2011

ETA Before and After the Carrero Assassination; Strategic Insights: v.10, issue 2 (Summer 2011)

Olmeda, Jose A.

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School
ETA Before and After the Carrero Assassination

José A. Olmeda

In December 1973 the Basque terrorist group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna) assassinated Admiral Carrero Blanco, the first and only prime minister in Franco’s dictatorship. Between 1946 and 1999 only three other Western heads of state or prime ministers were assassinated: US President John F. Kennedy (1963), Swedish prime minister Olof Palme (1986), and Israeli prime minister Yitzak Rabin (1995).1 Only the Carrero assassination was the work of a terrorist group. This resounding event supposedly helped to bring about the end of the authoritarian regime and became the signal achievement of the Basque nationalist organization. To assess this terrorist attack as a weapon of mass effect, this paper will examine the strategies ETA has adopted to distinguish itself within the Basque nationalist movement; its history of innovation in ideology, funding, and capabilities; how that innovation built up to the Carrero assassination; and the effect the assassination had on Spanish democracy and ETA's standing within the Basque nationalist movement. Although the profound psychological effects of the assassination allowed ETA to claim credit for the collapse of the Franco regime, it was unable to translate that credit into tangible progress towards its political goals.

Introduction

In 1958, a group of militant activists within the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (EAJ-PNV, founded in 1892) formed a breakaway faction seeking more radical policy goals and committed to outspoken, direct action against the authoritarian Franco regime. At its inception, this new organization, Euskadi ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Freedom, ETA), appeared to be generally unified behind a shared vision of a future independent, socialist Basque Country, to be achieved through ‘armed struggle.’ ETA is one of the oldest terrorist organizations in the Western world, operating for more than fifty years, with 858 assassinations and a history as a significant destabilizer of Spanish democracy.

The Basque nationalist movement, like other nationalist movements around the world, has a history of internal fragmentation and numerous divisions and mergers. The movement’s organizational field represents an increasingly heterogeneous mix of organizations and aims. Its branches compete for resources, legitimacy, and the right to speak on behalf of Basque society. Some groups have been able to navigate this competitive environment successfully, while others that are less adept at formulating effective strategies have found themselves increasingly marginalized. As these marginalized groups lose public support, they become unable to induce the government to respond

---

1 In Spain several prime ministers have been killed before Carrero: Prim (1870), Cánovas del Castillo (1897), Canalejas (1912), Dato (1921); besides Maura (1904), Cambó (1907), Suárez (1977) y Aznar (1995) were object of grave terrorist attacks. Since 1999, Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić was assassinated by snipers in Belgrade in 2003. Political assassinations are much more frequent in the rest of the world; see Iqbar, Zorn 2006. For public reactions to the cases in the main text (Kennedy, Palme, Rabin), see, respectively, Sheatsley, Feldman 1964; Hansén, Stern 2001; and Vertzberger 1997. It could also be mentioned that in 1979, Lord Mountbatten, cousin to the British Queen, was assassinated by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), who planted a bomb in his fishing boat, the Shadow V, at Mullaghamore, in County Sligo in the Republic of Ireland.
to their demands in any meaningful way. The formation and evolution of ETA must be understood within this context.

Politically motivated groups have a wide spectrum of strategies to choose from in this competition for relevance. Using the terminology of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: 5), Basque nationalism is a clear example of contentious politics. According to this concept, there is an essential continuity between institutional and non-institutional politics; conventional electoral politics, protest, civil disobedience, and terrorism each count as one strategic choice among many of differing intensity. Groups ultimately choose one strategy or a mix of strategies based on their own capabilities and motivations, as well as those of other groups competing for power within the nationalist movement (Chenoweth 2010).

Under this framework, ETA is a Basque nationalist organization that has chosen a violent strategy. The substantive issue is its attachment to Basque nationalism; it is not a nihilistic organization that cloaks itself in a political cause, but a Basque nationalist organization that practices terrorism to achieve its political ends. ETA’s formulated goals are: recovery of Basque culture and language, Basque secession from Spain, the annexation of the Navarre region of Spain to make the new state viable, and the incorporation of the Basque regions of France into the new state. All branches of the Basque nationalist movement share these ideological goals, irrespective of their tactics. ETA’s behavior should be analyzed in the context of the organizational population forming the nationalist movement, of which it is an integral part.

