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## **The French Got It Right This Time** **by Sheldon Richman**

The American put-downs of the French over their unwillingness to sign up for the Coalition of the Willing are a little too glib for my tastes. There's the story of the American who asked the French citizen if he speaks German. When told no, the American says, "You're welcome." Then there's the one about the American who asks if the French citizen wants all Americans out of his country — including the dead ones.

These are cheap debating points. They clarify nothing. They are home-crowd-pleasers and that is all.

To see this, we can come up with counter-anecdotes: The Frenchman asks the American if he speaks with a British accent, and when told no, he replies, "You're welcome." Or the Frenchman might tell the American that the Germans couldn't have conquered France in 1940 had the United States not entered World War I in 1917, because the Nazis would never have come to power had that war ended with a negotiated settlement, which U.S. entry foreclosed.

Another point that eludes the American side is that gratitude is no reason to follow someone off to war. Liberating France from the Nazis was a nice thing to do, but it is not nice to demand slavish support for U.S. foreign policy in return. Going to war is a serious matter. One should have a better reason for doing it than repaying an old debt. The congressional chatter about punishing France by restricting its wine and water exports is an exercise in pettiness, not to mention a violation of the rights of Americans.

It is regularly suggested that France's abstention from the Coalition of the Willing (who comes up with these idiotic names?) has much to do with its Iraqi oil contracts. It probably does, but this criticism slices two ways. If the French government can let oil and money set its foreign-policy agenda, why not the U.S. government? American exceptionalism sometimes goes to ridiculous

extremes. No one in this country has a scintilla of trouble imagining that the French are motivated by a wish to protect their access to oil. But suggest that the U.S. government might have something similar in mind and you could be accused of uttering fighting words. “America wouldn’t do that!” Well, why not? Are American politicians uniquely virtuous and incapable of acting on a base motive? That’s a touching piece of faith, but let’s see some evidence. The U.S. war record runs in the other direction. If American foreign-policy makers differ from their European counterparts it is in their ability to delude themselves into believing that they are pursuing a selfless cause. Certain American companies stand to gain multimillion-dollar contracts when control of Iraqi oil changes hands and the infrastructure needs rebuilding after the coming war. Many of those companies have ties to the Bush administration. It is not cynicism — just realism — that connects those dots. Scoffing at the idea that oil is part of the president’s war equation is not the same as refuting it.

The criticism of French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder is plagued by another difficulty. The French and German people overwhelmingly oppose the war. Those countries are democracies. Does the pro-war chorus expect Chirac and Schroeder to defy their people’s wishes? Apparently democracy is only for Iraq.

Usually, Americans have no reason to defer to the French or the other Europeans. Most countries in Europe have sunk further into the sludge of socialism than America has, and their economic conditions show it. Their respect for civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and press, is weak. Their enthusiasm for such things as the bogus Kyoto “global warming” treaty is groundless. Their ability to make themselves think that they care less about money than the Americans do is about equal to the Americans’ ability to make themselves think that war is a humanitarian gesture.

That being said, on the subject of war in Iraq, the French and Germans have got it right — regardless of their motives.

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