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The Paradox of American Power:

Why The World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone

by Joseph S. Nye Jr.

A Book Review Submitted To

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Book Review

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America, in the twenty-first century, will not be able to rely on its traditional military and economic power, or what author Joseph S. Nye refers to in his book, *The Paradox of American Power: Why The World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*, as hard power, in order to remain the dominant country in the world. Nye argues that because of strong economic competition from the European Union and Japan and the destructive capability of nuclear weapons, America will have to rely more on using soft power to gain influence. Soft power entails the spread of American cultural values, including democracy, human rights, and a free expression of ideas to other parts of the world in order to influence events and actions by governments and people in other countries so that they more closely reflect those values shared by Americans.

The United States has used mediums such as Hollywood films, student exchanges, and the Internet to increase its soft power. With the spread of the information revolution to new parts of the globe, Nye asserts that the Internet will in the future play an even bigger role than it has at the start of the twenty-first century in spreading America's democratic ideals, as more people, especially those in authoritarian countries, are exposed to ideas that originate outside of their government. In addition to the spread of information, Nye argues that not restricting immigration, as many Americans have desired, is also a necessary aspect of increasing America's soft power. He believes that immigration is an important part of American power because immigrants will spread their culture to America and then American culture will, in part, reflect the culture of the rest of the world, making the rest of the world want to follow America's lead.

Nye also finds it necessary for America, in order to increase its soft power, to cooperate with the international community because of an increasing number of transnational corporations and transnational actors, such as terrorists that take power away from governments. This was a lesson Nye believed that America learned after the terrorist attacks against America in September 2001. However, after the publication of Nye's book, President George W. Bush embarked on a crusade on his own in March 2003 to find weapons of mass destruction he believed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein possessed. Bush used the pretense that Hussein's weapons posed an imminent threat to the security of the United States.

President Bush embarked on this mission unilaterally, without the support of the international community, namely the United Nations. The UN, along with member countries, including Russia, Germany, and France, wanted to wait longer to make sure that Hussein had the weapons of mass destruction that President Bush claimed he had. This unilateral leadership exhibited by George W. Bush contrasts with the multilateral support that his father, President George HW Bush had in 1991 when the international community of the United Nations embraced the challenge to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. Nye believes that if America acts unilaterally in militaristic operations, it will lose its cultural appeal and drive other countries into alliances that would not only balance but check American power. In this case, Russia, Germany, and France have acted as an alliance. For the war on terrorism to be successful, Nye believes that the international community must be united, since "the United States lacks both the international and domestic prerequisites to resolve conflicts that are internal to other societies, and to monitor and control transnational transactions that threaten Americans at home" (Nye 2002: 40). This cooperation is especially important in the information age.

With the relative affordability of computers and the fast speed at which information travels on them, more people are able to play a role in foreign policy. As cable news networks have illustrated, terrorists have spread their propaganda on web sites they have created to promote the recruiting of future terrorists who object to American cultural values. In this manner, terrorists have gained soft power for their beliefs of anti-Americanism at the expense of the host country they live in. However, the spread of information has also had a positive impact around the world as it has given people in authoritarian countries, such as China, a way to get information that is otherwise restricted to them. This information that they are able to get through the Internet has allowed American cultural beliefs to spread to more parts of the world than ever before and, as a result, has the benefit of making America safer because as new generations around the world are being educated and grow-up on Western values, they will be less likely to support terrorists or other groups who want to curb American power. Nye explains that “when [American] policies avoid arrogance and stand for values others admire [America’s] soft power is bolstered” (Nye 2002: 73). Seemingly, George W. Bush did not understand this message before he decided to invade Iraq, acting arrogantly by claiming that he did not need the support of the United Nations.

Globalization of American values to more parts of the world, fostered by the global information revolution, has increased America’s influence in the world. America’s global leadership allows America’s economic, military, social, and environmental attitudes to rub off on the rest of the world. Nye believes that America’s ethnic diversity, fostered by its immigration policy, make it the natural leader for the international community. The spread of American culture to other countries, such as opening a Walmart in Japan, while catering to products needed by Japanese society, allows American cultural values, such as bargain shopping, to rub off on other societies.

