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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9157>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.9157

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Ellen Hallams, « From Crusader to Exemplar: Bush, Obama and the Reinvigoration of America's Soft Power », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 6-1 | 2011, document 4, Online since 28 June 2011, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/9157> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.9157

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From Crusader to Exemplar: Bush, Obama and the Reinvigoration of America's Soft Power

Ellen Hallams

“To all the other peoples and governments who are watching today...know...that we are ready to lead once more.”

Barack Obama¹

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- 1 The election of Barack Obama in November 2008 appeared to signal a rejuvenation of soft power ideas first articulated in the early 1990s by former Clinton official Joseph Nye. Obama rejected his predecessors crusading tone and style, seeking instead to reposition America firmly back into the exemplary tradition of US exceptionalism. He projected an image of the United States as a country that seeks to lead by example, viewing America as one nation amongst many, aware of the limitations to US power and pledging to reinvigorate America's soft power. This paper seeks to examine the rhetorical revitalization of this concept in the Obama Administration's early foreign policy and asks whether the debate over hard and soft power has now become outdated, given the Obama administration's emerging emphasis on “smart power” and the challenges of providing national security in a dangerous and unstable world. Despite promising a sharp break from the Bush Administration, Obama has found himself constrained by the realities of the international system; a deeply ingrained mistrust of the United States, resistance to US power, and the rise of emerging power centres have all served to expose the challenges of translating rhetoric into reality. The paper concludes by arguing that Obama's idealism and soft power instincts often conflict with the pragmatism that is at the heart of the President's approach to foreign policy, and what is often perceived as the malevolent nature of America's global power, but that he should be credited for putting soft power at the centre of US foreign policy, and demonstrating a genuine – if sometimes imperfect – commitment to leading by example.

I. Soft Power: Anatomy of an Idea

- 2 In 1990, Joseph S. Nye Jr, wrote an article in *Foreign Affairs* in which he argued that with the end of the Cold War concepts of power in world politics were changing with less emphasis on military power, and more on technology, education and economic growth. The critical problem facing the US at the end of the Cold War, Nye argued, was not how to control resources - a traditional barometer of global power - but how to control the political environment by influencing others. Nye identified five principal trends in world politics at the end of the Cold War: economic interdependence; a growth in transnational actors; nationalism in weak states; the spread of technology; and changing political issues. Such trends meant that the reliance on traditional concepts of power were no longer relevant and that a more attractive option for the United States would be to set the agenda in world politics by getting other nations to want to follow the United States, in contrast to ordering other states to do what the US wanted it to do.² Implicit in Nye's argument, however, was the assumption that US power was, by its nature, inherently benign, that other nations would want to 'follow' the US because of the sheer attractiveness of its values, culture and beliefs. This co-optive or "soft" power, as Nye coined the term, was further explored in Nye's later study, *The Paradox of American Power*, which located it firmly in the wider framework of the "Information Age." Nye argued that although soft, or co-optive, power was not new - the US having harnessed it during the Cold War through its role in creating international institutions, fostering cultural and academic exchanges, and public diplomacy - the changes in world politics with the end of the Cold War had made it more important.³
- 3 As Nye noted, the leveraging of America's soft power during the Cold War had been overshadowed by its continuing reliance on hard power; by the end of the Cold War President Eisenhower's warnings about the pervasive influence of the Military-Industrial Complex had become a reality. Even as the Cold War ended, expectations of a "peace dividend" proved unfounded with the 1991 Gulf War demonstrating to America's friends and foes alike its overwhelming conventional military superiority, while crises in Somalia, Haiti and the Balkans resulted in the deployment of US military forces. Indeed, between 1989-1999 the US undertook 48 open military interventions, compared to just 16 during the Cold War.⁴ By the end of the 20th century America had seemingly fallen in love with military power, with what C. Wright Mills termed a 'military metaphysics,' a tendency to view all international problems through a military lens. For Andrew Bacevich, the respected US political scientist and Vietnam veteran, the very idea of America has become inextricably interwoven with notions of militarism, what he defines as a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of military force. Bacevich argues that since WWII the United States has become a nation of "Wilsonians under arms," committed to exporting American values of liberty and democracy by military means, thereby corrupting the benign ideals of Wilson for whom war was simply a temporary measure, and not a permanent expression of the nation's character.⁵
- 4 Wilson is a figure who casts a long shadow over US foreign policy but as John Thompson points out, Wilsonianism is itself a contested concept.⁶ Seen by some as the torchbearer of a benign liberal order, others see in Wilson one of the earliest advocates of a Pax

Americana, someone who saw the East as a region 'to be opened and transformed whether we will it or not; the standards of the West are to be imposed on it...'⁷ The debate over the nature of Wilsonianism will surely continue, but it is important because it lies at the heart of claims made by Nye and others of the benign nature of US power. For Nye, the universal values espoused by Wilson are the heartbeat of America's soft power, a powerful and compelling magnet pulling other countries into its orbit. Nye, like Bacevich, saw US Cold War policies as driven by hard power, but unlike Bacevich, Nye believed that an increasingly chaotic and unstable post-Cold War environment was characterized by two forces that would diminish the utility of hard power: globalization and interdependence. What Nye successfully captured in 1990 was the changing context within which US policymakers had to operate and the challenges they faced. Flows of information via the Internet meant governments were losing control over information flows within their borders, while American values and interests were increasingly "sold" around the globe through Hollywood, CNN and MTV. In an increasingly interdependent world, the US had an opportunity to use its culture, values and policies to attract others and generate support for its goals and aspirations, and to shape others preferences through leading by example. In focusing attention on the role of ideas, values and culture, Nye made a seminal contribution to the debate over US foreign policy and offered a welcome corrective to a debate dominated by Realist discourse, with its emphasis on states, power and military force. However, what Nye underestimated was the degree to which the dissemination of American values and interests on a global scale would be viewed by some as the 'dark side' of globalization, setting up a perilous dichotomy between what Benjamin Barber termed 'Jihad vs McWorld.' For Barber, the advancement of "one McWorld tied together by technology, ecology, communications, and commerce," had only served to fuel resentment over America's seemingly imperious reach.⁸ This is not to say that US culture and values are universally opposed in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Very often it is US policies and actions that are the source of discontent, but as Barber rightly notes, the exporting of US values and culture have not been universally welcomed.

- 5 Nye's concept of soft power did not take hold as a new paradigm for US foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, becoming instead the source of much debate – and criticism – within academia and policy circles. Nye's influence was nevertheless perceptible during the Clinton years, not least because he served as Clinton's Assistant Secretary of Defense. Despite lacking foreign policy experience, Clinton was a president who intuitively grasped the changed context of the post-Cold War era, and the challenges posed by globalization and interdependence. Clinton understood that the boundaries between foreign and domestic policy were becoming blurred, and sought to place the promotion of American values firmly at the centre of US foreign policy, based on the 'Wilsonian' belief that promoting democracy and liberalism would foster a more stable and peaceful international order. Nye made a close link between the successful projection of America's soft power and multilateralism: the more the US worked with its partners and allies and through international institutions, the more support and legitimacy it would garner. Madeleine Albright appeared to embody this approach, articulating an "assertive multilateralism" that saw the US working through and with the UN in humanitarian operations in Somalia and Haiti, and with its NATO allies in the Balkans. The problem for the Clinton Administration was that it found multilateral endeavors
- 6 more complicated in practice than in principle.

