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Limits of American Power

JOSEPH S. NYE, JR.

Not since Rome has one nation loomed so large above the others. In the words of *The Economist*, “the United States bestrides the globe like a colossus. It dominates business, commerce and communications; its economy is the world’s most successful, its military might second to none.”¹ French foreign minister Hubert Védrine argued in 1999 that the United States had gone beyond its superpower status of the twentieth century. “U.S. supremacy today extends to the economy, currency, military areas, lifestyle, language and the products of mass culture that inundate the world, forming thought and fascinating even the enemies of the United States.”² Or as two American triumphalists put it, “Today’s international system is built not around a balance of power but around American hegemony.”³ As global interdependence has increased, many have argued that globalization is simply a disguise for American imperialism. The German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* reported that “American idols and icons are shaping the world from Katmandu to Kinshasa, from Cairo to Caracas. Globalization wears a ‘Made in USA’ label.”⁴

The United States is undoubtedly the world’s number one power, but how long can this situation last, and what should we do with it? Some pundits and

¹ “America’s World,” *The Economist*, 23 October 1999.

² Lara Marlowe, “French Minister Urges Greater UN Role to Counter US Hyperpower,” *The Irish Times*, 4 November 1999. In 1998, Védrine coined the term “hyperpower” to describe the United States because “the word ‘superpower’ seems to me too closely linked to the cold war and military issues.” Hubert Védrine with Dominique Moisi, *France in an Age of Globalization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 2.

³ Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “The Present Danger,” *The National Interest* (Spring 2000).

⁴ William Drozdiak, “Even Allies Resent U.S. Dominance,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1997.

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scholars argue that U.S. preeminence is simply the result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and that this “unipolar moment” will be brief.⁵ American strategy should be to husband strength and engage the world only selectively. Others argue that America’s power is so great that it will last for decades, and the unipolar moment can become a unipolar era.⁶ Charles Krauthammer argued in early 2001 that “after a decade of Prometheus playing pygmy, the first task of the new administration is to reassert American freedom of action.” We should refuse to play “the docile international citizen. . . . The new unilateralism recognizes the uniqueness of the unipolar world we now inhabit and thus marks the real beginning of American post-Cold War foreign policy.”⁷

Even before September 2001, this prescription was challenged by many, both liberals and conservatives, who consider themselves realists and consider it almost a law of nature in international politics that if one nation becomes too strong, others will team up to balance its power. In their eyes, America’s current predominance is ephemeral.⁸ As evidence, they might cite an Indian journalist who urges a strategic triangle linking Russia, India, and China “to provide a counterweight in what now looks like a dangerously unipolar world,”⁹ or the president of Venezuela telling a conference of oil producers that “the 21st century should be multipolar, and we all ought to push for the development of such a world.”¹⁰ Even friendly sources such as *The Economist* agree that “the one-superpower world will not last. Within the next couple of decades a China with up to 1½ billion people, a strongly growing economy and probably a still authoritarian government will almost certainly be trying to push its interests. . . . Sooner or later some strong and honest man will pull post-Yeltsin Russia together, and another contender for global influence will have reappeared.”¹¹ In my view, terrorism notwithstanding, American preponderance will last well into this century—but only if the United States learns to use power wisely.

Predicting the rise and fall of nations is notoriously difficult. In February 1941, publishing magnate Henry Luce boldly proclaimed the “American cen-

⁵ See Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* (Winter 1990–1991): 23–33; Christopher Lane, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Arise,” *International Security* (Spring 1993): 5–51; Charles Kupchan, “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity,” *International Security* (Fall 1998).

⁶ William Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World” in Michael Brown et al., *America’s Strategic Choices*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 305, 309; also from a liberal perspective, G. John Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order,” *International Security* (Winter 1998–99): 43–78.

⁷ Charles Krauthammer, “The New Unilateralism,” *Washington Post*, 8 June 2001.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, “Globalization and Governance,” *Political Science and Politics* (December 1999): 700.

⁹ Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, “Will Dream Partnership Become Reality?” *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 25 December 1998.

¹⁰ Hugo Chavez quoted in Larry Rohter, “A Man with Big Ideas, a Small Country . . . and Oil,” *New York Times*, 24 September 2000.

