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SOFT POWER

The Means to Success in World Politics
Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

When Pierre Laval, French foreign minister in May 1935, suggested to Joseph Stalin that he might encourage Catholicism in the Soviet Union in order to mollify Pope Pius XI, Stalin delivered a pointed rejoinder. "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?" Nearly 70 years later, eulogists for Pope John Paul II emphasized repeatedly his influence on the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s and, by extension, the eventual collapse of Soviet authority in eastern Europe. Though the papacy did not have army divisions, it had real power of a different sort.

This real power of a different sort is the subject of Joseph S. Nye, Jr.'s latest book, Soft Power. Nye, a political scientist, is dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. This is not his first exploration of the concept. He previously addressed it in the books Bound to Lead (1990) and The Paradox of American Power (2002), as well as several articles.

The main purpose of Soft Power is to explain what soft power actually means. For Nye, the world is a game board with three levels. The first is that of military power, where the United States clearly predominates. The second is that of economic power, where the US is strong but so are China, Japan, and the European Union. The third is the realm of transnational issues, including terrorism, crime, disease, climate, and the like. In this area power is widely dispersed, and even nonstate actors have roles. Playing on the top two levels of the game board requires hard power. Playing on the third, where Nye now sees the real game, requires soft power.

Believing commentators have misunderstood the term, Nye clarifies that soft power is about attracting others to your side by getting them to want the outcomes you want. He distinguishes this from hard power, which involves coercion or inducement, and from persuasion by argument. The key is attraction. Essential resources for soft power are those things that produce attraction, including a country's culture (both high and mass), its domestic political values and policies (when those values appear compatible), and its foreign policies (when those are seen as legitimate). Countries or nonstate actors can acquire soft power and then use it to assemble supporters. Nye admits that its use may not yield short-term results. Yet in an
era of instantaneous communications and the potential access of terrorists to weapons of mass destruction, however, Nye believes that soft power is indispensable for the preservation of US values.

The other purpose of Soft Power is to recommend substantive changes in the application of US foreign policy. Repelled by the awkward diplomacy of the Iraq War but sharing the administration's view of the great danger from international terrorism, Nye urges a return to the combination of hard and soft power used so effectively during the Cold War. He argues for a multilateral approach on major issues which will secure legitimacy and which, in turn, will attract allies. He also contemplates the development of new or refined diplomatic tools with which to market the US. Nye presupposes that current administration officials will continue to squander US soft power resources through unilateral actions. Rather than disregard it, Nye argues, these officials must engage soft power. Only with both kinds of power, he believes, can the US effectively counter Islamic extremism and attract moderate Muslim states.

Nye's argument, however, stumbles on two important points. First, he is ambiguous about exactly how (and which) new communications technologies have had transformative effects upon world affairs, and why these transformations are substantively more important than others going back to the telegraph in the 19th century. This is a fundamental part of the argument, but one glossed over too quickly.

Second, his discussion of nonstate actors is too abbreviated. He rightly emphasizes that charitable nongovernmental organizations, religious groups, and international organizations can have soft power. But left unaddressed are very relevant for-profit transnational corporations, whose lifestyle marketing has tremendous significance. He also constrains his analysis of malevolent organizations to just militant Islam without addressing other international terrorist or criminal groups.

Scholars will find his case for soft power engaging and worthy of further research. General readers will find in this work a cautionary tale. Nye has laid out a convincing argument as to why the US cannot afford to neglect its soft power. Implicitly this is also a warning for other advanced liberal democracies. In an active war against Islamofascism, those who might squander their own soft power by failing, for example, to deliver promised aid to tsunami victims would do well to read Nye's work closely.

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