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Project report
STS390, “Media, war and peace”
Spring session, 2004
Science, Technology & Society
University of Wollongong

Brian Martin’s theory of backfire describes the way in which attacks against innocent victims can produce unintended and negative consequences for the attackers. Two of the most prominent examples that illustrate this theory are the 1991 Rodney King beating and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Another prime and more recent example of backfire relates to the events in Spain, where the government of Jose Maria Aznar was voted out of power after covering up the involvement of Al Qaeda in the terrorist attacks on the Spanish train system on March 11th 2004.

Brian Martin argues that backfire occurs when ‘people react against what they perceive as an unjust attack’¹. A prime example of backfire was the aftermath of the brutal beating of Rodney King in 1991 by a group of officers from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). Extreme outrage was the reaction felt by Los Angeles residents and the wider community after George Holliday, an innocent bystander, released his videotape footage of the beating to the media. Significant backfire occurred in that a substantial majority of the community lost faith in the LAPD and, due to the perception that the officers involved in the beating were getting off lightly, some of the worst riots in U.S history took place. As Martin explains:

¹ Martin, ‘Iraq Attack Backfire’, 3.

‘This event probably would have become just another arrest statistic except for the fact that a portion of the incident was captured on videotape by an observer, George Holliday. After the video was screened on television, the ‘Rodney King beating’ became the most well-known case of police use of force in history...The reputation of the LAPD took a battering, as the force was widely perceived to be tolerant of brutality...The four officers directly involved in the beating were charged with assault and brought to trial. Media attention was intense over the following months, with thousands of newspaper articles published as well as extensive coverage by electronic media. Morale in the LAPD was seriously damaged’²

Another example of backfire relates to the 2003 U.S invasion of Iraq. In this case, widespread outrage was generated by the actions taken by the Coalition of the Willing. People from countries all over the globe took to the streets against what they perceived as American manipulation and deceit aimed at securing Iraq’s vast oil assets. The revelations of non-existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction triggered further anti-American sentiment, with people who had previously supported the war concluding that they had been duped. As Martin argues, this resulted in significant backfire against the Bush administration.

‘The war widened the rift between Americans and Western Europeans, further inflamed the Muslim world, softened support for the war on terrorism, and

² Martin, ‘The beating of Rodney King: the dynamics of backfire’, 2.

significantly weakened global public support for the pillars of the post-World War II era – the U.N and the North Atlantic alliance³.

In recent weeks this initial backfire effect against the US has re-intensified with the release of photographs depicting American soldiers torturing and sexually abusing Iraqi prisoners. The photographs have enraged much of the Middle East as well as people elsewhere including many who had previously supported the US action. People are angered that those who have claimed to be liberating and aiding the oppressed Iraqi people are engaging in forms of abuse that were routine under Saddam Hussein's regime. That the victims are not Al Qaeda members or sympathisers but Iraqi civilians, is adding insult to injury in the eyes of many, particularly Middle Easterners. That the abuse is perceived as being perpetrated not against a military target, but against innocent civilians is fuelling the backfire. Consequently, the US has all but lost the ideological battle for Iraqi hearts and minds, and now has even less chance of garnering international support for its cause.

Perhaps the most recent example of backfire relates to the Madrid terrorist attacks. On the 11th March 2004, ten blasts ripped through four commuter trains in Madrid, killing over 200 people and leaving a further 1500 wounded. The Jose Maria Aznar led government blamed the attack on the Basque separatist movement Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), despite clear evidence that Al Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalists were the real perpetrators. The backfire occurred when Spanish voters found out about the government cover-up. Voters saw the government's actions as an attack on

³ Martin, 'Iraq Attack Backfire', 1.

their democratic rights and voted them out of office in favour of the PSOE, the Socialist party.

In the hours following the train attacks it became increasingly clear to the Spanish government that Islamic fundamentalists were responsible. With an election imminent, the government believed that revealing this information to the public would be politically damaging, as opinion polls prior to the attack showed 90 percent of the Spanish population opposed the Iraq war and Spain's involvement⁴. So immediately after the terrorist attack, the government began an intense public relations campaign blaming ETA for the atrocity. As Ortega argues, the government 'force-fed editors and reporters (and even fellow European leaders) a version of events it knew to be false – that ETA, the Basque terrorist group, was behind the attacks'⁵.

The government's attempt to take political advantage by using ETA as the prime target for blame backfired with dire political consequences for the government. The terrorist group, which seeks to set up an independent Basque state, has for the past three decades assassinated tourists, police, politicians, judges and journalists.

However, because ETA had not carried out an attack of this scale and nature before, the Spanish people became increasingly suspicious. On the Saturday night, two days after the attack and merely hours before voters went to the polls, the Spanish Interior Minister, Angel Acebes was forced to reveal what Spanish police had told him, that Al Qaeda had claimed responsibility for the attack and a number of Moroccan suspects were under arrest. In light of the fact that Prime Minister Aznar had justified his decision to commit troops to Iraq by stating that this action would 'guarantee the

⁴ Daly, 'Spain denies war support left it bare to attacks', 18/05/03.

