

Whither American soft power?

BY DERWIN PEREIRA



The Cheshire Cat's vanishing smile in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is a trick whereby the cat fades away in stages, leaving only its grin floating in the air before that, too, disappears. That act makes Alice exclaim: "I've seen a cat without a grin, but never a grin without a cat!"

The same might be said of America today. It is in danger of abdicating its role as the world's default power as revisionist and irredentist powers claim that title little by little. Washington has decided that it will be the only hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, a desire that has begun to be translated into reality with the invasion of Venezuela. But the world at large is different: China, for example, is not Venezuela. There are many feline species looking for a catfight in the alleys of that wider world.

In the circumstances, the American Cheshire cat could have left behind at least the smile of its soft power, but even that is not the case. Take films. Once, classics such as *The Godfather*, *Jurassic Park*, *Forrest Gump*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Taxi Driver* and *Rain Man* dramatised different facets of American life for global consumption, primarily in the English language. Films on that scale simply do not exist any longer. Hence, as American soft power, too, fades away, the Cheshire Cat must be wondering: "Poor Alice! Where will she live now?" In a culturally lesser world, of course.

Let me look back to a better time, to what I would call the "American Years". Those years — from the end of World War II in 1945 to roughly now — were filled with both peril and promise. The peril clustered around the challenge to a world order, led by an imperfect but yet democratic America, that was posed by an imperfect but autocratic Soviet Union. The promise cohered in the way in which the American (and broadly Western) order responded to the communist challenge with guns, butter and ideas (including the ideas conveyed ever so softly through entertainment). The American First World proclaimed the virtues of political freedom; the Soviet Second World celebrated the virtues of economic solidarity; the Non-Aligned Third World, born of decolonisation and which knew very little of either freedom or solidarity, made up its own mind about the relative worth of the other worlds.

American high culture, which included anti-orthodox masterpieces such as Orson Welles' 1941 film *Citizen Kane* and Arthur Miller's 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, captivated discerning left-liberal audiences worldwide. Soviet high culture was not lacking in accomplishments either. Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) lasts to this day as a cinematic witness to the artistic potential of socialist communion.

Third World audiences compared these soft-power masterpieces to gain a sense of which world order — First or Second — was the better on balance. No one could really tell, but what everyone noticed was that Eisenstein's legacy of legitimate revolt against an unjust order had receded in the wake of the ascendant



Members of the military in tanks during the US Army's 250th Anniversary Parade in Washington, DC, in June 2025. One reason for America's success was that its economic system and military might were sufficient to protect it from the Soviet challenge

cy of the Stalinist orthodoxy in the Soviet Union, which treated freedom and order as being interchangeable. To protest against Stalin was to rebel automatically against the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; to rebel against the party was to destroy the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (perish the thought!); to so rebel was to invite upon oneself the combined wrath of Marx, Engels, Lenin and, of course, Stalin. Such was the twisted logic of a deterministic political system that was teleological as well: In the Soviet Union, the future lay foretold in the present's emergence from the past. Mercifully, that system broke down in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall; in 1991, the Soviet Union sent itself into oblivion. It had bartered away Eisenstein's soft power to Stalin's hard power.

By contrast, there have been many orthodoxies (including the notorious anti-communist McCarthy period) in the US, but no one in power in that country could obliterate what had preceded him in order to establish himself as the crowned emperor of all time. In the US, governments come and go, but the people go on forever — so long as they think of themselves as a people and not as different peoples. The soft power of the US resides in its not being a teleological nation: All, or at least most, ideological choices remain open to citizens as a condition of their American provenance. A penchant for sharp self-criticism and continuous introspection therefore underpins democracy.

That penchant contains the national DNA which best describes the American people. The French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville's classic portrayal of American life in the 19th century spoke elegantly of "habits of the heart", those emotional, intellectual and moral reflexes that define participation in social life. Great American films, taken together, amply exhibit those habits of the heart, which involve at some level at least those forever messy and uneasy connections between family life, religious choices, civic participation and political affiliation. The pulsing agency of everyday American culture is inscribed within the soft power that its films once exported to audiences abroad.

