

**Statement of The Hon. Doug Bereuter
Markup of H.R. 2131
Committee on Financial Services
March 17, 2004**

Mr. Chairman, as an original co-sponsor I want to express my strong support for H.R. 2131, a bill to award a Congressional Gold Medal to José María Aznar, the President of the Spanish Government. That position as head of government, of course, is more commonly described as “prime minister.”

Mr. Chairman, Prime Minister Aznar has been one of America’s best friends in Europe and a strong advocate of the transatlantic relationship. He recognized the threat of terrorism to international security, and he steadfastly provided support to fight terrorism throughout the world.

When some of our European allies led efforts in the United Nations to oppose military action in Iraq, he forcefully expressed support for American policy. In January 2003, the Wall Street Journal published an open letter from eight European heads of state and government, expressing support for the U.S. position.

Prime Minister Aznar's name was on the first line.

Mr. Chairman, I was an original co-sponsor of this bill when it was first introduced in May of last year. I believed at that time that the strong support demonstrated by Prime Minister Aznar for this country merited this very high honor. Today, I believe even more strongly that Congress should award him this medal.

As all of our colleagues surely know, last Thursday, at the height of the morning rush hour, terrorists detonated ten bombs on commuter trains in the Spanish capital of Madrid. These synchronized attacks blew up four different trains, several of which were in stations at the time, increasing the carnage. At last count, two hundred people were killed in these attacks, and almost 1,500 were injured.

These attacks were the worst terrorist atrocity in Spanish history and may be the most terrible on the European continent in modern history.

We have learned that these reprehensible acts are likely the work of Islamic extremists linked to al Qaeda, though a clear determination is not yet possible. The bombings in Spain demonstrate that Europe is indeed a target of al Qaeda and the brand of Islamic extremism that it espouses.

Prime Minister Aznar has long been a strong support of the war on terrorism. Of course, last week's attacks marked not a new phenomenon in Spanish life, only a new magnitude of suffering. For more than 30 years, Spaniards have endured a vicious terrorist campaign by the fringe, Basque-separatist ETA organization. Fully understanding the threat posed by terrorism, Prime Minister Aznar stood by America when we were attacked by al Qaeda on 9/11, just as America stands by Spain in the aftermath of the attacks of 3/11.

Awarding a Congressional Gold Medal to Prime Minister Aznar would be a fitting tribute to his support in the war on terrorism. Perhaps it is even more fitting when one thinks about the cost of that support for Mr. Aznar and for his Popular Party.

As we all know, his party was defeated in the national elections held this past Sunday. Many analysts have attributed the unexpected victory of the Socialist Party in those elections to voters' reactions to the terrorist attacks. Unfortunately, that is probably accurate, and it sends a very distressing message around the world that must be rejected.

It is true that Spain's participation in military action against Iraq was very unpopular among the electorate. Some post-election reports indicate that a large number of Spanish voters may have voted against the Popular Party in the belief that its support for the Iraq war was responsible for Spain being targeted by al Qaeda. That too, unfortunately, is almost certainly true.

This is not the place to comment further on the unfortunate signal that may have been sent to the terrorists by the Spanish voters. However, I will note that Prime Minister Aznar staked his political reputation and the electoral chances of his party on his support for the United States and joined us in the War on Terrorism. He paid a high price for that support.

Now more than ever, the United States Congress should recognize his extraordinary leadership and support by voting to award a Congressional Gold Medal to José María Aznar.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.