At the same time, however, Nye explains that America can lose its global influence because of poor policies, such as poor emission standards, which result in an increase in global warming that has a negative impact around the globe. Nye explains that with economic forces like the European Union that have matched American economic power, America will not be able to assert the same control it did at the end of World War II. This control will also shift away from the state, towards non-governmental actors as more people gain access to more information that will empower them to play a role in their country's foreign policy. He also warns that America will have to make sure that the globalization of its values does not infringe on the sovereignty of other countries, otherwise opposition to American policies and culture will develop.

Nye believes that America is in a good position to continue as the dominant country in the world well into the twenty-first century as long as it follows multilateral policies which, as of late, the Bush administration has not. Nye also does not believe that the country is as divided as many intellectuals believe it is, instead blaming the media for portraying more of the negative than the positive in the country. He explains that before the September 2001 attacks against America, "the nation had made tangible progress toward more than two-thirds of seventy or more significant domestic goals" (Nye 2002: 113). However, the close election results in 2000 and 2004 reflect that the country is very much divided in ideology between the two major parties for direction in America. This could explain why the nation has not achieved one-third of its domestic goals.

Migration to America has often been blamed for establishing a cultural divide in the country. Nye objects to this view, however. He believes that immigration can only have a positive result by increasing America's soft power. He claims that immigrants will speak favorably of America when they speak to their relatives back in their native country. He also contends that "communications and market forces still produce a

powerful incentive for mastering the English language and accepting a degree of assimilation” (Nye 2002: 118). However, this just is not the case. For example, pedestrian walk signs have been changed in South Florida to illustrate walk symbols instead of words so that English will no longer be necessary for a simple task, such as crossing the street. In addition, many American businesses, on their answering machines, will ask whether an individual wants to speak in English or in Spanish. Despite the cultural divide that multiculturalism creates, it is not necessarily a bad thing; as Nye has shown it does increase America’s influence on the rest of the world. It just seems that he has gotten carried away with his concept of soft power, trying to apply it, even when the argument is clearly illogical. Nye is right, however, that public indifference towards international affairs can be dangerous because it allows interest groups with an agenda of their own to play a greater role. This was illustrated when interest groups convinced Congress to withhold payment of membership fees to the United Nations, despite the fact that the majority of the public supports the United Nations.

Nye attests that “72 percent of the public think the United States should not take action alone in international crises if it does not have the support of allies” (Nye 2002: 133). This, however, was not the case during the recent invasion of Iraq by George W. Bush, as the majority of Americans were initially supportive of the invasion. Nye convincingly makes the case that America needs the international community because there are problems, like narcotrafficking, the spread of AIDS, and increasing global terrorism that cross borders and cannot be dealt with by one country, even if it is as powerful as the United States. Nye explains in his “grand strategy” for expressing American power that while America has to look out for its own safety first, it also has to make policies that do not aggravate or ignore the rights and opinions of other countries. To create such policies, Nye believes that the US has to provide “global public goods,”

that can benefit the international community, such as “maintain[ing] the balance of power in important regions...maintain[ing] international rules and institutions... [and] act[ing] as a convenor of coalitions and mediator of disputes,” not become the creator of disputes as George W. Bush has done” (Nye 2002: 147). Nye also asserts that America needs to spread its cultural values of human rights and democracy in order to exert its power for the global good. But he warns, “If [America’s] campaign against terrorism is seen as unilateral...it will likely fail...” (Nye 2002: 145).

In the *Paradox of American Power: Why The World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone*, author Joseph S. Nye, the Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, provides excellent, logical reasoning to explain why international cooperation is essential in the nuclear age and how the information revolution can increase America’s influence by spreading America’s ideas to more parts of the world. However, at times he can get carried away in trying to sell his concept of soft power. The overall reading of the book can get quite repetitive in many areas, reading almost like separate essays. But the repetition does help to hammer home the importance of soft power. At two hundred and twenty-two pages, this book is filled with thought provoking information that is useful to anyone in a diplomatic role and/or anyone who wishes to learn the importance of cooperation with the international community. It is also effective in explaining how America can lose its influence over the international community by disregarding the opinions of other countries and by acting unilaterally.