

The Accidental Prime Minister.

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"I don't want to be a great leader," Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero told Time magazine in September. In that case, Mr. Zapatero's first nine months in office must be called a resounding success.

The young prime minister made his unique mark even before he could find his way around the Moncloa Palace, ordering Spain's troops to cut and run from Iraq, pronto. His hasty decision last spring was the perfect "thank you" note to the terrorists who bombed the Madrid trains on March 11, and pushed him, unexpectedly, into office.

Incidentally, contrary to Socialist claims that the previous government exposed Spain to terrorism, we now know that the Madrid attacks were planned long before the Iraq war. The pullout, which cost Spain friends and influence abroad, brought no security at home. Spanish police have foiled several terrorist attacks since then. Spain remains both a target and a hub for Osama's global network.

Mr. Zapatero's unrelenting flurry of anti-American jibes make even French and German diplomats flinch. He twice urged U.S. allies to defect and leave Iraq. Yet he somehow expected President George W. Bush to return his calls. It would be tempting to shrug all this off as the blunders of an inexperienced prime minister who will eventually become wiser. But Mr. Zapatero's policy seems to be not as much driven by inexperience as by ideology, and this is hard to change.

This worldview helps explain his affinities for the last remaining bastions of socialism in Latin America. He's lobbying hard to have the European Union's sanctions against Cuba lifted, ostensibly to encourage reforms in that totalitarian island. Cuban dissidents, however, such as Oswaldo Paya, are not deceived. "The EU governments can act according to their interests and abandon this ethical position. But what no one can say, without insulting our intelligence, is that to abandon this position . . . is in the interests of Cuba and peaceful change." Strengthening Spain's ties with Venezuelan strongman President Hugo Chavez is another of Mr. Zapatero's pet projects. On a state visit in Madrid this week, Mr. Chavez rhapsodized about how "the vibes have been very, very good" between him and Mr. Zapatero. Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos even backed Mr. Chavez's accusation that the previous conservative Spanish government supported an attempted "coup" against him. The conservatives immediately denounced this as a lie, asking for Mr. Moratinos's resignation.

Mr. Zapatero is entitled to his views. But the Spanish people would be justified in asking just what do they get out of their leader appeasing terrorists, coddling up to dictators and whittling away Spain's global standing? There may be four long and dark years ahead on the Iberian peninsula.