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Soft Power and Morals in U.S. Foreign Policy

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Soft power is the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power comes primarily from three sources: its culture (when it is attractive to others), its political values such as democracy and human rights (when it lives up to them), and its policies (when they are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others). How a government behaves at home (for example, protecting a free press and the right to protest), in international institutions (consulting others and multilateralism), and in foreign policy (promoting development and human rights and public goods) can attract others by example.

Some hard-core skeptics argue that national interest is all that matters in foreign policy. They portray values and interests as opposing categories, but that is a false dichotomy. Our values are a type of interest, and among the most important because they tell us who we are as a people. Like most people, Americans care more about their co-nationals than foreigners, but that does not mean they are indifferent to the sufferings of other humans. Few would ignore a cry for help from a drowning person because she calls out in a foreign language.

Of course, leaders are constrained by public opinion in a democracy, but they often have considerable leeway to shape policy, and far-sighted leaders understand that our values can be a source of soft power when others see our policies as benign and legitimate. Most foreign policies combine both hard and soft power. The Marshall Plan, for example, relied on hard economic resources

and payments, but it also created a reputation for benignity and far-sightedness that attracted Europeans. As the Norwegian political scientist Geir Lundestad has argued, the American role in postwar Europe may have resembled an empire, but it was "an empire by invitation."

Given the different cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs of Americans, moral reasoning about foreign policy is often hotly contested, and several popular misconceptions add to the confusion. One is the ultra-realist view that ethics has nothing to contribute because there are no real choices in foreign policy and only your own country counts—though that of course is a profound moral choice in itself. Another misconception confuses a president's moral character with his moral consequences, but good people can sometimes make bad decisions and vice versa. Still another misconception makes judgments based on moral intentions and rhetoric rather than results.

As a practical matter, in our daily lives most people make moral judgments along three dimensions: intentions, means, and consequences. Intentions are more than just goals. They include both stated values and personal motives (which may remain hidden). Most people publicly express goals that are noble and worthy, even though their personal motives such as ego and self-interest may subtly corrupt those goals. Moreover, good goals must not only satisfy our values, they also have to pass a feasibility test of prudence. Otherwise, the best of intentions can have disastrous moral consequences. As proverbial wisdom says, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Lyndon Johnson may have had good intentions when he sent American troops to Vietnam, but a leader's good intentions are not proof of what is sometimes misleadingly called "moral clarity." Judgments based on good intentions alone are simply one-dimensional ethics. Ari Fleisher, the press secretary for George W. Bush, praised his boss for the "moral clarity" of his intentions, but more than that is needed for a sound moral evaluation of Bush's 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The second important dimension of moral judgment is means. We speak of means as effective if they achieve our goals, but ethical means also depend upon their quality as well as their efficacy. How do they treat the interests of others? Does a president consider the soft power of attraction and the importance of developing the trust of other countries? When it comes to means, leaders must decide how to combine the hard power of inducements and threats, and the soft power of values, culture, and policies that attract people to their goals. As General James Mattis once warned Congress, if you fail to fund the soft power of the State Department, you will have to buy me more bullets. Using hard power when soft power will do, or using soft power alone when hard power is necessary to protect values, raise serious ethical questions about means.

As for consequences, effectiveness is crucial and involves achieving the country's goals, but ethical consequences must also be good not merely for Americans, but for others as well. "America first" must be tempered by what Thomas Jefferson called "a proper consideration for the opinions of mankind." In practice, effectiveness and ethical means are often closely related. George W. Bush may have had good intentions about bringing democracy to Iraq, but the occupation failed because he lacked moral and effective means to do so. A leader who pursues moral but unrealistic goals or uses ineffective means can produce terrible moral consequences at home and abroad. Presidents with good intentions but weak contextual intelligence and reckless reality-testing sometimes produced bad consequences and ethical failure. Failure to do due diligence is culpable. Good moral reasoning does not judge presidential choices based on their stated intentions or outcomes alone, but on all three dimensions of intentions, means, and consequences.

According to democratic theory, leaders are trustees for the interests of the people who elected them. When Donald Trump declared "America First," it was consistent with democratic theory. But as I argue in Do Morals Matter?, the key question is not whether leaders defend the national interest, but how they define it. There is a major moral difference between a myopic transactional description of the type that Trump tended to favor and a broader and far-sighted definition.

Take for example Harry Truman's espousal of the Marshall Plan after World War II. Rather than narrowly insisting that European allies repay their war loans as the US demanded after World War I, Truman dedicated more than two percent of American gross domestic product to aiding the recovery of European economies through a process that allowed the Europeans to share in the planning. The result was good for Europeans, but it also served America's national interest in preventing Communist control of Western Europe.

