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The Decline of American Soft Power

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

For over five decades, Australia has been among the closest allies of the United States. Australian soldiers fought and died alongside American troops in the jungles of World War II's Pacific theater. During the cold war, Washington viewed Australia as one of the outposts of freedom in an increasingly perilous region; in Vietnam, Australians once again fought alongside American forces in intense jungle warfare. For decades, relations between administrations in Washington and Canberra were warm no matter which parties controlled the governments. Today, in the Iraq War, Australian troops again are serving with the US military.

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Culturally, as Australia abandoned some of its traditional ties to Britain, it started to have more in common with the United States. Australian entertainers like Nicole Kidman increasingly migrated to the United States for work, while American film, music, and books came to dominate Australian theaters, radio stations, and reading lists. Students from elite American universities increasingly chose Australia as a study-abroad destination, in part because the country seemed so welcoming and familiar.

Australia is not Cuba, a nation with a history of horrendous relations with the United States. It is not even France or Brazil, states whose interactions with America tend to fluctuate between moderately warm and icy cold. Yet precisely because Australia has been such a close US ally, the results of a poll taken in early 2005 by the Lowy Institute, a respected Australian research organization, are shocking. In this survey, barely more than half the Australians polled had positive feelings about the United States, although 84 percent saw Japan posi-

tively, and 86 percent viewed the United Kingdom positively. Worse, 57 percent of Australians perceived America's foreign policies as a potential threat—equivalent to the percentage of Australians worried about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. This despite the fact that, in 2002, a massive bomb in Bali planted by radical Islamists killed more than 200 people, most of them Australians.

Australia is not unique. Polls taken in many nations suggest that anti-Bush administration sentiment, which developed between 2002 and 2004, has mutated and strengthened into a broader anti-Americanism. Indeed, while previously publics in many countries differentiated between their dislike for George W. Bush's foreign policies and their personal respect and even love for American people, American values, American culture, and American companies, these distinctions may be disappearing.

A study released in August by Anholt-GMI, an organization that ranks the “brands” of nations, found that respondents from a range of countries ranked the United States only eleventh overall in terms of its cultural, political, popular, and business attractiveness. The United States was last in the rating for cultural heritage, which the survey's author said reflected widespread skepticism about Americans' “wisdom, intelligence, and integrity.” America's “governance, its cultural heritage, and its people are no longer widely respected or admired by the world,” Simon Anholt, the author, bluntly told the *Financial Times*.

“Foreigners are transferring anger at the US government to anger at the United States and anger at US business,” agreed Keith Reinhard, head of a coalition of companies, Business for Diplomatic Action, that is concerned about America's declining image. This anger can prove fatal: in Karachi, irate Pakistanis have attacked a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, an American symbol, four times in the past four years. In the most brutal attack, a mob stormed the KFC and burned it to the ground, killing six people inside.

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Other studies have revealed similar results. Although a recent Pew survey showed slight improvement in America's standing in the world, the downward trend remains unmistakable. In a survey this year of 21 nations by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), only one-third of those polled wanted American values to spread in their nation. Even as US military power has surpassed that of all rivals, America's vital soft power may be disintegrating.

SEEDS OF DECLINE

The idea of soft power can be traced to a 1990 essay by Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye. Soft power, essentially, is the ability of a nation to persuade and influence other countries not with threats or coercion, but through the attractiveness of its society, its values, its culture, and its institutions. This attractiveness can be conveyed through various means, including popular culture, public and private diplomacy, how a nation's leaders participate in multinational organizations and other forums, businesses' actions abroad, and the gravitational pull of a nation's economic strength. Ultimately, nations with the greatest soft power find that citizens of other countries aspire to share their values and institutions, and leaders of foreign countries view their policies as legitimate and want to follow their lead. As Nye put it: "If I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you."

