



## Faraway Friends

(From the book *What do Spanish Neocons Think? Twenty Years of GEES*  
Rafael Bardají, Florentino Portero et al. Ciudadela, Madrid, 2007)

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Book Review n° 77

July 1, 2007

A short answer to the question in the title of this book could be: 'The same as the Americans.' One could almost leave it at that if it were not for the fact that it is not at all very clear that such a thing as a Neocon exists, or *should* exist, in Spain. Hence, the question is somewhat loaded. Of course, it is loaded for rather good reasons. Have a heart; books need to be sold and one can almost see the thought-process, neurons flashing all over the place, of your average Spaniard reading that title. Neocon..., Bush. Spanish..., Aznar. Iraq. Pause. Gee whiz, they can think! Enterprising intellectuals are bound to be hooked.

Those who do will find a collection of essays covering the ideological

evolution of a group of men (white, mostly middle aged) from the Cold War to the aftermath of the March 11 Madrid train bombings. These men have three things in common: They are friends, some for over twenty years; they have all come together under the umbrella of small think tank called GEES (Spanish acronym for Strategic Studies Group) they created in 1986; and they have a shared political and analytical outlook. They have called that outlook 'neo-conservative.'

### When Spanish Conservatism went Neocon

There are a number of, say, 'organizational' aspects that lend weight to such a claim. As in the

case of the American namesake, the term defines people: It is a handy label for a cluster of like-minded friends. Further, the vital trajectory of these men has certain uncanny similarities with the American experience: Some had youthful flirtations with the radical left; they have all been drawn, by temperament and training, into the university and the think tank rather than the political rally; they have successfully occupied the back room of high policy-making and, albeit keeping partisan independence, have considerable influence within the right-of-center political party of the day. Thus, Rafael Bardají is an expert of PhD caliber in security matters with a gift for communication. Manuel Coma and Florentino Portero sprang from and remain in academe, as did Ignacio Cosidó who, like Bardají, occupied senior advisory posts for President José María Aznar.

Moreover, GEES itself, notwithstanding many differences and disparity in size, performs many of the organizational functions that the American Enterprise Institute and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies play for the Americans. Thus, for the last 20 years the Group has served as a gathering point where this small conservative crowd can get together and exchange views. It is also a useful vehicle for communicating policy perspectives to the wider public (even more so since GEES has developed one of the most successful and widely read public policy websites in Spain). GEES has even generated funds

from the private sector in the form of consulting fees, a highly unusual concept in Spain. Indeed, the fact that GEES has survived for two decades relying exclusively on private funding is in itself, for a variety of cultural reasons, a remarkable feat for a Spanish organization.

Moreover, in ideological terms their critique differs in essentially nothing from the kind of views espoused by the American right since the mid 1950s. The Spaniards assume the basic neo-conservative axiom according to which the characteristics of a nation's foreign policy must be understood as a consequence of her regnant sociopolitical system and believe that certain values must temper, guide and provide a moral compass to the practice of *realpolitik*. They also reach the same particular diagnosis for current Spain that the Americans have fashioned for the United States: The ills of foreign policy have their roots in the dominance of New Leftists ideological principles. Manuel Coma, echoing 50 years of American blasts against assorted fellow travelers and anti-war peaceniks nicely sums it up: "Military capacities without the will to use them are useless." Spain certainly lacks in military capabilities but, above all, she lacks in will. As far as these Spanish conservatives are concerned, the emasculation of Spain, and for that matter of the rest of Europe, as an international force for good is caused by failures of intellectual and political leadership. As Bardají puts it, the European

intelligentsia has imposed a 'demilitarized,' 'post-heroic' ideological hegemony over the continent.

From there, mirroring the debates that the earlier generation of American neo-conservatives fought against McGovern and Carter Democrats, the friends around GEES have found themselves reminding their fellow countrymen about a few elemental facts of life: Democracy is a good thing; it is a good thing in London and it is a good thing in Kandahar; some people think democracy an aberration; above everything, *wars happen*. There are instances when negotiation and diplomacy simply won't do the job. When this occurs, these Spanish thinkers wholeheartedly agree with Douglas MacArthur: In war, there is no substitute for victory. When one goes to war people will die and sometimes this is a terrible price that must be paid. 'If there is a need to fight, let us fight. If there is a need to kill, let us kill,' Bardají *dixit*.

### **In Defense of *La Españolada*.**

The authors indulge in perpetrating *españolada* by exaggerating the Spanish character of their work. This is a politically and intellectually useful thing. No doubt, the views advocated by GEES sound rather familiar to the intelligent American reader, but they sound a lot less recognizable on the European side of the Atlantic. A recent op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* remarked on the similarities between American partisan tension

and Spanish politics, concluding that Spain is a 'cautionary tale' for America. One begs to differ.

