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- 1 This volume by Joseph S. Nye does not represent his first intervention into the realm of politics and issues of power. A short list of previous studies by him includes titles like *Born to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990), *The Paradox of American Power* (2002), and *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (2004). Imbued in these works is Nye's uncanny ability to identify and probe key topics and themes in international relations which have not attracted as much attention by scholars as they perhaps deserve. In-depth analyses coupled with broad coverage, yet simultaneously focused commentaries characterize Nye's style, and *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era* is no exception to this approach.
- 2 For some, a study of political leadership might not seem timely at first glance. Consider the dynamic role played by the masses in the events of the Arab Spring in which particular leaders were compelled to give in to popular demands. Or elsewhere in the world, from Wall Street to Tahrir Square, we can observe collectivities joining forces to change the political, social, and economic landscapes of their societies. So, is the individual leader that relevant anymore? Especially if we consider the political system of the USA, do individual presidents really have the opportunity to change the way Washington D.C. operates, or is the 'making' of foreign policy a bit more akin to being on automatic pilot? Before rushing to judgment, consider these two names: Pope Francis and Nelson Mandela. With the former, many observers are struck by his approach to papal leadership. His simplicity and humility has changed the way many

people, Catholic and non-Catholic, view the institution of the Church. We will have to wait to see how deep and significant any changes might be with the passing of time. If the jury is still out for the current pope, the recently deceased Nelson Mandela requires no jury at all; his legacy and impact is clearly beyond reproach and dispute. His incredible life as an activist turned political prisoner in South Africa for his struggle against the unjust racist apartheid regime, up through to his release from prison and his assumption of the presidency of South Africa, reflect how individual leadership can play a decisive role not just in the affairs of nation-states but also in the world. Can the same hold true for American presidents?

- 3 In his book, Nye sets out to answer the following question: “whether presidents mattered in the creation of American primacy and what the answer tells us about their role in the future of American power” (xi). The author attempts to provide a response in four chapters which amount to just over one-hundred and fifty pages. In following the trajectory of American primacy, focus is placed on the last century of US history with particular attention to eight presidents who led the country during pivotal periods when foreign policy developments were particularly pronounced. He is not presenting “a complete history of leadership in twentieth-century American foreign policy” but rather trying to determine “whether good leadership (and what types) contributed to the creation of the unprecedented American primacy that developed in the previous century” (17). This is foregrounded by identifying specific moments in the nineteenth century that set a foundation of sorts for what would come later on, particularly after the US entrance in World War One. For example, the announcement of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the US war against Mexico in the 1840s, as well as governmental policies toward the Native Americans illustrate serious efforts to become a continental power within the Western Hemisphere. The country, likewise, enjoyed the benefits of its geography in having two mighty oceans to its east and west, as well as relatively weak nation-states on its borders. In addition, by the turn of the century, the US was a country on the rise, reports Nye, in terms of its footing in the global economy.
- 4 With the stage set, the author launches into his analyses of presidential leadership and issues of ethics in foreign affairs from the administration of Theodore Roosevelt to some preliminary observations of the Bush and Obama administrations of the twenty-first century. More specifically, focus is on the following presidents: T. Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Reagan, and Bush. In terms of evaluating leadership, Nye deploys the terms transformational leader and incremental leader, as well as transactional style and inspirational style to classify each leader. For example, when discussing President Taft he states that he was “clearly incremental rather than transformational in his objectives, and transactional rather than inspirational in his style of presidential leadership” (31). Or consider the following commentary on Eisenhower’s presidency: “Ike’s prudence was eight years of peace and prosperity. An incremental president with a transactional style can have a very effective foreign policy, and Eisenhower’s consolidation of containment completed the midcentury transformation of American foreign policy that was crucial to the creation of the American era” (49-50). For some readers, this approach or type of analysis might border on tedium. Nye’s use of tables and charts which serve as checklists might add to this drab way of assessing leadership as well as disrupting the flow of the narrative. This is particularly acute when he incorporates “scorecards” in evaluating presidential ethical parameters. For this reader, however, such concerns were dispelled mid-way

through the book due to the simple reason that in the end, the analyses were cogent and well argued. When discussing President G. H. W. Bush's leadership during the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union when the nature of international relations was changing quite rapidly and with little warning, Nye manages to encapsulate all the complexities of that historical moment into a sentence. "Bush was not transformational in his objectives or inspirational in his style," he points out, "but he presided successfully over a major structural transformation from a bipolar to a unipolar world" (59). Quite interestingly, the author admits that his research yielded a number of unexpected findings. For example, after examining the eight leaders he found that "transformational presidents like Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan changed how Americans see the world, [but] transactional presidents like Dwight Eisenhower and George H. W. Bush were sometimes more effective and more ethical" (xii).

- 5 A potential shortcoming of Nye's narrative is a section in his narrative devoted to counterfactual history. For some readers this might be an appealing tool in exploring alternative scenarios to the official historical record in terms of speculating what would have been had a particular president not been elected? For other readers, such an exercise might be tiresome. "If Robert Taft had run against and defeated Adlai Stevenson in 1952," for example, "there would have been no Eisenhower consolidation of the containment strategy..." (69). I tend to side with those readers questioning the real value of this sort of academic exercise, with the added element that it somewhat detracts from the study of leadership that the author is engaged in. One other issue which forms a key premise in Nye's investigation is his decision to use the word *primacy* and not a word more akin to imperialism or empire. He justifies his choice at the beginning of the volume in the following manner: "At the end of the twentieth century, the United States was the world's sole superpower. References to American empire or hegemony exaggerate the extent to which America could control the rest of the world, and I prefer the term 'primacy' to describe the way in which, by the end of the century, the United States became the only country with global military, economic and cultural reach" (1). Nye's deliberate use of primacy over empire or imperialism, in my mind, is unfortunate. While this is not the place to discuss America's imperial genesis, suffice to say that primacy is too *neutral* as a term and does not truly capture the designs and policies that went hand in hand with America's rise to superpower status following the Second World War. While US imperial practices differed vastly from that of Britain, France, or the Netherlands, it is misplaced to exempt the USA from the discourses of empire.
- 6 "Men make their own history," Karl Marx observed, "but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 329). Nye, quite appropriately, makes a parenthetical reference to this quote early in his narrative as he sets up the debate on presidential leadership, the role of human agency, and the importance of systems and structures in the formulation of American foreign policy. In my mind, this book is a highly impressive study which successfully negotiates a path through the very difficult terrain of American political leadership in the contemporary world. Nye's balanced and sharp reading of America's power trajectory over the past one-hundred years along with his astute analyses of US presidential leadership has set a rather high benchmark for future scholars to surpass. Where does Nye's journey ultimately take the reader? For Nye, leadership does

matter. As he explains, some “see history as an overwhelming river whose current is shaped by the large structural forces of climate and topography. But there is a difference between portraying human agents as clinging to a log swept along by the current and portraying them as white-water rafters trying to steer and fend off rocks, occasionally overturning and sometimes succeeding” (73).

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