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the United States seemed at the height of its soft power. American superiority in information technology powered the US economy and placed US businesses at the leading edge of the Internet and IT revolution. American music, film, and television dominated local markets in nations ranging from India to Indonesia. Legal and illegal immigration to the United States was soaring, as were applications for work, tourist, and study visas to come to the United States. The progression of democratic change in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Africa seemed to reflect the global appeal of American democratic culture and institutions. Symbols of America featured prominently in pro-reform demonstrations and protests ranging from China to Eastern Europe, and US political scientists speculated that eventually the entire world would adopt American political

institutions. On visits abroad, President Bill Clinton often was welcomed like a rock star—on a trip to Vietnam, he waded through crowds of jubilant Vietnamese as if he were the pope or Elvis.

But even in this idyllic period, seeds of a soft power decline were planted. Since the Second World War, public diplomacy—government-funded programs that try to influence public opinion abroad—had been a linchpin of US foreign policy. Radio Free Europe provided the news and values that inspired a generation of dissidents within the Soviet bloc. State Department international exchange programs introduced future foreign leaders from Margaret Thatcher to Hamid Karzai to the United States. Libraries and American centers operated by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and US embassies offered foreigners a window into American society. US government-sponsored tours by artists and musicians brought jazz, Pop art, and many other American trends to foreign audiences.

Yet the Clinton administration was overconfident about the post-cold war power and appeal of the United States, and it unwisely slashed bud-

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gets for the State Department's public diplomacy efforts while merging the USIA into State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. One study revealed that State Department funding for educational and cultural exchange programs declined every year between 1993 and 2002; another showed that the number of academic and cultural exchanges between the United States and foreign nations plummeted from 45,000 in 1995 to 29,000 in 2001. Between 1993 and 1999 the number of Foreign Service officers focused on public diplomacy in the State Department fell by nearly one-quarter, and many of the USIA libraries abroad were shuttered. Foggy Bottom's tangled bureaucracy tended to hamstring USIA leaders, since the undersecretary of state responsible for the USIA had little real contact with posts in the field, and since the USIA itself was being gutted. By the late 1990s, the USIA had roughly half the staff it did in the 1960s.

Other factors, too, presaged a soft power decline. The Soviet collapse had left America the sole superpower, a position likely to provoke resentment. Factions of both the Republican and Democratic parties in the 1990s began to express concerns about growing legal and illegal immigration into the United

States. America failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on global warming or the International Criminal Court (ICC). US intransigence on many bilateral and multilateral trade initiatives fostered ill will abroad. Meanwhile, citizens of some countries were linking globalization with unwelcome elements of the American social model, including limited social welfare protection and laissez-faire capitalism. Meetings of the World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank met with harsh anti-globalization and anti-US protests. The spread of American culture, combined with insensitivity by some US business leaders and politicians to fears that American film and media would overwhelm local industries, also fostered resentment.

UGLY AMERICANS

The past four years have transformed this resentment into outright anger. The Iraq War in particular has sharply reduced global acceptance of the legitimacy of America's role in the world—and a number of US actions have aggravated this decline. For example, poorly conceived security measures launched in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks have made it much harder for many foreigners to obtain American student, work, and tourist visas, or to apply for political asylum in the United States. These changes have prompted questions about the idea of America as a land of opportunity and refuge. The number of foreign visa applications to the United States, mostly for scholars, that were sent for extensive security review grew twenty-fold between 2000 and 2003, even though the resources to conduct these reviews were not yet in place. Despite these problems, the Republican leadership of Congress and the White House have been unable to agree on a comprehensive strategy to manage immigration and balance visa policies with homeland security.

The White House also has made further mistakes in public diplomacy, such as the growing politicization of Voice of America under an increasingly partisan board of governors. Politicization has led to reports of VOA staffers being prodded to promote rosy stories on the war in Iraq, stories that could compromise VOA's position as a beacon of accuracy and affect foreigners' perceptions of American freedoms and rule of law. The Bush administration has reportedly imposed tighter restrictions on Foreign Service officers' contacts with journalists abroad, has struggled to complement the VOA with newer broadcasting in the Middle East (the White House slashed VOA's Arabic service), and has failed to develop a

broader public diplomacy strategy to communicate America's values, beyond short-term political campaign-style responses to global events. In fact, the Bush administration is already on its third public diplomacy czar, White House confidante Karen Hughes, who recently embarked on a "listening tour" of the Middle East during which she drew extensive and often critical coverage in the American media but only a limited response from locals.

