

BOOK REVIEW

Joseph S. NYE, Jr., *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*
(New York, Oxford University Press, 2020)

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Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump

Joseph S. NYE, Jr.

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Since the end of World War II, the United States has been considered to be one of the major forces in world politics. Any slight change in its foreign affairs affects international issues. Although the country's institutional structure is considered to be the main pillar of its foreign policy, presidents also stand in the middle of this structure as important figures. Donald Trump is indeed an interesting and unusual president in the history of United States. In April 2018, former FBI Director James Comey declared that Trump was morally unfit to be President.¹ This claim leads to some questions. What is being morally accurate? What makes a president's decisions moral or immoral? Is it possible to judge or measure a president along with moral or ethical attitudes? These are the exact questions that Joseph S. Nye, Jr. tries to find out an answer in his new book that was published in January 2020.

In his book, Nye lays out a unique framework for evaluating moral and ethical sides of presidents' foreign policy decisions and discusses the implications of transnational threats that future presidents will have to consider producing a moral foreign policy. Regarding the time he served in the Departments of State and Defense, it is understandable why Nye has been interested in the moral dimensions of foreign policy. When it comes to morality or ethical questions, in analyses of foreign policies, these concepts seem like they are regarded as having too little an impact. Traditional foreign policy analyses tend to replace these concepts with national interests. However, Nye believes that there are instances where a president's moral beliefs have changed the way history turned out. To judge the morality of presidents' foreign policy decisions, according to Nye, first, one needs to lay out what morality actually means (p. 29-30). Nye defines morality as doing things because you feel you ought to. And, in US, he says that 'ought' is shaped in part by American exceptionalism and Wilsonian liberalism (p. 16-17, 20-21).

¹ Tom McCarthy, "James Comey says Donald Trump 'morally unfit' to be president ", 16 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/16/james-comey--donald-trump-morally-unfit-president-abc-interview> (Accessed 2 May 2020).

The book consists of nine chapters in total. The first two chapters introduce American Moralism and explain what a moral foreign policy actually is. In the second chapter, Nye explains his methodology and how to evaluate the moral sides of the foreign policies of presidents. According to him, presidential decisions do not just center on national interests but also have moral reasoning. In this sense, Nye uses a three-dimensional moral reasoning evaluation as follows: intentions, means, and consequences. Then he creates a scorecard for each president (p. 31-32, 56, 58-60). The following chapters mainly focus on the moral analysis of each president's foreign policy since the end of World War II, with various examples of that era. These chapters are divided into several sub-sections: The Founders, The Vietnam Era, Post-Vietnam Retrenchment, The End of the Cold War, The Unipolar Moment, and Twenty-First-Century Power Shifts. However, formulations of the US presidency in these monumental eras raise a question of whether an era-based distinction is really necessary or not. It is not clear that grouping the presidents in these eras really does justice to the three-dimensional moral analysis or it just creates an artificial similarity between presidents of that era.

Another important question is why Nye specifically focuses on moral reasoning. As stated above, the main reason why the book was written, in the end, is that morals do matter when it comes to US foreign policy. For instance, Nye states that Woodrow Wilson took US away from its orientation towards the Western hemisphere sent two million men to fight in Europe in World War I because he was not doing it for the old balance of power reasoning, but because he was doing it to make the world safe for democracy (p. 21). Wilson had to add a moral dimension to it in order to appeal to the American people and ensure the support of allies. But after World War I, US policy took an isolationist approach that contributed to an immoral decade of massive economic downturn and a genocidal World War II (p. 22-23). According to Nye, this led Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower to find the so-called 'Liberal International Order' which has also played a large role in shaping US conceptions of morality. This so-called order began in 1945, and therefore the book starts after 1945. As touched on before, starting with Roosevelt, he evaluates each US President thus far along three-dimensions of morality; intentions, means, and consequences. This is where the interesting arguments start. For example, in terms of intentions of his three-dimensional reasoning, Nye claims that in Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson basically did not want to be seen as a coward and that led him to say good things about saving the Vietnamese people, but it was more about not appearing to be a coward (p. 111-112). Because if some of the deeper motives are personal insecurity or personal gain, then there is a gap between stated intentions and what is really going on. For the second dimension of means, Nye claims that if means do not pay any attention to the lives or the concerns of others, they are usually called immoral means. And the third and final dimension is consequences. This dimension is an answer to what the ultimate outcome is. This outcome appears, according to Nye, when an action results in a good way and not leads to any damage for others, and even leads to some good for others.

Based on his methodology, Nye creates scorecards for each in terms of the morality of their foreign policy decisions and it creates an opportunity to rank 14 presidents. He puts four presidents in the top tier: Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and George H. W. Bush. Arguably, according to him, Bush managed to end the Cold War without bloodshed, which was an extraordinary accomplishment as Nye states (p. 169-170). In the bottom tier, he puts Johnson, (because he expanded the US role in Vietnam), Nixon, and although his term continued when the book was written, Trump. Regarding the scorings, it is problematic and not clear how to group other presidents; therefore the rest seem to

fall in various places in the middle between the top and bottom tiers. In the last chapter, Nye mainly focuses on the ups and downs of these moral traditions of presidents and what may challenge future moral foreign policies. Nye concludes his book by discussing the potential impacts that China and transnational threats – like climate change, cybercrime, and infectious diseases – will have on the ways future US Presidents will be able to enact moral foreign policy (p. 248, 257, 264-65).

To conclude, the book is a valuable piece to US foreign policy literature. Even though understanding and evaluating moral and ethical sides of US president may seem confusing for non-US readers, Nye does good work on putting it as simple as possible. In this sense, the book is a comprehensive work to grasp the important events from a US perspective, from World War II until the 21st century, through a moral lens.