

The Kennedy School's departing dean considers the limits of armed might and the virtues of attraction.



Soft Power & Leadership

by Joseph S. Nye Jr.

It is a central paradox of American power: The sheer might of the United States is unquestioned. American troops are stationed in some 130 countries around the globe, and no opposing army would dare challenge the U.S. on a level playing field. But as America's military superiority has increased, its ability to persuade has reached low ebb in many parts of the world, even among its oldest allies. In the following remarks, delivered as an address given on at the Center for Public Leadership's March 2004 conference on "Misuses of Power: Causes and Corrections," Joseph S. Nye Jr., dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, distinguishes between hard power—the power to coerce—and soft—the power to attract. As Dean Nye prepares to step down after 10 years of extraordinary leadership of the Kennedy School, we can think of no better way to honor him than to share with *Compass's* readers his insights on power and leadership. What follows is the full text of the dean's remarks. An edited version appears in the Spring 2004 issue of ***Compass: A Journal of Leadership***. You can order your copy by sending an e-mail to CPL@ksg.harvard.edu.

The dictionary says that leadership means going ahead or showing the way. To lead is to help a group define and achieve a common purpose. There are various types and levels of leadership, but all have in common a relationship with followers. Thus leadership and power are inextricably intertwined. I will argue below that many leadership skills such as creating a vision, communicating it, attracting and choosing able people, delegating, and forming coalitions depend upon what I call soft power. But first we should ask: what is power.

I. What Is Power?

At the most general level, power means the ability to get the outcomes one wants. Specifically, power is the ability to influence the behavior of others to get the outcomes one wants. But there are several way to affect the behavior of others.

- You can coerce them with threats.
- You can induce them with payments
- Or you can attract or co-opt them.

Sometimes I can affect your behavior without commanding it. If you believe that my objectives are legitimate, I may be able to persuade you without using threats or inducements. For example, loyal Catholics may follow the Pope's teaching on cap-

ital punishment not because of a threat of excommunication, but out of respect for his moral authority. Or some radical Muslims may be attracted to support Osama bin Laden's actions not because of payments or threats, but because they believe in the legitimacy of his objectives.

Practical politicians and ordinary people often find these questions of behavior and motivation too complicated. Thus they turn to a shortcut definition of power and simply define it as the possession of capabilities or resources that can influence outcomes. Someone who has authority, wealth or an attractive personality is called powerful. In international politics, by this second definition of power as resources, we consider a country powerful if it has:

- a relatively large population;
- territory;
- natural resources;
- economic strength;
- military force;
- and social stability.

The virtue of this second definition as resources is that it makes power appear more concrete, measurable and predictable. Power in this sense is like holding the high cards in a

card game. But this definition also has problems. When people define power as synonymous with the resources that produce it, they sometimes encounter the paradox that those best endowed with power do not always get the outcomes they want.

If you show the highest cards in a poker game, others are likely to fold their hands rather than challenge you. But power resources are not as fungible as money. What wins in one game may not help at all in another. Holding a winning poker hand does not help if the game is bridge. Even if the game is poker, if you play your high hand poorly, or fall victim to bluff and deception, you can still lose.

Having the resources of power does not guarantee that you will always get the outcome you want. For example, in terms of resources, the United States was far more powerful than Vietnam. And America was the world's only superpower in 2001, but it failed to prevent September 11. Converting resources into realized power in the sense of obtaining desired outcomes requires well-designed strategies and skillful leadership. Yet strategies are often inadequate and leaders frequently misjudge—witness Hitler in 1941 or Saddam Hussein in 1990.

Measuring power in terms of resources is an imperfect but useful shorthand. As a first approximation in any game, it helps to start by figuring out who is holding the high cards. But it is equally important to understand which resources provide the best basis for power behavior in a particular context. Oil was not an impressive power resource before the industrial age, nor was uranium significant before the nuclear age. Power resources cannot be judged without knowing the context. Before you judge who is holding the high cards, you need to understand what game you are playing and how the value of the cards may be changing. In some situations those who hold high office, command force, or possess wealth are not the most powerful. That is what revolutions are about.