More broadly, the White House's near-exclusive focus on terrorism, its entry into the Iraq War, and its disavowal of multilateral norms and institutions—including accepted global prohibitions on torture—have added to this alienation overseas. Compared with the Clinton administration, which featured economic heavyweights like Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, the Bush administration's economic team has consisted largely of minor figures, such as Treasury Secretary John Snow, who seem to wield little power in a cabinet dominated by powerhouses like Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In contrast to the Clinton administration's emphasis on globalization, the Bush White House's enunciation of its worldview in the 2002 National Security Strategy focused little on economic power, a major factor in a nation's attractiveness. In a small number of foreign countries seriously threatened by terrorism, such as Singapore or Israel, this focus on terror makes sense, and studies show populations in these nations retain relatively favorable impressions of the United States.

But in many other countries, an exclusive focus on counterterrorism seems strange, if not unwise. At meetings of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation council in October 2003, President Bush concentrated almost exclusively on security issues, even though most participants had come to hammer out trade deals. The president's focus befuddled many Asian leaders. Worse, the excesses of the war on terror—including abuse of prisoners in Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib—have devalued the attractiveness of American values, since that attractiveness rests in part on foreign perceptions of the United States as a humane and lawful actor on the global stage.

These mistakes now are magnified by an increasingly globalized media, especially Arab and Asian satellite television networks, which tend to be skeptical of the United States and dismissive of American values. As a result, foreigners often know a significant amount about US foreign policy, while the mainstream American media, despite claims

after 9-11 that they would take more interest in the world, have remained extremely provincial. No surprise, then, that one study, by *National Geographic* and Roper, found that nearly one-third of Americans could not find the Pacific Ocean on a map—a lack of knowledge that can offend foreigners. If Americans even venture abroad, that is: as British historian Niall Ferguson has reported, almost three-quarters of the small number of Americans living overseas are in Mexico and Canada. Even at US embassies, where there are pools of Americans knowledgeable about the wider world, tighter security measures increasingly separate diplomats from local populations. When I visited the American embassy in Manila after 9-11, for example, I discovered that anyone who wanted access to some of its books and other resources about the United States had to pass through a Byzantine series of security checks.

In battling terrorism, the Bush administration has chosen either bilateral or unilateral strategies, while punishing nations that back multilateral institutions. The Clinton administration did not always use its political leverage to promote multilateral institutions, but it at least openly praised multilateralism while trying to publicly soothe fears of American unilateralism. The Bush administration does not even offer such praise or reassurance. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, who traveled less than many of his predecessors, often skipped European and Asian multilateral forums; Rice has continued this trend, failing to attend a key meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) this summer, for which she was chastised by leaders in the region. The White House disdains multinational institutions such as the UNESCO treaty to promote cultural diversity, which has strong support around the world, particularly in nations proud of their local film and music industries. To take one of the saddest examples, Washington is considering cutting off aid to impoverished nations such as Niger—a relatively pro-US Muslim country—if they support the ICC. By comparison, the United Kingdom's government, which also backed the unpopular war in Iraq, continues to support European engagement and global institutions ranging from the Kyoto Protocol to the ICC. Britain's public image, in surveys, has remained strong.

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ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

Unlike in the 1990s, foreigners now have alternative social and economic models to consider; the "American Dream" is not the only vision in town. As the European Union has expanded, it now has a larger population than America and a gross domestic product equivalent to that of the United States. In banking, mobile telephony, aerospace, and other cutting-edge industries, European corporations like Nokia have begun to challenge, if not surpass, American companies. European expansion has made the EU seem accessible, and attractive, to a wide range of potential member-states in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the former Soviet Union. Brussels has used this desire to join the union to persuade Turkey to make drastic political changes, to push the Balkans away from its recent bloody past, and to convince former Soviet states to reform their economies and political systems—just the kind of persuasion and leverage that defines soft power. The EU also has devoted more resources to public diplomacy and

overseas aid, becoming the world's largest provider of development assistance.