- 7 As the US engaged in operations in Haiti, Somalia and Bosnia, it became embroiled in increasingly bitter disputes with the UN, NATO and European allies, leading the Clinton Administration to revert to what it described as “multilateral when we can, unilateral when we must.” This ambivalence towards multilateral engagement was also coupled with a growing disregard for international law and treaties by a Republican-controlled Congress highly skeptical of soft power approaches. In Clinton’s second-term, the US Congress sought to rein in Clinton’s multilateral tendencies wherever possible, believing in America’s inalienable right to “go it alone” in world affairs, unconstrained by international institutions. Critics of soft power in the 1990s alleged that foreign policy was not a popularity contest; Charles Krauthammer emerged as the foremost proponent of a “new unilateralism” that would find its true voice with the coming to power of George W. Bush and the neo-conservatives. The ingrained exceptionalist discourse that infused US foreign policy in the 1990s often sent confusing and mixed messages to America’s international allies. At times, the Clinton Administration appeared committed multilateralists and soft power advocates; at others, they appeared to revert to unilateralist tendencies and exceptionalist beliefs about America as the “indispensable nation.” Moreover, as Bacevich notes by the 1990s it was the US military that had become a “compelling affirmation of American exceptionalism.”⁹ The leaking of the Pentagon’s 1992 Defense Planning Guidance blueprint for US global hegemony fuelled notions of a Pax Americana, sentiments further bolstered by statements emanating from prominent conservatives. Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testified to the House Armed Services Committee that he wanted the US to be the ‘bully on the block’, in 1999 Condoleezza Rice claimed the world only had room for one hegemon and in 2000, General Henry Shelton referred to the US military as the ‘new centurions.’¹⁰
- 8 As America headed for the 21st century, there seemed little appetite for the projection of soft power. Public diplomacy – a vital component of US soft power during the Cold War – was not accorded a high priority by the Clinton Administration with the US Information Agency eventually folded into the State Department. Moreover, although Nye had been right to argue that soft power played an important role in the Cold War, through programmes such as the Marshall Plan or the Voice of America, the exporting of US values and ideals found a ready market in Western Europe and Japan, and offered an appealing alternative to those suffering behind the Iron Curtain; in the post-Cold War era, the aggressive exporting of US culture and values beyond Europe and Asia, into Africa and the Middle East, was not universally welcomed.. Although Clinton made commendable efforts at fostering diplomacy and negotiation on issues such as Northern Ireland, the Middle East peace process and North Korea, all too often America’s soft power was undermined by its policies, an ingrained tendency to resort to military force and unilateralism, and assumptions of US superiority. Efforts to foster an Israeli-Palestinian peace were undercut by the administration’s evident pro-Israeli bias, the administration’s commitment to democracy promotion undermined by support for authoritarian regimes, while its use of cruise missiles in Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan fuelled anti-US sentiment, putting paid to any notion that America would retreat from its militaristic tendencies. This was an era then of soft power theories and hard power realities; Cold War habits proved hard to shake, the “military metaphysics” that C. Wright Mills had spoken of during the Cold War, seemingly still exerting a profound influence on US policymakers.

II. The Bush Administration and the 'New Exceptionalism'

- 9 If the Clinton Administration had only half-heartedly embraced soft power ideas and approaches, then the Bush Administration appeared to decisively reject them. From the outset, the Bush Administration made clear its preference both for unilateral actions and a Realist-oriented view of America's military power. I
- 10 n calling for US troops to be withdrawn from the Balkans, Bush made clear that he perceived the kinds of humanitarian intervention undertaken by Clinton in Somalia and Bosnia to be detrimental to the more pressing goal of addressing the major strategic threats to America's interests, namely China and Russia.
- 11 9/11, however, unleashed the messianic ideals of the neoconservatives who sought to aggressively export and promote American democracy. According to Lynch and Singh, in their compelling, though controversial, study of Bush's foreign policy, Bush did not radically depart from the US foreign policy tradition. There was no "revolution" in American foreign policy; the Bush Doctrine – the set of ideas and the administration's world-view as set out in the 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS) and Bush's West Point speech – is viewed by Lynch and Singh as fitting into, rather than departing from a foreign policy tradition that has long borne the hallmarks of unilateralism, the expansive interpretation of presidential power and the promotion of American values.¹¹ Moreover, as Bacevich notes, Bush's militaristic approach to the 'War on Terror' was anchored in a deeply rooted tradition of militarism that had built up a steady momentum by 9/11 – to the point where, he argues, it had dulled Americans capacity to think critically.¹² Still, the Bush administration's preference for the blunt instrument of military force in delivering regime change in Afghanistan and Iraq and its dismissive attitude towards allies and international institutions represented a sharp deviation from the more tempered liberal internationalism of the Clinton years. Suzanne Nossell claimed that 'After September 11, conservatives adopted the trappings of liberal internationalism, entangling the rhetoric of human rights and democracy in a strategy of aggressive unilateralism. But the militant imperiousness of the Bush administration is fundamentally inconsistent with the ideals they claim to invoke.'¹³ Others, notably Tony Smith, argued that unlike his predecessor, Bush was committed to not just liberal internationalism, but liberal internationalist imperialism.¹⁴
- 12 At the heart of this liberal internationalist "imperialism" was America's hard power. For the Bush Administration, 9/11 provided the contextual framework for a new strategic doctrine that was the manifestation of neoconservative thinking regarding the American military stretching back more than a decade. The neoconservative desire to maintain America's global hegemony and military dominance, combined with Donald Rumsfeld's commitment to a "new way of war," based on information technologies and precision weapons, ensured that there was little sympathy for soft power ideas in the Bush Administration. Rumsfeld himself was famously ignorant of the concept. When asked for his thoughts on soft power at an army conference following the war in Iraq, he responded, "I don't know what it means."¹⁵ The result was an administration for whom the art of persuading others to share America's goals and values was subsumed by a fervent belief in the power of the American military to bring about decisive change to the Middle East. Indeed, the problem with the Bush Doctrine was not its articulation of

democracy promotion *per se*, but the belief that this democratic project would be carried out through the application of America's overwhelming military superiority, with little role for international organisations and allies, and a disregard for international law and norms. Bush, like his predecessors, was fundamentally committed to notions of American exceptionalism, yet there also seemed something distinctly different about the Bush Administration's "brand" of US exceptionalism. It was not just Bush's stark depiction of the world as divided into "good" and "evil," nor his evident desire to light up the Middle East with the flame of American democracy; rather, it was what Stanley Hoffman termed a "new exceptionalism," a strident belief that in a desire to promote what Bush termed a "distinctly American internationalism," it would be legitimate to act outside of international laws and institutions when they threatened to constrain America's freedom of action. For Hoffman, the exceptionalism of the Bush Administration was "something entirely new and particularly troubling," in particular, the "bizarre...claim that the US Constitution allows no bowing to a superior law, such as international law, and no transfer, pooling or delegation of sovereignty to any international organization."¹⁶

- 13 The Bush Administration's dismissive attitude to NATO and its rejection of allied offers of help and support that followed the alliance's invocation of its Article V guarantee took many in NATO by surprise – and left many feeling bruised and battered by the "thanks but no thanks" approach of Paul Wolfowitz and others, who were disinclined to work with America's allies.¹⁷ The Bush Administration's disregard for the UN further served to alienate key allies and made securing support from those same allies for reconstruction and stabilisation operations in Afghanistan and Iraq much harder. Although the Bush Administration did engage with the UN, it was evident that it was paying only lip-service to an institution that Republicans had constantly derided through the 1990s. What characterised the Bush Administration's approach to both NATO and the UN was an arrogance that at times bordered on outright contempt. Only the day after 9/11, when discussing the limits international law could place on America's military response, Bush commented to Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, "I don't care what the international lawyer says, we are going to kick some ass."¹⁸ Although such contempt was not always on public display, Bush and his chief advisers made it abundantly clear they would not be constrained by cumbersome alliances and ineffective institutions.

