

How the U.S. Schemed Against Spain's Transition from Dictatorship to Democracy

By VICENTE NAVARRO

According to conventional wisdom in Spain and in the U.S., in Spain's transition from the Franco dictatorship to democracy, it was King Juan Carlos, with the assistance of the U.S. government (first the Ford administration, then the Carter administration), who brought democracy to Spain. In this interpretation of events taking place from 1975, when the dictator died, to 1978, when the first democratically elected government was installed, the U.S. government actively supported the development of democracy in Spain.

The reality, however, was very different. As documented in a recent book by Nicolas Sartorins and Alberto Sabio, *El Final de la Dictadura* (The End of the Dictatorship), the U.S. government was not very keen on having full democracy in Spain. The primary, if not exclusive, concern of the U.S. government in Spain was to preserve its military and economic interests. Democracy in Spain was the least of its concerns. As a matter of fact, the U.S. government would have preferred to keep both Franco and the dictatorial regime alive and in good health, rather than open up a democratic process with an uncertain outcome. As the U.S. ambassador in Spain, Mr. Stabler, wrote in February 1975 to Secretary of State (under President Ford) Henry Kissinger, "It will be much easier to reach an agreement with the Spanish Government to renew the military bases in that country if Franco stays in power. But he is not going to last much longer and the transition to a post-Franco era has already begun" (Archives of the Gerald Ford Foundation. National Security Advisor, Box 12, Spain).

Beginning in 1945, the U.S. government saw Spain as a military base. The democratic forces in Spain, which had helped the Allies in defeating the Nazi regime in Europe (the first battalion to liberate Paris consisted of Spanish republicans), were hoping that the collapse of the Hitler regime would be followed by the collapse of one of its main allies in Europe – the Franco regime. To bring about that collapse, the Spanish democratic forces needed U.S. and allied support. But the Truman administration had different thoughts. Even though the Cold War had not yet officially begun, the U.S. government saw Franco's anti-communist stance as an important asset, and his willingness to please the allied forces (to make them forget his support for Hitler) made him very agreeable to the U.S. demands. The most important of these, expressed in a Pentagon study published on April 19, 1945, was the need for the U.S. government to establish its own Gibraltar in Spain. And this it did – not just one (Rota), but six U.S. military bases equivalent to Gibraltar were established in Spain.

It was Truman who gave the green light to save Franco's regime, and it was Eisenhower who visited Spain to give that regime the international recognition Franco craved. From then on, the U.S. government became the major ally to one of the most hated dictatorships in the history of Europe. (Franco assassinated nearly 200,000 people immediately after his fascist coup in 1939.) The U.S. government also pushed for membership of the Franco regime in NATO, a proposal that was too much for the U.S.'s European allies to accept. They vetoed it.

The U.S. military bases came up for renewal in 1975, when Franco's days were numbered. The Ford administration was aware that the Franco regime was very unpopular, and so were the U.S. government and its military bases in Spain. Even in a poll carried out during the dictatorship (which repressed all opposition views), the majority of Spaniards had indicated they wanted U.S. military bases out of Spain. During the period 1974-1978, the Spanish working class was restless. Its opposition to the dictatorship was very active. No other country in Europe witnessed such strong popular agitation against its government. From 1974 to 1977, Spain saw enormous labor agitation, the largest in Western Europe since World War II. This worried the Ford administration. Moreover, Portugal was in the midst of a military and popular revolt against Franco's best friend in Portugal, the dictator Salazar. The Pentagon even made plans in case Portugal and Spain were taken over by political forces hostile to U.S. interests: the U.S. would support the establishment of an Atlantic government, allied to the U.S., to include the Islands of Azores, Madeira, and the Canary Islands. The Pentagon was still recovering from its defeat in Vietnam (Saigon "fell" on April 30, 1975), and in Europe the left was positioned to win the elections in France and Italy. It was clear to the Ford administration that however much it might prefer seeing Franco remain in power, things in Spain and elsewhere were getting quite rough for U.S. government interests; it could not afford to lose Spain. And the King became the solution. Franco had appointed Juan Carlos as his successor, and at his coronation he had sworn loyalty to the fascist party (*El Movimiento Nacional*). But the King (and the U.S. administration) was aware that something needed to change in Spain.