¹¹ “When the Snarling’s Over,” *The Economist*, 13 March 1999.

tury.” Yet by the 1980s, many analysts thought Luce’s vision had run its course, the victim of such culprits as Vietnam, a slowing economy, and imperial overstretch. In 1985, economist Lester Thurow asked why, when Rome had lasted a thousand years as a republic and an empire, we were slipping after only fifty.¹² Polls showed that half the public agreed that the nation was contracting in power and prestige.¹³

The declinists who filled American bestseller lists a decade ago were not the first to go wrong. After Britain lost its American colonies in the eighteenth century, Horace Walpole lamented Britain’s reduction to “a miserable little island” as insignificant as Denmark or Sardinia.¹⁴ His prediction was colored by the then current view of colonial commerce and failed to foresee the coming industrial revolution that would give Britain a second century with even greater preeminence. Similarly, the American declinists failed to understand that a “third industrial revolution” was about to give the United States a “second century.”¹⁵ The United States has certainly been the leader in the global information revolution.

On the other hand, nothing lasts forever in world politics. A century ago, economic globalization was as high by some measures as it is today. World finance rested on a gold standard, immigration was at unparalleled levels, trade was increasing, and Britain had an empire on which the sun never set. As author William Pfaff put it, “Responsible political and economic scholars in 1900 would undoubtedly have described the twentieth-century prospect as continuing imperial rivalries within a Europe-dominated world, lasting paternalistic tutelage by Europeans of their Asian and African colonies, solid constitutional government in Western Europe, steadily growing prosperity, increasing scientific knowledge turned to human benefit, etc. All would have been wrong.”¹⁶ What followed, of course, were two world wars, the great social disease of totalitarian fascism and communism, the end of European empires, and the end of Europe as the arbiter of world power. Economic globalization was reversed and did not again reach its 1914 levels until the 1970s. Conceivably, it could happen again.

Can we do better as we enter the twenty-first century? The apocrypha of Yogi Berra warns us not to make predictions, particularly about the future. Yet we have no choice. We walk around with pictures of the future in our heads as

¹² Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Lester Thurow, *The Zero Sum Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

¹³ Martilla and Kiley, Inc. (Boston, MA), *Americans Talk Security*, no. 6, May 1988, and no. 8, August 1988.

¹⁴ Quoted in Barbara Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 221.

¹⁵ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1999 [1973]), new introduction.

¹⁶ William Pfaff, *Barbarian Sentiments: America in the New Century*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 280.

a necessary condition of planning our actions. At the national level, we need such pictures to guide policy and tell us how to use our unprecedented power. There is, of course, no single future; there are multiple possible futures, and the quality of our foreign policy can make some more likely than others. When systems involve complex interactions and feedbacks, small causes can have large effects. And when people are involved, human reaction to the prediction itself may make it fail to come true.

We cannot hope to predict the future, but we can draw our pictures carefully so as to avoid some common mistakes.¹⁷ A decade ago, a more careful analysis of American power could have saved us from the mistaken portrait of American decline. More recently, accurate predictions of catastrophic terrorism failed to avert a tragedy that leads some again to foresee decline. It is important to prevent the errors of both declinism and triumphalism. Declinism tends to produce overly cautious behavior that could undercut influence; triumphalism could beget a potentially dangerous absence of restraint, as well as an arrogance that would also squander influence. With careful analysis, the United States can make better decisions about how to protect its people, promote values, and lead toward a better world over the next few decades. I begin this analysis with an examination of the sources of U.S. power.

THE SOURCES OF AMERICAN POWER

We hear a lot about how powerful America has become in recent years, but what do we mean by power? Simply put, power is the ability to effect the outcomes you want and, if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen. For example, NATO's military power reversed Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing of Kosovo, and the promise of economic aid to Serbia's devastated economy reversed the Serbian government's initial disinclination to hand Milosevic over to the Hague tribunal.

The ability to obtain the outcomes one wants is often associated with the possession of certain resources, and so we commonly use shorthand and define power as possession of relatively large amounts of such elements as population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force, and political stability. Power in this sense means holding the high cards in the international poker game. If you show high cards, others are likely to fold their hands. Of course, if you play your hand poorly or fall victim to bluff and deception, you can still lose, or at least fail to get the outcome you want. For example, the United States was the largest power after World War I, but it failed to prevent the rise of Hitler or Pearl Harbor. Converting America's potential power resources into realized power requires well-designed policy and skillful leadership. But it helps to start by holding the high cards.