III. 'It is not whose army wins, but whose story wins'

- 14 The Bush Administration's attitude towards the UN was indicative of the broader world-view held by many neoconservatives and officials within the administration about America's role in the world. By their own admission, the neoconservatives view international treaties and conventions as seeking "to constrain and control American power," and international organisations as an illegitimate encroachment on US sovereignty.¹⁹ Such views set the Bush Administration apart from its predecessors. On 7 February, 2002, President Bush signed a secret order suspending the Geneva conventions. As Philippe Sands has documented, the administration's line of reasoning was premised upon the belief that it was engaged in an "extraordinary war" that transcended the usual legal norms and laws.²⁰ This was not a unanimous view. Secretary of State Colin Powell, his lawyer Will Taft, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Richard Myers all believed the Geneva conventions had to be applied. In a memo dated January 26, 2002, Powell made the argument that suspending the Geneva conventions would have a "high cost in

terms of negative international reaction...; [and] It will undermine public support among critical allies.”²¹ Such views, however, were outnumbered by those who firmly believed Geneva should not apply, including Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Douglas Feith, Jim Haynes, General Counsel to Rumsfeld, David Addington, General Counsel to the Vice-President and Alberto Gonzales, General Counsel to the President – otherwise known as the “War Council.” 10 months later, on December 2, 2002, Rumsfeld signed the now infamous Action Memo entitled Counter-Terrorism techniques that approved new and aggressive interrogation techniques for use at the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

- 15 The line of argument espoused by the “War Council” was part of a wider mindset popular amongst senior Bush Administration officials and a number of neoconservatives. In 2002, Robert Kagan, editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard*, argued that “the United States naturally seeks a certain freedom of action to deal with the strategic dangers that it alone has the means and sometimes the will to address.” Kagan cited Robert Cooper, a key advisor to Tony Blair, who advanced the argument that while Europe might operate on the basis of laws and cooperative security, when dealing with the world outside of Europe, it may nevertheless be necessary to use force and act outside international law to deal with those who regularly undermine it. For Cooper, the challenge to the postmodern world “is to get used to the idea of double standards ... Among ourselves, we keep the law but when we are operating in the jungle, we must also use the laws of the jungle.”²² In the context of the War on Terror, the Bush Administration used this frame of thinking to advance the argument that because the United States was facing a unique enemy that operated according to the “laws of the jungle”, so the United States reserved the right to also use the laws of the jungle, unconstrained by international institutions, laws and norms.
- 16 The Bush Administration’s determination to work through what Dick Cheney termed the “dark side” was flawed for two reasons. Firstly, it was counter-productive, undermining America’s efforts to fight radical Islamic terrorism. When a CIA analyst was sent to Guantanamo to find out why the interrogations were not working, his central conclusion was that “if we captured some people who weren’t terrorists when we got them, they are now.”²³ The US military’s tactics and strategy on the ground in Iraq also fuelled the insurgency that plunged the country into a maelstrom of violence and bloodshed. In April 2003, the 82nd Airborne division shot a group of demonstrators who had gathered to protest the presence of US forces, killing 17, and in another incident two days later, shot three protestors.²⁴ A year later, in March 2004, the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) took over from the 82nd Airborne division, but following the ambush of a Blackwater convoy that led to the deaths of four contractors, Donald Rumsfeld ordered the storming of Fallujah in a poorly planned and ill-conceived attack. MEF’s Commanding Officer Lt Gen. James T. Conway – who had resisted calls for revenge – admitted that “When we were told to attack Fallujah, I think we certainly increased the level of animosity that existed.”²⁵ The Battle for Fallujah prompted Sunni Arab members of the Iraqi Governing Council to resign in protest, damaging US political credibility. The Bush Administration also ordered a halt to operations, with US forces replaced by a “Fallujah brigade” that was drawn from the local populace but which refused all cooperation with the US. US actions also precipitated an influx of foreign jihadis which further fuelled the insurgency, and gave rise to the Al Anbar Awakening of 2005-2006. In April 2008, in testimony to Congress, General David Petraeus, architect of the Bush Administration’s surge strategy,

conceded that US misconduct at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere “inflamed the insurgency and damaged the credibility of Coalition Forces in Iraq, in the region, and around the world.”

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- 17 As polls indicated declining international support for the US, academics and political commentators engaged in heated debates over whether America’s declining international credibility and legitimacy mattered. Francis Fukuyama, a former neoconservative who opposed the Iraq War, argued the Bush Administration had failed to understand the adverse reaction its policies had generated, claiming

Legitimacy is important to us not simply because we want to feel good about ourselves, but because it is useful. Other people will follow the American lead if they believe that it is legitimate; if they do not, they will resist, complain, obstruct or actively oppose what we do. In this respect, it matters not what we believe to be legitimate, but rather what other people believe is legitimate.²⁷

- 18 Fukuyama captures well here the problem facing contemporary American power. US policymakers have a tendency to assume US power is benign and that US global leadership is actively desired by many around the world. Even Nye has conceded that “we can...no longer assume ... that global public opinion will buy into the American narrative. We can no longer assume that the world out there so readily identifies with our idea of ‘the good life’ as universally appealing.”²⁸ But making broad generalisations about the benign or malign nature of US power, soft or hard, is also problematic. In some instances, such as Bosnia or Kosovo for example, the projection of American hard power was seen as vital in stemming gross violations of basic human rights. Despite this, others saw the US-led NATO intervention as a violation of international law, and one which caused the unnecessary deaths of civilians.²⁹ Over Iraq, opposition to the US-led war was widespread, seen by many as further evidence of America’s imperial footprint, but viewed by others as a necessary evil to rid the world of a despotic regime.³⁰ Similarly, some aspects of US culture are welcomed in Arab or African nations, whose societies remain torn between a desire for modernity and traditional tribal and religious values. The point here is that American power is inherently subjective, with perceptions of it as benign or malign wholly dependent on the different interpretative lenses through which it is viewed. Perceptions matter, however, and whilst there has been a tendency for successive US administrations to disregard how others view American power, it was a problem particularly prevalent within the Bush administration. For many on the American Right, America’s sliding popularity ratings in Europe and other parts of the world were irrelevant; claims America had squandered its soft power and damaged its international standing fell on deaf ears as champions of US primacy such as Charles Krauthammer only strived to make their voices even louder, deriding those soft power advocates who wanted to make America “not the arbiter of international events but a good and tame international citizen.”³¹

