American Power, Globalism, and the Internet: Editorial Essay

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American Power, Globalism, and the Internet: Editorial Essay

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.01. Introduction (Return to Index)

This editorial is the second in a series of analyses on the linked topics of the Internet and
globalism. [1] In the foregoing piece, we argued that the Internet and globalism are closely related
in their development, key factors in defining the era in which we live. One consequence of the
growth of the Internet is the development of a global civic culture. But economic globalism does
not require the Internet in its present form, and it is possible that we will have economic
globalism, but not cultural globalism. In this piece we wish to discuss the emerging global civic
culture as it relates to the power of the American state and the future of the country.

We focus here on an important and timely issue, the power of the state, and particularly of the
American state, in the age of the Internet. We argue throughout this series of editorial essays that the events of September 11, 2002, can be understood to a considerable degree as the result of the impact of the Internet.

In preparing this argument, we have found very useful a recent work, Joseph S. Nye Jr’s The Paradox of American Power. [2] Nye is a considerable figure, even in the talented ranks of American scholar-bureaucrats, ranks that include such figures as George Kennan and Henry Kissinger. He is a former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council, and was Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration. He is currently Dean of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. He has written a number of influential works in addition to this latest one. [3]

Nye’s analysis of globalization and of the origins and consequences of the Internet, though considered from the primary focal point of U.S. policy rather than from the focal point of the impact of the Internet itself, as we approached it in a previous essay, is roughly congruent with our foregoing analysis. Where Nye adds considerable value, however, is in spelling out the impact of the Internet upon American power.

.02. “Hard Power” (Return to Index)
Nye is, of course, as a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, well acquainted with what he terms “hard power”, i.e., the traditional elements of state power such as military force and economic influence. He states that: “Military power and economic power are both examples of hard command power that can be used to induce others to change their position.” [4] In short, “hard power” flows largely from economic and military strength and is at least implicitly coercive.

.03. “Soft” Power (Return to Index)
But Nye goes on to define an additional type of power, “soft power”:

A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense it is just as important to set the agenda in world politics and attract others as it is to force them to change through the threat or use of military or economic weapons. This aspect of power—getting others to want what you want—I call soft power. [5]

American hard power is different from that of the country in previous eras, or from that of previous great powers only in degree: recent conflicts such as Desert Storm, the war in Kosovo or the Afghani campaign show an unparalleled blend of fire power and technological sophistication, an ability to so dominate the “battle space” as to make war appear almost effortless, as well as largely bloodless, at least for American forces.

.04. The Origins of Soft Power (Return to Index)
However, American soft power, Nye argues, is quantitatively and qualitatively different from earlier American power, or from that of previous great powers. American values and institutions are
being projected world wide, largely as a consequence of the related phenomenon of globalization and what Nye terms “the global information age.” [6] As we argued earlier, neither of these can be disentangled from the growth of the Internet itself.

While soft power greatly benefits the United States in that it tends to make others emulate Americans, and thus to want what they want, it is not, unlike military power, a deliberate consequence of policy. Rather, soft power flows from a number of extra-governmental sources such as popular culture, from the exemplary power of legal and political institutions, from U.S.-based human rights groups, even from groups such as the anti-W.T.O. protestors, who, even while attacking the system, disseminate widely held American values. Nye refers to this process as “social globalization,” and also sees an “incipient… civil society at the global level.” [7] This corresponds to what we earlier termed “Global Civic Culture.”

Much of Nye’s analysis is intended to make a relatively simple point: That the United States is indefinitely unchallengeable in terms of its “hard power”; but “soft power” is growing steadily more important in a networked world, and is the more frangible of American sources of power. There will be a natural process that somewhat vitiates the impact of American soft power in any event as other information economies mature. For example, by 2010, Nye argues, there will be more Chinese Internet users than American ones. [8] While American sites will remain very attractive, because of the fact that English has become the world’s second language, China too sits at the center of a linguistic empire that not only embraces the worldwide Diaspora of Chinese people, but has also in the past embraced much of East Asia including Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and other nations.

.05. A Dichotomy or a Transition? (Return to Index)
Nye’s position intersects at several points with the analysis of Manuel Castells, sociologist and the author of the encyclopedic multi-volume work, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. [9]

Nye’s argument follows in time upon that of Castells in that Castells wrote in 1996, Nye after September 11, 2002. But Nye’s position is ultimately grounded in an earlier tradition of “realist” definitions of power:

*Power used to be in the hands of princes, oligarchies, and ruling elites; it was defined as the capacity to impose one’s will on others. Modifying their behavior. This image of power does not fit with our reality any longer [10]...*

Castells spends far more time than does Nye considering the “Information Age.” In doing so, he perhaps has the advantage in contextualizing American power. His argument is also far more dynamic. To Castells, the Information Age is an ongoing process, which he considers from a number of perspectives.

Nye believes that there are two dichotomous kinds of power: “hard” and “soft”. For Castells,
there are not two kinds of power, but a still incomplete transition from one kind of power to another.