¹⁷ On the complexities of projections, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Peering into the Future," *Foreign Affairs* (July-August 1994); see also Robert Jervis, "The Future of World Politics: Will It Resemble the Past?" *International Security* (Winter 1991-1992).

Traditionally, the test of a great power was “strength for war.”¹⁸ War was the ultimate game in which the cards of international politics were played and estimates of relative power were proven. Over the centuries, as technologies evolved, the sources of power have changed. In the agrarian economies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, population was a critical power resource because it provided a base for taxes and the recruitment of infantry (who were mostly mercenaries), and this combination of men and money gave the edge to France. But in the nineteenth century, the growing importance of industry benefited first Britain, which ruled the waves with a navy that had no peer, and later Germany, which used efficient administration and railways to transport armies for quick victories on the Continent (though Russia had a larger population and army). By the middle of the twentieth century, with the advent of the nuclear age, the United States and the Soviet Union possessed not only industrial might but nuclear arsenals and intercontinental missiles.

Today the foundations of power have been moving away from the emphasis on military force and conquest. Paradoxically, nuclear weapons were one of the causes. As we know from the history of the cold war, nuclear weapons proved so awesome and destructive that they became muscle bound—too costly to use except, theoretically, in the most extreme circumstances.¹⁹ A second important change was the rise of nationalism, which has made it more difficult for empires to rule over awakened populations. In the nineteenth century, a few adventurers conquered most of Africa with a handful of soldiers, and Britain ruled India with a colonial force that was a tiny fraction of the indigenous population. Today, colonial rule is not only widely condemned but far too costly, as both cold war superpowers discovered in Vietnam and Afghanistan. The collapse of the Soviet empire followed the end of European empires by a matter of decades.

A third important cause is societal change inside great powers. Postindustrial societies are focused on welfare rather than glory, and they loathe high casualties except when survival is at stake. This does not mean that they will not use force, even when casualties are expected—witness the 1991 Gulf War or Afghanistan today. But the absence of a warrior ethic in modern democracies means that the use of force requires an elaborate moral justification to ensure popular support (except in cases where survival is at stake). Roughly speaking, there are three types of countries in the world today: poor, weak preindustrial states, which are often the chaotic remnants of collapsed empires; modernizing industrial states such as India or China; and the postindustrial societies that prevail in Europe, North America, and Japan. The use of force is common in the first type of country, still accepted in the second, but less toler-

¹⁸ A. J. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1954), xxix.

¹⁹ Whether this would change with the proliferation of nuclear weapons to more states is hotly debated among theorists. Deterrence should work with most states, but the prospects of accident and loss of control would increase. For my views, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Nuclear Ethics* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

ated in the third. In the words of British diplomat Robert Cooper, “A large number of the most powerful states no longer want to fight or to conquer.”²⁰ War remains possible, but it is much less acceptable now than it was a century or even half a century ago.²¹

Finally, for most of today’s great powers, the use of force would jeopardize their economic objectives. Even nondemocratic countries that feel fewer popular moral constraints on the use of force have to consider its effects on their economic objectives. As Thomas Friedman has put it, countries are disciplined by an “electronic herd” of investors who control their access to capital in a globalized economy.²² And Richard Rosecrance writes, “In the past, it was cheaper to seize another state’s territory by force than to develop the sophisticated economic and trading apparatus needed to derive benefit from commercial exchange with it.”²³ Imperial Japan used the former approach when it created the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere in the 1930s, but Japan’s post-World War II role as a trading state turned out to be far more successful, leading it to become the second largest national economy in the world. It is difficult now to imagine a scenario in which Japan would try to colonize its neighbors, or succeed in doing so.

As mentioned above, none of this is to suggest that military force plays no role in international politics today. For one thing, the information revolution has yet to transform most of the world. Many states are unconstrained by democratic societal forces, as Kuwait learned from its neighbor Iraq, and terrorist groups pay little heed to the normal constraints of liberal societies. Civil wars are rife in many parts of the world where collapsed empires left power vacuums. Moreover, throughout history, the rise of new great powers has been accompanied by anxieties that have sometimes precipitated military crises. In Thucydides’ immortal description, the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece was caused by the rise to power of Athens and the fear it created in Sparta.²⁴ World War I owed much to the rise of the kaiser’s Germany and the fear that it created in Britain.²⁵ Some foretell a similar dynamic in this century arising from the rise of China and the fear it creates in the United States.

