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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Taken for a Ride

By PAUL KRUGMAN

“Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” So George Bush declared on Sept. 20, 2001. But what was he saying? Surely he didn't mean that everyone was obliged to support all of his policies, that if you opposed him on anything you were aiding terrorists.

Now we know that he meant just that.

A year ago, President Bush, who had a global mandate to pursue the terrorists responsible for 9/11, went after someone else instead. Most Americans, I suspect, still don't realize how badly this apparent exploitation of the world's good will — and the subsequent failure to find weapons of mass destruction — damaged our credibility. They imagine that only the dastardly French, and now maybe the cowardly Spaniards, doubt our word. But yesterday, according to Agence France-Presse, the president of Poland — which has roughly 2,500 soldiers in Iraq — had this to say: “That they deceived us about the weapons of mass destruction, that's true. We were taken for a ride.”

This is the context for last weekend's election upset in Spain, where the Aznar government had taken the country into Iraq against the wishes of 90 percent of the public. Spanish voters weren't intimidated by the terrorist bombings — they turned on a ruling party they didn't trust. When the government rushed to blame the wrong people for the attack, tried to suppress growing evidence to the contrary and used its control over state television and radio both to push its false accusation and to play down antigovernment protests, it reminded people of the broader lies about the war.

By voting for a new government, in other words, the Spaniards were enforcing the accountability that is the essence of democracy. But in the world according to Mr. Bush's supporters, anyone who demands accountability is on the side of the evildoers. According to Dennis Hastert, the speaker of the House, the Spanish people “had a huge terrorist attack within their country and they chose to change their government and to, in a sense, appease terrorists.”

So there you have it. A country's ruling party leads the nation into a war fought on false pretenses, fails to protect the nation from terrorists and engages in a cover-up when a terrorist attack does occur. But its electoral defeat isn't democracy at work; it's a victory for the terrorists.

Notice, by the way, that Spain's prime minister-elect insists that he intends to fight terrorism. He has even said that his country's forces could remain in Iraq if they were placed under U.N. control. So if the Bush administration were really concerned about maintaining a united front against terrorism, all it would have to do is drop its my-way-or-the-highway approach. But it won't.

For these denunciations of Spain, while counterproductive when viewed as foreign policy, serve a crucial domestic purpose: they help re-establish the political climate the Bush administration prefers, in which anyone who opposes any administration policy can be accused of undermining the fight against terrorism.

This week the Bush campaign unveiled an ad accusing John Kerry of, among other things, opposing increases in combat pay because he voted against an \$87 billion appropriation for Iraq. Those who have followed this issue were astonished at the ad's sheer up-is-down-ism.

In fact, the Bush administration has done the very thing it falsely accuses Mr. Kerry of doing: it has tried repeatedly to slash combat pay and military benefits, provoking angry articles in *The Army Times* with headlines like “An Act of `Betrayal.’” Oh, and Mr. Kerry wasn't trying to block funds for Iraq — he was trying to force the administration, which had concealed the cost of the occupation until its tax cut was passed, to roll back part of the tax cut to cover the expense.

But the bigger point is this: in the Bush vision, it was never legitimate to challenge any piece of the administration's policy on Iraq. Before the war, it was your patriotic duty to trust the president's assertions about the case for war. Once we went in and those assertions proved utterly false, it became your patriotic duty to support the troops — a phrase that, to the administration, always means supporting the president. At no point has it been legitimate to hold Mr. Bush accountable. And that's the way he wants it.

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