n his latest book, Joseph Nye presents a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted dimensions of power and advances a framework for what he calls “liberal realism.” Nye writes for the “intelligent reader” rather than an academic audience and offers a set of recommendations for a smart power strategy in the 21st century.1 Smart power, he explains, is “the combination of the hard power of coercion and payment with the soft power of persuasion and attraction.”

According to Nye, the problem confronting all states in the new century is the increasing number of threats (for example, international financial instability and terrorism) outside their control resulting from a diffusion of power from states to nonstate actors. Military power has not become obsolete, but will continue to underpin international order and shape the agenda and political calculations of leaders. Economic resources will remain a tool of smart power as well, although nonstate actors and market vicissitudes will constrain its exercise. The use of soft power (for example, diplomacy, public diplomacy, exchanges, assistance/training programs) to attract and persuade foreign publics will be critical in a global information age. The cyber age diffuses power, placing more dangers outside the control of even powerful states. States will still play the dominant role on the world stage, but that stage will become more crowded and unruly. In coming decades, the rising power of other state and nonstate actors will challenge a still preponderant America. The United States, therefore, will need “power with others as much as power over others. America’s capacity to maintain alliances and create networks will be an important dimension of the nation’s hard and soft power.”

In what he calls liberal realism, Nye proposes an American “smart power strategy” centered on multilateralism and partnering in the context of a global information age. Based on a synthesis of interests and values, this strategy gives priority to national interests, but considers values “an intangible national interest.” Tradeoffs and compromises are inevitable, Nye concedes. While according an unquestionable primacy to securing national survival, his grand strategy recommends all manner of multilateral, economic initiatives.

Nye notes that his concept of smart power has influenced the Obama administration’s policy. And so it has. In two speeches before the Council on Foreign Relations,2 Secretary of State Hillary Clinton outlined the smart power strategy “central to our thinking and our decision-making.” The “heart of America’s mission in the world today,” she stated, is to exercise “American leadership to solve problems in concert with others.” Taking a multilateral approach, the administration will mobilize all available resources in a “blend of principle and pragmatism” to revitalize international institutions, reach beyond governments to nonstate actors and people, and join others to solve shared problems. Setting forth an ambitious global agenda in a “new American Moment,” Secretary Clinton seemed heedless of limits and the need to set priorities. America must do it all. “What do we give up on? What do we put on the backburner?” she asked. Council President Richard Haass raised the awkward question of money. With U.S. debt nearing the size of gross domestic product and deficits running at $1.5 trillion a year, Haass objected, how can America conduct foreign policy as if it had unlimited resources. The Secretary answered that making the right decisions will be “very tough.”

Neither the Secretary’s agenda nor Nye’s book takes sufficient account of the Nation’s fiscal peril and its consequences for America’s role in the world. Nye claims that the country can solve its debt problem with consumption taxes and expenditure cuts to pay for entitlement programs once the economy recovers. He overlooks the daunting political task of reducing entitlement programs themselves, the main driver of the country’s unsustainable debt. Richard Haass and Roger Altman have issued a dire fiscal forecast entailing huge spending cuts and substantial tax hikes, and Michael Mandelbaum has written a bracing book explaining how economic constraints will inevitably curtail America’s post–World War II activist foreign policy with baleful effects for the stability and prosperity of the world.3

Nye counsels restraint in democracy promotion, but he elevates our values to an “intangible national interest,” and his liberal realism invites an ambitious foreign policy. The Obama administration’s smart power strategy joins interests and values. Secretary Clinton declares that “democratic values are a cornerstone of our foreign policy” and rejects what she calls a false choice “between our security and our values.”4 This expansive view of foreign policy recalls the hubris of “democratic transformation,” what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice termed a “uniquely American realism,” according to which our national interests require an international order reflecting our values.5
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This expansive view of foreign policy recalls the habits of “democratic transformation,” what Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice termed a “uniquely American realism,” according to which our national interests require an international order reflecting our values.
During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Senator Barack Obama often distinguished between the bad war of choice (Iraq) and the good war of necessity (Afghanistan). On March 19, a U.S.-led coalition initiated a humanitarian war against Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, launching Operation Odyssey Dawn to create a no-fly zone to neutralize Qadhafi’s air force and enforce an arms embargo in order to protect civilians from his suppression of rebel forces. In a March 28 speech to the Nation, President Obama justified this optional war in a third Muslim country, asserting America’s responsibility to mankind and “who we are. … Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as President, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.”

As he spoke, the President proclaimed mission accomplished for our limited objective and transferred leadership to our North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners. However, the shape of Obama’s “coalition of the willing” and of the mission itself is unclear. The war has divided NATO and demonstrated the irrelevance of the European Union, from its inception the creature of French foreign policy. The war against Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, 19, a U.S.-led coalition initiated a humanitarian intervention, particularly if Marginal strategic interest. The United States is strong enough to get away with it. Nor will the United States punish a far more monstrous regime than Qadhafi’s—North Korea. Kim Jong-il knows the reason. That is why he is not going to give up his nuclear weapons. The ancient Athenians, who also boasted of who they were and their values, taught the Melians a harsh geopolitical lesson. Practical people understand, Athenian envoys informed the Melians, “the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”

Professor Nye hails President Obama’s Libyan war as smart power in action. If he is correct, the future of American power is bleak. Smart power offers a guide to the implementation of foreign policy, but smart power will be to no avail if policy goals are dumb. Armed humanitarian intervention, particularly if irreversible, and opportunistic regime change are profoundly ill-conceived goals for U.S. foreign policy. History will forever remain replete with cruel tyrants and their atrocities. No end exists to humanitarian warmaking for a nation that would assume the moral custodianship of mankind. As Henry Kissinger and James Baker write, “our idealistic goals cannot be the sole motivation for the use of force in U.S. foreign policy. We cannot be the world’s policeman. We cannot use military force to meet every humanitarian challenge that may arise. Where would we stop?”

The United States will not have a credible foreign policy until it adopts a more modest conception of its national interests and ceases to meddle in other states’ domestic affairs in the vain attempt to reform them according to supposed “universal values.” This need for self-restraint becomes more exigent particularly in Muslim lands, where no Lech Walesa or Vaclav Havel waits in the wings to lead. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned, “We have to be very realistic about our capacity to shape the world and to shape other countries that have their own history and their own culture and their own traditions—and particularly, to shape them in our image.”

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams classically stated this policy of American self-restraint in a speech to the House of Representatives on July 4, 1821: “Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [America’s] heart, her beneficences and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. PRISM

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12 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “From Lone Ranger to Smart Arranger,” Politico, April 7, 2011.