For Castells, power is being permanently transformed; Nye’s hard power is eroding: states, even the most powerful one, the United States, now live in an environment marked by a decentralized net of “local terror equilibria.” 11In the past, during the Cold War, several major states and their allies established an equilibrium based upon mutual assured destruction; this prevented any one power from dominating the global political or economic system, but it also protected each of the major states from the others. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union the United States then enjoyed a brief period of near absolute dominance.

.06. American Power Following 9-11 (Return to Index)

But global processes had already distributed a variety of weapons of mass destruction among major and minor powers, and more importantly, among non-state actors as well. September 11, 2002, revealed the vulnerabilities of even the greatest of powers to non-state actors. The devastating effect of the low-cost and relatively simple improvised weapons that were used then suddenly illuminated a terrible new world.

The use of a bacteriological weapon, Anthrax, then followed quickly upon the trauma of 9-11—so quickly that historians may well treat the two events as one. This attack revealed an additional and, to many, even more terrifying vulnerability and again showed the new power of non-state actors.

Castells refers to these sorts of weapons, including chemical and biological ones, as well as the feared low-yield “dirty” nuclear devices sometimes referred to as “suitcase bombs” as “veto technologies” and presumes that this new decentralized web of great and small states and non-state actors will require constant small interventions by many different powers to maintain a relative peace. This seems to be an apt description of events since September 11 as a variety of alliances, states, and international organizations have joined the campaign against terrorism.

There are, then, many indications that Castells is, to a considerable degree at least, correct in his analysis of state power in the Information Age, and Nye wrong. State power is evolving toward a decentralized fabric, like all else in the Information Age.

.07. The Limitations of the Networked International System (Return to Index)

There are also many indications that some in the American policy-making institutions understand the implications of a world like that described by Castells. Recently (March, 2002), the Pentagon report “The Nuclear Posture Review” discussed conditions under which the United States might use nuclear weapons. This analysis immediately attracted a great deal of attention because it suggested the first-strike employment of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear powers. Since the end of World War II such use has been presumed to be outside the parameters of civilized warfare, and particularly outside American nuclear doctrine. But times have changed.
As stated by one reporter, Michael Gordon, “Another theme in the report is the possible use of nuclear weapons to destroy enemy stocks of biological weapons, chemical arms and other arms of mass destruction.” These are, of course, precisely the “veto technologies” listed by Castells.

The limitation in the current international system is probably most critically, from an American point of view, that it tends to restrain unilateral American action. As a result, great attention necessarily must be paid to alliances and coalition building. But if anything terrifies the international community it is the specter of nuclear war, or the possibility of a return to a Cold War system with its attendant enormous expenses and the inherent threat of destruction.

.08. The Nuclear Posture Review (Return to Index)

The “Nuclear Posture Review” represents the Bush administration’s attempt to break the bonds that presently restrains American power: first-strike use of nuclear weapons effectively removes the need to consult allies. It amounts to an attempt to restore the brief period of absolute domination (and absolute security) enjoyed by the U.S. following the fall of the Soviet Union, before we had become aware of the terrible new forces that could be employed by “rogue states” and criminal organizations such as Al Quaeda.

If the United States were to be successful in putting the terrorist genie back in the bottle by threatening nuclear strikes on states that both harbor terrorists and possess weapons of mass destruction, including most especially chemical and bacteriological ones, then Nye is, perhaps, correct: There are two sorts of power and the United States can continue to enjoy a near monopoly of classical “hard” power.

But Nye, like Castells, recognizes that “under the influence of the information revolution and globalization, world politics is changing in a way that means Americans cannot achieve all of their international goals acting alone.” The uproar, both domestic and international over the implications of the “Nuclear Policy Review” is evidence of the essential accuracy of Castell’s analysis. Once again, the United States has discovered the limits of state autonomy in a networked system.

.09. Additional Causes of the Loss of State Power (Return to Index)

In addition, Castells’ broader analysis of the Information Age lets us see a number of other factors critical to state power. Castells demonstrates, we think, that the power of all states, including the American state, is being irreversibly eroded, not by enemies who can be confronted with nuclear weapons, but by historical processes, most especially by globalization and the development of the Internet.

This is not to agree with the claims of some that the state is in any sense disappearing. Libertarian dreams of replacing the state by infallibly just and accurate market forces are just that, dreams. But the role of the state, like all else, must yield before the impact of globalization and the development of the Internet. Exactly how it changes is not important to our analysis in
this stage; it is a topic to which we will return in the future.

Above all, the state is losing power in the face of globalized economic processes facilitated by networked means of communication. Globalization has raised capital flows to the level of hazard earlier represented only by catastrophic forces of nature. Portuguese state power was destroyed by the earthquake at Lisbon in 1755, effectively ending the great era of Portuguese exploration and expansion. And Portugal was, of course, one of the first powerful states. But capital flows struck with far more devastating effect the economies of Korea, Thailand, Japan, and many other states in the late twentieth century. As long as states are dependant upon an interlocked world economy, no nation can long act independently.