II. Soft Power

Everyone is familiar with hard power. We know that military and economic might often get others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements (“carrots”) or threats (“sticks”). But sometimes you can get the outcomes you want without tangible threats or payoffs. The indirect way to get what you want has sometimes been called “the second face of power.” A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense, it is also important to set the agenda and attract others, and not only to force them to change by threatening coercive measures. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opts people rather than coerces them.

Soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others. At the personal level, we are all familiar with the power of attraction and seduction. In a relationship or a marriage, for example, power does not necessarily reside with the larger partner, but in the mysterious chemistry of attraction. And in the business world, smart executives know that leadership is not just a matter of issuing commands, but also involves leading by example and attracting others to do what you want. It is difficult to run a large organization by commands alone unless you can get others to buy in to your values. Similarly, contemporary practices of community-based policing rely on making the police sufficiently friendly and attractive that a community wants to help them achieve shared objectives.

Political leaders have long understood the power that comes from attraction. If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to use carrots or sticks to make you do it. And while leaders in authoritarian countries can use coercion and issue commands, politicians in democracies have to rely more on a combination of inducement and attraction. Soft power is a staple of daily democratic politics. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions, and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority. If a leader represents values that others want to follow, it will cost less to lead.

Soft power is not merely the same as influence. After all, influence can also rest on the hard power of threats or payments. And soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence. Simply put, in behavioral terms, soft power is attractive power. In terms of resources, soft power resources are the assets that produce such attraction. Whether a particular asset is a soft power resource that produces attraction can be measured by asking people through polls or focus groups. Whether that attraction in turn produces desired policy outcomes has to be judged in particular cases. Attraction does not always determine others' preferences. But the gap between power measured as resources and power judged as the outcomes of behavior is not unique to soft power. It occurs with all forms of power.

One way to think about the difference between hard and soft power is to consider the variety of ways you can obtain the outcomes you want:

- You can command me to change my preferences and do what you want by threatening me with force or economic sanctions.
- You can induce me to do what you want by using your economic power to pay me.
- You can restrict my preferences by setting the agenda in such a way that my more extravagant wishes seem too unrealistic to pursue.
- Or you can appeal to my sense of attraction, love or duty in our relationship, and appeal to our shared values about the justness of contributing to those shared values and purposes.

If I am persuaded to go along with your purposes without any explicit threat or exchange taking place—in short, if my behavior is determined by an observable but intangible attraction—soft power is at work. Soft power uses a different type of currency—not force, not money—to engender cooperation, an attraction to shared values and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values.

If leadership is legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance.

If culture and ideology are attractive, others more willingly follow.

If a government, corporation, or organization establishes or follows rules that are consistent with its interests and values, its actions will more likely appear legitimate in the eyes of others.

If it can help support institutions that encourage others to channel or limit their activities in ways it prefers, it will not need as many costly carrots and sticks.

Much as Adam Smith observed that people are led by an invisible hand when making decisions in a free market, our decisions in the marketplace for ideas are often shaped by soft power—an intan-

gible attraction that persuades us to go along with others without any explicit threat or exchange taking place.

III. The Interplay Between Hard and Soft Power

Hard and soft power are related because they are both aspects of the ability to achieve one's purpose by affecting the behavior of others. The distinction between them is one of degree, both in the nature of the behavior and in the tangibility of the resources. Command power - the ability to change what others do - can rest on coercion or inducement. Co-optive power—the ability to shape what others want—can rest on the attractiveness of one's culture and values or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes others fail to express some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic.

The types of behavior between command and co-option range along a spectrum from coercion to economic inducement to agenda-setting to pure attraction. Soft power resources tend to be associated with the co-optive end of the spectrum of behavior, whereas hard power resources are usually associated with command behavior. But the relationship is imperfect. For example, sometimes people are attracted to others with command power by myths of invincibility. As Osama bin Laden put it in one of his videos, “when people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse.”

To cite an example from American history, President John F. Kennedy went ahead with nuclear testing in 1961 despite negative polls, because he worried about global perceptions of Soviet gains in the arms race. Kennedy “was willing to sacrifice some of America's ‘soft’ prestige in return for gains in the harder currency of military prestige.”

Hard and soft power sometimes reinforce and sometimes interfere with each other. A leader who courts popularity may be loathe to exercise hard power when he should, but a leader who throws his weight around without regard to the effects on his soft power may find others placing obstacles in the way of his hard power. Nobody likes to feel manipulated, even by soft power.