ETA’s Ideological Evolution

One strategy ETA has used in its competition with other branches of the Basque nationalist movement is its endorsement of a diffuse Marxist-Leninist platform that serves to differentiate it from more traditionalist groups. From its founding until the fall of the Franco regime, ETA’s strategy was inspired by the Third World revolutionary wars. At ETA’s first annual conference in May 1962, the group declared itself ‘a Basque revolutionary national liberation movement.’ ETA’s anti-colonialist rhetoric compared it to the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria and the Vietcong in Vietnam—movements that enjoyed much broader popular support than ETA. The analysis completely disregarded the fact that, in socioeconomic terms, the Basque country bore no resemblance to Third World countries. This lack of political realism and disconnection with reality has been a constant in ETA’s terrorist campaign.

Under this strategy, terrorist actions were considered the trigger for an armed insurrection in which the Basque people would secede, achieving their independence from Spain. There was no mention of French Basque country at that time because France was its sanctuary and continued to be until the mid-1990s. The period of democratic transition appeared to represent the most appropriate time to implement this strategy, but after the consolidation of democracy and the establishment of autonomous communities, the potential for a popular uprising in the Basque country ceased to be credible, even for the most fanatical ideologues.

ETA has added new ideological ingredients over time. For example, ETA adopted an anti-nuclear platform and in 1984 became the only European organization to successfully prevent the construction of a nuclear power station; the socialist government of Felipe González gave in to terrorist pressure after the assassination of the chief engineer in 1981 and the project director in
1982. In 1992, during the Urrats-Berri Process, the ETA political wing Herri Batasuna (HB) adapted to the disappearance of the Eastern bloc and altered its Marxist-Leninist ideology, redefining itself as “abertzale (patriot) and progressive left.”

ETA considers institutionalized politics to be necessary in certain periods, but also considers them dangerous because they may lead to pliable, bourgeois-like attitudes, even among ETA’s own members. In the ETA-fostered internal reflection in HB that led to the Oldartzen Statement in 1996, ETA insisted upon the need to increase the offensive strategy and actions on different fronts (armed, civil disobedience, national construction, etc.) to avoid that risk. This risk became a reality for ETA Político-Military, an offshoot of ETA, during the first years of the transition to democracy, when it decided to dissolve in 1982 after negotiating immunity with the UCD (Unión de Centro Democrático) government. ETA’s fears were confirmed by the split within Batasuna in the 1990s, which led to the current Aralar movement with a high number of abertzales from Navarra. ETA has never mentioned the possibility of giving up arms, and during the 1998 ceasefire it assumed the role of “guarantor of the process” that would eventually bring about the national and social liberation of a re-unified Basque Country. ETA thereby should gain control over moderate nationalist forces and their political institutions and regional security forces (Ertzaintza). This never mentioned possibility of giving up arms is a very important aspect, although it has not been fully exploited by those who establish the counter-terrorist guidelines in the political field.

The addition of ambiguous progressive and eco-leftist discourse has given ETA an increasingly populist image. However, at every critical moment for the organization, the old guard of extreme nationalists eventually triumphed and guaranteed that orthodoxy would prevail. Even the Basque anti-nuclear movement distinguished itself from similar movements worldwide by continuously emphasizing its Basque nationalist character. When ETA spearheaded violent protests against the proposed nuclear power plant, it was reluctant to admit independent Basque anti-nuclear groups into its broader political front organizations. A similar logic has guided every episode of negotiation between ETA and different Spanish socialist governments, with the armed branch prevailing over the political branch. Thus, ETA has a history of opportunistically adjusting its ideology to fit the times, but not so far that it would have to give up armed struggle.

**ETA's History of Innovation**

*Leadership Capability*

The important question regarding ETA is not whether there is a political motive behind armed violence, but whether a political leadership directs the implementation and quality of that violence. To effectively achieve specific goals, a terrorist group needs some sort of political leadership to regulate its violent activities and direct them towards its ultimate objectives. Since violence is not an end in itself, these goals, when attained, should lead to the end of violent actions. If the goals prove unattainable, the political leadership must be able to reformulate its strategy, adjusting its means and its ends. Such reformulation is only possible if violence is limited to rational and instrumental activities. If there is no political influence behind terrorism, then a strategy cannot be established, the military objectives cannot be determined, and no efforts can be made to accomplish them (Neumann, Smith 2008; Smith 1995; Tangen, Smith 2000).

