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Only American Voters Can Reinvigorate U.S. Soft Power: A Rumination After Joe Nye's Memorial Service ^[1]

I recently attended a memorial service at Harvard University for my one-time boss and academic mentor Joseph Nye, who readers doubtless know died unexpectedly this past spring. It drove home not only how professionally respected and admired Joe was—a statement of the bleeding obvious—but how universally adored he was, including of course by me, as a mensch of the first order, although I'm not sure that anyone ever called him that to his face.

But only a mensch could have formally conceptualized, taught, strategized, and advocated soft power, with its astute, acute blending of national self-interest and a confident appeal to the better angels of America's and the world's nature—the alchemical distillation of the “liberal realism” with which he identified—as forcefully, even evangelically, as Joe did over the three-and-a-half decades since he first presented it in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* and subsequently expanded on it, most notably in his slim but conceptually rich eponymous 2004 book.

However, it was as obvious to Joe as to any other observer that the emergence of Donald Trump posed a direct threat to America's enormous and varied array of soft power attributes that were at least as important as the country's military and economic might, if not more so, to maintaining U.S. global predominance. An America that was admired and trusted by a critical mass of states and peoples was resistant to the classical realist phenomenon of an overweening, too-powerful state provoking a concerted, sustained containing backlash by a consortium of anxious rivals. Postwar America, for all its manifold shortcomings and hypocrisies, was never perceived as a second coming of Napoleonic France, and though malign revisionist powers would seek to dislodge the U.S. from its apex position in world affairs, it faced no Waterloo.

But Donald Trump's first principles, dating back, let us not forget, to the 1980s, that America was being played for a sucker by clever, unscrupulous allies and client states, intertwined with his equally longstanding admiration for autocrats over democrats and reformers, virtually guaranteed that soft power in its virtuous form would be on the chopping block, and with it America's unchallengeable global preponderance. (Nonetheless, thanks to Trump, a dark, decidedly unvirtuous version of soft power providing succor to malign figures and movements the world over—let us call it “alt-soft power”—began to flourish almost immediately, as I wrote on this website in early 2017. It has of course only gotten worse than even I in my severely pessimism could have predicted at the time.)

It will not surprise anyone that Joe was, in his understated way, clearly despondent over the attack on the principles that he correctly saw as winning and essential for the United States, as is evident from both comments he made in an interview he gave days before he died and

in a posthumously published *Foreign Affairs* article that he co-wrote with his best friend and longtime collaborator, Robert Keohane, poignantly titled “The End of the Long American Century.”

As Joe put it in his April 8, 2025 interview, “I mean, when you come into office and the first things you say are that you’re going to take Greenland from Denmark, a NATO ally, no matter what. Or you say that we’re going to retake the Panama Canal, which reawakens all of the Latin American suspicions about American imperialism. Or you abolish AID, which is an agency which makes Americans look more benign through its assistance. Basically, these suggest that you’re not even thinking about America first, you’re thinking about America alone.” Coming from Joe, noted for his decades of ebullient bullishness that I witnessed daily for three years as his research aide, this was the equivalent of a typical foreign policy analyst declaring that the earth was about to be struck by a planet-killing asteroid.

There is of course much to be despondent about, and I spend much time and energy fretting that the U.S. may have damaged its national reputation to the point that it can never recover. But my and many others’ despair notwithstanding, I believe that while Donald Trump and prominent MAGA-verse illiberal ideologues like Steve Bannon, Curtis Yarvin, Michael Anton and their ilk (potential heir to the presidency J.D. Vance among them) have the upper hand at present and can continue doing an enormous amount of damage to America’s soft power components over the next several years, the clock is, or can be, ticking down on them. But this will come to pass only if the American public can be persuaded that the reinvigoration of U.S. soft power, and with it the restoration of America as the trustworthy apex state, is desirable and, most to the point, essential for the sake of national security and the public’s safety and prosperity. Americans voted Trump in, and of course only they can vote him out, rejecting along with him the aforementioned MAGA-connected ideologues whose reactionary, anti-democratic, and in key ways un-American views on both domestic and international affairs, I contend, would be perceived as repellent by a majority of voters were they clearly, and widely, publicized.