The "Democratic Conversion" of the Spanish King King Juan Carlos appointed Arias Navarro, a close confidant of the dictator Franco, to lead his first government. The ministers of this government, presided over by the King, were linked to U.S. economic interests and were profoundly pro-U.S. government. The Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr. Areilza, was Spanish ambassador to the U.S. in the 1950s and was close to Rockefeller family interests and the Chase Manhattan Bank. The Minister of Justice, Mr. Garriges Diaz-Caisabete, was Spanish Ambassador in the U.S. in the 1960s (and had played a key role in the renewal of U.S. military bases in Spain) and consultant to many U.S. corporations in Spain. The Vice-President, Mr. Osorio, was once president of the Spanish affiliate of Exxon. The Minister of the Economy, Mr. Vilar Mirt, had been head of a major steel company of the United Steel Corporation. It was this government that signed the renewal of the U.S. military bases. Just as Franco had needed the military bases to gain U.S. government support, so the King now needed U.S. support to gain legitimacy and international recognition. And the U.S. government gladly offered both, even though the brutality of this government of the Monarchy rivaled that of the Franco regime. Torture, political assassinations, and jailing of political opponents were common practice in Spain under the Arias Navarro government, and the U.S. government was fully aware of this. A reception given by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for King Juan Carlos at the Waldorf Astoria in New York was met by demonstrations against the royal visit, organized by Amnesty International.

The same support for the Spanish monarchy came from the Carter administration and its Secretary of State, Mr. Cyrus Vance. The profoundly anti-communist position of the King made him attractive to the Carter government, which had

pressured its European allies to admit Spain to the European Common Market. The U.S. government thought Spain's entry into the Common Market would be good for U.S. business interests based in Spain. Here again, no concerns were expressed by the U.S. government that Spain was still a dictatorship, now led not by a general but by a king. The European governments, however, were not ready to admit the Spanish dictatorship into the Common Market. The German Premier Helmut Schmidt, a social democrat, vetoed it. Not so, incidentally, Germany's foreign secretary, the liberal Mr. Gensher, who supported it. He was fairly representative of the European liberal parties (which are right-wing parties in Europe), which had always put their economic interests above any liberal concerns. It was the social democratic governing parties that vetoed entry of the Spanish dictatorship to the European Common Market.

Continuing labor demonstrations forced the fall of Arias Navarro's government and the establishment of a new monarchic government, led by Suarez, who had been Secretary General of the fascist movement and had supported most of the repressive measures of the Arias Navarro government. Suarez, along with the King, knew the situation could become explosive – indeed, the first year of the Suarez government saw the greatest labor unrest – unless a more open process was put in place, with legalization of all parties, including the Communist Party. The electoral rules, however, would be designed to discriminate against the working class and against progressive areas of the country, electoral rules that continue to this day. For example, the province of Segovia, a conservative stronghold, needs only 30,000 votes to elect a member of the Spanish parliament. Barcelona, a stronghold for progressive forces, needs 150,000 votes. And although the alliance of left-wing forces – Izquierda Unida (to the left of the Socialist Party), which includes the Spanish Communist Party – is the third largest party in Spain by popular vote, it is only the fifth largest in Parliament, reduced to a small parliamentary group.

This small piece of history explains why European polls show that, of the populations of Europe, the Spanish population is the least friendly toward U.S. foreign policy. However, correctly reading the political situation in the U.S., the Spanish people have never identified the U.S. government and its policies with the majority of the people who live and work in the U.S. According to the same polls, compared with much of continental Europe, the Spanish population has a greater empathy for average folk in the U.S. – that is, for the people and the popular culture. They share the opinion held by the majority of the U.S. population expressed in many polls that the federal government does not primarily represent their interests.

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