

When Hard Power Undermines Soft Power

JOE NYE, DEAN OF THE KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT AT HARVARD, IS ALSO A FORMER CHAIRMAN OF THE CIA'S NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE COUNCIL. HIS MOST RECENT BOOK IS *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. (PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2004).

NPQ | In your recent book, *Soft Power*, you wrote: "Politics has become a contest of competitive credibility. The world of traditional power politics is typically about whose military or economy wins. Politics in an information age may ultimately be about whose story wins."

No WMD have been found in Iraq. The occupation is deteriorating. Then there are the photos of abused and tortured Iraqi prisoners. Has America's story lost?

JOE NYE | I'm afraid so. We are losing credibility. The story we told about why we went into Iraq — to find and destroy WMD — has turned out to be very thin. Part of that story was also about bringing democracy and human rights to Iraq. Instead, the story that has emerged is documented in those photos, which shattered US credibility.

All this has been very costly to American soft power — our power of attraction as an open, democratic society and market economy — as opinion polls throughout the world show. American standing has lost 30 points on average in European countries — including our supposed allies such as Britain, Spain and Italy — since the end of the Clinton administration. We've done much worse in the Islamic world. In Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, three-quarters of those polled had a positive image of the US in 2000. Now, since the Iraq war, that has tumbled to 15 percent.

Polls show that more people in Jordan and Pakistan are attracted to Osama bin Laden than George W. Bush, which is worrying since these are frontline states in the struggle against Al Qaeda.

NPQ | Is this the worst crisis of American soft power in your memory?

NYE | It is analagous to Vietnam. We have to remember how unpopular the US was toward the end of the Vietnam War. My Lai, the massacre of women and children, was worse than what has happened at Abu Ghraib.

Yet, within a decade, America had recovered from the loss of soft power. But we did it by changing our policy and projecting new policies, such as President Jimmy Carter's focus on human rights in foreign policy.

So, it is possible to recover. It won't be easy. And it won't be possible without a

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change in policy. Above all, to recover in the Middle East, we have to return to the kind of push for Middle East peace that nearly came to fruition under Bill Clinton. That is a litmus test.

We're also going to have to live up to our values by not only punishing corporals for the Abu Ghraib abuses. We're going to have go higher up the chain of command to assign responsibility. The fact that we, as an open democracy, are willing to criticize ourselves and take corrective action, is a critical saving grace of the American way; it will restore our credibility like nothing else.

Beyond this, the US needs to be more consultative with other countries and again engage multilateral institutions. A great deal of the loss of American soft power is because others feel we don't take into account their interests in our actions. Arrogance and unilateralism in American foreign policy has cost us.

In short, the damage is reparable. If people were repelled by American culture, that would be hard to change. If they are repelled by our policies, we can change those. It is the fund of good will that comes out of our culture that can turn things around.

NPQ | That may have been more true at an earlier time in American history. But today's postmodern mass culture is hardly appealing to those in the socially conservative Muslim world. When Janet Jackson exposed her breast at the Super Bowl, it was hard enough for many American parents to take, no less an ascetic cleric like Ayatollah Sistani, the Shiite leader in Iraq.

NYE | American popular culture can be repulsive as well as attractive. It is only soft power where it has a positive effect. The mullahs who run Iran are no doubt horrified at Hollywood movies in which divorced women wear bikinis and go to work every day. But, Iranian teenagers want nothing more than a Hollywood video to watch in the privacy of their home.

NPQ | That's a good thing or a bad thing?

NYE | The point is that not all people, even in conservative Islamic countries, are necessarily repelled by American popular culture.

Moreover, a lot of American soft power comes from our "higher culture" such as education and exchange programs. The vast majority of foreign students who study in the US return home with a positive estimation of American life.

NPQ | Would you say that America's soft power is in crisis today because it has been undermined by hard power?

NYE | The way we have gone about using our hard power has undermined our soft power. If we had been less impatient and more consultative going into Iraq, we would have done less damage.

We can now see that the devaluation of soft power can undermine hard power. Because of American arrogance, the democratic Turkish parliament refused to see the war as legitimate and wouldn't allow US troops to launch from their soil. That undermined the hard power strategy of the US in a very concrete way.

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NPQ | What can public diplomacy do to reverse this crisis of American soft power?

NYE | The basic rule of advertising is that you can't sell a lousy product. It will indeed be hard to sell America to the world again unless we change our policies.

Nonetheless, we are barely making the effort. In 2002, the US spent \$150 million on all the exchange and broadcasting programs that comprise public diplomacy. That is about two hours worth of the annual defense budget. We spend 400 times more on hard power than soft power.



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The Degeneration of War

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NEWHAVEN, CONN.—I recently participated in a fascinating international conference at Yale University entitled “The Degeneration of War 1914–1945.” Scholars at the conference discussed a number of disturbing case studies from both World War I and World War II where fighting had become much more deadly, military discipline had declined, and human rights had become increasingly abused. While the focus was limited to those two struggles, it is clear that the concept of the degeneration of war can easily be transferred to other times and places.