Geoeconomics has not replaced geopolitics, although in the early twenty-first century there has clearly been a blurring of the traditional boundaries between the two. To ignore the role of force and the centrality of security would

²⁰ Robert Cooper, *The Postmodern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 2000), 22.

²¹ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

²² Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), chap. 6.

²³ Richard N. Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 16, 160.

²⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), book I, chapter 1.

²⁵ And in turn, as industrialization progressed and railroads were built, Germany feared the rise of Russia.

be like ignoring oxygen. Under normal circumstances, oxygen is plentiful and we pay it little attention. But once those conditions change and we begin to miss it, we can focus on nothing else.²⁶ Even in those areas where the direct employment of force falls out of use among countries—for instance, within Western Europe or between the United States and Japan—nonstate actors such as terrorists may use force. Moreover, military force can still play an important political role among advanced nations. For example, most countries in East Asia welcome the presence of American troops as an insurance policy against uncertain neighbors. Moreover, deterring threats or ensuring access to a crucial resource such as oil in the Persian Gulf increases America's influence with its allies. Sometimes the linkages may be direct; more often they are present in the back of statesmen's minds. As the Defense Department describes it, one of the missions of American troops based overseas is to “shape the environment.”

With that said, economic power *has* become more important than in the past, both because of the relative increase in the costliness of force and because economic objectives loom large in the values of postindustrial societies.²⁷ In a world of economic globalization, all countries are to some extent dependent on market forces beyond their direct control. When President Clinton was struggling to balance the federal budget in 1993, one of his advisers stated in exasperation that if he were to be reborn, he would like to come back as “the market” because that was clearly the most powerful player.²⁸ But markets constrain different countries to different degrees. Because the United States constitutes such a large part of the market in trade and finance, it is better placed to set its own terms than are Argentina or Thailand. And if small countries are willing to pay the price of opting out of the market, they can reduce the power that other countries have over them. Thus American economic sanctions have had little effect, for example, on improving human rights in isolated Myanmar. Saddam Hussein's strong preference for his own survival rather than the welfare of the Iraqi people meant that crippling sanctions failed for more than a decade to remove him from power. And economic sanctions may disrupt but not deter nonstate terrorists. But the exceptions prove the rule. Military power remains crucial in certain situations, but it is a mistake to focus too narrowly on the military dimensions of American power.

²⁶ Henry Kissinger portrays four international systems existing side by side: the West (and Western Hemisphere), marked by democratic peace; Asia, where strategic conflict is possible; the Middle East, marked by religious conflict; and Africa, where civil wars threaten weak postcolonial states. “America at the Apex,” *The National Interest* (Summer 2001).

²⁷ Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Power and Interdependence*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), chap. 1.

²⁸ James Carville quoted in Bob Woodward, *The Agenda: Inside the Clinton White House* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 302.

SOFT POWER

In my view, if the United States wants to remain strong, Americans need also to pay attention to our soft power. What precisely do I mean by soft power? Military power and economic power are both examples of hard command power that can be used to induce others to change their position. Hard power can rest on inducements (carrots) or threats (sticks). But there is also an indirect way to exercise 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 just as important to set the agenda in world politics and attract others as it is to force them to change through the threat or use of military or economic weapons. This aspect of power—getting others to want what you want—I call soft power.²⁹ It coopts people rather than coerces them.

Soft power rests on the ability to set the political agenda in a way that shapes the preferences of others. At the personal level, wise parents know that if they have brought up their children with the right beliefs and values, their power will be greater and will last longer than if they have relied only on spankings, cutting off allowances, or taking away the car keys. Similarly, political leaders and thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci have long understood the power that comes from setting the agenda and determining the framework of a debate. The ability to establish preferences tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as an attractive culture, ideology, and institutions. If I can get you to *want* to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do *not* want to do. If the United States represents values that others want to follow, it will cost us less to lead. Soft power is not merely the same as influence, though it is one source of influence. After all, I can also influence you by threats or rewards. Soft power is also more than persuasion or the ability to move people by argument. It is the ability to entice and attract. And attraction often leads to acquiescence or imitation.