This diplomacy, combined with foreign nations' desire to emulate the European

social and political model—which is perceived as more humane than America's—may be why emerging democracies now favor European parliamentary states, constitutions, and legal systems when they are designing their institutions. Recent attention to immigration woes, costly welfare budgets, and the rejection of an EU constitution has not erased Europe's attractiveness.

In the Middle East, declining American soft power may contribute to the growing attractiveness of Islamist alternatives. In several Muslim countries where the United States has given heavily promoted aid to civil society and women's rights groups, anti-Americanism is more muted than in other parts of the region.

In Asia, China has emerged as a potential rival to American soft power as the Chinese economy continues to grow and Beijing begins to enunciate its values and market its institutions and culture. To their Asian neighbors, Chinese officials and diplomats advertise the idea that China is growing into a preeminent power but supports a multipolar world in which nations do not aggressively interfere in other nations' affairs. This message is communicated

in various ways. China Radio International now broadcasts to Southeast Asia 24 hours per day; Beijing has drastically boosted its aid budget in many parts of Asia; and China has attracted growing numbers of students and officials from across the region for study trips. Through this public diplomacy, development assistance, increased interaction with multilateral institutions such as ASEAN, and other efforts, Beijing emphasizes mutual interests and promotes the idea of multipolarity, downplaying any Chinese desire to dominate the region. This is contrasted with an implicit portrayal of the United States as a unilateralist, non-Asian nation pushing an agenda that ignores Asian interests.

Beijing has had some success. Partly because of China's willingness to participate, Asian multilateral institutions ranging from the Chiang Mai currency initiative (a network of bilateral currency swap agreements) to the East Asian summit (a gathering of both Southeast and Northeast Asian leaders) have gained prominence. Public sentiment across Asia has become more favorable toward China, and Chinese companies have begun to venture abroad and build their brand names. In the Lowy Institute poll, some 70 percent of Australians viewed China positively. In a recent survey in Thailand, 76 percent of respondents considered China to be Thailand's closest friend.

LOSS OF GRAVITY

The evidence of America's declining attractiveness is both particular and widespread. It is specific in that many groups once drawn to the United States are now abandoning it. If they choose to avoid America, they are unable to witness American values and ideals first hand, and to bring those values and ideals back to their homelands. The United Kingdom now ranks ahead of the United States in applications for political asylum. The Council of Graduate Schools, an organization of American universities, reports that the number of international graduate school applications fell 28 percent between 2003 and 2004, and 5 percent between 2004 and 2005. Tourist arrivals to the United States fell by nearly 10 million between 2000 and 2003, and foreign tourist interest in America is not rebounding strongly, despite a weak dollar, which makes travel to the United States cheaper. Perhaps most surprising, despite the image of the United States as a magnet for foreign talent, legal immigration to America has been dropping since 2000.

The evidence of America's declining attractiveness is wide, with surveys from every part of the

world showing diminished reputation. In addition to the Anholt and Lowy polls, a March 2005 poll by the BBC of 22 nations across several continents found that nearly all believed China plays a more positive role in the world than the United States. Another study found that people in Eastern Europe, traditionally a source of pro-US sentiment because of America's actions during the cold war, view the EU as a more positive actor on a range of foreign policy issues. An April 2005 poll of 23 countries by the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that people in 20 nations want Europe to be more influential than America. An Interbrand study of corporate marketing found that trust in American brands is declining, while a 2004 poll by the Global Market Institute revealed that some 60 percent of French and German consumers now have a negative impression of American businesses. Even Barbie is not safe: sales of the US icon have fallen during recent periods of foreign antipathy to America. As Hughes was setting off on her recent "listening tour" to the Middle East, a congressional panel put it bluntly: "America's image and reputation abroad could hardly be worse."

A broad decline in soft power has many practical implications. These include the drain in foreign talent coming to the United States, the potential backlash against American companies, the growing attractiveness of China and Europe, and the possibility that anti-US sentiment will make it easier for terrorist groups to recruit. In addition, with a decline in soft power, Washington is simply less able to persuade others. In the run-up to the Iraq War, the Bush administration could not convince Turkey, a longtime US ally, to play a major staging role, in part because America's image in Turkey was so poor. During the war itself, the United States has failed to obtain significant participation from all but a handful of major nations, again in part because of America's negative image in countries ranging from India to Germany. In attempts to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons, Washington has had to allow China to play a central role, partly because few Asian states view the United States as a neutral, legitimate broker in the talks.

