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Americans Should be “Anti-American”

by Sheldon Richman

“The Iraq war has also made anti-Americanism respectable again, as it was during the Cold War but had not been since the demise of the Soviet Union.”

Those words come from Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, writing in the June 18 issue of the *Washington Post*. In his article he was at pains to show that anti-Americanism did not begin with President George W. Bush and will not end with him. “Some folks seem to believe that by returning to the policies of Harry Truman, Dean Acheson and John F. Kennedy, America will become popular around the world. I like those policies, too, but let’s not kid ourselves,” Kagan writes. “They also sparked enormous resentment among millions of peoples in many countries, resentments that are now returning to the fore. The fact is, because America is the dominant power in the world, it will always attract criticism and be blamed both for what it does and what it does not do.”

Kagan is right. Ill-feeling toward the United States long preceded Bush, and it won’t end anytime soon. People do resent the dominant power and see its hand everywhere. But if we are to understand what is really going on, we have to engage in some careful analysis.

What do we mean when we say that anti-Americanism has returned? Kagan and others cleverly use the term “America” as a package deal — an assortment of disparate ideas that need to be separated and examined individually if we are to grasp the reality. What exactly do anti-Americanists dislike? There are several possible candidates: the people, the culture, the tradition of freedom, the commercial spirit, the U.S. government’s foreign policies.

The evidence is strong that non-Americans for the most part do not hate individual Americans or their culture, freedom, and commercial spirit. On the contrary, people in other most places seem to have a warm affection for Americans in their private capacity. Polls repeatedly show this, including polls done in Arab countries.

That leaves only one real object of foreign hostility, U.S. foreign policy. And let’s face it, what’s not to dislike? Since the end of World War II, a succession of American presidents and their diplomatic and military minions have treated much of the world like slow, pitiable

stepchildren badly in need of their guidance. If their governments are following unwise policies, have no fear: an American president will set them right. And if they elect the wrong leaders, he will come to the rescue with a timely regime change. From the Dominican Republic to Iran, it's happened repeatedly. But most Americans pay no attention. As the songwriter satirist Tom Lehrer put it,

For might makes right,
And 'til they've seen the light,
They've got to be protected,
All their rights respected,
'Til somebody we like can be elected.

You can find the details in Stephen Kinzer's new book, *Overthrow*.

The point here is that when Kagan writes about anti-Americanism, he's deliberately using an equivocal term in order to elicit unthinking, knee-jerk anti-anti-Americanism in his readers. He likes the imperial U.S. foreign policy, so when foreign people express their hatred for it, Kagan and his ilk misdirect us to think the foreigners hate us as individuals. The apologists for empire count on you not to examine the matter too closely, because if you did, you might see the merit in what the foreigners are saying.

America once signified the ideals of individual freedom, peace, and nonintervention. But if, as Kagan believes, Americanism now means imperialism, then good Americans should be "anti-American" too.

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This article was originally published in June 2006.