Soft power arises in large part from our values. These values are expressed in our culture, in the policies we follow inside our country, and in the way we handle ourselves internationally. The government sometimes finds it difficult to control and employ soft power. Like love, it is hard to measure and to handle, and does not touch everyone, but that does not diminish its importance. As Hubert Védrine laments, Americans are so powerful because they can “inspire the dreams and desires of others, thanks to the mastery of global images through film and television and because, for these same reasons, large numbers of students from other countries come to the United States to finish their studies.”³⁰ Soft power is an important reality.

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), chap. 2. This builds on what Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz called the “second face of power” in “Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework,” *American Political Science Review* (September 1963): 632–42.

³⁰ Védrine, *France in an Age of Globalization*, 3.

Of course, hard and soft power are related and can reinforce each other. Both are aspects of the ability to achieve our purposes by affecting the behavior of others. Sometimes the same power resources can affect the entire spectrum of behavior from coercion to attraction.³¹ A country that suffers economic and military decline is likely to lose its ability to shape the international agenda as well as its attractiveness. And some countries may be attracted to others with hard power by the myth of invincibility or inevitability. Both Hitler and Stalin tried to develop such myths. Hard power can also be used to establish empires and institutions that set the agenda for smaller states—witness Soviet rule over the countries of Eastern Europe. But soft power is not simply the reflection of hard power. The Vatican did not lose its soft power when it lost the Papal States in Italy in the nineteenth century. Conversely, the Soviet Union lost much of its soft power after it invaded Hungary and Czechoslovakia, even though its economic and military resources continued to grow. Imperious policies that utilized Soviet hard power actually undercut its soft power. And some countries such as Canada, the Netherlands, and the Scandinavian states have political clout that is greater than their military and economic weight, because of the incorporation of attractive causes such as economic aid or peacekeeping into their definitions of national interest. These are lessons that the unilateralists forget at their and our peril.

Britain in the nineteenth century and America in the second half of the twentieth century enhanced their power by creating liberal international economic rules and institutions that were consistent with the liberal and democratic structures of British and American capitalism—free trade and the gold standard in the case of Britain, the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, and other institutions in the case of the United States. If a country can make its power legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others more willingly follow. If it can establish international rules that are consistent with its society, it will be less likely to have to change. If it can help support institutions that encourage other countries to channel or limit their activities in ways it prefers, it may not need as many costly carrots and sticks.

³¹ 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. 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 ideology or the ability to manipulate the agenda of political choices in a manner that makes actors fail to express some preferences because they seem to be too unrealistic. The forms of behavior between command and co-optive power range along a continuum: command power, coercion, inducement, agenda setting, attraction, co-optive power. Soft power resources tend to be associated with co-optive power behavior, whereas hard power resources are usually associated with command behavior. But the relationship is imperfect. For example, countries may be attracted to others with command power by myths of invincibility, and command power may sometimes be used to establish institutions that later become regarded as legitimate. But the general association is strong enough to allow the useful shorthand reference to hard and soft power.

In short, the universality of a country's culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international activity are critical sources of power. The values of democracy, personal freedom, upward mobility, and openness that are often expressed in American popular culture, higher education, and foreign policy contribute to American power in many areas. In the view of German journalist Josef Joffe, America's soft power "looms even larger than its economic and military assets. U.S. culture, low-brow or high, radiates outward with an intensity last seen in the days of the Roman Empire—but with a novel twist. Rome's and Soviet Russia's cultural sway stopped exactly at their military borders. America's soft power, though, rules over an empire on which the sun never sets."³²

Of course, soft power is more than just cultural power. The values the U.S. government champions in its behavior at home (for example, democracy), in international institutions (listening to others), and in foreign policy (promoting peace and human rights) also affect the preferences of others. America can attract (or repel) others by the influence of its example. But soft power does not belong to the government in the same degree that hard power does. Some hard power assets (such as armed forces) are strictly governmental, others are inherently national (such as our oil and gas reserves), and many can be transferred to collective control (such as industrial assets that can be mobilized in an emergency). In contrast, many soft power resources are separate from American government and only partly responsive to its purposes. In the Vietnam era, for example, American government policy and popular culture worked at cross-purposes. Today popular U.S. firms or nongovernmental groups develop soft power of their own that may coincide or be at odds with official foreign policy goals. That is all the more reason for the government to make sure that its own actions reinforce rather than undercut American soft power. All these sources of soft power are likely to become increasingly important in the global information age of this new century. And, at the same time, the arrogance, indifference to the opinions of others, and narrow approach to our national interests advocated by the new unilateralists are a sure way to undermine American soft power.