It should be recalled, and emphasized, that while Donald Trump was re-elected fair and square, garnering more votes than the hapless Kamala Harris in the 2024 election (in contrast with his 3 million popular vote loss to Hillary Clinton in 2016), his victory over Harris was by the thinnest of margins, and his vote total did not provide him with a popular majority. This is critically important, because so much of the reputational damage Trump has wrought is due to his wanton shredding of relationships with longtime, natural allies of the United States and two their fellow travelers—Geir Lundestad’s “Empire by Invitation” writ large—and the informed citizens of these countries are aware that it was ordinary Americans who empowered Trump by elevating him to the presidency for a second time.

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It is thus American voters who will have to convince disillusioned peoples across the world

that they have not abandoned the policies and mindset that for eight decades maintained the global commons, stood for the highest human values and aspirations abroad—and just as important at home—even if honoring them far too often in the breach (see e.g. most recently Joe Biden, ostensible tribune of liberal internationalism, providing Israel with the massive weaponry and political cover to commit flagrant war crimes and almost inarguably genocide in Gaza), pushed back against international state and nonstate malefactors, all while performing the hat-trick of ensuring the primacy of the United States in the international system.

The effort to build a clear—and it must be clear—majority of Americans in favor of once again taking up the mantle of (relatively) benevolent global leadership, and thereby reconstruct the sullied U.S. reputation, will necessarily be an uphill one, but it does not have to be unduly steep. President Trump has his hard core of about one-third of American voters that is doubtless immune to any persuasive efforts. The half of the electorate that voted against Trump in 2024 are either not in need of persuasion or can relatively easily be brought around. This leaves about one-sixth of voters who are up for grabs, and for the sake of the United States' existential security right-minded academics, journalist-commentators, influencers, and especially U.S. political figures must prioritize educating them about the critical need for the US to be admired and looked to for leadership rather than feared and distrusted. The core message must be that while an isolationist Fortress America might look invulnerable at first glance, the world will be a lonely and dangerous place without the steadfast allies and associates the United States has counted on for nearly a century, and that America's solo aloofness will only make it more likely that revisionist states will take existentially reckless action in attempting to fill the power vacuum created by a US withdrawal from global leadership.

Hard power by itself is actually relatively easy to accumulate, as demonstrated by the fact that even an utter political and economic basket case like North Korea has been able to keep its neighbors, as well as the U.S., in a perpetual state of anxiety due to its successful nuclear program. Soft power, on the other hand, is quite difficult to amass because of its intangible nature, a fact perhaps lost on Americans, even relatively well-informed ones, because the US has in the past twelve decades developed such a preponderance of this persuasive, attractive, co-optive, seductive power. It did not coalesce easily or spontaneously; rather, it was the end result of strenuous private and public activities the roots of which date back to the deathless words of the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights (e.g. no First Amendment, no Hollywood). But as master investor Warren Buffett has averred, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently." America's reputation has indeed been ruined, and only American voters can re-establish it. They must, for they will fail to do so at the United States' peril, fulfilling Abraham Lincoln's warning that "[i]f destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide."

It will be a useful starting point in recognizing the enduring and indomitable nature of soft power for both the American public and those whose charge is to educate and, yes, persuade them to recall Joe Nye's observation after the Cold War ended concerning the dénouement of Stalin's cynical wartime query, "And how many divisions does the Pope have?" Joe noted that the Soviet Union had collapsed, but the Papacy continued to flourish, a testimonial if there ever was one to the ultimate supremacy of soft power, and the core of a lesson that we academics, journalist-commentators, influencers, and U.S. political figures must energetically and effectively communicate to the unaligned but persuadable segment of the American public. If we fail to persuade them, they in turn will not persuade foreign publics of America's

constancy when it comes to a fealty to its highest principles at home and abroad—which in turn will imperil the security of the United States and indeed perhaps its very survival, along with the survival of human civilization in toto.

Joe Nye understood the stakes, hence his energetic explaining and evangelizing about the necessity of pursuing and fortifying American soft power. We right-minded academics, influencers, policy makers, and politicians understand them as well. In Joe's lamented absence, we must take up his fallen baton and act as soft power's domestic explainers and evangelists, persuading a critical mass of American voters, attracting and co-opting, getting them to want the outcome we want—exploiting our soft power, such as it is, to save and reinvigorate soft power to the world's benefit and, self-interestedly and most to the point, America's benefit. Let us ascend our various pulpits and get to work.
