to conceal talks that were getting underway when the Agreement on Liberties was being signed. They had to conceal a standing negotiation process where the institutional future of the Basque Country and Navarre was brought to the table and on the other side of it sat not just one but two terrorist organisations as political interlocutors – ETA and Batasuna. They say that they did not accept such and such a condition regarding Navarre. But the point is “What were you doing holding talks on Navarre whether there was agreement or not?”.

They had to conceal the facts before, during and after each and every phase that has arbitrarily taken shape in this process. They had to lie to everybody and

do this repeatedly: to the citizenry, to the victims, to the party from whose ranks they call for support, to the media, to the European Parliament and to the Spanish Parliament. But this is something that cannot be done the whole time.

They had to deceive so many people and so much that in they have ended up deceiving themselves. They saw men of peace where there were only the well-drilled errand boys of gun-slingers. They thought a murderer with a long track record, who to all intents and purposes knows exactly when and against whom to go for broke, deserved what they termed more humanitarian treatment. They believed that the political arm of ETA would make a stand against its masters and they turned it into a necessary political interlocutor. And while the terrorists went about destroying and extorting they were monitoring the cease-fire and excusing ETA from the burden of proving it.

Today, in memory of Miguel Ángel Blanco, I would like to make a defence of the value of truth. I would like to say, in his memory, that it is worth telling the truth, acting truthfully and governing thus. I would like to say that you can never play with the truth from within democratic institutions and far less so if the issue at hand is the struggle for freedom and against terrorism.

Calling for truth, demanding truth, is not going too far coming from a leader of the opposition supposedly keen to give the Government problems. It is a formal civil and democratic request for an explanation, which is essential to a system where people are not subjects but citizens. And speaking up from within the bosom of national sovereignty to demand the truth from the Government is the noblest and fairest way I know of honouring my duty as a representative of the citizenry.

There is no need to go on. But I would like to point out what in my view should not be forgotten given the future that lies ahead for us.

ETA is going to carry on putting the resolve of State institutions to face up to it to the test. It is going to do this from the position it has attained thanks to the dismantling of the Agreement on Liberties and the neutralisation of a hefty slice of the resources at the disposal of the rule of law to combat all of its criminal structure. With some it will test them for weaknesses; with us our steadfastness. Let us be ready so that ETA has no elbow-room to exercise its strategy.

The Government and its party again get their priorities wrong. It is not in silence that they should seek shelter but instead in the truth and in restoring a genuinely anti-terrorist policy which leaves ETA in no doubt that the aim is once more to defeat it.

As the Partido Popular, among others, has claimed, the credibility which the Government surely stands to gain by putting together an effective anti-terrorist policy rides on repairing the serious cracks which have appeared in the apparatus of the rule of law. It is not possible to make up lost ground against ETA if the

Supreme Court is stopped from making a pronouncement on the legality of the party Acción Nacionalista Vasca (Basque Nationalist Action).

Credible and effective action against ETA's brand of terrorism means acting against the gunmen, though it also requires enhancing the role of the rule of law and, above all, its network of organisations, which is currently being overhauled.

And finally, let us clear up a few concepts now that we are talking about unity. Unity? Of course. We have the satisfaction of having managed, from the responsibility of the seat of Government, to conduct a more effective anti-terrorist policy than ever before against ETA, with the backing of 85 percent of the citizens represented in parliament.

This is why we have the right to demand that unity be genuine, ambitious in its aims and not conditioned by those who have never wanted to move ahead. It is unacceptable at this stage in the game to seek unity built around a supposed agreement of the least. I believe that with its majority attitudes Spanish society does not deserve that the only prospect for antiterrorist policy should consist of an agreement of the least, of an agreement, that is, based on a mishmash of basic principles among which will surely be the desire to leave the door open for talks with ETA which the latter can open and close at its whim and as it suits ETA's own interests.

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I believe that this would be the most dire and unpardonable error of contumacy that could be made. With ETA there is no end through dialogue. ETA knows this very well and makes it patently clear. Those people who thought that when ETA sets out its conditions it does so for internal consumption had better believe it now.

And the fact is that ETA will always have the chance to survive if the door is left open for talks, which, as we have seen, means letting the terrorists sit down and negotiate, not the future, but actually the destruction of our constitutional and statutory framework, or in other words, the destruction of our liberties.

I am under no delusions. I know very well that this story has not reached its end. We are witnessing the fact that what the Government is throwing its energy into is not the issue of how to restore active unity in the war on terrorism, the unity of those who stand for some 85 or 90 percent of citizens, but how to cover up a disaster and how to wriggle out of explanations that might be demanded of it.

For this reason it is now permissible to talk about everything except what has happened to anti-terrorist policy. And when the finger to the lips bids you remain silent, just remember Quevedo refusing to shut up however much they might call for hush or try to frighten.

So let us speak out. Let us speak without fear about everything that has shown it brings together the vast majority of Spanish people. Let us speak about our commitment to freedom. Let us declare our confidence in the energy of that great nation of citizens that is Spain. Let us declare Spain as the setting for our freedom and our rights, the freedom and rights of everybody.

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I do not know what certain people may say. You already know that depending on the day, sometimes it is “we’ve done the same as Aznar” and at other times it is the line that “Aznar is to blame for everything”. And both things are not possible at the same time.

I admit that being here with you, on an occasion such as this and after being honoured with this award from the Miguel Ángel Blanco Foundation, I do not much care what they say.

It is enough for me to know that I am accompanied on a day like today by the truth of the victims, by their dignity and by the special memory of Miguel Ángel Blanco, with his parents, with his sister and his friends.

Here before them I can only express my infinite gratitude and offer them the security of my commitment to the memory of Miguel Ángel, in which we find the example that inspires us and the spirit that will never be found lacking in us to honour it as it deserves.