Sometimes the same power resources can sometimes affect the entire spectrum of behavior from coercion to attraction. And in many real world situations, peoples' motives are mixed. Moreover, the distinction between hard and soft power is one of degree, both in the nature of the behavior and in the tangibility of the resources. Both are aspects of the ability to achieve one's purposes by affecting the behavior of others.

IV. The Limits of Soft Power

Some skeptics object to the idea of soft power because they think of power narrowly in terms of commands or active control. In their view, imitation or attraction do not add up to power. Some imitation or attraction does not produce much power over policy outcomes, and neither does imitation always produce desirable outcomes.

For example, in the 1980s, Japan was widely admired for its innovative industrial processes, but imitation by companies in other countries came back to haunt the Japanese when it reduced their market power. Similarly, armies frequently imitate and therefore nullify the successful tactics of their opponents and make it more difficult for them to achieve the outcomes they want. Such observations are correct, but they miss the point that attraction often does allow you to get what

you want. The skeptics who want to define power only as deliberate acts of command and control are ignoring the second or “structural” face of power—the ability to get the outcomes you want without having to force people to change their behavior through threats or payments.

At the same time, it is important to specify the conditions under which attraction is more likely to lead to desired outcomes, and those when it will not. All power depends on context—who relates to whom under what circumstances—but soft power depends more than hard power upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers. Moreover, attraction often has a diffuse effect of creating general influence, rather than producing an easily observable specific action. Just as money can be invested, politicians speak of storing up political capital to be drawn upon in future circumstances.

Of course, such goodwill may not ultimately be honored, and diffuse reciprocity is less tangible than an immediate exchange. Nonetheless, the indirect effects of attraction and a diffuse influence can make a significant difference in obtaining favorable outcomes in bargaining situations. Otherwise leaders would insist only on immediate payoffs and specific reciprocity, and we know that is not always the way they behave. Social psychologists have developed a substantial body of empirical research exploring the relationship between attractiveness and power.

Soft power is also likely to be more important when power is dispersed. A dictatorial leader cannot be totally indifferent to the views of the people under his rule, but he can often ignore popularity when he calculates his interests. In settings where opinions matter, leaders have less leeway to adopt tactics and strike deals than in autocracies. Thus it was impossible for the Turkish government to permit the transport of American troops across the country in 2003 because American policies had greatly reduced our popularity in public opinion and in the parliament. In contrast, it was far easier for the United States to obtain the use of bases in authoritarian Uzbekistan for operations in Afghanistan.

Finally, while soft power sometimes has direct effects on specific goals, it is more likely to have an impact on general goals. For example, it is easier to attract people to democracy than to coerce them to be democratic. Both specific and general goals are important, but soft power is particularly relevant to the latter. The fact that the impact of attraction on achieving preferred outcomes varies by context and type of goals does not make it irrelevant, any more than the fact that bombs and bayonets do not produce desired outcomes when we seek to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, slow global warming, or create democracy.

V. The Information Revolution

The conditions for projecting soft power have transformed dramatically in recent years. The information revolution and globalization are transforming and shrinking the world. At the beginning of the 21st century, these two forces have enhanced American power. But with time, technology will spread to other countries and peoples, and America's relative preeminence will diminish. For example, today the American twentieth of the global population represents more than half of the Internet. In a decade or two, English may remain a “lingua franca,” as Latin did after the ebb of Rome's might, but at some point in the

future, the Asian cyber-community and economy may loom larger than the American.

Even more important, the information revolution is creating virtual communities and networks that cut across national borders. Transnational corporations and non-governmental actors will play larger roles. Many of these organizations will have soft power of their own as they attract citizens into coalitions that cut across national boundaries. Political leadership becomes in part a competition for attractiveness, legitimacy and credibility. The ability to share information—and to be believed—becomes an important source of attraction and power.

This political game in a global information age suggests that the relative role of soft power to hard power will likely increase. The most likely gainers in an information age will have:

- multiple channels of communication that help to frame issues,
- cultural customs and ideas that are close to prevailing global norms
- and credibility that is enhanced by values and policies.