- 19 While Krauthammer and Fukuyama squabbled over the relative merits of the neoconservative agenda, the Bush Administration appeared to have understood some of the consequences of neglecting America’s soft power. When Condoleezza Rice met the unashamedly pro-American French President Nicolas Sarkozy after his election in 2007, she asked him: “What can I do for you?” Sarkozy responded by saying: “Improve your image in the world. It’s difficult when the country that is the most powerful, the most successful...is one of the most unpopular countries in the world. It presents overwhelming problems for you and overwhelming problems for your allies.”³² Bush’s second term in office did appear to herald a shift to a more multilateral, soft power

approach, that saw the Bush Administration commit to the six-party talks with North Korea, engage with its European allies over IAEA inspections in Iran, establish a more cooperative relationship with NATO and triple foreign aid assistance to Africa. By 2005 it also appeared that the Bush Administration was belatedly coming to realize Joseph Nye's claim that "In the information age, success depends not only on whose army wins, but also on whose story wins."³³

- 20 The administration began to place a renewed emphasis on public diplomacy, a key component of soft power much under-valued by Bush Administration hawks. In 2004, the US established 2004 Radio Sawa, an Arabic-language radio network that sought to use a blend of US and Arab pop music to reach out to Arab youth, and its TV equivalent, Al Hurra. It was the appointment of Karen Hughes as Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in 2005, however, that heralded the beginning of a concerted effort to ensure a more prominent role for public diplomacy in the battle to win Arab "hearts and minds." In 2005 Bush admitted "We're behind when it comes to selling our own story and telling people the truth about America."³⁴ It was within this context that Hughes, and her successor James Glassman, established a program called Public Diplomacy 2.0 that sought to embrace social networking sites and other web tools to win the "war of ideas." The Bush Administration's public diplomacy efforts were largely ineffectual, however, because the administration continued to demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of the audiences they were trying to reach, engaging in a "one-way, message-driven information assault on the Arab and Islamic world."³⁵ Robert Gates, Secretary of Defence under both Bush and Obama, lamented the dearth of funding for soft power, claiming that "America's civilian institutions of diplomacy and development have been chronically undermanned and underfunded for far too long, relative to what we spend on the military." The result, he noted, has been the "creeping militarization of some aspects of America's foreign policy...over the long term, we cannot kill or capture our way to victory."³⁶

IV. Barack Obama and the Revitalization of America's Soft Power

- 21 The Bush Administration left office with domestic poll ratings at an all-time low, and with much of the rest of the world clamoring for the election of a junior Senator from Illinois. Part of the allure of Obama for international audiences was his seeming embrace of soft power, and a desire to reestablish America's moral credibility. During the campaign Obama pledged to "restore our moral standing so that America is once again that last best hope for all who are called to the cause of freedom..."³⁷ Such lofty rhetoric was predictable as Obama sought to paint himself as the candidate of change, but it also reflected America's declining international standing. In a September 2008 Pew survey, seven-in-ten voters said America was less respected than in the past, while almost half (48%) said they regarded that as a major problem. Majorities in 19 of the 24 countries in the survey had little or no confidence in President Bush, including Britain, Germany, France and Spain. 81% of Britain's claimed to have little or no confidence in Bush, a figure that rose to 88% in Spain, while in the Middle East, the figures rose even higher, to 89% in Turkey and Jordan. The survey also found a widespread belief that US foreign policy would "change for the better" after the inauguration of a new US president, with large

majorities in France (68%), Spain (67%) and Germany (64%) stating they believed that US foreign policy would improve after the election.³⁸

²² By campaigning on a platform of change that emphasized the desire to rebuild America's international credibility, and engage in constructive diplomacy and negotiation with America's adversaries, Obama raised hopes that the tensions, disputes and crises that plagued America's regional and bilateral relationships during the Bush years would be a thing of the past. Obama made clear his intentions by surrounding himself with former Clinton-era advisers, schooled in the art of diplomacy and negotiation. Obama appointed former chief negotiator in Bosnia, Richard Holbrooke, as special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and Clinton's former Middle East peace envoy, Dennis Ross, as special envoy to Iran and adviser on the Middle East. More controversially, Obama appointed the hawkish Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State, while he retained Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense. Both Clinton and Vice-President Joe Biden were supporters of the war in Iraq, while other appointments have included former Bush-era officials, including John Brennan as Obama's chief counter-terrorism advisor. The composition of Obama's foreign policy team led some critics to question how far the new president would depart from his predecessor. Inderjeet Parmar described Obama as one of a number of Democratic "presidents who cosy up to militarists in the hope of gaining public credibility," suggesting if Obama was serious about change, he would not have appointed an administration that "could fairly be labelled a hybrid Bush-Clinton third term."³⁹ Such appointments, however, reflected a pragmatic realisation on the part of the inexperienced Obama that in inheriting two major conflicts and a world of growing instability, he required a foreign policy team with experience and a degree of continuity from the previous administration.

²³ Moreover, the first few months of Obama's presidency suggested that the "change" Obama pledged to deliver during the campaign was less about the foreign policy team he assembled, and far more about the approach to foreign policy he would adopt. Such an approach derived from a view of the world far removed from that of George W. Bush, what Carl Pedersen identifies as a "rooted cosmopolitanism," that centered on his "dual identity as an American citizen and a citizen of the world."⁴⁰ Unlike the closed world-view of his predecessor, Obama's upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia, his African heritage and the influence of his mother – who had worked on development and microfinance projects in Indonesia – gave him an insight and understanding of the world far more profound than anything gained from the official visits that his rivals boasted of. A student of multiculturalism, and the Civil Rights and anti-apartheid movements, as a young man Obama developed a "sensitivity to the potential disconnect between US rhetoric and US actions" that has informed his foreign policy.⁴¹ In this respect, Obama is the natural proponent of Nye's soft power approach, an individual who understands Nye's belief that how others see America *does* matter, because negative perceptions and views "undercut soft power, reducing the ability of the United States to achieve its goals without resorting to coercion or payment."⁴² For Obama – as for Nye – soft power is not about winning popularity, but about enabling the US to obtain the outcomes it wants, garnering respect and winning the trust of those it needs to help it achieve its outcomes.

²⁴ Obama proclaimed in his inaugural address that "we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals," and from the outset sought to distance himself from the policies and approach pursued by the Bush Administration. Upon taking office, he issued four executive orders: suspending the military tribunals at Guantanamo Bay and pledging

to close the facility within a year; outlawing torture; ordering the closure of the CIA's secret prisons; and ordering a review of detention policies. The inflammatory language of the "War on Terror" was dropped and Obama ordered the release of the "torture memos," four memoranda written by the Office of Legal Counsel between 2002-2005, detailing the Bush Administration's attempts to construct a legal framework for its controversial detention methods. Obama purposefully sought to undo some of the damage he believed his predecessor had wrought by reaching out to the Arab world in his landmark speech in Cairo in which he proclaimed a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect...There must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground."⁴³

²⁵ Obama's approach to foreign policy has been described by some as "psychological realism," an

intuitive understanding that the United States was unable to impose its own moral and historical narrative on the rest of the world. Obama asserted the American narrative and was unabashedly proud of it; he was an authentic American nationalist. But he did not imagine that he could make progress with the rest of the world dependent on the world sharing that narrative.⁴⁴