Many Third World citizens cheered on America, not because it was the best nation on earth but because it was the least worst among its contenders. Those citizens did so precisely because Americans themselves said so, because American art, literature and entertainment all attested to the fallibility of passing systems and posited hope in a better future created by socially-evolving humans. It is only that system which could have produced an Orson Welles, an Arthur Miller, a Humphry Bogart, a James Dean, a Dustin Hoffman, a Robert Redford, an

Al Pacino, a Robert de Niro, a Tom Hanks, a Denzel Washington, a Leonardo di Caprio and a Steven Spielberg — along with eternal manifestations of the female spirit such as Greta Garbo, Meryl Streep, Katherine Hepburn, Ingrid Bergman, Vivien Leigh and Audrey Hepburn. The US owes the soft power of its peak to these cultural warriors.

They belong to the past.

Who has taken up their mantle? No one comes to mind readily.

Reinventing soft power

It is an axiom that power is exercised through either force or legitimacy. Force is hard power; legitimacy comes from many sources, one of them being soft power, or non-coercive influence over others. The eminent Harvard academic Joseph Nye helped push the concept of "soft power" into the global commons three decades ago. Power is the ability to obtain or influence desired outcomes from others primarily through coercion or inducement, he noted. Soft power, then, is the benign ability to shape the preferences of others: If those others want the same thing because they share the same worldview, outlook and culture, their power could be enlisted in achieving American goals.

In a *Foreign Policy* article in 1990, Nye wrote: "A state may achieve the outcomes it prefers in world politics because other states want to follow it or have agreed to a situation that produces such effects. In this sense, it is just as important to set the agenda and structure the situations in world politics as to get others to change in particular cases. This second aspect of power — which occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants — might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants."

The worldwide consumption of American media products was very much a part of American soft power. I have spoken already about how American soft power eclipsed Soviet soft power by emphasising enduring and endearing values such as balancing individualism and social commitment through sceptical uncertainty — all hallmarks of the Western intellectual tradition. One reason for America's success was that its economic system and military might were sufficient to protect it from the Soviet challenge. The poor did suffer in First World America (as they did in Third World Asia, Africa and Latin America). Technically, there were no poor in the Soviet Second World. However, the sharing of poverty in the Soviet Union (and later communist China and Vietnam) did not produce the kind of dissenting intellectual population that could speak, write and act as freely as could its American

counterpart. American soft power triumphed because the US's economics and politics had trumped those of the Soviet Union.

Things have changed vastly now. China and Russia have shed communism both as ideology and culture. They have retreated to glorified and sometimes militarised pasts. Russians speak of recovering lost cultural lands on the battlefield — witness Ukraine. China's CCTV's special documentary series on Chinese civilisation mesmerised not only Chinese citizens and the diaspora but also the discerning world at large with its message: "China is an East Asian country with a large territory, a huge population and an ancient history. With written records dating back 4,000 years, it is recognised as one of the four great ancient civilisations of the world, together with ancient Egypt, Babylon and India. Moreover, it is the only ancient civilisation that has continued to this very day." (The US became independent only in 1776, leaving it historically as a mere baby among the global ancients.)

The Slavic and Sinic cultural and media spheres are on the ascendant: bold, confident and assertive. Their soft power will grow as their hard power increases. By contrast, signs of American contraction, real or imagined, will tilt world opinion towards a tendency to identify perceptually with Moscow and Beijing, the new capitals of global power. Washington will not disappear from the map, of course, but it will have to share ideational space with its two chief rivals. Unless the world descends into nuclear anarchy in the process, America needs to understand that it needs soft power against rivals as much as it requires hard power.

I can do no better than look at what Nye wrote before his recent death. In an article in *Project Syndicate* published on May 16, 2025, in his final commentary, Nye recalled a Norwegian historian who had described Cold War-Europe as being divided into a Soviet and an American empire. "But there was a crucial difference: the American side was 'an empire by invitation'. That became clear when the Soviets had to deploy troops to Budapest in 1956, and to Prague in 1968. In contrast, Nato has not only survived but voluntarily increased its membership." One reason why America was an empire by invitation was its soft power. The Soviet Union deployed hard power because it had nothing else to deploy. Tanks invade countries that ideas cannot conquer.

Nye acknowledged America's global shortcomings but continued: "To be sure, American soft power has had its ups and downs over the years. The US was unpopular in many countries during the Vietnam and Iraq wars. But soft power derives from a country's society and culture as well as from government actions. Even during the Vietnam War, when crowds marched through streets around the world to protest US policies, they sang the American civil-rights anthem 'We Shall Overcome'."

That is my point as well. Even in just a single area — films — the final message of American soft power is that humankind was born to overcome. Not to succumb to the enticements or prerogatives of power. Not to be glad to be unfree. But to search for freedom even if it means falling by the wayside of history — because in the quest lies the destination.

Soft power is power after all. ■

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