To understand the new breed of Spanish conservatives responsible for this book, one needs to grasp how the suffocating stranglehold of New Left principles make the Spanish political atmosphere, where these men operate, radically different from the American. Granted, there are plenty of defeatist, appeasement-prone intellectuals and politicians in the United States, and politicking in Washington D.C. may tend to degenerate into embarrassing squabbling, but no sane American politician would question the nation's territorial integrity or openly withdraw support from the men doing the fighting overseas. Just watch the Democrats' congressional acrobatics about Iraq. In part, this is a consequence of the American conservative movement's success in ensuring that the United States as a polity rejected the notion that her own values are corrupt and not worth fighting for. Moreover, the American conservative movement is, quite simply, a lot bigger than the Spanish. It possesses an efficient machinery of think tanks, publications and academics, together with a vigorous grass roots wing which is now a political force of nature with two crucial effects: It keeps neo-conservatives attuned to popular feeling; and provides neoconservative pundits with an audience which, repelled by liberal defeatism, is predisposed to hear what they have to say.

Not so the other side of the Atlantic. The section of the book devoted to the 'The Spain of Zapatero' nicely reflects the vitriol of Spanish politics. Between 1996 and 2004 Spanish Neocons found in President José María Aznar a politician who understood their outlook and shared it. Some described Aznar's presidency as a 'Neocon paradise on earth.' Since then Spanish conservatives have found themselves in a radically different position. For Spain has entered a near full blown counter-revolution of a sort altogether unheard of in the United States and that everybody thought Spain had left behind for good. This has had effects upon GEES' men. Earlier American Neocons developed their interest in foreign affairs almost as an afterthought, whereas GEES, which had from the start fluid relations with the security establishment, has traditionally focused on strategic issues and produced little regarding the home front. In a shift that brings these men even closer to the American Neocon worldview, domestic affairs is now getting plenty of attention. Watch the contributions of Oscar Elía Mañú, a young rising star with an interest in the fundamentally moral crisis of Spanish society.

The Spanish right finds itself very much on the defensive against a seemingly triumphant adversary which, from the very seat of power, relativizes on the legitimacy of democracy overseas and of national identity at home. President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero himself, for instance, believes Aznar to be the

culprit for the bombings in Madrid. No less. According to this view, since Spain supported the coalition efforts in Iraq the bombers actually had a point. This has been followed by an astonishing enterprise to cozy up with the same (semi-feudal) neighboring government that five years ago positively invaded Spanish sovereign territory –again, because of Aznar's nasty habit of pursuing the interests of the nation he was leading. The alternative was better summed up by the Socialist Minister of Defense, who declared that he would 'rather die than kill.' Mind you, according to the Minister *of Defense*, under no circumstances must one's declared mortal enemies be antagonized. Failing that, surrender.

Thus, the men of GEES are in a position that is a lot closer to William Buckley's in 1955 than to William Kristol's in 2007. In the Spanish political lexicon, adjectives like 'rightwing' and 'conservative' are still very much terms of abuse vaguely associated with long-gone dictators. The Spanish cultural elites are, quite simply, not prepared to accept the conservative outlook as a legitimate sparring adversary in the way the American liberal intelligentsia had to *after* the Buckleyites forced them to through wit, intelligence and quality writing. Buckley and his small band of allies worked to re-adjust conservative tenets to new circumstances. The Spanish right needs to work along the same parameters.

At first, associating oneself with American neo-conservatives seems

to be a useful solution. Being the result of clearly successful tactics and close to their own views, all that is needed is to translate it, as it were, into Spanish. Only it cannot be done. For all the ideological coincidences in the world, by appropriating the brand and reproducing American political idioms the men around GEES risk appearing, perhaps even actually becoming, unrealistic, removed from reality, or both. Neo-conservatives emerged and have evolved from within American society at particular historical junctures. It matters not how much agreement there is, Spanish conservatism cannot be and *should not* be the same thing.

What Spaniards need right now is to recover a sense of pride in their own identity, and this cannot be done thrusting upon them an evidently imported set of ideas.

If anything, the issues that concern American conservatives are not always relevant, or not so to the same degree, in Spain. Consider the principle of subsidiarity, according to which the least bad form of political power is that closer to the citizen – like the states as opposed to the Washington D.C. All good and well except that Spain suffers from intense centrifugal tensions that right now demand a more Jacobin approach. Similarly, Spanish new conservatives are considerably closer to Classical Liberals than their American counterparts. Living

under a more bloated and inefficient state they readily give three cheers for free markets. As for foreign policy, both American Neocons and their Spanish counterparts have drifted towards a post-realist position that tempers *realpolitik* with certain principles. Yet, your average Spaniard has not yet arrived to the point of realizing that Spain has international interests beyond capturing European Union subsidies. Spanish new conservatives are doing a tremendous and necessary job in advising willing partners within the conservative Popular Party, the government and the public at large, about the international dimension of the national interest. It is, for now, more than enough.

This book nicely reflects the intellectual evolution of a new Spanish conservatism firmly inserted within a broader, transnational neo-conservative community. The events leading to the war in Iraq had the comforting side effect of revealing that certain principles are shared throughout the West by men like William Kristol, the friends around GEES, Michael Gove in Britain, Giuliano Ferrara in Italy and Guy Millier in France. Yet, comfort, inspiration and friendship need to be sustained upon the basis of allowing distinctiveness to shine. Spanish neo-conservatism needs to be kept Spanish. We may start by giving it another name.