Soft power resources are difficult to control. Indeed, a government that tries too hard to control them may actually damage its credibility. Soft power is difficult, because many of its crucial resources are outside the control of governments, and their effects depend heavily on acceptance by the receiving audiences. Moreover, soft power resources often work indirectly by shaping the environment for policy, and sometimes take years to produce the desired outcomes.

Of course, these differences are matters of degree. Not all hard power actions promptly produce desired outcomes—witness the length and ultimate failure of the Vietnam War, or the fact that economic sanctions have historically failed to produce their intended outcomes in more than half the cases where they were tried. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein survived sanctions for more than a decade, and although the four-week military campaign broke his regime, it was only a first step toward achieving American objectives in Iraq. As one former military officer has observed, the mark of a great campaign is not what it destroys, but what it creates. Moreover, sometimes dissemination of information can quickly produce or prevent a desired outcome. But generally, soft power resources are slower, more diffuse, and more cumbersome to wield than hard power resources.

Information is power, and today a much larger part of the world's population has access to that power. Technological advances have led to dramatic reduction in the cost of processing and transmitting information. The result is an explosion of information, and that has produced a "paradox of plenty." Plenty of information leads to scarcity—of attention. When people are overwhelmed with the volume of information confronting them, it is hard to know what to focus on. Attention rather than information becomes the scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable information from background clutter gain power. Editors and cue-givers become more in demand, and this is a source of power for those who can tell us where to focus our attention.

Among editors and cue-givers, credibility is the crucial resource, and an important source of soft power. Reputation becomes even more important than in the past, and political struggles occur over the creation and destruction of credibility. Governments compete for credibility not only with other governments, but with a broad range of alternatives including news media, corporations, non-governmental organizations, inter-governmental organizations, and networks of scientific communities.

Politics has become a contest of competitive credibility. The world of traditional power politics is typically about whose military or economy wins. Politics in an information age "may ultimately be about whose story wins." Governments compete with each other and with other organizations to enhance their own credibility and weaken that of their opponents.

Reputation has always mattered in political leadership, but the role of credibility becomes an even more important power resource because of the "paradox of plenty." Information that appears to be propaganda may not only be scorned, but it may also turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines a reputation for credibility. Under the new conditions more than ever, the soft sell may prove more effective than a hard sell. It is a mistake to discount soft power as just a question of image, public relations and ephemeral popularity. It is a form of power—a means of obtaining desired outcomes. When we discount the importance of our attractiveness, we pay a price.

Finally, power in an information age will come not just from strong hard power, but from strong sharing. But in an information age, such sharing not only enhances the ability of others to cooperate with us but also increases their inclination to do so. As we share with others, we develop common outlooks and approaches that improve our ability to deal with the new challenges. Power flows from that attraction. Dismissing the importance of attraction as merely ephemeral popularity ignores key insights from new theories of leadership as well as the new realities of the information age.

VI. Conclusion

Soft power has always been a key element of leadership. The power to attract—to get others to want what you want, to frame the issues, to set the agenda—has its roots in thousands of years of human experience. One of our archetypal stories is that of a "stranger in a strange land," in which a hero finds himself in unfamiliar surroundings. In the Book of Genesis, when Joseph finds himself imprisoned in Egypt, a foreign land, he wins the Pharaoh's favor through the attractiveness of his wisdom.

Skillful leaders have always understood that attractiveness stems from credibility and legitimacy. Power has never flowed solely from the barrel of a gun; even the most brutal dictators have relied on attraction as well as fear. Globalization and the communications revolution pose new leadership challenges that will increase the importance of credibility, legitimacy, and accountability. In an age when it's necessary to win the battle of the story as well as the battle on the field, leaders need to pay more attention than ever to soft power.

When the United States paid insufficient attention to issues of legitimacy and credibility in the way it went about its policy on Iraq, polls showed a dramatic drop in American soft power. That did not prevent the U.S. from entering Iraq, but it meant that the U.S. had to pay higher costs in the blood and treasure than would otherwise have been the case. Similarly, if Yasser Arafat had chosen the soft power model of Ghandi or Martin Luther King rather than the hard power of terrorism, he could have attracted moderate Israelis and would have a Palestinian state by now. I said at the start that leadership is inextricably intertwined with power. Leaders have to make crucial choices about the types of power that they use. Woe be to followers of those leaders who ignore or devalue the significance of soft power. ■