Power in the global information age is becoming less tangible and less coercive, particularly among the advanced countries, but most of the world does not consist of postindustrial societies, and that limits the transformation of power. Much of Africa and the Middle East remains locked in preindustrial agricultural societies with weak institutions and authoritarian rulers. Other countries, such as China, India, and Brazil, are industrial economies analogous to parts of the West in the mid-twentieth century.³³ In such a variegated world, all three sources of power—military, economic, and soft—remain relevant, although to different degrees in different relationships. However, if current economic and social trends continue, leadership in the information revolution and

³² Josef Joffe, "Who's Afraid of Mr. Big?" *The National Interest* (Summer 2001): 43.

³³ See Cooper, *Postmodern State*; Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.

TABLE 1
Leading States and Their Power Resources, 1500–2000

<i>Period</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Major Resources</i>
Sixteenth century	Spain	Gold bullion, colonial trade, mercenary armies, dynastic ties
Seventeenth century	Netherlands	Trade, capital markets, navy
Eighteenth century	France	Population, rural industry, public administration, army, culture (soft power)
Nineteenth century	Britain	Industry, political cohesion, finance and credit, navy, liberal norms (soft power), island location (easy to defend)
Twentieth century	United States	Economic scale, scientific and technical leadership, location, military forces and alliances, universalistic culture and liberal international regimes (soft power)
Twenty-first century	United States	Technological leadership, military and economic scale, soft power, hub of transnational communications

soft power will become more important in the mix. Table 1 provides a simplified description of the evolution of power resources over the past few centuries.

Power in the twenty-first century will rest on a mix of hard and soft resources. No country is better endowed than the United States in all three dimensions—military, economic, and soft power. Its greatest mistake in such a world would be to fall into one-dimensional analysis and to believe that investing in military power alone will ensure its strength.

BALANCE OR HEGEMONY?

America's power—hard and soft—is only part of the story. How others react to American power is equally important to the question of stability and governance in this global information age. Many realists extol the virtues of the classic nineteenth-century European balance of power, in which constantly shifting coalitions contained the ambitions of any especially aggressive power. They urge the United States to rediscover the virtues of a balance of power at the global level today. Already in the 1970s, Richard Nixon argued that “the only time in the history of the world that we have had any extended periods of peace is when there has been a balance of power. It is when one nation becomes infinitely more powerful in relation to its potential competitors that the danger of

war arises.”³⁴ But whether such multipolarity would be good or bad for the United States and for the world is debatable. I am skeptical.

War was the constant companion and crucial instrument of the multipolar balance of power. The classic European balance provided stability in the sense of maintaining the independence of most countries, but there were wars among the great powers for 60 percent of the years since 1500.³⁵ Rote adherence to the balance of power and multipolarity may prove to be a dangerous approach to global governance in a world where war could turn nuclear.

Many regions of the world and periods in history have seen stability under hegemony—when one power has been preeminent. Margaret Thatcher warned against drifting toward “an Orwellian future of Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia—three mercantilist world empires on increasingly hostile terms. . . . In other words, 2095 might look like 1914 played on a somewhat larger stage.”³⁶ Both the Nixon and Thatcher views are too mechanical because they ignore soft power. America is an exception, says Josef Joffe, “because the ‘hyperpower’ is also the most alluring and seductive society in history. Napoleon had to rely on bayonets to spread France’s revolutionary creed. In the American case, Munichers and Muscovites *want* what the avatar of ultra-modernity has to offer.”³⁷

