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OPINION

The term “soft power,” which entered public discourse in the wake of the Cold War, refers to the power that flows from intangible things such as the culture, values, and moral authority of a country, in contrast to its “hard power,” which is based in its military and economic resources. Soft power is not coercive: it entices others to do what a country wants them to do — to follow its lead in foreign policy, to join its coalitions, and to adopt its ideology — because they find its values, reputation, and strength compelling and want to emulate these. Soft power on its own is insufficient to meet US national security needs, but hard power also has its limits, as the current war against Iran demonstrates. Soft power allows for more effective and efficient use of hard power than hard power alone as it encourages cooperation and compliance which deters the need for hard power.

Most indicators demonstrate that American soft power has declined since the start of the second Donald Trump administration. Yet, it has been under threat many times in the past and it has always (mostly) recovered. What is unique about this administration, however, is that it is unintentionally and intentionally destroying traditional sources and instruments of American soft power, doing damage that may not be repaired for decades.

What is soft power?

In the 1990s, the term “soft power” was popularized by Joseph Nye, who framed it as a form of power operating through attraction whereas hard power operates through coercion. This was in response to the Cold War-era argument that America was in decline. Nye argued that decline is overlooked what he called “co-optive or soft power,” a key form of power that prompted other countries to willingly support or accept US goals with little or no coercion. Nye first kept the definition rather broad, first defining it simply as “getting others to want what you want”. He expanded the definition after 9/11, identifying culture, political values, and policies on international issues as the primary ingredients of soft power. John Ikenberry has pointed out that legitimacy is also an important component. It can be difficult to identify the exact impact that soft power has on the world, particularly in specific instances, just as it can be difficult to identify the exact impact of a company’s reputation on consumers’ interest in its products. Yet, as in the latter case, it is hard to believe that soft power has no impact. Regardless of their nature, different actors, and not only states, rely on soft power to achieve their goals. Terrorist groups, for example, depend heavily on it for recruitment and for legitimacy within their own communities. And state and nonstate actors rarely wield it on its own. Rather, the most effective use of power combines hard and soft power, with one amplifying the other. Nye refers to this as “smart power”. Despite critical views, the concept is therefore valuable in policy analysis.

Evolution of American soft power

Perhaps the best-known con-

ception of American soft power flows from the idea of America as a “city on a hill” — a country inherently attractive to people of other nations, who hope to share in the “American dream”. The idea reflects the conception that America’s values like freedom, equal opportunity, innovation, and capitalism are not only crucial to its fabric but also attract people worldwide, thus generating soft power. Originally formulated by John Winthrop in 1630, the idea of America as a “city on a hill” resonated globally in the 1950s and 1960s, with the country experiencing an economic boom with rising prosperity and consumerism. This drew a wave of mass immigration to America beginning in 1965 — one indicator of soft power — but its “global ideological appeal” diminished during the era of civil rights contestation, when the country’s hypocrisy was revealed and its championing freedom and equality abroad contrasted sharply with its domestic reality. Later, as socioeconomic inequality grew in the 1990s and early 2000s, with certain parts of the population left behind, particularly people of color and immigrant populations, the American economic model also came into question.

Over the past 25 years, other US actions have taken some of the shine off the “city on a hill”. Most notably, as Nye explained, the response to 9/11, and the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003 greatly reduced the international trust in and the legitimacy of America. Survey data shows that US credibility collapsed in dozens of countries directly after the invasion of Iraq. According to the Pew Research Center, the favorability rating of the United States dropped from 75 percent in the summer of 2002 to 48 percent in March 2003 (immediately after the invasion) in Great Britain, from 70 to 34 percent in Italy, from 61 to 25 percent in Germany, from 63 to 31 percent in France, and from 61 to 28 percent in Russia. The controversies around the treatment of prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay detention center and Abu Ghraib prison complex in 2004–2006 also caused significant reputational damage to the United States as a human rights defender. The country’s allies and partners, as well as international human rights organizations and domestic commentators, spoke out against the reported torture of detainees at the hands of the US military. Amnesty International called Guantánamo the “gulag of our times” and a UN committee found in 2006 that America’s use of indefinite detention violated the 1984 Convention Against Torture. In a 2006 meeting with then president George W. Bush, Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel called for the closure of Guantánamo. Editorial pages around the world condemned the United States. For example, The Guardian called Guantánamo a “indelible stain” on the United States. And others pointed out the administration’s hypocrisy. France’s Le Monde stated: “President Bush’s loss of prestige is also serious:



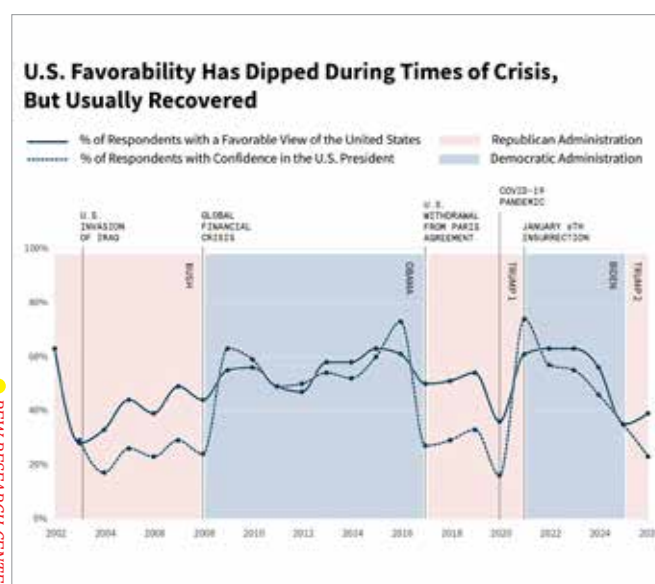
The illustration shows US President Donald Trump (C), Russian President Vladimir Putin (2nd-L), Chinese President Xi Jinping (3rd-L) and Hungarian former prime minister Viktor Orban.
● MARK HARRIS/FOREIGN POLICY

an administration wanting to give lessons is now hoisted by its own petard.” In 2008, the Senate Armed Services Committee concluded that detainee abuse “compromised [America’s] moral authority,” showing that the reputational damage was understood at home as well as abroad. Meanwhile, perceptions of incompetence related to responses to domestic natural disasters, particularly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, chipped away at the idea that America could take care of its domestic problems. Foreign media explicitly framed Katrina as exposing the country’s weakness. The Russian press compared the handling of the hurricane to the Kremlin’s widely criticized mismanagement of the 2000 Kursk submarine disaster. America’s reputation was further eroded by the Wikileaks release of around 250,000 diplomatic cables in 2010, which made public candid and at times unflattering US assessments of foreign leaders, and by the revelations by Edward Snowden in 2013 of the National Security Agency’s surveillance activities at home and abroad, including in allied countries. Furthermore, America’s refusal to ratify international treaties it had signed, such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, and the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, or to sign the Mine Ban Treaty, worsened the perceptions of its

commitment to democratic values and human rights. The ups and downs of American soft power can be measured through the United States’ global favorability ratings, which are a good proxy for the attractiveness of the country, on which its soft power ultimately depends (see figure 1). In the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes survey, an average of 63 percent in the countries surveyed said they had a favorable view of the United States; in 2004, this stood at 33 percent. During former president Barack Obama’s administration, the country’s average favorability score rebounded, reaching 55 percent in 2009 and peaking at 63 percent in 2015. In 2020, as the first Trump administration was drawing to a close, America’s score had fallen back to 36 percent. In 2021, during the first year of the Biden administration, it had risen again, up to 61 percent. And in 2025, when Trump took office for the second time, it fell down again, to 35 percent.

The first Trump administration

The first administration of President Donald Trump deprioritized soft power under its America First agenda. For example, in 2017, the director of the Office of Management and Budget, Mick Mulvaney, stated when presenting the administration’s first budget: “It is not a soft-power budget. This is a hard-power budget, and



The administration also took several actions that directly contradicted the US values that defined the “city on a hill”. This included Executive Order 13769 that banned people from several Muslim-majority countries from entry into the United States, family separation policies at US borders, and cuts to refugee resettlement targets. At home, Trump’s attacks on the media, challenges to judicial independence, and the handling of anti-Trump protests, led the World Press Freedom Index to drop the rating of the United States to its lowest level in history and the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index to downgrade the country from a “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy”.

that was done intentionally. The president very clearly wants to send a message to our allies and to our potential adversaries that this is a strong-power administration.” The administration withdrew from key multilateral agreements that had been championed by previous administrations, including the Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) regarding Iran, and it verbally attacked NATO allies and international institutions in a way that hurt the credibility of US commitments globally and, with that, US soft power.

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Some components of US soft power — such as cultural influence, educational appeal, sports, and public diplomacy — did not diminish significantly during the first Trump administration. The United States continued to dominate at the Olympics and in exports of creative services and maintained its share of creative goods. International students and tourists continued to be drawn to the United States at similar levels as during the Obama administration, with the notable exception of the pandemic years, which was unrelated to soft power projection. But other indices showed the damage many of Trump’s policies were doing. In the 2021 Global Soft Power Index, for example, the United States fell from first to sixth place as a result of the “turbulent” 2020 presidential election and the “incompetent” response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first Trump administration demonstrated the limits of purely coercive power in its extensive use of sanctions, military, and other threats in different contexts, and at the same time, it showed that American soft power at that point was not enough to draw other countries on board in the pursuit of some of its goals. Examples of the latter included Europe’s efforts to circumvent Trump’s withdrawal from the JCPOA by developing a special payment mechanism, the fact that few nations followed