

THE PARADOX OF AMERICAN POWER: WHY THE WORLD'S ONLY SUPERPOWER CAN'T GO IT ALONE

by Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 222 pages, US \$13.95.

COLOSSUS: THE PRICE OF AMERICA'S EMPIRE

by Niall Ferguson

New York: The Penguin Press, 2004, 384 pages, \$38.00.

Reviewed by Major A.B. Godefroy

A decade after several leading scholars in American foreign policy predicted the inevitable demise of American hegemony and the rise of a multi-polar world order, neither has yet occurred. The end of the Cold War did not trigger widespread counterbalancing by other major states to match American dominance, nor did the United States adopt a policy of strategic disengagement as some had hoped or prescribed. Many are still analyzing why the emerging structure of international politics, as suggested by Christopher Layne and Kenneth Waltz, failed to materialize.¹ As a result, the application of both the traditional balance of power theory and structural realism in the context of American foreign policy is being reassessed.

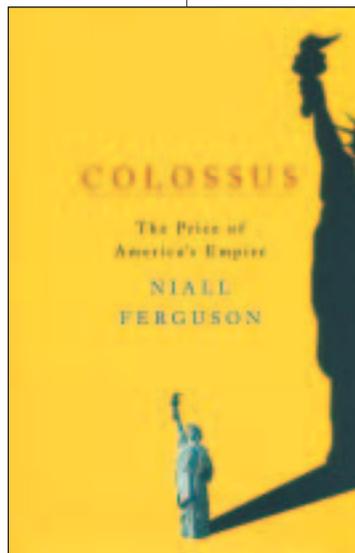
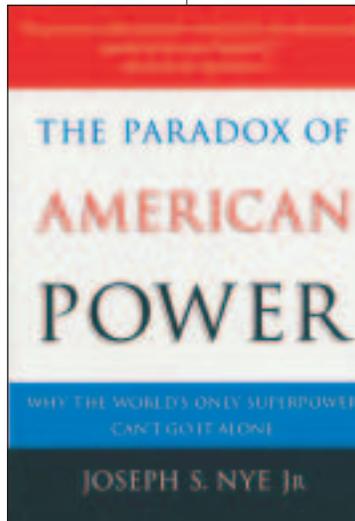
Yet, despite the continued absence of a counterbalance to the United States, recent arguments again debate the viability of current American foreign policy and whether it can be sustained. Some scholars argue that it cannot, and that current strategy eventually will overextend American resources, leading ultimately to failure. However, some have adopted a different view – arguing that now is precisely the moment to exercise American power and ensure a stable, liberal, international order for the future.

Whether applauded or resented, recent American foreign policy and the seemingly inevitable rise of an 'American Empire' have captured significant attention. In the last two years alone, the issue has spawned at least a dozen

scholarly works and perhaps hundreds of articles in western journals. Two recent additions to the dialogue are Joseph Nye's *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*, and Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. Though addressing the same topic, these two books provide very different perspectives on American grand strategy and the all-important question – how does the United States best secure the homeland and promote its values and national interests abroad while avoiding self-defeating behaviour and actions that prematurely ended so many previous empires?

Nye, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense and now Dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, argues for what he describes as a 'soft power' approach to American foreign policy. Suggesting that traditional forms of hard power, such as military force, have become less relevant in influencing international politics, he offers that, instead, the United States should pursue a policy of primarily soft power. His concept includes the transnational appeal of a country's culture, its investment in international institutions, and its ability to co-opt political allies in the pursuit of common international interests. Nye feels that considering no other state is likely to openly challenge U.S. hegemony in the near term, it is more in the national interest to appeal to other nations and avoid any aggressive or arrogant foreign policy that further isolates American interests and values from the rest of the world.

Although it is a compelling argument, Nye's thesis relies greatly upon assumptions, many of which are hotly contested within international relations scholarship today. Military power has had tremendous relevance in international relations since 11 September 2001, effecting dramatic political changes in Southwest Asia. Meanwhile, the influence of international institutions, such as the United Nations, continues to be exposed as stagnant and ineffectual. The current humanitarian crisis in the Sudan is but a recent example of where the might of the Security Council has again fallen impotent while debating the exact definition of the word genocide. Meanwhile, thousands starve to death as unscrupulous factions war over a country on the verge of collapse. As for American culture, one could argue



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that it is loved and hated with equal intensity, even by its closest neighbours, Canada and Mexico. Other issues cited by Nye, such as the relative decline of the state to non-state actors, the necessity for the adoption of a liberal internationalist agenda, or the imperative to build coalitions of the willing rather than act unilaterally to achieve political aims, are also questionable in terms of becoming inevitable trends, let alone being deemed desirable or necessary. Both Henry Kissinger and John Mearsheimer, among others, have criticized many of the tenets of soft power, and, as realists, certainly believe the importance of these constructs to be exaggerated.²

So if not soft power, what then? Niall Ferguson presents a less flexible argument in *Colossus*, suggesting that future American grand strategy can now only succeed through strategic engagement supported by hard power. Ferguson, currently the Herzog Professor of Financial History at the Stern Business School of New York University, is well known for his remarkable examinations of the convergence of wealth and international relations. His recent work includes a history of the House of Rothschild and a history of Hamburg business and German politics. *Colossus* follows a similar vein. Here, he demonstrates that the sheer cost of achieving and maintaining US future security, living standards, and liberal imperialism demands a policy of forward presence. Ferguson warns his readers, however, that American self-characterization as a 'reluctant empire' serves only to weaken these pillars. Instead, he prefers that America should assume its inevitable role as a hegemonic power more aggressively. Although sympathetic to the ideals of soft power, he plainly observes that hard power, not soft power, was needed to force dynamic political change in the Middle East, and will always be needed to maintain a liberal international order through the War on Terrorism and after.