- ²⁶ A pragmatic realist he may be, but Obama has also displayed breathtaking idealism in demonstrating that America is "ready to lead once more." In a speech in Prague in April 2009 Obama outlined his ambitious goal of "a world free of nuclear weapons," committing to specific policy departures including the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the strengthening of the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the downgrading of nuclear weapons in US national security. It was for such vision that Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The prize was an awkward moment for a President in office for less than a year and was premature, only adding to the weight of expectations on already burdened shoulders. Obama's acceptance speech also captured the dilemma at the heart of his foreign policy, as he acknowledged the challenges of balancing soft power impulses with the requirements of national security:

I am the Commander-in-Chief of the military of a nation in the midst of two wars ... I'm responsible for the deployment of thousands of young Americans to battle in a distant land...And so I come here with an acute sense of the costs of armed conflict – filled with difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace, and our effort to replace one with the other.⁴⁵

V. A Soft Power President in a Hard Power World?

- ²⁷ It is Obama's policy towards the war in Afghanistan that has most called into question his soft power credentials. His decision to increase the US presence by committing an additional 35,000 troops in December 2009 seemed to undermine his parallel efforts to reshape the narrative of US foreign policy. Moreover, his decision to increase predator drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan initiated by Bush sent further mixed messages to those he was trying to persuade and co-opt. Obama has been described as Bush-lite, a president who might talk the language of soft power but who often resorts to hard power solutions. According to Lynch and Singh, "Obama is tacking rapidly and strongly to the basic bipartisan foreign policy consensus in America. Much as he seems to evoke John F. Kennedy rather than Jimmy Carter in his approach, he increasingly resembles a Cold War

style Democratic hawk.”⁴⁶ Afghanistan has exposed the central dilemma Obama faces: how to balance his own soft power impulses and world-view with the realities of the world he inherited. As he noted in Oslo:

I face the world as it is, and cannot stand idle in the face of threats to the American people ... Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism – it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason.⁴⁷

28 On the face of it, Obama’s decision to increase US troop levels in Afghanistan and predator drone strikes in Pakistan suggest he is less wedded to notions of soft power than he has proclaimed. Yet Obama did not believe that an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan was an option he could consider, given the policies and strategy set in place by his predecessor. And unlike his predecessor, Obama recognized that while some level of force was necessary, America’s efforts in Afghanistan needed to centre around a more focused and politically-oriented counter-terrorist operation, rather than a fully-resourced COIN campaign. Absent from Obama’s rhetoric were grandiose notions of democratizing the Middle East, and in their place a more thoughtful and nuanced attempt to recalibrate US strategy in the region. Although Obama was criticized for taking months to deliberate over the administration’s strategy for Afghanistan, Obama took the time to ask the searching questions Bush had failed to ask: Do we need to defeat the Taliban? Is a COIN strategy in Afghanistan the best way to defend US national security?⁴⁸ Obama was adamant in his belief that an open-ended perpetual commitment in Afghanistan would only serve to reinforce the notion of a US occupation.⁴⁹ Obama has also been conscious of the need to treat America’s NATO allies with greater respect than his predecessor; when General David Petraeus informed Obama he would rather have an extra 10,000 US, instead of NATO troops, the president was quick to remind him to “Be careful how you characterise our NATO allies. We need them. They will be useful in this coalition.”⁵⁰

29 In early 2009 the new administration made a concerted effort to reach out to NATO, rejecting the Bush-era habit of berating allies for failing to contribute more troops, instead asking Europeans to focus on what they could do, increasing funding and resources for civilian reconstruction. Jeremy Shapiro, a State Department adviser on Europe, commented that that “the tone of the messages he is giving is a specific and intended sharp break with the past.”⁵¹ In February 2009, Vice-President Joe Biden gave a speech to the 45th Munich Conference on Security Policy in which he made clear the “new tone” that the Obama Administration intended to set in its relations with Europe. However, Biden also made clear that in return for the new tone and approach of the Obama administration, the US would expect more from its partners.⁵² By the time NATO’s 60th anniversary summit in Strasbourg drew to a close, Obama had managed to extract promises of troops, military trainers and civilian experts from America’s European allies in what *The Washington Post* called a “sweeping demonstration of support for the new administration's leadership.”⁵³ French President Nicholas Sarkozy welcomed the new approach, commenting “It feels really good to work with a U.S. president ... who understands that the world doesn't boil down to simply American frontiers and borders.”

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30 At heart then, Obama is a pragmatic realist, deeply ambitious and determined to reconfigure America’s role in the world yet imbued with an astute awareness that the world in which he operates will sometimes require uncomfortable choices. It is not only

the war in Afghanistan that has exposed the dilemmas Obama faces. On a range of issues, from climate change to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the challenges posed by Iran and North Korea, Obama has often found himself having to compromise. Obama's Cairo speech was a clear attempt to rebuild America's soft power in the Middle East, but continuing support for the corrupt regime of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan despite the fraudulent elections – viewed as a necessary evil in Washington – and the failure to close Guantanamo Bay remain points of contention for many in the Arab world. The killing of Osama Bin Laden in May 2011, although a huge boost for the president domestically, was regarded by Pakistan as a unacceptable violation of Pakistani sovereignty, while even in the West questions have been raised as to why the President 'executed' Bin Laden, instead of bringing him to trial.⁵⁵ Despite seeming to demonstrate a commitment to a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, the early resistance of Benjamin Netanyahu to Obama's demands for an end to the construction of illegal Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem left Obama looking powerless – and subject to criticism that he had failed to exert sufficient pressure on Netanyahu, and done little to help alleviate the humanitarian situation in Gaza.⁵⁶ Moreover, although Obama has engaged with the peace process from the very start of his presidency, based upon the premise that progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front is linked to securing Arab support on the equally challenging question of Iran, the release of the 'Palestine Papers' in January 2011 only served to expose the degree of disappointment with Obama felt by many Palestinians. The papers reveal the dismay at Obama's 'capitulation' on the settlement issue, continuing perceptions of the US position as 'pro-Israeli' and the administration's rejection of its predecessors commitment to using the 1967 borders as a baseline for negotiations.⁵⁷ In a speech in Washington in May 2011 Obama sought to reclaim the initiative by stating that Israeli and Palestinian borders should be based on the 1967 lines, a move met with hostility from the visiting Netanyahu, at the same time as he urged the Palestinians not to go to the UN to seek recognition for the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem as an independent state.⁵⁸ Like his predecessors, Obama remains constrained by a powerful domestic Jewish lobby and America's historic links with Israel, but his sustained effort to maintain the pressure on Netanyahu suggests a president determined to chart a more balanced path.

³¹ On Iran, although Obama has demonstrated a more principled commitment to 'constructive engagement,' the political turmoil surrounding the Iranian elections exposed, again, the limits of Obama's soft power approach. On the one hand, Obama needed to grasp the opportunity presented by the groundswell of anti-Ahmedinijad sentiment and the reformist movement, but his response was notably cautious, reluctant to be seen as "meddling" in Iran's political affairs given the desire to engage the regime on nuclear proliferation. Obama's response was further evidence of his instinctive pragmatism and the administration's commitment to 'smart' power, a willingness to take each case on its merits and consider the appropriate mix of hard and soft power. Elsewhere, Obama's efforts to forge a new relationship with China have succumbed to the usual pressures, with disputes over Taiwan, exchange rates, human rights and internet censorship, the Chinese going so far as to accuse the Americans of "information imperialism."⁵⁹ Despite being accused of "soft-peddling" the Chinese on human rights, Obama has opted for a strategy of quiet engagement, with human rights talks taking place behind closed doors, as he attempts to balance criticism of China's human rights record with the desire for a cooperative relationship on key global issues like climate change.