Instead, Washington must increasingly resort to the other option Nye discusses—force, or the threat of force. With foreign governments and publics suspicious of American policy, the White House has been unable to lead a multinational effort to halt Iran's nuclear program, and instead has had to resort to threatening sanctions at the United Nations or even the possibility of strikes against

Iran. With America's image declining in nations like Thailand and Pakistan, it is harder for leaders in these countries to openly embrace counterterrorism cooperation with the United States, so Washington resorts to quiet arm-twisting and blandishments to obtain counterterror concessions.

Force is not a long-term solution. Newer, non-traditional security threats such as disease, human trafficking, and drug trafficking can only be managed through forms of multilateral cooperation that depend on America's ability to persuade other nations. Terrorism itself cannot be defeated by force alone, a fact that even the White House recognizes. The 2002 National Security Strategy emphasizes that winning the war on terror requires the United States to lead a battle of ideas against the ideological roots of terrorism, in addition to rooting out and destroying individual militant cells.

THE WAY BACK

The game is not lost. As Nye himself notes, the United States recovered from a previous decline in soft power after the Vietnam War. Other recent examples suggest the same—in the wake of a concerted American response to the December 2004 Asian tsunami, complemented by solid public diplomacy, the image of the United States in Indonesia this year has improved. And the United States still clearly possesses a soft power lead over its nearest rivals. It remains the world's most powerful economic actor, and it retains hard power credentials that will augment its soft power for years to come. Still, the administration must realize that it is doing long-term damage to American soft power, and that it can reverse its losses.

Doing so would require a multifaceted initiative. First, it would involve a clear and concrete public diplomacy strategy. Hughes or another czar needs to create a public diplomacy structure within the State Department that makes sense, better integrating public diplomacy officers into embassies around the world and placing a specialist on the National Security Council to help coordinate public diplomacy efforts with broader US policy. In the field, public diplomacy should cater to host countries and emphasize cultural ties by reopening American centers and boosting academic and cultural exchange programs. It should highlight US development assistance, support for political reform, and willingness to listen to locals on what kinds of aid to provide. A study of public perceptions of the United States

in Morocco found that “informing people about aid in the areas in which America's strengths are acknowledged”—in Morocco, primarily democracy assistance—“had a significant positive effect on the attitudes of focus group members.”

All of this requires money. Currently, US spending per capita on public diplomacy pales when compared to that of France or Canada. But there are encouraging signs, including several congressional bills that would fund major increases in international education and cultural exchanges.

There are other parts of a soft power strategy. Comprehensive immigration reform, which would balance security with regulated and open borders, could help assure foreigners that America remains a welcoming and vital society. More effective broadcasting abroad, absent the partisan meddling that may have injured VOA's image, could help promote the idea that America is committed to a free press and even allows criticism; the Voice of America and other US-government funded broadcasters might consider more regularly featuring critics of US policies. It is just such unbiased, stellar reporting, including criticism of the British government, that has earned the BBC worldwide trust—trust that reflects back on the United Kingdom. Closer coordination between government public diplomacy and efforts by nongovernmental organizations, arts and culture foundations, and the private sector, such as Business for Diplomatic Action, also could prove fruitful.

In what could be most painful for the White House, an effective strategy to rejuvenate soft power would require at least reconsidering opposition to some multilateral institutions. It would also mean allowing other major powers, such as the EU or China, freedom to take the lead on important regional issues, like drug trafficking or weapons proliferation, without automatically assuming that this leadership threatens American interests. It is probably too much to expect a change of course regarding Kyoto or the International Criminal Court, which have become almost iconic among conservatives opposed to joining multinational groupings. But participating in the UNESCO cultural treaty, the treaty banning land mines, and other less vital institutions could help rehabilitate America's image, at a limited cost to US sovereignty. The alternative? One day soon, perhaps, even Australia might refuse to send its troops to fight alongside American soldiers. ■