Though Ferguson's thesis is at times disjointed, and may appear to mimic recent works by other scholars, it includes a critical financial examination of the costs of current American liberal anti-imperialism that often deflates myths and generalizations that have gained influence in popular media or political rhetoric. For example, he notes that the cost of the Afghanistan War, the Iraq War, and related activities to date are often

exaggerated and, in fact, remain far less than what was spent during the last decade of the Cold War in containing the Soviet Union. He also questions why the international community believes the UN to be a desperately needed counterbalance to American unilateralism, given that the US finances most of its operating costs. As Ferguson points out: "More than a fifth of the regular two-year UN budget of \$2.54 billion is paid for by the United States...American contributions also account for half the budget of the World Food Program, a quarter of the budget of UN peacekeeping operations, the International Atomic Energy Agency...", and the list goes on. In essence, the UN, it seems, is not an alternative to the United States but in reality is a creature of the United States. "And when its resources are so much smaller than those of the US government," Ferguson writes, "its functions can never be more than complementary to American power." As if to completely expose its true impotence, the entire budget of the UN, the reader is reminded, is roughly equal to what the Pentagon spends every thirty-two hours. Given these facts, one is left to question whether the UN can ever again truly act successfully as a body for collective security.

Overall, Ferguson's book provides a reality check to the tenets offered by Joseph Nye and tests them against recent events including the Iraq War. While Nye's policy requires Americans exporting themselves and their culture out into the world, Ferguson conservatively points out that, unlike so many citizens of the British Empire, Americans generally choose not to leave their country for any long period of time if at all possible. Believing the centre to be more desirable than the periphery, more Americans, he argues, prefer to stay home and earn CEO after their name rather than CBE, in reference to the Companion of the Order of the British Empire, an honour often bestowed upon British civil servants who serve loyally for lengthy periods outside Britain. If this is so, can America continue to dominate international relations, or will those who foretold of America's hegemonic demise see their prediction realized?

Doctor Andrew Godefroy teaches History and is a course developer at the Royal Military College of Canada.

NOTES

1. Christopher Lane, "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise", *International Security*, Vol.17: 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5-51; Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics", *International Security*, Vol.18:2 (Fall 1993), pp. 44-79.
2. Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), pp.17-31; and John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions", *International Security*, Vol.19: 3 (Winter 1994), pp. 5-49.

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Problem: It's the wrong book It's the wrong edition Other. Details (if other): Cancel. Thanks for telling us about the problem.
Return to Book Page. *The Paradox of American Power* is a book written by political scientist Joseph Nye and published in 2002.
According to Nye, a nation has never had as much cultural, economic, and military power as currently wields the United States of America. Yet, at the same time, a nation has never been so interdependent with the rest of the world. Nye describes "hard" and "soft" power and asserts that maintaining and maximizing soft power is fundamental to keeping the U.S. the worldwide leader. Nye asserts that But Americans were largely indifferent and uncertain about how to shape a foreign policy to guide this power. Polls showed the American public focused on domestic affairs and paying little attention to the rest of the world. Between 1989 and 2000, the television networks closed foreign bureaus and cut their foreign news content by two-thirds. TV executives found that "young adults cared more about the Zone diet than the subtleties of Middle East diplomacy." The president of MSNBC blamed "a national fog of materialism and disinterest and avoidance." And many of those Americans who did pay attent 1 Keohane, Robert O. & Nye, Joseph S. Jr., *Power and Interdependence in the Information Age*, *Foreign Aff.*, Sept./Oct. 1998, at 81 . 2 See also, e.g., Franck, Thomas M., *Community Based on Autonomy*, 36 *Colum. J. Transnat'l L.* 41 (1997). 3 Nye remains a believer in the melting-pot model of assimilation, which he deploys to rebut a flagging new nativist agenda advocating restrictionist immigration policies (seep. 118). In so doing, he also at least implicitly rejects the postnational premises of such social scientists as Arjun Appadurai and Yasemin Soysal. See Appadurai, Arjun, *Modernity at L Request PDF* | On Jul 1, 2003, Peter J. Spiro and others published *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate.Â Joseph Nye (1991) first introduced the concept of soft power in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. He has since further developed the concept in a series of articles and books (Nye 2002(Nye -2003(Nye , 2003(Nye , 2004a(Nye , 2004b.Â While the concept of soft power has rapidly moved from the academic theory to ubiquitous political buzzword, it has, to this point, not received adequate critical assessment. Because of this, the soft power has been misused and misunderstood despite the cautions of its proponents.