.10. The Link Between States and Their Citizens Weakens (Return to Index)
Castells raises additional relevant factors. He believes that the essential element of state influence in the 20th century has been its bottom-line welfare functions. When all else fails individual citizens, it has been the industrial state that has provided a social safety net. But globalization and the networking of production effectively cause states to continually reduce welfare expenses. In the struggle for markets, it is the system with the leanest cost structure that wins.

There are now no remaining great power welfare states. This not only weakens individual ties to the state, but also causes many to perceive that it is the state itself, by entering into agreements such as NAFTA and the WTO, that is responsible for their plight.

In an effort to regain citizen loyalty, many states, including those as disparate as the United States and the Peoples Republic of China, have chosen to decentralize budgetary and control processes to ever lower administrative levels. Paradoxically, this further reduces the power of the state, and attenuates loyalty to it. Furthermore, this tendency is further enhanced by another characteristic of the Internet: the continual creation of micro-communities of interest that increasingly command the loyalty of individuals.

Even internal political institutions are deeply affected by globalization and the Informational Society. The political party structures in each of the major states have been simultaneously weakening. This process is furthest advanced, of course, in the United States, where the Informational Society itself is the most advanced. There are probably many factors that contribute to this development, many of which are related to either globalization or the Internet. The increasing inability of the state to disburse welfare funds clearly weakens many political machines.

But it is probably the Information Society itself that is primarily responsible. [16] Once again Castells coins an apt term with which to explain these events: “informational politics.” [17] Simply put, electronic media have displaced print media as the space in which politics is discussed. This implies the same collapse of time and broadening of impact that characterizes electronic media in general. In addition, the contest for audience attention continually drives the media to seek broader and broader audiences with the resultant reluctance to deal with any issues, particularly controversial ones, in detail or over an extended period of time lest the audience move on to
more diverting sources of infotainment. Because politics now exist largely in media space, appearance has become more important than substance. And citizens defect from the political process as essentially misleading or corrupt.

Another consequence of political action being conducted in media space is the development of a tendency to attribute complex events to colorful attention-grabbing individuals who can seize media attention. This means that a worldwide Islamicist reaction to globalization and the Internet is reduced to the single figure of Ibn Bin Laden. This process, of course, empowers charismatic and ultimately simplistic individuals who can reduce complex issues to quickly transmitted symbolic explanations.

.11. How Might the State Respond? (Return to Index)

The problems of the American state in the Informational Age recently have been greatly ameliorated by the simple fact that the American people have come under attack. This has silenced critics of the state ranging from parties out of power to even local anti-state groups such as Citizen Militias.

This problem is only temporarily solved, of course, by such expedients as mounting a war against enemies. However, it may be that a war against terrorism that goes on indefinitely and continually expands will put the continuing decline of the state at bay, perhaps also indefinitely. It may ultimately, however, also exacerbate the decline if state responses are eventually seen once again as costly, misguided, and counter-productive. [18]

We have argued here that state responses that are not directed at the actual sources of individual problems risk being ineffective, or at best will not be both efficient and maximally effective. However, a state such as the United States is an extremely powerful organism and may well solve many of its problems simply by profligate expenditures of economic and military power. But if the nature of such problems as the terrorist attack of September 11, 2002, and the diminishing claims of all states to citizen loyalty are indeed in some considerable part a consequence of those changes we encapsulate here as globalization and the networked society, then the attempts to ameliorate the results of these changes properly should be directed at the causes themselves. In the next editorial, we wish to examine some possible responses, and to assess their possible impact on the Internet.

.12. NOTES (Return to Index)
(Please note: ordinals below are anchors back to the appropriate point in the text.)


3. For Nye's home page at Harvard
see: http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/degreeprog/courses.nsf/wzByDirectoryName/JosephNye


8. Nye 94.


11. Castells, 265.


17. Castells, 310.
18. It seems to me that the ultimate weakness of this strategy is that it requires attacks not against decentralized networks, but against states. The link between Al Quaeda and Afghanistan, as one example, may seem sufficiently direct to most individuals and most states to compel support. But the less direct the apparent tie, the less compelling the case. An attack against Iraq may even be satisfactory, to many Americans at least, in that Iraq is, in some sense, a historic enemy. But the more distant the tie between other states and terrorists, the less compelling the cause. Ultimately this strategy risks being judged as motivated by factors other than reducing the threat of terrorism. Domestically it may be seen as linked to domestic political goals; internationally it may be seen as linked to American attempts to achieve economic and political advantages.

.13. Sources: (Return to Index)

Please note: After a given period of time, The New York Times, frequently cited here, moves its articles into archives requiring paid access. As an historian, I regret the need to cite sources the value of which is time bound, but see no alternatives. At worst, however, these articles are available in the collections of large libraries, as they have always been.


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