---

2 Echeverría 2006.
Unlike other terrorist organizations, ETA’s armed faction controls its political branches, which conflicts with the strategy of violence. This has created three problems related to the political control of the armed instrument that ETA has not yet solved. First, because there is an asymmetric conflict of low intensity, in which the Spanish democracy is unwilling to use all of its resources to crush the enemy, there is a situation of calculation and competition in which each opponent makes decisions that depend on those taken by the other. Since ETA has never been able to maintain a hypothetical stalemate, much less defeat the democratic state, the only thing that it can attempt is to influence decision makers within the Spanish state to meet their demands. This is especially true as French law enforcement cooperates more and more with the Spanish government, denying ETA its old sanctuary in France.

Second, ETA is imbued with an intense vanguardist ideology that reinforces its isolation. This is a double vanguardism: as a trustee of a messianic spirit to the other Basque nationalist groups and in a more secular manner as a Leninist vanguard for the Basque workers toward a “Basque socialism” suited to this stage of the 21st century in Western Europe. The underlying ideology is likewise doubly totalitarian: an exclusive ethnic nationalism and a historically failed and anachronistic Marxist-Leninist complement (labeled after the implosion of the Soviet Union as simply “progressive”). In organizational terms, ETA is structured as an armed party, with different specialized subordinate political branches and mass organizations in different fronts. The result is an organizational complex guided by the elitist violent actions that serve to maintain the cohesion of the organizational fabric, but lack a compelling political logic apart from meeting the ideological and emotional drives of the Basque nationalist movement.

Third, rejection of the new Spanish democracy after the collapse of the Franco regime limits ETA's ability to adapt to new political circumstances. The segment of those who accepted violence as the primary means to disrupt the democratic system continues to regard Spanish democracy as an artificial creation astutely designed to maintain powerful interests and stifle dying Basque nationalist aspirations. Only if constitutional rules and the autonomy statute are surpassed can nationalist goals be achieved. Only a minority of terrorist Basque nationalists joined the fledgling Spanish democracy as a consequence of the 1982 dissolution of ETA Política-Militar, which split from ETA in 1974 and merged with the Basque Socialist Party. In contrast, PNV, the mainstream nationalist party, took advantage of the institutional fabric built by the new democratic regime to exploit the regime’s resources without hiding PNV’s disloyalty to its constitutional foundations. Terrorist violence remains the primary tactic, with a subordinate political branch devoted to resource extraction from the democratic system, under different brands, from Herri Batasuna (1978) to Bildu (2011). The members of the political branch have never explicitly questioned its subordinate position, nor implemented real political control over the armed branch, thereby rendering the achievement of its political objectives impossible in practice.

Thus, ETA’s militant strategy has achieved few tangible results, except perhaps stopping the construction of a nuclear plant at Lemóniz, forcing a new route for the design of the Leizaráin highway, and radicalizing PNV. Its decreasing ability to impose costs and its political inflexibility allowed the People’s Party government (1996-2004) to develop an effective counter-terrorism policy, one that would be continued by the Socialist government in 2009 following its failed negotiations with the terrorist group (in 2000, 2004, and 2006). This is a clear example of what the sociology of organizations labels “permanently failing organizations.” However, this does not mean that coercion and intimidation have disappeared. The political and social consequences created by the terrorist
branch of Basque nationalism have not evaporated merely because ETA commits less murder than it would like, or even none at all. This situation implies that ETA has not made a careful assessment of the power of its enemies, the Spanish and French governments, or that it lacks a sophisticated understanding of how to launch attacks to achieve its political objectives.

**Funding Capability**

In contrast to its political stagnation, ETA has developed a sophisticated system for funding its activities. Aside from the early years when ETA was partly financed by some governments (Soviet Union, People’s Republic of China, Czechoslovakia, or Libya), ETA funding has experienced the classic stages of any terrorist group; banks and jewelry store robberies, kidnapping, and an increasingly sophisticated extortion system. However, ETA has developed such an efficient system that it is currently able to meet surprisingly high standards in cost-efficiency, quality, and marketing criteria.

