

Joseph S. Nye Jr. *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013. xiv, 183pp. (\$27.95 cloth).

Do presidents matter? Do they affect the sweep of history by their decisions and actions, or do historical forces drive policy outcomes and the consequences that flow from them? Nye believes that they do both, that institutional structures and relationships are important, that domestic politics help conditions a country's response, and that culture, resources, and economics shape and redefine national interests in an ever-changing international environment. But he also believes that personal factors, cognitive, emotional, and relational, also affect policy judgments and political outcomes with positive or negative repercussions for the leader that makes them and the societies they impact.

In the Richard Ullman Lectures, given at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University, Nye creates a framework for understanding and evaluating presidential leadership. In doing so, he critiques much of the literature that camouflages the idiosyncratic with broad generalizations that purport to explain development and change. His point is that the complexity (and unpredictability) of international events and domestic reactions to them distances these generalizations from real world situations and hides the effect that individuals have policy making. Pattern--based explanations, often cyclical in character, can identify key variables but cannot precisely measure their interaction; they also have difficulty anticipating new and unexpected factors and long or even short-term consequences which upset the equilibrium on which many of these explanations are based.

To make his case, Nye constructs a number of interrelated typologies in which he categorizes components of presidential leadership. These components include goals which can be transformational, incremental, or simply the maintenance of the status quo (p.9). They also include means that can be transactional, resulting from the exercise of hard power (the use of military, economic, or even political resources), or inspirational, resulting from the exercise "soft power" (emotive, persuasive, and charismatic). Organizational capacity, political savvy, and contextual understanding are necessary to exercise hard power successfully while communicative skills, emotional intelligence and vision are critical for the effective use of soft power (p.12). In both cases, presidents (democratic leaders) must be sensitive to the external environment in which they are operating, the strength and direction of public attitudes, feelings, and opinions, and to some extent, that trends shape and even transcend the situation.

Although transformational goals and inspirational messages are normally associated with strong and effective leadership, Nye finds little association between them, American primacy, and policy success. He examines eight presidents who held office during periods of American expansionism, the promotion of American exceptionalism, and the threats to American national security by other powerful nation states: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Franklyn Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush. With insightful, descriptive analyses of each of these presidents' goals, styles, and leadership skills, Nye argues, "...there is no evidence to conclude that leaders with transformational objectives or inspirational styles were better in the sense of more effective in the creation of American primacy" (p.132). Some of the presidents with more modest international goals and fewer rhetorical flourishes, such as Truman, Eisenhower, and G.H. W.

Bush, did better and had a larger, more positive impact on America's position in the world and its national security than did the presidents with transcendental visions, soaring words, and big sticks.

Nye also discusses the ethics of foreign policy leadership, asking whether presidents who emphasized the morality of their actions, who justified their decisions on the basis of America's democratic values of human rights and political equality, produced more ethical policy consequences. He says that they did not if measured in terms of promoting American interests, minimizing the adverse impact of American actions on others, and broadening public debate on the importance of morality in foreign policy decision making. On these ethical dimensions, George H. W. Bush receives the highest grade and Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson the lowest. Again Nye concludes that there is no obvious relationship between transformational leadership goals and inspirational messages on one hand and the ethical consequences of foreign policy decisions on the other.

In his final chapter, Nye turns to leadership styles in the Twenty-First Century. Comparing George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 to Woodrow Wilson prior to and especially after World War I, Nye states that transformational goals and their inspirational rhetoric, fueled by external threats, however, did not help either of them achieve their desired policy outcomes; rather the style contributed to inflexibility and failed leadership. Not so with Franklin Roosevelt, whom Nye lauds for positioning the country to take advantage of the threats to national security when they materialized concretely, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German submarines on U.S. shipping, attacks which Roosevelt magnified and to some extent, falsified in his public rhetoric.

Obama also had transformational goals and an inspirational message when he came to office. However, according to Nye, he has not produced transformational results; rather he has been guided by pragmatism, with mixed consequences, more positive than negative (pp. 146-148).

Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era is a wise book. It is clearly and carefully written, very accessible to a wide range of audiences. It is persuasively argued, well illustrated, and carefully documented. It makes a powerful case that presidents' leadership decisions do matter, that those decisions have to be examined qualitatively and in some detail (with counterfactuals considered) in order to appreciate their complexity as well as identify their individualized components.

Nye also demonstrates the limits on presidential power. He cautions against overreach, overstatement, and over righteousness. He reminds his readers (and warns presidents) that the exercise of overwhelming force does not necessarily achieve desired goals, be they the pursuit of American interests, values, or positive imagery within the international community.

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