⁵ Ortega, 'Appeasement? No. ; The elections in Spain are proof of the consequences of government deception--not the power of terror', 29/03/04.

security of Spaniards from any internal or external threat'⁶, this information triggered massive protests across Spain and led to the highest voter turnout in 20 years for Sunday's election⁷ in which the Aznar-led government were resoundingly voted out of office.

The backfire then, was a reaction against two perceived unjust attacks: firstly, Spanish involvement in the US-led war on innocent Iraqi civilians and secondly, the attempt by the government to manipulate the democratic process.

While the actions of the Spanish government inevitably resulted in a spectacular backfire effect, the administration took a number of measures in the days following the Madrid attacks to try to prevent or at least lessen the impact of that backfire.

Martin argues that there are five ways in which an attacker can inhibit or lessen backfire. The attacker can cover-up the attack, reinterpret the events that took place, devalue the target, use official bodies or channels that conduct investigations which justify the attack, and/or use intimidation or bribery⁸. The Aznar-led government made use of all five inhibitors.

As in the Rodney King case, where the existence of videotape footage made a cover-up of the attack impossible, a complete cover up of the Madrid bombings was out of the question because of its massive and extreme nature. However, in the hours immediately following the attack the government exerted significant control over the broadcast content of Spanish television. As Tony Saunois argues, Aznar's government censored coverage of the bombing on the state television channels:

⁶ Rolfe, 'For Spanish Leader, War is a Gamble', 20/03/03.

⁷ Fray, 'Blair vulnerable in wake of Spain's voter backlash', 20/03/04.

⁸ Martin, 'The beating of Rodney King: the dynamics of backfire', 3.

“Following the bombings people searched in vain for rolling news programmes only to find the main channels were only showing ‘Lion King’ and science fiction films. Information services were blanked out.”⁹

The government also chose to cover-up both the reason for the attack and the true identity of the perpetrators, in the process reinterpreting the events that took place. The government carried out the cover-up by dismissing both the evidence found by police and the reports being produced and published by Spain’s alternative news media. For example, on the morning of the attack, Spanish police discovered a deserted van housing bomb detonators and an audiotape with Quranic verses¹⁰. When the media brought this information to the attention of the Spanish people, the government publicly rejected the Al Qaeda connection. Spain’s Foreign Minister Ana Palacios contacted Spanish embassies on the day of the attack with a memo that read:

‘You should use any opportunity to confirm ETA's responsibility for these brutal attacks, hence helping to dissipate any type of doubt that certain interested parties may want to promote’¹¹.

There is no doubt that the Spanish government also attempted to devalue the target, i.e. ETA, by making public personal attacks against key figures within the terrorist organisation. For example when the head of ETA’s banned political party, Arnaldo Otegi, publicly denied that ETA was responsible for the attack, government ministers like Angel Acebes publicly labelled Otegi ‘vile’ and a liar during press conferences¹².

⁹ Saunois, “Madrid bombings – ‘The wars are yours – the deaths are ours’”, 16/03/04.

¹⁰ Vitzthum and Carreyrou, ‘The General’s Ghost’, 26/03/04.

¹¹ Sanchez, ‘Homage to Castilla’, 17/03/04

¹² Vitzthum and Carreyrou, ‘The General’s Ghost’, 26/03/04.

Moreover, immediately after the attack Spain's state-run television stations, TVE and Telemadrid, began repeatedly screening an unscheduled documentary about various ETA assassinations¹³. The action was intended to make the Spanish people draw an inference between ETA's past guilt and the train bombings.

The Aznar government certainly made special use of official channels with the deliberate intention of inhibiting the backfire. As Martin argues 'many official channels give the appearance of dispensing justice'¹⁴. The government knew that it needed an official body to label ETA guilty in order for a suspicious Spanish public to believe the government's version of events. That official body was the United Nations Security Council. As Norman Hermant explained on ABC's *Lateline* 'within hours of blasts in Madrid, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a Spanish resolution condemning the bombings and placing the blame on the Basque terrorist group ETA'¹⁵. The Spanish government provided the UN Security Council with the evidence that supported their position, i.e. that ETA and not Al Qaeda were responsible. When questioned as to why the Security Council had passed such a resolution, the US ambassador to the UN John Negroponte explained 'we have no information to the contrary'¹⁶. In other words, by suppressing the unfavourable evidence the government were able to manipulate the Security Council into passing a favourable resolution that helped the government gain credibility in the eyes of the public.

¹³ Sharrock, 'Journalists' onslaught on Spanish propaganda', 18/03/04

¹⁴ Martin, 'Iraq Attack Backfire' 10.