Since robbery and assaults cost ETA a great number of casualties, it decided to use the kidnapping and extortion of important businessmen to finance its operations—businessmen would rather pay than become a likely target to be kidnapped or murdered. This “revolutionary tax” has produced a great amount of money, allowing ETA not only to finance itself and its political wing, but also to establish weapons and explosives factories to enhance its logistical independence. ETA has attained a complex level in the implementation for exacting financial resources, enabling it to abandon basic methods of funding. In 2002-2003, ETA’s messages to demand the “tax” began to include a personal reference code for each “client,” illustrating the efficiency of its financing and collection apparatus. Its annual budget for 2002 was around one million euros according to French security forces.

ETA may resort to kidnapping at any time to collect funds. There remains a sophisticated system of safe houses that has not been dismantled. At times, ETA engages in money laundering and makes transfers abroad, allotting the money to activists in Latin America. In this case, it is necessary to keep people abroad distributing funds among sleeper agents or activists in reserve. Establishing front companies and making investments in economic sectors are also common ETA practices. However, as Buesa (2011) has rightly demonstrated, the main funding source in the last decade has been the participation of its political branch in Spanish democracy through public funding according to its electoral results.

**Weapons Capability**

ETA’s efforts to keep itself well armed demonstrate a similar level of sophistication. To provide itself with weapons, ETA bought supplies in the black market in Spain and other European countries. Regarding explosives, ETA stole dynamite and plastic explosive (nitroglycerine-based gelatin) from quarries in the Basque Country and neighboring provinces. As controls became stricter in Spain, ETA had to strengthen its relations with the Provisional Irish Republican Army and some Palestinian groups, as well as Mafia groups in Italy and France, which facilitated access to weapons.

---

3 Buesa 2011.
4 Echeverría 2006.
and training (including in distant places like the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon). Although ETA has garnered supplies from purchases and robberies, it also has an extensive ability to manufacture weapons, particularly mortars (*Jotasu*), hand-made grenades, and hollow charge anti-tank grenades (*Jotake*), although anti-tank grenades are no longer in use due to lack of precision. Likewise, ETA is able to manufacture ammonal (including a sophisticated packet-bomb disguised as a pack of cigarettes and found in the training academy in Arcachon, which was dismantled in 1993, and also in a safe house in Lyon in April 2002). Moreover, ETA is able to manufacture and repair small arms. ETA has shown an interest in purchasing missiles several times; the case of the SAM-7 purchased in the 1980s allowed Spanish Intelligence Services, with the co-operation of the CIA to introduce the microchip that helped launch Operation Sokoa in France.

Regarding electronic components, ETA has made purchases in the free market in Belgium, France, Italy, Switzerland, and other countries. ETA also manufactures sophisticated electronic initiators of explosive devices that use several frequencies coded in remote controls, photoelectric cells, or movement sensors. In the safe house dismantled in Lyon in April 2002, infrared-ray movement sensors were discovered. Likewise, in 2002, legal purchases of sophisticated materials from well-known companies were discovered in France. These purchases were intended for use in the construction of new generation booby-traps against police explosive disposal teams. Regarding chemical weapons, it is important to point out that a manual to manufacture this type of weapons was seized in Mexico on July 17, 2003.

Over its lifetime, ETA has demonstrated an ability to adapt its operational capabilities to changing circumstance to ensure that it stays well funded and well armed. That talent for innovation can be found in ETA’s to planning, implementation, and execution of its plot to assassinate the second highest official in the Franco regime, with profound effects on Spanish society. However, ETA seems to lack that talent for innovation in its politics and leadership, making it unable to leverage such a critical success into tangible results.

**ETA’s 1973 Assassination of Admiral Carrero**

ETA’s assassination of Carrero was a hallmark in its short criminal trajectory. Out of the blue, a little known small terrorist organization was capable of assassinating the prime minister of a long-lived authoritarian regime, reaching the front pages of mass media around the world. The success of the attack has contributed to the myth, propagated by ETA and sectors of the Spanish Left, that this assassination was a catalyst of the transition to democracy due to the relevance of Carrero in the dictatorship. However it is important to contextualize the crime to get a more nuanced picture. The assassination was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the transition to democracy because there is no such indispensable person for the continuity of any political regime, especially after the disappearance of its founding dictator.

ETA’s central leadership obtained through unknown channels—possibly from communist anti-Franco opposition—information about Carrero’s lifestyle, specifically, his daily attendance at mass at a particular church in Madrid. Before that time, the ETA leadership had never considered kidnapping or assassinating Admiral Carrero. However, based on this new information and his key role in the Franco regime, Carrero made an attractive kidnapping target who could be ransomed for ETA terrorists held by Spanish authorities since December 1970 (Forest 2007: 29-30). ETA began
collecting intelligence on the target in December of 1972, after learning about his daily mass attendance, when Franco was already 80 years old. They named the target “Ogro” (Ogre) due to his physical appearance.

