

# National Center for Critical Incident Analysis

Interim Report 28 October 2004

## **American Vulnerability Increased by Political Acrimony**

Washington, D.C., An interim report by a new research organization highlights the lack of trust in the electoral process as a growing vulnerability that terrorists could exploit during election week in the United States.

In 2004 America must balance the democratic ideal of holding free and open elections with the requirement to protect the security of our electorate, the study found. At stake is more than just the outcome of this year's voting. The lack of bipartisan consensus at home about the validity of the electoral process creates additional vulnerability to threats from abroad.

The interim report is being issued by the National Center for Critical Incident Analysis (NCCIA) following a symposium in October at the National Defense University in Washington. The study was part of a meeting that included thirty experts on homeland defense, law enforcement, public health, psychology and journalism. Highlights include:

- The NCCIA analyzed the potential disruption of the electoral process and determined that a key element is trust between the electorate and elected officials.
- The group examined the Madrid bombings of March 2004 that occurred three days before the Spanish national elections. The terrorist acts in Madrid are widely credited with changing the outcome of the election and ousting the ruling party.
- The NCCIA looked at whether the bombings themselves were less instrumental than the breakdown in trust that occurred when the government rushed to blame homegrown terrorists and downplayed evidence implicating Islamist terrorists.
- The Spanish electorate felt betrayed by officials who appeared to seek political capital from the incident by blaming a Basque separatist group. It soon became clear that the bombing was not caused by locals but was rather the work of those who opposed Spain's cooperation with the US in Iraq.
- Quick, erroneous finger pointing rocked the election in Spain. The lack of trust was the crucial element.

A similar mood could infect the US. In a contentious, closely fought election we cannot allow the trust between the electorate and elected officials to be destroyed by partisan claims about voting irregularities, demonizing of opponents, or system failures because of overzealous concerns about voter security. Contingency plans for security need to be in place, of course. But that's not enough, the group concluded.

Sadly, the 2004 electoral process is plagued by acrimony and litigiousness. The parties have even initiated legal action before Election Day. Lurking somewhere in the background are terrorists who would like nothing more than to strike at the political will

of the United States. They were emboldened by their violent disruption of the democratic process in Spain earlier this year.

The NCCIA believes that a bipartisan statement ought to be issued by both candidates and their respective supporters about voter safety and security that focuses on the issue of trust. That statement must assure the voters that any crisis will be handled in a way that fully informs the voter, quickly and accurately. It is the duty of state and local officials to ensure that no eligible voter is disenfranchised and to maintain security at the polls.

If violence occurs, bipartisan validation of government actions can help reduce the damage to America's political stability.

The NCCIA is a new, privately funded, interdisciplinary effort by civilian experts in public health, national security, law enforcement, communications and social psychology dedicated to improving the public's ability to understand and cope with critical incidents. It is affiliated with the National Defense University Foundation.

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