³² US-Sino relations will likely remain a difficult challenge in balancing competing tensions. As one analyst has noted such challenges “cannot be charmed out of existence.”

⁶⁰ To suggest that Obama thought he could “charm” such issues out of existence is, however, missing the point. By putting soft power at the centre rather than the margins of US foreign policy, Obama has gone a long way towards reconfiguring America’s image in the world – in a remarkably short space of time. As Zbigniew Brzezinski argued in early 2010:

Obama has undertaken a truly ambitious effort to redefine the United States’ view of the world and to reconnect the United States with the emerging historical context of the twenty-first century. He has done this remarkably well. In less than a year, he has comprehensively reconceptualized U.S. foreign policy.⁶¹

- ³³ Signs are also beginning to emerge that Obama’s softer touches are beginning to pay dividends, particularly as Obama benefits from the momentum generated by domestic successes, notably healthcare reform, allowing him to focus on key foreign policy issues that have often seemed to take a back-seat to domestic concerns. Climate change was one such issue, but even despite the pressing domestic challenges Obama faced, he played a crucial role in helping facilitate negotiations with the Chinese and Indians behind the scenes at Copenhagen. Although those negotiations delivered a non-binding agreement that fell far short of what many had hoped for, the challenges of getting a comprehensive, binding agreement were always going to exceed the persuasive powers of one individual.

³⁴ More notably, a year on from his landmark speech in Prague, Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the START III agreement committing both countries to reducing their nuclear arsenals by a third, and affirming a shared determination to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Obama generated leverage with Russia in abandoning Bush-era plans for a missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic that had led to a deep rift in relations, and developing a new plan focused on the threat of short-range missiles from Iran. Crucially, the improved relationship with Russia is now beginning to facilitate cooperation on Iran, with the Russians supporting tough new UN sanctions. The renewed emphasis on diplomacy and the “reset” of US-Russian relations has generated real and tangible gains, representing a notable shift away from the often inflammatory rhetoric and terse exchanges that characterised the relationship during the Bush-era.

VI. Smart Power: ‘The world we’re trying to build’

³⁵ Iran is an issue that epitomizes the administration’s increasing embrace of “smart power,” the integration of soft and hard power that Hillary Clinton championed at her Senate confirmation hearings. According to Clinton smart power has diplomacy at its vanguard, but seeks to use “the full range of tools at our disposal—diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural—picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation.”⁶² The term was first coined by Suzanne Nossel in an article for *Foreign Affairs* in 2004, but has only recently become part of the US foreign policy lexicon, thanks in part to Clinton. However, the term was also picked up by Joseph Nye. In 2006, Nye established a bipartisan Commission on Smart Power with former Bush deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage. Although acknowledging that “America should have higher ambitions than being popular” it asserted that

foreign opinion matters to U.S. decisionmaking. A good reputation fosters goodwill and brings acceptance for unpopular ventures. Helping other nations and individuals achieve their aspirations is the best way to strengthen America's reputation abroad. This approach will require a shift in how the U.S. government thinks about security.⁶³

36 Many of its recommendations – restoring alliances and partnerships, an emphasis on global development, investing in global public goods and public diplomacy – have been evident in Obama's foreign policy. Obama has demonstrated a renewed commitment to both the UN and NATO, announcing a “new era of engagement” in America's relations with the UN, after the troubled relationship of the Bush years. Obama appointed Susan Rice as Ambassador to the UN, restoring the post to cabinet level and paying over \$2 billion the US owed in UN dues.

37 The Obama administration has also demonstrated a commitment to reinvigorating US public diplomacy as a central component of America's soft power. Obama and Clinton have built upon the Public Diplomacy 2.0. programme begun by the Bush Administration with a number of initiatives pioneered by a new generation of technologically-savvy “whizz-kids” in the State Department. The State Department's technology-enabled approach to diplomacy has seen Obama's speeches and online “tweets” translated into dozens of languages, alongside efforts to “wire up” more remote parts of the world. Obama's Cairo speech was a classic example of how the administration is using social media technologies to promote its message and construct an alternative narrative to that offered by groups like Al-Qaeda. The speech was instantaneously wired around the world, via social networking sites, podcasts, and a live Webcast on the White House's Web site. Updates via text message reached 20,000 non-US citizens in over 200 countries around the world, with the texts being available in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and eight other languages. In addition, translated versions of the speech were available to download on YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace, and the South Asian social networking site Orkut. The White House used Facebook to conduct an international discussion on the event, while responses to the speech submitted via text messages were compiled and later posted on America.gov. The Obama Administration has breathed new life into public diplomacy initiatives, and accorded it a far higher priority than the Bush Administration. R.S. Zaharna has noted “the energy and sense of purpose in the way the administration appears to be reaching out to the international community in general and the Muslim world in particular. The focus on listening and engagement is pronounced as is the deliberate effort to communicate respect and understanding. The rhetoric is less shrill, less demanding and less confrontational. Metaphorically, the image of U.S. public diplomacy is one of open hands rather than clenched fists.”⁶⁴

38 The problem for Obama remains the same, however: ensuring that words are matched by deeds and that US policy and actions are not at odds with the messages being crafted. To that end, the US under Obama has achieved a better balance than under Bush, but there remain policies, including the use of force in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the failure to close Guantanamo, that continue to undermine the image of America the administration is trying to disseminate. It is the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings, however, that have most exposed the contradictions at the heart of the administration's approach. In his Cairo speech, Obama was at pains to emphasise his “commitment...to governments that reflect the will of the people.” Although arguing that ‘America does not presume to know what is best for everyone...’ Obama affirmed his

unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.⁶⁵

39 Given such “unyielding beliefs,” it is not surprising that the administration’s calls for an ‘orderly transition’ following the toppling of President Mubarak disappointed many; the British journalist and veteran Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk was scathing in his condemnation of an administration that had put the “national interest” before its proclaimed moral values, arguing that “One of the blights of history will now involve a U.S. president who held out his hand to the Islamic world and then clenched his fist when it fought a dictatorship and demanded democracy.”⁶⁶ Obama took the middle-ground, wanting to support the pro-democracy movement, without undermining America’s long-term strategic interests. Pragmatism, it seemed, had again trumped principle. Others lambasted Obama for acquiescing in “the triumph of militant Islam in places whose regimes heretofore lent themselves, at least occasionally, to furthering Western interests.”⁶⁷ As Ryan Lizza observes, the protests in Egypt exposed the “inherent contradictions of an Administration trying to simultaneously encourage and contain the forces of revolution,” with Obama himself uneasy at his own “cool detachment” from the “people.”⁶⁸ Yet Obama’s response was not as contradictory as might be thought; his instinct was to support the protestors demands for democracy and freedom, at the same time as ensuring the country was carefully “steered” towards a genuine democratic transformation, mindful of the perils of the US once again leading a charge for democracy. Obama neither wanted America’s footprints stamped over Mubarak’s departure given events in Iraq, nor did he want to see the Muslim Brotherhood fill a power vacuum that would threaten to undermine the rights sought by the protestors – or US strategic interests. His approach was one of forceful persuasion, privately calling Mubarak to explore the prospects for an orderly transition, before publicly calling on that transition to ‘begin now.’

