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Unmasking the ugly 'anti-American'

Strong critics of U.S. foreign policy often encounter charges of "anti-Americanism." Even though vast numbers of people in the United States disagree with Washington's assumptions and military actions, some pundits can't resist grabbing onto a timeworn handle of pseudo-patriotic demagoguery.

In a typical outburst before the war on Iraq last spring, Rush Limbaugh told his radio audience: "I want to say something about these anti-war demonstrators. No, let's not mince words, let's call them what they are — anti-American demonstrators."

Weeks later, former Congressman Joe Scarborough, a Republican now rising through the ranks of talking heads, said on MSNBC: "These leftist stooges for anti-American causes are always given a free pass. Isn't it time to make them stand up and be counted for their views, which could hurt American troop morale?"

Today, in an era when the sun never sets on deployed American troops, the hoary epithet is not only a rhetorical weapon against domestic dissenters or foreign foes. It's also useful for brandishing against allies. Oddly, in recent months, across the narrow spectrum of U.S. mainstream punditry, even European unity has been portrayed as "anti-American."

An extensive article by Andrew Sullivan at the outset of the summer, in the mildly liberal *New Republic*, warned that "with the unveiling of a new federalist constitution for a 'United States of Europe' in June, the anti-American trend will be subtly but profoundly institutionalized." Sullivan added: "It's past time that Americans wake up and see this new threat for what it is."

Similar noises have come from right-wing outlets such as *The Weekly Standard*. Under the stern headline "America needs a serious Europe policy," a contributing editor declared that "the anti-American drift of the EU is cause for concern. At a minimum, it should lead Washington to rethink its traditional enthusiasm for greater European integration. Much as British entry into the euro zone might make life easier for American businesses (and tourists), it is sure to make life more difficult for American diplomats." And, the article could have added, for American war planners.

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The elastic "anti-American" label stretches along a wide gamut. The routine aim is to disparage and stigmatize activities or sentiments that displease policymakers in Washington. Thus, "anti-American" has spanned from al-Qaida terrorists, to angry Iraqis tiring of occupation, to recalcitrant German and French leaders, to Labor Party backbenchers in Britain's House of Commons.

Any Americans gauged to be insufficiently supportive of U.S. government policies may also qualify for similar aspersions. (During a debate on CNN International this year, a fervent war supporter proclaimed me to be a "self-hating American.")

The officials now running Washington are intoxicated with priorities that involve spending more than \$1 billion a day on the U.S. military. Meanwhile, the media support for de facto empire-building is tinged with sometimes-harsh criticism — without urging forthright resistance to a succession of wars largely driven by the USA. In many cases, the fear of being called "anti-American" seems to match tacit enthusiasm for visions of pax Americana.

A few weeks before he became the New York Times executive editor, Bill Keller wrote in a June 14 essay about the Iraq intelligence debacle: "The truth is that the information-gathering machine designed to guide our leaders in matters of war and peace shows signs of being corrupted. To my mind, this is a worrisome problem, but not because it invalidates the war we won. It is a problem because it weakens us for the wars we still face."

"The wars we still face" are chronically touted as imperatives. In the months and years ahead, many commentators will keep equating opposition to military actions with "anti-Americanism."

But the fog of such rhetoric cannot hide destructive agendas. A lengthy mid-summer report in the Los Angeles Times concluded that top Pentagon officials "are studying the lessons of Iraq closely — to ensure that the next U.S. takeover of a foreign country goes more smoothly."

A special assistant to Donald Rumsfeld was upbeat. "We're going to get better over time," said Lawrence Di Rita. "We've always thought of post-hostilities as a phase" apart from combat, but "the future of war is that these things are going to be much more of a continuum. ... We'll get better as we do it more often."

While political commanders plan to "do it more often," those of us who oppose them can expect to hear that we're "anti-American." ■

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