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Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (Book Review)

Donna A. Cristo
Sacred Heart University

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BOOK REVIEW

Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. NY: PublicAffairs, 2004, pp. 175.

In *Soft Power*, Joseph Nye advocates the benefits of using soft power in US foreign policy. His definition of soft power is as follows: "A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries - admiring values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness - want to follow it (p. 5)." Of course, this is diametrically opposed to the use of hard power, which is predicated on the use of coercion, inducement, and at its most negative, force. Soft power can only be used if others acknowledge this power, and those who wish to use it, can shape it as a means to achieving their goals. As the author notes, in a free society, soft power cannot and is not shaped by those who wish to use its powerful influence. The author states that "much of American soft power has been produced by Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft and Michael Jordan (p. 17)."

Soft power waxes and wanes based on world geopolitical events and the world's perception, rightly or wrongly, of the country in question. Fareed Zakaria (2003), in his expose in *Newsweek*, "Why America Scares the World and What to Do About it," states that America's soft power has been eroding since the end of the cold war. The cold war kept Europe pro-American as their distrust of the former Soviet Union was far greater than their distrust of the US abusing its immense economic and military power. However, the end of the cold war, which left only one superpower remaining, the US, has caused a widening worry that the US would shape and dominate the world; thus, this has caused a prevailing feeling of deep and widening mistrust from the rest of the world.

Although worthwhile, the strategy assessment of the US's use of soft power is not a new or novel idea. The management and psychology literature has long touted the benefits of using referent power (soft power) over coercive power (hard power). In their classic article, "The Bases of Social Power," Raven and French (1959), describe the five bases of power: reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert. Referent power is based on identification and attraction, and yields the greatest influence in relation to the other bases along as this strong attraction exists. The authors point out that referent power has the broadest range of power. The most negative power is coercion, which decreases attraction, and thus referent power. In relation to the rest of the world, there are some countries and individuals that are attracted to the US and its culture and others that are not. This is especially true of Islamic fundamentalists who believe that the US's

secular culture is evil and corrupt. Moreover, many European countries have long shared feelings that their cultures are far superior to that of the US.

The major failure of the Bush administration in gaining broad support for the war against Iraq may in fact be a failure in assessing the strength of the referent power of the US, which had been eroding for many years prior to the administration. Although it would have been best to move ahead with broad support using soft power, the US could not use what they did not have. The fault of the Bush administration could lie in their immediate use of coercive power without the exploration of the other bases of power before declaring war. But it is important to note that France, Germany, and Russia had their own self-interest in mind when they opposed the war against Iraq. These countries had a long history of trying to weaken the containment of Iraq to ensure that they could have good trading relations with it.

The book is well written and well researched, and is a worthwhile read. It certainly would generate a great deal of introspection and discussion. The book explores the sources of American soft power as well as the sources of the Soviet Union, Europe, and Asia. The author comments and assesses how soft power should be wielded, noting full well that there are many limitations to its creation and its use. As Nye states,

Soft power is more difficult to wield, many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audiences. Moreover, soft-power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcome. (p. 99)

These difficulties aside, the US has been sadly lacking in its creation of soft power. In its arrogance at being the only superpower remaining, the US has ignored the need to create soft power, and thereby has dismissed its use in obtaining its long-term strategic goals in foreign policy. Nevertheless, there are times when coercive power is necessary and is the only means to create a successful outcome. However, the creation of government created and sanctioned soft power would go a long way in accomplishing goals without diminishing credibility. Nye concludes that the US needs a better strategy for wielding soft power and that the US needs to combine hard and soft power to meet the new challenges in years ahead. I agree. The tough part will be in the execution.

References

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DONNA A. CRISTO
Pace University
Sacred Heart University

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