40 It is an approach that has been described as anti-ideological “consequentialism,”⁶⁹ and it was again on display as the Obama Administration debated what course of action to take in Libya, a crisis that has exposed even more sharply the schisms at the heart of the administration. On the one hand “Obama’s Women of War,” liberal interventionists such as Samantha Power, Susan Rice, Gayle Smith and Hillary Clinton, purportedly pushed the president to intervene in Libya, in the face of opposition from predominantly male Realists, such as Defense Secretary Robert Gates.⁷⁰ Clinton and Power in particular pushed the president to take a smart power approach, using soft power to isolate Qadaffi diplomatically, while to help remove Libya from its seat on the UN Security Council. As the administration debated military options, the perception grew that the UK and France were dragging Obama into the conflict, but accounts of the decision-making process reveal an administration, once again, carefully weighing up its options, conscious of how its actions might be perceived in the Arab world, and a determination to work through the UN and Arab League. Hillary Clinton justified the US response in stating that

we’re going to see whether the Security Council will support the Arab League. Not support the United States – support the Arab League...for those who want to see the United States always acting unilaterally, it’s not satisfying. But, for the world we’re trying to build, where we have a lot of

responsible actors who are willing to step up and lead, it is exactly what we should be doing.⁷¹

41 For critics of Obama, his “consequentialist” approach to foreign policy, one that sees him approach each case on its merits weighing up the evidence on both sides in a manner befitting a lawyer, is precisely the problem. Obama appears something of a paradox: a president who seems to embrace soft power, but has increased the US military commitment in Afghanistan; who has proclaimed a new era of constructive engagement with Iran, only at times to revert to Bush-era hard-line rhetoric; who has pledged to close Guantanamo, but failed to do so; who speaks out in support of democracy, freedom and human rights, but deliberates at length over whether to support protest movements demanding those very rights; who proclaims America as the “last, best, hope on earth,” at the same time that he speaks of the limits to American power.

42 For some, Obama’s policy toward issues such as Iran or the Arab protests is not smart but simply “bad logic.” For Mark Levine, “Refusing to support the region's pro-democracy movements is neither particularly respectful, nor does it represent a lack of interference. It is a form of action - powerfully so - in favour of the status quo. And most everyone in the region understands it as such.”⁷² Thus, Obama’s instinctive pragmatism pushes him towards a middle ground where he is seen as lacking the courage of his convictions. Left-wing critics have been withering in their condemnation of a president who promised ‘change’ in US foreign policy but who, they argue, has thus far failed to deviate from the norms governing US policy for much of its modern history: global hegemony, militarism, and imperialism. Tariq Ali is scathing in his critique of Obama’s speeches in Cairo, Prague, Oslo and elsewhere, regarding them as filled with “sonorous banality and armor-plated hypocrisy”, with Obama described as a “hand-me-down version” of the “imperialist” Woodrow Wilson, promising peace but delivering war.⁷³ For Tariq Ali, Noam Chomsky, Jon Pilger and others, Obama is as much a part of the US imperial project as Bush was, with shifts in style and approach counting for little.⁷⁴ Such criticisms are not without foundation; a TomDispatch analysis of Pentagon documents has revealed that “the Obama administration has sought to send billions of dollars in weapons systems -- from advanced helicopters to fighter jets -- to the very regimes that have beaten, jailed, and killed pro-democracy demonstrators, journalists, and reform activists throughout the Arab Spring.”⁷⁵ Arms sales such as these – long a feature of US foreign policy – do much to undermine any notion that Obama is a ‘soft’ power president, and further reinforce the arguments of those like Bacevich who maintains that Obama remains as blind as his predecessors as to the folly of deploying US military force in the Greater Middle East.⁷⁶

43 Yet critics of Obama perhaps fail to understand that the complexity and pragmatism that appears to lie at the heart of his foreign policy, although not always appreciated by the public and political commentators, is arguably one of the president’s strengths. Obama appears to have an astute ability to see the world not in narrow black-and-white, good v. evil terms, but in the shades of gray he finds it. A blanket policy of intervention in support of pro-democracy movements may not always be the right choice to make, even if it morally seems the right thing to do; nor does ruling out ‘liberal interventionism’ on the grounds that it fuels resentment towards the US or drags the US into conflicts in which its vital interests are not at stake. In his May 2011 speech on the turmoil in the Middle East, Obama sought to respond to his critics by once again affirming America’s support for democratic movements, but reminding his audience that America had to act with “humility” after its actions in Iraq. Soft power was, however, at the heart of Obama’s

speech. Justifying military action in Libya, but not elsewhere, on the grounds of an “imminent massacre” and the scale of the violence, he acknowledged the violence and repression in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen claiming that

America must use all our influence to encourage reform in the region. Even as we acknowledge that each country is different, we will need to speak honestly about the principles that we believe in, with friend and foe alike. Our message is simple: if you take the risks that reform entails, you will have the full support of the United States. We must also build on our efforts to broaden our engagement beyond elites, so that we reach the people who will shape the future – particularly young people... We will continue to make good on the commitments that I made in Cairo – to build networks of entrepreneurs, and expand exchanges in education; to foster cooperation in science and technology, and combat disease. Across the region, we intend to provide assistance to civil society, including those that may not be officially sanctioned, and who speak uncomfortable truths. And we will use the technology to connect with – and listen to – the voices of the people. In fact, real reform will not come at the ballot box alone. Through our efforts we must support those basic rights to speak your mind and access information. We will support open access to the Internet, and the right of journalists to be heard – whether it's a big news organization or a blogger. In the 21st century, information is power; the truth cannot be hidden; and the legitimacy of governments will ultimately depend on active and informed citizens.⁷⁷

44 Abandoning decades of US arms sales to unsavoury regimes may do more to bolster America's global image than any single speech, and Obama may lack the bold leadership and courage of his convictions to deliver genuine change, but the more nuanced, studious and pragmatic leadership he has thus far provided does promise to chart a more balanced path through what are desperately turbulent times. As one adviser to Obama is reported to have commented, the administration's emphasis on “stealth and modesty” is “so at odds with the John Wayne expectation for what America is in the world But it's necessary for shepherding us through this phrase.”⁷⁸

45 The world Obama inhabits does not lend itself easily to soft power approaches, and the president himself has been forced to confront such a reality, with events such as the suspected terrorist attack on the inauguration and the Christmas Day bombing serving as powerful reminders of the dominant paradigm for US foreign policy that he inherited – the seemingly omnipresent threat from international terrorism. Yet, the fact that soft power has to sometimes sit alongside hard power, or that others might not respond in the manner in which Obama hoped, does not diminish its significance or utility. If there is an emerging Obama doctrine then it appears to be centered on the complexities of the world America inhabits, the “burdens of global citizenship” in an interconnected world and the necessities of partnership and cooperation. As Ryan Lizza notes, “the one consistent thread running through most of Obama's decisions has been that America must act humbly in the world,”⁷⁹ Whatever an Obama “doctrine” might be, it seems clear that soft power is at the very heart of Obama's foreign policy world. The president may not be dogmatically wedded to it, nor apply it consistently, but a genuine appreciation that the United States needs to better incorporate soft power practices and principles into its foreign policy is undoubtedly present in this administration. Obama has done more than any previous president to elevate the concept to the centre, not the periphery, of US foreign policy, but his administration is also testimony to the fact that the US has now moved beyond the hard power/soft power debate. The emergence of “smart power” as a

concept in US foreign policy reflects an acceptance that soft power has a central role to play in US foreign policy and an appreciation of its virtues and merits, alongside a hard-headed recognition that it is not the answer to all America's ills, and must not only be carefully applied and leveraged, but combined with other levers of US power where necessary.