On December 19, 1972, the Director of the Civil Guard sent Carrero a letter with an intelligence report describing the arrival of ETA members in Spain, as well as one cell in Madrid, and their plan to kidnap Prince Juan Carlos, Admiral Carrero, the General Director of the Civil Guard, or one of their relatives to claim the freedom of the ETA prisoners. However, Carrero did not increase his protection or change his daily routine; he continued to use his non-armored Dodge Dart. Only when he was appointed Prime Minister on June 4, 1973, did he add a new car with a driver and three policemen to his former protection of just one driver and a bodyguard.

Before 1973, ETA had only limited operational experience: bombings of multiple television masts, two kidnappings, and several murders; none of these operations took place outside the Basque Country (Spanish or French) or Navarre. Therefore, given that the informant remains unknown, a strange serendipity occurred at the launch of the operation. “Txabi”, the leader of the cell<sup>6</sup> which killed Carrero, considered him the key element for the continuity of Franco’s regime: a successful attack would show the efficacy of armed struggle to destroy the Spanish state (Forest 2007: 48-50). However, an analysis of the regime’s collapse and the transition to democracy following the assassination—published by Pertur, later one of the main theorists of ETA Políti-co-Military—shows the impending internal crisis of the terrorist group and its future split between nationalists and revolutionaries in 1974.<sup>7</sup> The nationalists would continue to follow its terrorist campaign until now; the revolutionaries, opposing the political control of the armed branch, would voluntarily dissolve ETA Políti-co-Military in September 1982.

Luis Carrero Blanco went to Mass on the morning of December 20, 1973, to the nearby church of San Francisco de Borja, his family’s parish. For months, the terrorists had watched Carrero travel a daily route from number 6 Hermanos Becquer Street to the church, back again to his house for breakfast, and then to the Prime Minister’s office on Castellana Avenue. The attack was delayed for one day while Henry Kissinger, the U.S. secretary of state, was visiting Spain. Carrero left his home at 8:45 and was in the church until 9:20. Upon leaving, he entered his official unshielded car with his driver and a bodyguard, and was followed by another vehicle with a driver and two policemen. To return home, it was necessary to make a turn that followed the traffic signs, up Juan Bravo St. and turning again onto Claudio Coello St. When his car reached number 104 on this street, behind the church, the attack occurred. The ETA cell had excavated a T-shaped cell of seven meters to the center of the road, placed three powerful explosive charges inside, and piled sandbags around the charges in a manner that would direct the explosion upward. For greater accuracy, they placed a vehicle in the second lane, which forced the driver to pass directly over the explosives, and drew a red line to signal the precise position of the excavated cell. At the precise moment of his passage, they detonated the bombs, which threw the car over the church building to land in the church courtyard. Carrero did not die immediately, but the injuries he suffered were fatal. The hours that

---

<sup>7</sup> See Amigo 1978: 177-193.
followed were filled with confusion in Madrid and throughout Spain. The police reaction showed disorientation and a lack of professionalism.8

That the terrorists managed to kill Carrero is less noteworthy than the things the members of the cell did in Madrid without being detected or prosecuted by the police. ETA raided an armory, stole a submachine gun from a soldier of the General Captaincy, and left weapons in coffee shops on a few occasions. Despite this, the leadership of the military front was able to hold a meeting in the spring of 1973 where they planned the attack without being disturbed by security forces. This seems unbelievable now, but we must bear in mind that at that time, the terrorist spiral was just beginning its escalation against Spanish society, but at the same time it was deteriorating the internal cohesion of the group, causing the militant faction to break away from the political faction and assert itself with spectacular attacks. The very boldness of the attack is an indicator of innovation.

The assassination of a leader can shake a polity to its very core, provoking struggles over political succession, shaking both elites’ and the general public’s sense of security and political order, and widening political cleavages in society.9 An assassination crisis can easily become a national trauma, a political wound that persists and will not heal. Such was the case in the United States in the wake of the John F. Kennedy assassination, where the investigation involved many irregularities. The Swedish experience following the assassination of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 was similarly painful. However, in the assassinations of Prime Ministers Carrero and Rabin, these critical moments had less of a lasting impact on the public’s political values, beliefs and attitudes than might have been anticipated from the magnitude of the event and the intensity of the immediate responses.

