September 11 and Europe

By Eric Margolis

AS America is in the midst of the anniversary of 9/11, it's worth recalling how Europe dealt with the problem of political terrorism — and won.

From the 1970-1990s, Europe was assailed by a variety of violent extremist groups — what the North American media calls 'terrorists.' I try to avoid this pejorative term because it inhibits thoughtful analysis and has often been used as a propaganda weapon by the powerful against those resisting injustice.

For example, when I was covering South Africa in the 1980s, Nelson Mandela's ANC bombed restaurants and buses packed with civilians. South Africa branded the ANC a 'terrorist organization.' Yet abroad, Mandela and his ANC were hailed as 'freedom fighters.' Former Afghan 'freedom fighters,' like Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar, are today scourged as 'terrorists.'

In Europe, during the 1970s and 1980s, Palestinian groups staged high-profile attacks to gain international attention for their then little-known cause. The Irish Republican Army, largely financed by Americans, waged a bloody campaign to unite Belfast with Ireland. In 1993, the IRA detonated a huge truck bomb in London, causing nearly $1 billion in damage, the most costly terror attack until the 2001 World Trade Centre outrage.

Italy was terrorized by gangs of murderous Marxists and fascists, culminating in the 1978 kidnapping and murder of Prime Minister Aldo Moro. West Germany battled for a decade against left-wing fanatics of the Baader Meinhof gang, Red Army Faction, and other groups seeking to destroy democracy and capitalism. Spain continues to be hit by bombings and assassinations by Basque ETA separatists.

Here in Paris, I vividly recall the massacre on the rue de Rennes, where shoppers were sliced into bloody ribbons by flying plate glass after Lebanese detonated bombs in one of the city's busiest shopping areas. France suffered two decades of agonizing attacks by assorted Mideasterners, North Africans, Corsican separatists, Abu Nidal's killers, Carlos the Jackal, and government assassins from Israel, Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Serbia.

Unlike post-9/11 United States, Europe did not indulge in self-pity or nationalist frenzy. Europeans became hardened to random, bloody attacks. There were few calls in Europe, such as we now hear in the US, for vengeance attacks and extensive military operations against foreign nations. Europeans realized they faced a long, hard struggle in the shadows. After two decades of political violence in Europe, most of its perpetrators were defeated or reduced insignificant

By contrast, 9/11 was a titanic, single shock to generally unworldly, self-absorbed Americans, whose nation had been untouched by war or terrorist attacks before. Most Americans had little idea how deeply their government was involved in other nation's affairs, or how much the US had come to be hated across the Mideast. This was the first time America would have to pay what the British imperialists used to call, 'the price of empire.'

Europeans understood three important things Americans have yet to grasp. First, police and intelligence forces must be the spearhead of a war against terrorism. Military forces are blunt instruments that should only play a minor role, defending borders and key installations. Better airport security — not a preemptive invasion of Afghanistan — would have spared the World Trade Centre and Pentagon the attack that came on September 11 last year.

Second, it was not necessary to curtail liberty and civil rights to wage a campaign against political violence. Better security coordination, not less freedom, is the answer. Fortunately for the Europeans, there was no John Ashcroft to threaten their rules of law and common decency. Europe did have its share of closet proto-fascist politicians, and a few warmongering politicians who urged military crusades, but these mountebanks were largely sidelined or ignored.

Third, during the 'terror years,' Europe's media generally behaved in a more responsible, balanced, and critical manner than much of today's US media, which, since 9/11, has too often promoted panic, fear, and hatred of Muslims and Iraq in America. The European media had its share of 'news fabricators,' but they were nowhere near as influential as the big guns of America's axe-grinding neo-conservative and right-wing media. Further, Europe's press, which is politically varied and avoids the growing uniformity of views in American media, did not rush to offer itself as mouthpieces for government propaganda, as has some of the US media.

The results of public manipulation and fear are painfully clear. The US media has convinced a majority of Americans they are totally innocent victims of evil forces, and that Iraq was behind 9/11, though there exists not a shred of evidence. So Americans clamour for war against Iraq.

Over 75 per cent of Europeans oppose attacking Iraq, in spite of efforts by right-wing British media to fan war fever. In fact, the common view here in Europe is that the Bush administration has run amok and is a greater threat than international terrorism or Iraq.

American conservatives like to accuse Europeans of being wimps in the so-called war against terrorism. Europeans, who understand war and colonial conflicts far better than Americans, learned from 20 years' painful experience that patient police work and diplomacy, rather than flag-waving and military breast-beating, have been and will remain the way to overcome political violence.— *Copyright Eric Margolis, 2002.*