¹⁵ Hermant, 'Spanish Government Looks for Answers', 12/03/2004

¹⁶ Goldstein, 'Madrid: UN's Credibility Critically Wounded', 16/03/04

In its haste to inhibit a backfire effect, the government also used intimidation, but stopped short of bribery. Prime Minister Aznar personally phoned the editors of Spain's major newspapers and assured them that ETA was without a doubt the body responsible for the blast. Antonio Franco, editor of *El Periodico*, claimed that Aznar telephoned his newspaper on two separate occasions and 'courteously cautioned' him 'not to be mistaken, ETA was responsible'¹⁷.

In the end, the government's attempts to inhibit a backfire effect failed because certain groups within Spanish society were strongly motivated to expose the lies and manipulations, in other words to promote and exacerbate a backfire effect against Aznar's government. The push to promote the backfire was carried out by a diverse range of people in two specific ways.

Firstly, momentum was quickly gathered for a mass protest. When foreign press and alternative / independent media began publishing reports that contradicted the government's version of events, many young people who felt that the democratic process had been violated, used text messages to organise a huge rally outside the government office on the eve of the election. Protestors yelled 'Aznar, your delusions of grandeur have led to this' and 'liars, users, murderers, manipulators'¹⁸. The protest rapidly grew in numbers and intensity with people feeling betrayed by the officials elected to serve and protect them. There was a sense of urgency and a need to maximise the backfire effect in the short space of time available to them. This resulted in tens of thousands of protestors taking to the streets of Madrid and Barcelona to maximise publicity and stir people of all ages to take action against the government.

¹⁷ Sharrock, 'Journalists' onslaught on Spanish propaganda', 18/03/04

¹⁸ Chrisafis, 'Angry voters demand to know the truth behind carnage', 15/03/04.

The protest was a form of non-violent action and its use and function can be linked to the theories of Gene Sharp. Sharp argues that protests are an effective way for people and specific groups to counter violence and repression perpetrated by states, dictatorships, militaries etc. For example, in ‘The Politics of Nonviolent Action- Part 2’ Sharp writes:

‘An extensive, determined and skilful application of non-violent action will cause the opponent very special problems, which will disturb or frustrate the effective utilization of his own forces. The actionists will then be able to apply something like *jiu-jitsu* to their opponent, throwing him off balance politically, causing his repression to rebound against his position and weakening his power. Furthermore, by remaining nonviolent while continuing the struggle, the actionists will help to improve their own power position in several ways.’¹⁹

While the Madrid bombings case does not strictly speaking fit Sharp’s theories, in that the Spanish government itself did not carry out direct acts of violence or repression on the people, the government was seen to be perpetrating acts of violence by committing troops to Iraq, thereby provoking the violent attacks against the Spanish people. As Sharp argues, protests serve to ‘express deep personal feelings or moral condemnation on a social or political issue’²⁰. By non-violently protesting, the Spanish people were able to use the government’s lies and manipulations against it, causing a significant backfire effect. Furthermore, the non-violent action showed that

¹⁹ Sharp, ‘The Politics of Nonviolent Action- Part 2’, 110.

²⁰ Sharp, ‘The Politics of Nonviolent Action- Part 2’, 117 .

the Spanish people were demonstrating ‘extreme dissent in ways compatible with democratic principles’²¹. In other words, the protesters showed they were ordinary law-abiding citizens who were voicing opposition against a government that had failed them. The protest also highlighted the deceit and raised the public’s political awareness in the hours leading up to the election.

Secondly, the backfire effect was promoted and maximised by the actions of the Spanish electorate. The voter turnout at the March 14 election was over 77%, the highest in two decades. Voters from all walks of Spanish society decided to exercise their democratic right and punish the government for disrespecting the electorate and the victims of the train blasts. Voter turnout was particularly high amongst Spain’s working class, which can arguably be attributed to the fact that the most fatal train blast occurred in El Pozo, a working class community²². Moreover, voter turnout was also high amongst first time voters who had overwhelmingly opposed their country’s participation in the Iraq war in the first place.

To paraphrase the words of the University of Wollongong Spanish History lecturer, Dr Lorraine White, the actions of the Spanish government most certainly did result in a backfire effect²³. While the government took numerous measures to inhibit the backfire effect, ultimately the actions of a politically engaged Spanish people won out and augmented the backfire effect against Aznar’s government. As Dr White argues, the PSOE’s election victory is evidence that this backfire effect was extreme: ‘no one

²¹ Sharp, ‘Social Power and Political Freedom’, 139.

²² Saunois, “Madrid bombings – ‘The wars are yours – the deaths are ours’”, 16/03/04.

²³ Interview conducted with Lorraine White 17/05/04

expected the PSOE to win this election as it is still recovering from the scandals of the last time it was in power²⁴.

²⁴ Interview conducted with Lorraine White 17/05/04

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