It is conventional wisdom—and a belief widely shared among the Spanish left—that this assassination was the catalyst for regime change (Reinares 1987: 121):

“The detonator which precipitated the change of the political system in Spain from authoritarianism towards a liberal democracy was set off in December 1973, when the then President of the Government [sic], Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco was killed in a bomb attack. Though General Franco was still alive, postfrancoism became inevitable. A regime so leader-orientated had lost the person who could guarantee continuity. Although there did exist an institutional heir, Prince Juan Carlos, political succession had been granted to the victim of what soon would be known as ‘Operación Ogro’. In this way terrorism made its mark at the very beginning of the transition and became a part of the sordid legacy of the dictatorship.”

This seems to be a simplistic interpretation derived from ETA’s own analysis of the attack. It must be stressed, however, that this attack was a strategic, tactical and organizational innovation. It was a game-changer for ETA in its confrontation with Franco’s regime and Spain. ETA had to plan a complex operation coordinating several cells and employing a significant amount of explosives in a new way—a significant shift in the technologies and techniques used until that time—and they did so in a new place: Madrid, Spain’s capital city, close to the US Embassy, and far from the familiar environment of the more rural Basque Country. Everything it did was done for the first time and without prior operational experience.

8 The best journalistic account is Fuente, García, Prieto 1988.
9 San Martín 1983: 88-105, provides a very rich account of the contradictions among the regime elites and their poor crisis management. He was the director of the small intelligence service, which depended on Carrero, had good contacts in the opposition forces, and reported to Carrero very frequently.
In the Spanish case, the physical and psychic decline of Franco very quickly took over the front pages of the mass media. The newly appointed prime minister, Carlos Arias Navarro, the inefficient interior minister under whose watch the assassination took place, was closer to the dictator’s inner circle. He was also the first prime minister under the reinstated monarchy after Franco’s death in November of 1975. King Juan Carlos considered Arias Navarro an unmitigated disaster as a political leader, and soon appointed Adolfo Suárez to implement general elections scheduled for June 1977. This fact is a proof that the disappearance of Carrero, a more seasoned and prudent politician than Arias, did not advance the transition to democracy. Had ETA not killed Carrero, the king could have overcome the admiral’s hypothetical resistance to political change as he did with Arias. However, even Carrero’s supposed opposition is doubtful because he was a smarter political analyst than Arias and very loyal to the monarch. Further, deeper economic, social, and political forces were driving the transformation of the authoritarian regime.

Analysis

At least in this case, it seems that a window of opportunity appeared, to use Kingdom’s terminology (2003) about “garbage can decision-making”: in the stream of problems, ETA had around 150 militants in Spanish prisons; in the stream of ideas, it received information about the daily routines of Carrero from unknown sources. The arrival of information was a focusing event that launched the group’s decision to innovate in the political stream and to audaciously attack the Spanish state in Madrid, targeting its most important political figure after Franco, a significant symbol. A kidnapping was planned at first, but that alternative was discarded for security reasons and the final decision was made to perform the assassination. The terrorists were strongly motivated by the memory of their activists who had fallen in clashes with Spanish police forces.

In this case, there was an external trigger, but the leadership of the group was receptive to the information, and the cell on the ground was active in the planning of the action. It was a top-down decision with bottom-up feedback. The information about Carrero’s daily moves was a necessary condition of the attack.

The context of this innovation was a bit exceptional because it appeared at the very beginning of the evolutionary life cycle of the organization. The technology was state of the art at that time; the decision was made in the middle of an ideological debate, which later would end in the split of ETA Político-Military from ETA; and the decision was made autonomously by the military front without consulting the rest of the organization (Shabad, Llera 1995: 430). The vulnerability of Carrero should be stressed: he lacked security countermeasures, had a non-armored car, and minimal escort. The general political context was the decline of the authoritarian regime and the deteriorating health of the dictator, who was 80 years old in December 1972. Everybody in the regime and in the opposition had expectations for political change.