Humans are storytellers, and the narratives that presidents use to explain their foreign policies define national identity at home, and can expand the domestic political space for a more enlightened definition of the national interest. Such narratives can also generate the soft power of attraction abroad that creates an enabling environment for the United States. But presidential narratives that show lack of respect for other cultures and religions not only narrow moral discourse at home, but they also weaken American soft power abroad and thus undercut our national interest. That is why the broadening of moral discourse is an important aspect in the assessment of presidents' foreign policies. Reagan had a natural talent for such stories. Trump did not.

Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz, once compared foreign policy to gardening— "the constant nurturing of a complex array of actors, interests and goals." Shultz's successor Condoleezza Rice wanted a more transformational diplomacy, as a landscape architect. There is a role for both images depending on the context, but we should avoid the common mistake of automatically thinking that the transformational architect is a better foreign policy leader—in terms both of effectiveness and ethics—than the careful gardener. As Henry Kissinger put it, "To strike a balance between the two aspects of world order—power and legitimacy—is the essence of statesmanship. Calculations of power without a moral dimension will turn every disagreement into a test of strength . . . Moral prescriptions without concern for equilibrium, on the other hand, tend toward either crusades or an impotent policy tempting challenges; either extreme risks endangering the coherence of the international order itself" Well-meaning interventions that lack realism can alter millions of lives for the worse.

Prudence is a necessary virtue for a good foreign policy, but it is not sufficient. American presidents between the two world wars were prudent when they needed a broader institutional vision. Wilson had such a vision but without sufficient realism. Franklin Roosevelt started without a foreign policy vision but developed one on the job. In a world of rapid technological and social change, just tending the garden is sometimes not enough. A sense of vision and strategy that correctly understands and responds to these new changes is also crucial. In judging a president's record of pursuing a moral foreign policy that makes Americans safer but also makes the world a better place, it is important to look at the full range of their leadership skills, to look at both actions and institutions, commissions and omissions, and to make three-dimensional moral judgments. Even then, we will often wind up with mixed verdicts, but that is the nature of foreign policy.

Looking back over the past seven decades of American primacy, we can see certain patterns in the role of soft power, ethics and foreign policy. All presidents expressed formal goals and values that were attractive to Americans. After all, that is how they got elected. All proclaimed a goal of preserving American primacy. While that goal was attractive to the American public, its morality depended on how it was implemented. Imperial swagger and hubris did not pass the test, but provision of global public goods by the largest state had important moral consequences as well as generating soft power.

The moral problems in the presidents' stated intentions arose more from their personal motives than from their stated formal goals. All too often, personal considerations created a divergence from their formal goals. Johnson and Nixon may have admirably sought the formal goal of protecting South Vietnamese from

Communist totalitarianism, but they also expanded and prolonged the war because they did not want to be "the man who lost Vietnam." How does one justify the expenditure of American and other lives if the motive is to avoid domestic political embarrassment? In contrast, Truman allowed his presidency to be politically weakened by the stalemate in Korea rather than follow MacArthur's advice of using nuclear weapons.

In terms of the three-dimensional moral judgments outlined above, the founding presidents of the post-1945 world order—FDR, Truman, and Eisenhower—all had moral intentions, both in values and personal motives, and largely moral consequences. Where they sometimes fell short was on the dimension of their means involving the use of force. In contrast, the Vietnam era presidents, particularly Johnson and Nixon, rated poorly on their motives, means and consequences. The two post-Vietnam presidents, Ford and Carter, had notably moral foreign policies on all three dimensions but their tenures were brief, and they illustrate that a moral foreign policy is not necessarily the same as an effective one.

The two presidents who presided over the end of the Cold War, Reagan and Bush 41, also scored quite well on all three dimensions of morality. The years of unipolarity and then the diffusion of power in the twenty-first century produced mixed results with Clinton and Obama above the average and Bush 43 and Trump falling well below average. Among the fourteen presidents since 1945, in my view the four best at combining morality and effectiveness in foreign policy were FDR, Truman, Eisenhower, and Bush 41. Reagan, Kennedy, Ford, Carter, Clinton and Obama make up the middle. The four worst were Johnson, Nixon, Bush 43, and Trump. Of course, such judgments can be contested, and my own views have changed somewhat. Time provides perspective. Historical revision is inevitable as new facts are uncovered and as each generation re-examines the past in terms of new circumstances and its changing priorities.

Obviously, such judgments reflect the circumstances these presidents faced, and as the realist theorist Arnold Wolfers once put it, a moral foreign policy means making the best choices that the circumstances permit. War involves special circumstances. Because wars impose enormous costs on Americans and others, they raise enormous moral issues. Presiding over a major war such as World War II is different from presiding over debatable wars of intervention such as Vietnam and Iraq. Even limited wars have unintended consequences and often prove very difficult to end.