The term “balance of power” is sometimes used in contradictory ways. The most interesting use of the term is as a predictor about how countries will behave; that is, will they pursue policies that will prevent any other country from developing power that could threaten their independence? By the evidence of history, many believe, the current preponderance of the United States will call forth a countervailing coalition that will eventually limit American power. In the words of the self-styled realist political scientist Kenneth Waltz, “both friends and foes will react as countries always have to threatened or real predominance of one among them: they will work to right the balance. The present condition of international politics is unnatural.”³⁸

In my view, such a mechanical prediction misses the mark. For one thing, countries sometimes react to the rise of a single power by “bandwagoning”—that is, joining the seemingly stronger rather than weaker side—much as Mussolini did when he decided, after several years of hesitation, to ally with Hitler. Proximity to and perceptions of threat also affect the way in which countries react.³⁹ The United States benefits from its geographical separation from Eu-

³⁴ Nixon quoted in James Chace and Nicholas X. Rizopoulos, “Towards a New Concert of Nations: An American Perspective,” *World Policy Journal* (Fall 1999): 9.

³⁵ Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 97.

³⁶ Margaret Thatcher, “Why America Must Remain Number One,” *National Review*, 31 July 1995, 25.

³⁷ Josef Joffe, “Envy,” *The New Republic*, 17 January 2000, 6.

³⁸ Kenneth Waltz, “Globalization and American Power,” *The National Interest* (Spring 2000): 55–56.

³⁹ Stephen Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power,” *International Security* (Spring 1985).

rope and Asia in that it often appears as a less proximate threat than neighboring countries inside those regions. Indeed, in 1945, the United States was by far the strongest nation on earth, and a mechanical application of balancing theory would have predicted an alliance against it. Instead, Europe and Japan allied with the Americans because the Soviet Union, while weaker in overall power, posed a greater military threat because of its geographical proximity and its lingering revolutionary ambitions. Today, Iraq and Iran both dislike the United States and might be expected to work together to balance American power in the Persian Gulf, but they worry even more about each other. Nationalism can also complicate predictions. For example, if North Korea and South Korea are reunited, they should have a strong incentive to maintain an alliance with a distant power such as the United States in order to balance their two giant neighbors, China and Japan. But intense nationalism resulting in opposition to an American presence could change this if American diplomacy is heavy-handed. Nonstate actors can also have an effect, as witnessed by the way cooperation against terrorists changed some states' behavior after September 2001.

A good case can be made that inequality of power can be a source of peace and stability. No matter how power is measured, some theorists argue, an equal distribution of power among major states has been relatively rare in history, and efforts to maintain a balance have often led to war. On the other hand, inequality of power has often led to peace and stability because there was little point in declaring war on a dominant state. The political scientist Robert Gilpin has argued that "*Pax Britannica* and *Pax Americana*, like the *Pax Romana*, ensured an international system of relative peace and security." And the economist Charles Kindleberger claimed that "for the world economy to be stabilized, there has to be a stabilizer, one stabilizer."⁴⁰ Global governance requires a large state to take the lead. But how much and what kind of inequality of power is necessary—or tolerable—and for how long? If the leading country possesses soft power and behaves in a manner that benefits others, effective countercoalitions may be slow to arise. If, on the other hand, the leading country defines its interests narrowly and uses its weight arrogantly, it increases the incentives for others to coordinate to escape its hegemony.

Some countries chafe under the weight of American power more than others. *Hegemony* is sometimes used as a term of opprobrium by political leaders in Russia, China, the Middle East, France, and others. The term is used less often or less negatively in countries where American soft power is strong. If hegemony means being able to dictate, or at least dominate, the rules and arrangements by which international relations are conducted, as Joshua Goldstein argues, then the United States is hardly a hegemon today.⁴¹ It does have

⁴⁰ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 144–45; Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 305.

⁴¹ Joshua S. Goldstein, *Long Cycles: Prosperity and War in the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 281.

a predominant voice and vote in the International Monetary Fund, but it cannot alone choose the director. It has not been able to prevail over Europe and Japan in the World Trade Organization. It opposed the Land Mines Treaty but could not prevent it from coming into existence. Saddam Hussein remained in power for more than a decade despite American efforts to drive him out. The U.S. opposed Russia's war in Chechnya and civil war in Colombia, but to no avail. If hegemony is defined more modestly as a situation where one country has significantly more power resources or capabilities than others, then it simply signifies American preponderance, not necessarily dominance or control.⁴² Even after World War II, when the United States controlled half the world's economic production (because all other countries had been devastated by the war), it was not able to prevail in all of its objectives.⁴³