Information concerning this type of action came from the Intelligence Service of Civil Guard a year before it took place. The terrorist cell made many mistakes while preparing the action, as stated earlier: ETA raided an armory, stole a submachine gun from a soldier of the General Captaincy, and, on a few occasions, left weapons in public places. This illustrates a perennial problem in intelligence: the information was there, but nobody connected the dots.
It seems to me, at least in this case, that without the external information about Carrero’s daily routines, the decision to prepare the operation would not have been launched. At the beginning of its evolutionary cycle, terrorists in prisons were an acute problem, but this problem has faded over the years. For example, ETA organized an operation to break its militants out of Segovia prison in April of 1976. It has since organized other ambitious attacks, but countermeasures fortunately prevailed.

In hindsight, we see things differently, but in real time, we have the problem of strategic surprise, signals and noise in intelligence. We do not consider the audacity and imagination of our enemies; innovations are mainly mental leaps forward that combine strategy, tactics and technologies in new and creative fashion to damage opponents. These variables do not evolve in a linear way. I cannot envision indicators that would signal this precise trajectory of innovation. In fact, security forces did have information about the possible action obtained through human intelligence, but this did not trigger effective countermeasures against the relevant persons. ETA was perceived as a threat, but mainly as a public order problem in the Basque Provinces, not as a group capable and motivated to attack the top political official under the dictator in Madrid.

As we have seen, the right information (Civil Guard report about a possible attack) went to the right place (Carrero himself) one year before the strike at a political moment when he was worried about public order, but no significant decision was made by himself or by his entourage, who were all blind to ETA’s threat.

**ETA Strategy since the Carrero Assassination**

Although the profound psychological impact of the Carrero assassination allowed ETA to claim credit for the collapse of the Franco regime—a claim widely accepted by the Spanish left even today—ETA was unable to translate that popular perception into tangible results, nor did it become a major player in the transition to democracy. Instead, its lack of an effective political leadership led ETA to pursue strategies that achieved little.

The Carrero assassination and the democratic transition marked a new stage in ETA’s evolution. Abandoning the ideology of revolutionary struggle, from 1978 to 1998, ETA was characterized by a strategy based on the assumption that terrorist pressure would eventually induce the state to abandon its principles and yield to the claims of ETA. In this strategy, terrorism no longer represented an early-stage tactic that would eventually inspire a mass insurrection, but rather the essential element that would lead directly to victory. The success of this strategy depended on the respective perseverance of the state and the terrorist network; however, massive public support for firm Spanish policy against ETA diminished the credibility of this strategy. There is reason to suppose that in the mid-1990s, ETA perceived that its chances of forcing the Spanish democracy to acquiesce were increasingly remote because its own operational capacity was weakening.

From 1998 to 2000, ETA attempted an alliance with non-violent nationalist forces grounded in the repudiation of the regional autonomy framework to pursue a unilateral path to independence, backed by broad popular support that would leave the state unable to resist. The premise of this policy shift was that ETA’s increasingly weak terrorist actions were insufficient to compel the Spanish democracy to yield. The new strategy formed through contact between ETA, PNV and Euskal Alkartasuna (EA, Basque Solidarity) in August 1998 as well as the Estella-Lizarra agreements...
and the declaration of a cease-fire by ETA in September of that year. However, ETA quickly saw that there was little potential for the National Front to achieve massive support from the Basque people for an immediate independence process, so their new strategy could lead in the opposite direction, toward an integration of the sectors that supported it under regional autonomy. Hence, ETA broke with the rest of the nationalist forces and resumed terrorist attacks in 2000.

After extremely intense pressure by Spanish and French security forces during the administration of the People’s Party government (1996-2004) and resumed by the Socialist government after the failure of negotiations in 2007, ETA is under an acute operational crisis. ETA militants are less skilled, younger, and more marginalized than in the past and, consequently, more vulnerable to Spanish counter-terrorism policies. Organizational capabilities have been greatly diminished, and the motivations of its militants and sympathizers are declining. This diminishing morale is causing a slow trickle of defections, which is visible in the abandonment of ETA’s discipline by some prisoners in Spanish and French jails. A 2009 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights against ETA’s political branches, Herri Batasuna and Batasuna, further challenges the viability of ETA. The court upheld a 2003 ban of the two parties, ruling that their political projects are in essence contrary to the democratic principles espoused by the Spanish Constitution. The Court recognizes that every political party may “campaign for a change in legislation or statutory or constitutional structures of the state,” but with “two conditions: that they use legal and democratic means and that the proposed change is compatible with fundamental democratic principles.”