The importance of prudence as a moral virtue in foreign policy becomes clear when one compares Eisenhower's refusal to send troops to Vietnam with

Kennedy and Johnson's decisions. After losing 241 Marines in a terrorist attack during Lebanon's civil war in 1983, Reagan withdrew the troops rather than double down. Similarly, Obama and Trump's reluctance to send more than a small number of forces to Syria may look different with time. Bush 41 was criticized for restricting his objectives, terminating the Gulf War after four days' fighting, and not sending American armies to Baghdad in 1991, but his decision seems better when contrasted with the lack of prudence that his son showed in 2003 when members of his administration expected to be greeted as liberators after the invasion of Iraq and failed to prepare adequately for the occupation. In foreign policy as in law, some levels of negligence are culpable.

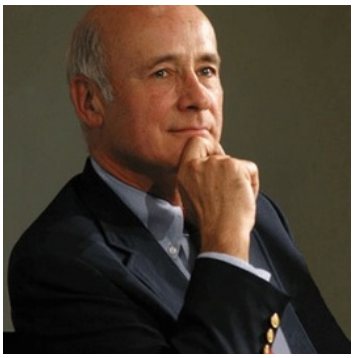
Realists sometimes dismiss prudence as an instrumental and not a moral value, but we have seen that given the complexity and high prospect of unintended consequences when judging the morality of foreign policy decisions, the distinction between instrumental and intuited values breaks down and prudence becomes a crucial virtue. Three-dimensional ethics means leaders must balance Max Weber's famous distinction between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility. Moral decisions in foreign policy involve both intuition and reason. Willful ignorance or careless assessment produces immoral consequences. Conversely, not all decisions based on conviction are prudential, as some cases here indicated. Truman's response to North Korea's crossing the 38th parallel in Korea, for example, was imprudent, though he saw it as a moral imperative. These reasoned and intuited virtues can conflict with each other. Principle and prudence do not always coincide.

Prudence was a critical virtue with regard to cases relating to the non-use of nuclear weapons. The virtues of prudence and moral revulsion against killing innocent civilians began to reinforce each other. Truman used the new and poorly understood atomic weapon to end World War II, but he rejected proposals of preventive war in 1948 when America had a nuclear monopoly. He again refused to use nuclear weapons to break the Korean stalemate even though the United States had overwhelming nuclear superiority. Prudence about expanding the war and maintaining the support of allies was part of his decision, but he was also appalled at the idea of killing so many children.

Eisenhower threatened to use nuclear weapons as a means of creating deterrence in the Cold War, but at several points he rejected military advice to actually use them. While prudence became an increasingly important part of the mix of virtues after the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb in 1949, privately Eisenhower also invoked moral convictions in explaining his decisions to his advisors in the 1950s. Kennedy's prudence in seeking a compromise to end the Cuban Missile Crisis is a stark moral contrast to Johnson's risky advocacy of

an air strike that is revealed by the tapes of conversations during the crisis. But neither Johnson nor Nixon seriously considered using (as opposed to threatening) nuclear weapons to escape their Vietnam imbroglio. The moral consequences of these "nonevents" were enormous. Had these presidential choices gone the other way, and the nuclear taboo not developed, the world would look very different today, and so would America soft power.

In conclusion, judgments can differ even when assessing presidents of the same period. Anyone who has engaged in grading student exams, or watched Olympic figure skating or diving, knows that judging is not a science. Even when there is broad agreement on the facts, different judges may weigh them differently. For example, some realists rate Nixon more highly than I do because they focus only on his opening to China, and forgive him everything else. They are uninterested in his poor legacy on international economics and inflation, or on human rights. I weigh those factors more highly, and find it difficult to forgive his spending 21,000 US lives (and countless Vietnamese lives) to create a reputational "decent interval," which in any event turned out to be brief. Similarly, some people might rate Johnson more highly than I do on the grounds that he was dealing with an inherited dilemma and was trying to preserve an innovative domestic record that included more progress on civil rights than any president since Lincoln. If we include his domestic accomplishments my score would change. Still others might grade JFK more poorly because of what he contributed to the Vietnam dilemma or more highly because of his avoidance of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I tried to be objective, but my personal rankings are less significant than the importance of careful efforts to include morality and soft power in assessments of American foreign policy. Skeptical dismissal is an intellectual evasion. Even if judgments are not definitive, their value is in exploring the neglected aspects of how to think carefully when assessing morality in foreign policy and how it affects our soft power. History shows morals did matter.



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From 1977-79, Dr. Nye was Deputy Undersecretary of State and chaired the National Security Council Group on Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons. In 1993-94 he chaired the National Intelligence Council which prepares intelligence estimates for the president, and in 1994-95 served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. He won Distinguished Service medals from all three agencies.

Dr. Nye has published fourteen academic books, a novel, and more than 200 articles in professional and policy journals. Recent books include Soft Power, The Powers to Lead, The Future of Power, Is the American Century Over?, and Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump.

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