

Book Review

The Future of Power

By Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

PublicAffairs, 2011

300 pp., \$27.99

ISBN: 978-1-58648-891-8

REVIEWED BY JOHN W. COFFEY

In his latest book, Joseph Nye presents a comprehensive examination of the multi-faceted 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 unexceptionable primacy to securing national survival, his grand strategy recommends all manner of multinational good works.

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

Dr. John W. Coffey served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy from 1986 to 1988 and as a Civil Servant at the Departments of Commerce and State for 15 years, retiring in 2005.

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

Nor does Nye, beyond a nod to recognizing limits, come to grips with setting priorities among national interests in order to match limited means to ends. As Mandelbaum argues,

given current fiscal straits, we must distinguish between those missions and initiatives vital to national safety and prosperity and those that are merely desirable and, therefore, expendable. Our oldest commitments belong to the first category: U.S. security guarantees and military presence in the Middle East, East Asia, and Europe. Our newer commitments of the last 20 years—nation-building in such places as Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan—are expendable.⁴ Similarly, John Mearsheimer urges a return to America’s traditional “grand strategy of offshore balancing” aimed at preventing a hostile hegemon from dominating the same three vital areas.⁵

Professor Nye’s book has won wide acclaim, yet how new is smart power? Apart from a novel diffusion of power in the cyber age, if smart power means the adroit marshaling of hard and soft resources in a multilateral approach to common problems, what, if not smart power, was the post–World War II American statecraft that created the international security and politico-economic architecture that underlay seven decades of security and prosperity benefiting much of the world?

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.”⁶ 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.⁷

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."⁸

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 are unclear. The war has divided NATO and demonstrated the irrelevance of the European Union, from its inception the creature of French foreign policy. The Arab League, after endorsing the no-fly zone, expressed shock at civilian casualties. Mission creep has expanded the scope of action from protecting civilians to attacking Qadhafi's ground forces and supplies to force regime change. As of this writing, the conflict has ground to a stalemate, while Qadhafi has parried the effects of Allied economic sanctions more successfully than the rebels in the east, and France and Britain, the instigators of the Libyan venture, are running out of ammo. Belatedly, President Obama dispatched Central Intelligence Agency teams and special envoy

Chris Stevens to ascertain just who the rebels are and what additional support they might need. From the start, the administration failed to match the means of limited force to its maximalist goal of regime change, defying a fact of life that in a less risk-averse age, every boy learned on the schoolyard playground: Don't start a fight you can't finish.

Some countries may draw a less benevolent lesson from America's moralistic intervention, as Russia did from President Bill Clinton's Balkan humanitarian intervention.⁹ The bald fact is that Libya is weak and, unlike Saudi Arabia or Bahrain where we have bigger fish to fry,¹⁰ of 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."¹¹

Professor Nye hails President Obama's Libyan war as smart power in action.¹² 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 irresolute, 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?”¹³

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.”¹⁴ 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 benedictions 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.”¹⁵ **PRISM**

Notes

¹ See also Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Future of American Power: Dominance and Decline in Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs* (November–December 2010), 2–12.

² Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Relations,”

Washington, DC, July 15, 2009; and “Remarks on United States Foreign Policy,” Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, September 8, 2010.

³ Roger C. Altman and Richard N. Haass, “American Profligacy and American Power: The Consequences of Fiscal Irresponsibility,” *Foreign Affairs* (November–December 2010), 25–34; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America’s Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010); also “Foreign Policy in an Age of Austerity: A Conversation with Brent Scowcroft,” *The American Interest* (January–February 2010), 30–39.

⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, “In an Era of Tightening Budgets, Can America Remain a Superpower on the Cheap?” *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2011.

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, “Imperial By Design,” *The National Interest* (January–February 2011), 16–34.

⁶ Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Civil Society: Supporting Democracy in the 21st Century,” Krakow, Poland, July 3, 2010; “Remarks on United States Foreign Policy,” Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC, September 8, 2010.

⁷ Condoleezza Rice, “American Realism for a New World,” *Foreign Affairs* (July–August 2008), 3–5. Another architect of the Bush Doctrine sees its progeny in the Obama Doctrine: Michael Gerson, “In Search of the Obama Doctrine,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2011. A key Bush advisor on Iraq warns of parallels in Libya: Meghan O’Sullivan, “Will Libya Become Obama’s Iraq?” *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2011.

⁸ Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on Libya,” National Defense University, Washington, DC, March 28, 2011.

⁹ See Michael Mandelbaum, “Modest Expectations: Facing Up to Our Russia Options,” *The American Interest* (May–June 2009), 52.

¹⁰ See Joby Warrick and Michael Birnbaum, “As Bahrain Stifles Protest Movement, U.S.’s Muted Objections Draw Criticism,” *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2011.

COFFEY

¹¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954), Book V, 360.

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

¹³ Henry A. Kissinger and James A. Baker III, "Grounds for U.S. Military Intervention," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 2011.

¹⁴ Quoted in Michael Gerson, "The Paradox of Bob Gates," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2011.

¹⁵ Quoted in Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 35.