Regarding its immediate political environment, ETA has usually had to be active on different fronts at the same time. The political support network it created has reinforced ETA’s activism in a variety of ways: visibility in elections through the famous 200,000 votes that have been steadily decreasing; obtaining economic benefits from the state and infrastructures of great value to maintain both street rioting and terrorism while sharpening the contradictions of its enemy, the rule of law; and tactically attracting those nationalist parties (PNV and EA) that ETA has historically considered opponents to divide and confront them. ETA has retained around 10 percent of the electorate, i.e., around 150,000 votes, for thirty years.

Public opinion support for the terrorist group has also significantly decreased. Support for ETA, which was around 10% in the 1980s, is currently around 3%. In contrast, total rejection has increased from 40% in the mid-1980s to 62% currently. The remaining 30% takes a position of rejection but with some qualifications, for instance, supporting the group’s aims but not the violent means used to achieve them, or justifying the existence of ETA during the dictatorship but not under democracy. These results produced a polarization of Basque nationalist forces, leading to serious confrontation with the political system due to the threat of secession invoked by the Basque regional government.

Further, ETA has been unable to achieve an assassination with a similar mass effect to Admiral Carrero’s, although it has also pursued similarly ambitious targets: it tried to kill Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez in 1977 by shooting an RPG-7 grenade launcher at his official residence in the Palacio de la Moncloa; it tried to kill José María Aznar with a car bomb in 1995 when he was the opposition leader and three more times with SAM-7 Strela missiles after he became Prime Minister while he was campaigning in the Basque Country in 2001; and it tried to assassinate the Head of the State, King Juan Carlos I, with a high caliber rifle in 1998 while he was enjoying his summer holidays in Palma de Mallorca.
**Current situation**

If Carrero’s assassination had the supposed effects claimed by ETA, why has it not reached any of its strategic aims yet, after a terrorist campaign of more than fifty years and 858 victims? Most of the victims have been killed during the democratic regime, showing the antidemocratic character of terrorist Basque nationalism. The Spanish state has managed to survive this deathly terrorist campaign, and at the same time has preserved its democratic institutions, has professionalized its police and security forces, and has achieved a strategic advance over the terrorist organization. In January 2010 there were 750 terrorists in prison, 585 in Spain and 165 in France.

Today, after suffering a series of blows to its leadership, membership, and infrastructure and facing national and international political and judicial strategies of isolation and counteraction, ETA lives within the negative context faced by all terrorist groups worldwide since September 11th. Nevertheless, ETA still strives to adapt to this increasingly hostile atmosphere using a process of organizational changes that may allow it to survive to achieve its goals. However, at present, we could speak of a “minimal victory” (Avidror 2007) for Spain, in which terror is not destroyed, but is contained at a minimal level, and constant energy must be invested to prevent its eruption. Minimal victory does not provide a solution to the politico-ideological conflict that forms the basis of armed struggle and terror. This “minimal victory,” in which terror is contained and checked before it strikes, becomes more significant if, due to the terror organizations’ prolonged lack of success, they consciously or unconsciously decide to reduce the number of terror attempts. Such an achievement is possible, for example, when the terror bodies are busy protecting their own lives instead of planning terror and carrying it out. If the decision on the field does not lead the political bodies to an understanding that the situation permits them to withstand the demands of the terror organizations and they choose to compromise, surrender, withdraw, or concede, then all of the work invested by the security forces will be in vain.

The current cease-fire declared on September 5, 2010, and the recent legalization of the latest avatar of its political branch (Bildu) in 2011, another gross strategic mistake by the socialist government of Rodríguez Zapatero, could set the scenario for the next years: political participation in the Spanish democratic political system, and the terrorist organization behind the scenes, preserving its autonomy from its political branch, rearming and reorganizing its seriously weakened networks, waiting again for the impossible achievement of its political aims, and ready to attack as soon as it is decided.

**References**


Domínguez Iribarren, Florencio, *Las conexiones de ETA en América* (Barcelona: RBA, 2010).

Echeverría, Carlos, *The Lessons Learnt from the Fight against ETA*, manuscript.

Forest, Eva, *Operación Ogro (Cómo y por qué ejecutamos a Carrero Blanco)* (Hondarribia-Fuenterrabía: Hiru, 2007 [1974]).


McAdam, Doug; Tarrow, Sidney; Tilly, Charles, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2001).


San Martín, José Ignacio, *Servicio especial. A las órdenes de Carrero Blanco (De Castellana a El Aaiún)* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1983).