Pax Britannica in the nineteenth century is often cited as an example of successful hegemony, even though Britain ranked behind the United States and Russia in GNP. Britain was never as superior in productivity to the rest of the world as the United States has been since 1945, but Britain also had a degree of soft power. Victorian culture was influential around the globe, and Britain gained in reputation when it defined its interests in ways that benefited other nations (for example, opening its markets to imports or eradicating piracy). America lacks a global territorial empire like Britain's, but instead possesses a large, continental-scale home economy and has greater soft power. These differences between Britain and America suggest a greater staying power for American hegemony. Political scientist William Wohlforth argues that the United States is so far ahead that potential rivals find it dangerous to invite America's focused enmity, and allied states can feel confident that they can continue to rely on American protection.⁴⁴ Thus the usual balancing forces are weakened.

Nonetheless, if American diplomacy is unilateral and arrogant, our preponderance would not prevent other states and nonstate actors from taking actions

⁴² See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 235.

⁴³ Over the years, a number of scholars have tried to predict the rise and fall of nations by developing a general historical theory of hegemonic transition. Some have tried to generalize from the experience of Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Britain. Others have focused more closely on Britain's decline in the twentieth century as a predictor for the fate for the United States. None of these approaches has been successful. Most of the theories have predicted that America would decline long before now. Vague definitions and arbitrary schematizations alert us to the inadequacies of such grand theories. Most try to squeeze history into procrustean theoretical beds by focusing on particular power resources while ignoring others that are equally important. Hegemony can be used as a descriptive term (though it is sometimes fraught with emotional overtones), but grand hegemonic theories are weak in predicting future events. See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Politics of the World Economy: The States, the Movements, and the Civilizations: Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 38, 41; George Modelski, "The Long Cycle of Global Politics and the Nation-State," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (April 1978); George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987). For a detailed discussion, see Nye, *Bound to Lead*, chap. 2.

⁴⁴ Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World."

that complicate American calculations and constrain its freedom of action.⁴⁵ For example, some allies may follow the American bandwagon on the largest security issues but form coalitions to balance American behavior in other areas such as trade or the environment. And diplomatic maneuvering short of alliance can have political effects. As William Safire observed when Presidents Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush first met, “Well aware of the weakness of his hand, Putin is emulating Nixon’s strategy by playing the China card. Pointedly, just before meeting with Bush, Putin traveled to Shanghai to set up a regional cooperation semi-alliance with Jiang Zemin and some of his Asian fellow travelers.”⁴⁶ Putin’s tactics, according to one reporter, “put Mr. Bush on the defensive, and Mr. Bush was at pains to assert that America is not about to go it alone in international affairs.”⁴⁷

Pax Americana is likely to last not only because of unmatched American hard power but also to the extent that the United States “is uniquely capable of engaging in ‘strategic restraint,’ reassuring partners and facilitating cooperation.”⁴⁸ The open and pluralistic way in which U.S. foreign policy is made can often reduce surprises, allow others to have a voice, and contribute to soft power. Moreover, the impact of American preponderance is softened when it is embodied in a web of multilateral institutions that allow others to participate in decisions and that act as a sort of world constitution to limit the capriciousness of American power. That was the lesson the United States learned as it struggled to create an antiterrorist coalition in the wake of the September 2001 attacks. When the society and culture of the hegemon are attractive, the sense of threat and need to balance it are reduced.⁴⁹ Whether other countries will unite to balance American power will depend on how the United States behaves as well as the power resources of potential challengers.

⁴⁵ Stephen Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off-Balance’: Self-Restraint and US Foreign Policy,” *Kennedy School Research Working Paper Series 00–013*, October 2000.

⁴⁶ William Safire, “Putin’s China Card,” *New York Times*, 18 June 2001.

⁴⁷ Patrick Tyler, “Bush and Putin Look Each Other in the Eye,” *New York Times*, 17 June 2001.

⁴⁸ Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint,” 47; also Ikenberry, “Getting Hegemony Right,” *The National Interest* (Spring 2001): 17–24.

⁴⁹ Josef Joffe, “How America Does It,” *Foreign Affairs* (September–October 1997).