
A Conversation with Joseph S. Nye, Jr. on Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era

JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In your recently published book, Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era, you examine the foreign policy decisions of U.S. presidents who presided over the most critical phases of America's rise to world primacy in the twentieth century. In your view, how are the presidencies of the twenty-first century fundamentally different than in the twentieth, if they are? More specifically, what do you think is the legacy of President Obama in either advancing or diminishing American primacy?*

NYE: According to the recent National Intelligence Council estimate about the state of the world in 2030, the United States will remain the leading country, but without the degree of primacy that it had at the end of the twentieth century. This will be caused by the "rise of the rest" rather than

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. is University Distinguished Service Professor and former Dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. He received his bachelor's degree *summa cum laude* from Princeton University, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, and earned a Ph.D. in political science from Harvard. He has served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Chair of the National Intelligence Council, and a Deputy Under Secretary of State. His recent books include *Soft Power*, *The Power Game: A Washington Novel*, *The Powers to Lead*, *The Future of Power* and in 2013 released *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era*. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the British Academy, and the American Academy of Diplomacy. In 2011, *Foreign Policy* named him one of the top 100 Global Thinkers.

the decline of the U.S. presidents in this century will continue to have to think in terms of leadership and the effects of their decisions on the international system, but the system will be more complex, and this will require good contextual intelligence.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Your book shows how “transactional” presidents like Dwight D. Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush were sometimes more effective and ethical than “transformational” presidents, such as Wilson and Reagan. In your view, is President Obama a transformational or a transactional president? Has his administration’s foreign policy been effective and ethical, one or the other, or neither?*

NYE: While it is still too early to give a full judgment on President Obama, I argue in my book that he ran as a transformational president, and many of the foreign policy speeches in his first year were in the same vein, but

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when confronted with intractable realities, he had the good sense to respond in a pragmatic transactional style like Eisenhower or the first President Bush. In the chapter on ethics in my book, I argue that prudence is an important rule of foreign policy ethics where the complexity of the system often means that good intentions can result in negative unintended consequences. The Hippocratic oath suggests appropriate guidance: first, do no harm.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In your book, you touch upon the changing nature of exercising power in the twenty-first century.*

How do you think that the rise of non-state actors, cyber issues, and asymmetric warfare is changing the nature of security and power? How must the United States adapt its policies or grand strategy to confront the unique security challenges of the twenty-first century?

NYE: In an earlier book, *The Future of Power*, I wrote that there are two major power shifts occurring in this century; a “horizontal” power transition among countries from West to East and a “vertical” power diffusion from states and governments to non-state actors. Cyber-power is a perfect example of power diffusion. Individuals and groups are able to do things that previously were reserved only to governments. This creates a

whole new dimension of security challenges, and we are only beginning to comprehend the implications.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In this evolving context, is a soft power approach to global politics—one that attempts to build “reputation power” to attract and co-opt rather than coerce—the best way to exercise leadership in the world today?*

NYE: Power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants and that can be done by coercion and payments (hard power) or attraction and persuasion (soft power).

Both hard and soft power have always been important components of a smart foreign policy, but in a global information age, soft power may be increasing its portion of the mix. As John Arquilla has put it, sometimes success is determined not by whose army wins, but by whose story wins.

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FLETCHER FORUM: *In your book, you touch upon the continuing tensions inherent in managing domestic and international authority. Do you think the Obama administration has been effective in balancing domestic and international politics? How might the administration more effectively balance these two spheres?*

NYE: American elections are more often determined by domestic than by foreign policy issues, and Congress has a powerful constitutional role to play. As the scholar Edward Corwin once put it, when it comes to foreign policy, the constitution creates an invitation to struggle over control. President Obama taught constitutional law and obviously understands this. His administration encounters it every day. That is why it is surprising that they have developed a reputation for not spending enough time wooing Congress.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Your book raises the assertion that perhaps some of the best presidential decisions are decisions not to act. Kennedy’s decision during the Cuban Missile Crisis of course comes to mind as a salient example. In your view, how does the Obama administration’s inaction (in a military sense) in both Syria and Iran fit into this notion? Are those decisions not to act the right ones?*

NYE: In addition to Kennedy in the Missile Crisis, the example of Eisenhower declining to use nuclear weapons against China when it was

recommended by the joint chiefs, or Bush 41 foregoing the opportunity to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall and thus prepare the way for negotiations with Gorbachev over the future of German were crucial “non-events.” As in the Sherlock Holmes story, dogs that do not bark may be more important than those that do. But this is often not clear until historians have time to make a balanced judgment. With the cases of Syria and Iran still in play, it is too soon to make that judgment.

FLETCHER FORUM: *You categorize George W. Bush as a transformational leader after September 11, in the lead up to and following his decision to invade Iraq. In hindsight, many view the invasion as a grave foreign policy error. Does this change how we understand transformational leadership, or is it part and parcel of what it means to be a transformational leader that one often must make decisions that are risky and unpopular?*

NYE: There is a tendency among leadership theorists and editorial writers to celebrate transformational leaders who seek major changes and neglect

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..... transactional leaders who merely try to keep the train of policy from derailing. Bush 41 famously said he did not do “the vision thing” but he turned out to have one of our best foreign policies. Bush 43 said he did not play “small ball” and the risks he took led to one of our worst foreign policies. Neither transformational nor transactional leaders are better per se. What counts is the prudent assessment of risks, and carefully thinking through consequences. That involves contextual intelligence. The first Bush had it; the second did not.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What do you mean by contextual intelligence?*

NYE: Contextual intelligence is a leadership skill that involves assessment of the power positions, cultures, sense of timing, and needs of followers and how they vary in different contexts. One size does not fit all, and the ability to adjust to different contexts often marks the difference between success and failure. It is critically important as the example above of the two Bushes illustrates.

FLETCHER FORUM: *In your book, you point out that Roosevelt was the first president to integrate the United States into global politics, yet he did not*

transform the way in which the American public saw their role in the world. To whom do you credit this internal paradigm shift?

NYE: As Henry Kissinger points out in his book *Diplomacy*, Teddy Roosevelt was ahead of his time in foreseeing the emergence of the United States as a great power, but his realpolitik assessments did not convert his American followers. Woodrow Wilson's moralistic approach had a stronger impact, and he sent Americans to fight in Europe, a major change from our hemispheric traditions. But there was a backlash against Wilsonianism in the 1930s, so it was Franklin Roosevelt taking the United States into World War II that was the real turning point.

FLETCHER FORUM: *What does the American view of their role in the world look like today? Do you perceive any changing trends in how the American public understands its role as a global superpower?*

NYE: American opinion remains largely internationalist, though there has been some loss of confidence after the
great recession of 2008. Some polls show many Americans believing that their country is in decline, but that has occurred many times in the past half century and proven to be wrong. The key question is whether the public will avoid declinism or triumphalism and realize that the world's only superpower can only meet today's global challenges if it works with others. *f*

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