VII. Conclusion

46 Much has changed since John Quincy Adams asserted in 1821 that the United States “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.”⁸⁰ Active US global leadership has been instrumental in dealing with some of the foremost threats to international peace and security in the modern era. Previous administrations and presidents have not always acted in a manner that commands respect and credibility abroad, but the Bush Administration's neglect and squandering of America's soft power did much to erode America's international legitimacy and credibility. Far from commending, in Adams's words, “the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example,”⁸¹ the Bush Administration's conduct of the War on Terror served to fuel anti-American sentiment and undermine its own aims and objectives. To caricature Bush as a hard power president and Obama as a soft power would be false, however. Bush's preference for hard power was evident from the beginning of his administration, a natural instinct for a group of individuals who believed overwhelmingly in the power of the American military to deliver their policy goals and objectives. Yet there was an attempt to recoup some of the damage done during the administration's first term in its second, with the administration reaching out to allies, committing itself to diplomacy and negotiation on issues such as Iran and North Korea, and attempting – though somewhat belatedly – to revitalise its public diplomacy.

47 While Obama may be a soft power president at heart, he is also a pragmatist, a “smart” president, intuitively aware of the hard power world in which he operates and which does, often, constrain his policy choices. As Obama has acknowledged: “When you start applying blanket policies on the complexities of the current world situation, you're going to get yourself into trouble.”⁸² Obama himself is a far more complex figure than his predecessor. The changes in Bush's foreign policy could not mask his unshakeable belief in American global hegemony, and a Manichean view of the world divided into “good” and “evil.” Although Obama does indeed share with Bush a fundamental commitment to American exceptionalism, he does not view the world in such narrow terms, nor does he believe American values can be imposed upon other cultures and societies, or that the US can exhibit disdain for international institutions and allies without suffering the consequences. Obama is also acutely aware of the limits of American power. During the campaign Obama was seen carrying a copy of Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World*, a book that charts the “rise of the rest” and an end to the “unipolar moment” famously trumpeted by Krauthammer in 1990.⁸³

48 Unlike his predecessor, Obama does not seek to defend and promote an assertive US global hegemony predicated on America's unrivalled military dominance. Obama acknowledged in his inauguration address that “the world has changed” and that claims to American global leadership are often counter-productive. The “post-American” world is one in which there are significant constraints on the exercises of American power, some of them caused by his predecessor, others that are more structural and rooted in

changes to world order. US influence in the world has declined, in part because of growing anti-Americanism and resentment at American policies over the eight years of the Bush Administration, but also because America is no longer the behemoth it once was. As Barry Buzan notes, not only has America's capacity for global leadership been weakened by the rise of emerging powers such as China, India and Brazil and the economic crisis Obama inherited, but also because "there is a general turn within international society against hegemony and therefore against the global leadership role itself." The challenge for the US then is that it has "to learn to live in a more pluralist international society where it is no longer the sole superpower but merely the first among equals."⁸⁴ Just over a year on from his election, it would seem Obama is neither the aggressive advocate of US hegemony of his predecessor, but nor has he discarded claims to US global leadership. Rather, he accepts the limits to American power and seeks to return to an ideal of US exceptionalism in which the US is an exemplar state, leading by example, but which also looks to others to share the burdens of global leadership. He does not reject US exceptionalism – but in many ways he seeks to move beyond interpretations of it that have become deeply entrenched in the US political psyche. As he proclaimed in his inauguration address America was "ready to lead once more"; gone would be the crusading hegemon of the Bush years, and in its place would emerge a more tolerant, respectful and humble nation, a nation whose "power grows through its prudent use," whose "security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint."⁸⁵

⁴⁹ The early signs are that Obama's reinvigoration of US soft power is beginning to deliver tangible rewards. The early "failures" of the Obama administration are being replaced with successes – some tentative, others more notable, including START III and moves towards nuclear disarmament. Whether Obama's powers of persuasion will succeed in kick-starting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process back into life remain to be seen – and many daunting obstacles remain to the two-state solution the US still prefers. Relations with the UN and NATO have improved with the administration demonstrating a firm commitment to both, while the Pew Global Attitudes Project has observed that since 2008 "the image of the United States has improved markedly in most parts of the world, reflecting global confidence in Barack Obama."⁸⁶

⁵⁰ The task for Obama remains daunting, however, a reality that was starkly reinforced when Obama's Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale sat down with a Pakistani journalist in a hotel in Karachi in August 2009, as part of Obama's strategy to convince the people of Pakistan the US is "their friend." Following a presentation by McHale on building bridges between America and the Muslim world, the Pakistani journalist is reported to have responded: "You should know that we hate all Americans. From the bottom of our souls, we hate you."⁸⁷ Indeed, for all the reinvigoration of America's soft power under Obama, there are enormous structural obstacles that remain. America's normative authority was undermined by the Bush Administration to the point where reestablishing US credibility and legitimacy is likely to take a number of years. Constrained by the realities of the world he inherited, Obama is also pursuing policies that sit uncomfortably with efforts to "rebrand" America, while resistance to US global leadership is hard-wired in many parts of the world, the product of decades of US dominance. Time will tell as to whether Obama is able to overcome such structural impediments. Following a rapturously received speech to the British Parliament in May 2011, Obama was told "You are an idealist, and it's an idealism that serves nations."

Obama's response was short, and to the point: "Thank you very much. That's what I try to do."⁸⁸ Obama's idealism and soft power instincts can be both a blessing and a curse, but as Obama approaches the mid-way point of his first term in office, he should be credited for not only having put soft power at the centre of US foreign policy, but also demonstrating a genuine – if sometimes imperfect – commitment to leading by example.'

NOTES

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4. Morris Berman, *Dark Ages America: The Final Phase of Empire* (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006), 145.
5. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 9-33.
6. **John A. Thompson, 'Wilsonianism: the dynamics of a conflicted concept,' *International Affairs*, 86/1 (January 2010): 27-47.**
7. See Berman, 81.
8. See Benjamin Barber, 'Jihad vs McWorld,' *The Atlantic Magazine* (March 1992), available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1992/03/jihad-vs-mcworld/3882/>
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10. See Berman, 149-150.
11. See Timothy J. Lynch and Robert Singh, *After Bush: The Case for Continuity in American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
12. Bacevich, p.
13. Suzanne Nossel, 'Smart Power,' *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 83, Issue 2 (Mar/Apr 2004), p. 132.
14. See Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xxxvi.
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16. Stanley Hoffman, 'The High and the Mighty: Bush's national-security strategy and the new American hubris,' *The American Prospect*, 13 January 2003, available at http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_high_and_the_mighty
17. For a detailed discussion of the US attitude and approach to NATO after 9/11 see Ellen Hallams, *The Transatlantic Alliance Renewed: The U S & NATO Since 9/11* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).
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Keywords: Bush, diplomacy, exceptionalism, Nye, Obama, smart power, soft power

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