

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Henry Kwong

*“The Powers to Lead,” by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 240 pages, \$21.95*

Like many Americans, Joseph S. Nye, a well-known scholar who coined the term “soft power,” is dissatisfied with the current state of national leadership. This is reflected in the criticisms of George W. Bush’s presidency that he sprinkles throughout his latest book, “The Powers to Lead.” In adhering to his conservative vision, Bush’s stubbornness has inhibited his ability to learn, thus displaying inadequate emotional intelligence. For someone with a Harvard MBA, it is difficult to see why Bush has had difficulty organizing and managing “his inner circle of advisors to ensure an accurate flow of information and influence.” (p. 77) Bush’s rhetoric on waging war against evil shows no understanding of the message’s cultural context, perhaps appropriate in one setting but counterproductive in front of a different audience.

In “The Powers to Lead,” Nye examines how individuals can apply “hard” and “soft” power to become successful leaders. No management guru, self-help cheerleader or the next flavor-of-the-month motivational speaker, Nye’s discussion of power and leadership is informed by his background as a leading academic and distinguished civil servant.

Nye defines a leader as someone who helps a group create and achieve shared goals. A leader has the power to orient and mobilize others for a purpose or objective. Despite numerous studies, leadership scholarship has not identified a clear profile of a leader. Nye concedes that leadership, therefore, is an art, not a science, but it can still be studied and analyzed. Measured by the yardsticks in their fields, many leaders will not be successful.

According to Nye, power is characterized as either “hard” or “soft.” Hard power is typified by commands, force and coercion. It requires both organizational and political skills. On the other hand, the hallmarks of soft power include emotional intelligence, communication and vision. Soft power is manifested through persuasiveness, attraction, charisma, and participation. For Nye, “the secret to success lies in the ability of leaders to combine hard and soft power resources in appropriate contexts.” (p. 67) An effective leader is able to demonstrate hard and soft power, combining the two into what he terms smart power. In a globalized world where the internet provides more accessible information and more avenues for individuals to participate and express opinions, smart power is more important than ever before.

For Nye, leadership styles take two forms: “transformational” or “transactional.” Concerned with raising the conscience level of followers,

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transformational leadership is characterized by an appeal to transcend self-interest, to empower and to pursue a higher moral ground. As the embodiment of soft power and transformational leadership, Mahatma Gandhi would be held in high regard in Nye's conception of leadership. Gandhi is one of a handful of exceptional persons who led not by title or formal authority, but by overwhelming moral stature.

In contrast, transactional leadership appeals to self-interest and base emotions. Leaders of this style motivate followers to achieve goals and objectives by utilizing rewards and threats. Transactional leaders prefer the status quo and operate best in a stable environment.

Effective leaders also need to be able to comprehend their environment. In football, a quarterback will be called upon to read the defenses coming at him and adjust accordingly. In business and the public sector, managers and policymakers must constantly adapt to rapidly changing conditions in order to survive and thrive. Nye describes this ability as "contextual intelligence." Leaders' skills will fit some situations better than others. Individuals may be more ideally suited to demonstrate effective leadership when the environmental conditions change. Truly capable leaders can be successful in different contexts. In another time, contextual intelligence would be interpreted as simply good judgment. Good leadership calls for good judgment.

If there is any criticism of the book, it is Nye's failure to explore in greater detail the role-played by other relevant qualities in the powers to lead. At appropriate times, people like to see their leaders demonstrate down-to-earth qualities like humility, self-deprecation, unpretentiousness and humor. Not only do we want leaders to be confident and decisive, we also want leaders who are human, not abstract or arrogant beings raised on a pedestal.

Given the events of the past eight years, the country is literally screaming for effective leadership. A healthy democracy requires good leadership. In our democracy, a new U.S. president will take office in a few months. With the country facing extremely difficult issues at home and abroad, it is abundantly clear that decisive leadership, informed by smart power, is vitally needed at this time. As we have seen recently, however, the freedom to vote does not guarantee good leaders.

Nye's insightful book will not be the last word on the ingredients that make a good leader. There will no doubt be more books on leadership coming down the non-fiction pipeline to add to the already voluminous literature that exists on the subject. Nevertheless, Nye's book motivated this reviewer to watch again two of his favorite movies of all time, "Patton" and "Gandhi"—the former showcasing hard power and the latter depicting soft power. A professor teaching leadership should definitely add Nye's book to the mandatory reading list.