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Boycott the Boycotters **by Sheldon Richman**

I'm not much for consumer boycotts, but if I were to boycott anyone, it would be those who are calling on Americans to boycott the French. Chief among them is the Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly. Since I already don't watch his program, I guess I can't boycott him. But I would if I could.

O'Reilly and others want Americans to lay off French products because France's president, Jacques Chirac, didn't parrot the Bush line on war with Iraq. He says we should buy Poland Spring bottled water rather than Evian and not vacation in France. Will that change the French government's policy? No, O'Reilly says. "This isn't trying to influence policy. This is payback."

Payback? How so? Regardless of what one thought of the Bush administration's policy or the Chirac administration's dissent, one should immediately see the problem with the campaign: it wants to punish French individuals for what their government did. How absurd. You don't like Chirac, so you "retaliate" by harming French people working in the private sector to satisfy American consumers? I hope the smart bombs in Iraq were more accurate than that.

Even if it hurts the French government by lowering tax revenues, it's a bit like shooting a hostage to kill the hostage-taker. The morality is dubious, to say the least.

O'Reilly makes an exception for French-owned hotels in the United States. He correctly points out that boycotting them would harm the Americans who work there. Not all of O'Reilly's allies agree with him. Stephen Moore, president of the Club for Growth, upped the ante on O'Reilly's program by calling for a boycott of those hotels too. It goes to show that just when you thought things couldn't get more absurd, they do.

O'Reilly has not quite thought out his case. When John Magnus, a trade expert, was invited on the program to debate the issue, he pointed out that "the vast bulk of what France sends to us is not identifiably French by the time it gets to consumers and would be very difficult to catch with a boycott." These include chemicals and engine parts. To distract viewers from that stinging point, O'Reilly noted that the French make profits of \$9 billion a year from exports to the United States.

He needs a course in sound economics. In a free exchange each party gains more in value than he gives up. If that were not true, the transaction wouldn't occur. The French can make \$9 billion in profits from Americans only by offering things we want to buy — things we prefer to whatever else we could have bought. If someone buys Evian water rather than Poland Spring, he demonstrates a preference for it. In other words, Americans do not make sacrifices so the French can earn profits. American consumers and French producers all benefit from their exchanges. To harm them we have to harm ourselves.

Trade does more than benefit the immediate parties. It encourages peaceful social cooperation and the division of labor that makes us prosperous. The great thing about free trade (as opposed to state-managed trade) is that it enables people to deal directly with each other, outside the purview of governments. It de-politicizes human relations. This is good because governments are divisive and destructive of social cooperation. Anything they do (beginning with taxation) entails the use of force against peaceful, productive people. Governments can't give anyone anything without first taking it from someone else. In countless ways governments stifle enterprise and trade, and generate envy and resentment. Trade is positive-sum: all parties benefit. Government is at best zero-sum: one man's gain is other men's loss.

Considering the blessings of free international trade, the idea of disrupting it over politics is appalling. It is ridiculous to boycott someone's goods because his government stayed out of a war. O'Reilly might reply that the French people themselves opposed the war. But that doesn't save the boycott campaign from absurdity. A significant number of Americans and others around the world opposed the war. Should we boycott them too? Once you go down that road, there is no place to stop.

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