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Democracy Dies in Darkness



So do morals matter in U.S. foreign policy? I asked the expert.

A new book by Joseph S. Nye Jr. suggests that for presidents, good intentions are not enough.

By **Henry Farrell**

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For college freshmen or incoming presidents, no international relations reading list would be complete without a few pivotal readings from Harvard Kennedy School Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus Joseph S. Nye Jr.

In his new book, “Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump,” Nye developed a scorecard to determine how U.S. presidents since 1945 factored questions of ethics and morality into their foreign policy. I asked him a few questions to get to the heart of his findings.

HF: Your book asks how morality affects U.S. presidential decision-making over foreign policy. Left-wing critics of the United States suggest that morality plays little or no role in U.S. foreign policy. Realist critics suggest that it shouldn't play any role. What does the post-World War II historical record suggest?

JSN: The conventional wisdom in our field is that “interests bake the cake” and then politicians sprinkle a little moral icing on it to make it look pretty. By looking in detail at the 14 presidents since 1945, I show that in a number of instances, if you hold too simply to this cynical view, you are going to get the history wrong. Several crucial decisions, such as Truman’s rejection of MacArthur’s advice to use nuclear weapons in 1950, were strongly influenced by the president’s moral views. And the world would look very different today had Truman decided differently.

Donald Trump has challenged U.S. notions about foreign policy morality, suggesting for example that the U.S. is not “so innocent” and has done “plenty of killing too.” Is he right?

For once, Trump is right. American exceptionalism has made us too sanctimonious about our past and about our intentions. Our 19th century behavior toward Mexico and the Philippines was immoral. Press secretary Ari Fleischer praised the “moral clarity” of President George W. Bush’s freedom agenda, but that did not prevent Bush from producing highly immoral consequences by invading Iraq.

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My book outlines a three-dimensional test for analyzing the morality of presidential decisions: intentions, means and consequences. Good intentions are not enough.

You describe how Trump’s approach to international politics relies very little on “soft power,” a concept that you developed in the late 1980s. What consequences has that had during the coronavirus crisis?

Soft power is the ability to affect others — to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment. In the short term, the hard power that Trump extols is usually more effective, but over time the soft power of attraction builds the trust needed for cooperative solutions that transnational problems like covid-19 (or climate change) require.

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Elected leaders have to put their national interest first. The moral question is how they define it. Trump’s narrow and transactional definition of “America First” is missing an opportunity to use and increase American soft power, in stark contrast to earlier presidents like Truman or Eisenhower. The Marshall Plan was in America’s interest, but defined in a way that included the interests of others. It produced both hard and soft power for the United States.

One of the key questions that runs through the book is the morality of nuclear weapons. How has morality informed U.S. presidents' thoughts and decisions about using (and not using) nuclear force?

In his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Thomas Schelling argued that the development of a nuclear taboo was one of the most important developments since 1945. Presidents like Truman and Eisenhower were caught in the nuclear paradox that there must be some prospect of use for nuclear deterrence to work and thus they were unwilling to declare a no-first-use policy. But on occasions when the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed a plan for use to Eisenhower, he replied, “you boys must be crazy.” Part of his response was based on caution, but his private language also included explicit moral reasons.

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You are ultimately sympathetic to a Weberian analysis of the relationship between power and morality, where you need to reconcile moral convictions with political responsibility. Some realists — John Hulsman and Anatol Lieven; arguably Hans Morgenthau — have thought in similar ways. What differences, if any, are there between how you balance convictions and responsibility, and how they might?

Weber was correct that political leaders must start with a politics of consequences, and the smart realists you mention understand that. In my book, I argue that in an anarchic world, one should start analysis with realism. My complaint is that too many realists stop where they start. Not all issues are matters of survival, and many situations allow inclusion of cosmopolitan and liberal insights about human rights or the value of institutions. Political scientists should always be wary of labels, but to the extent I use one, I call myself a “liberal realist.”

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