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Power – Hard, Soft, Smart?

By Diane Chido
Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
April 2025



When I teach my Gannon University course on U.S. Government and Politics, the first thing we discuss is “what is politics?” and “what is government?” The bottom line is that both are essentially about one thing: power. The power to influence the use of resources. For example, through legislation that influences how people behave and interact; distribution of government funding; projection of military force; or use of trade, financing, and sanctions to leverage how other countries behave. “Power, power, power!” I tell my students that politics are the way to obtain and maintain power, and government is the way in which it is used at home and abroad to achieve specific objectives.

We often hear the quote "power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," attributed to British politician Lord John Acton, who wrote this line in an 1887 letter to an Anglican bishop.^[1] While the saying is a popular one, I am not aware of any social science hard research that has proven this to be always true. As the most powerful country militarily and economically for now, the U.S. exercises outsized power among countries in the modern world. How the U.S. has used its vast power over the past century is always dynamic.

In the post-World War I era, the U.S. changed dramatically from one in which 80% of the population lived in rural areas and engaged in agriculture to one in which 80% of the population lived in cities and engaged in industrial manufacturing. The U.S. became the successor in global power of its once largest rival, Great Britain, upon which it was said in the 19th century that the sun never

set, due to its vast colonial empire. Today, the same could be said of the United States military with its multitude of posts and bases around the world and its role in maintaining global shipping security.

At the turn of the 20th century, President Theodore Roosevelt began building U.S. naval power as a way to project strength beyond our geographic boundaries. This was expanded exponentially by his cousin, President Franklin Roosevelt, in the lead-up to World War II and has continued to the present day, particularly with our invention of aircraft carriers that could control air and sea far beyond our shores. Using men and materiel to project power and strength militarily is an expression of “hard power” often explained as the power to coerce others to do what you want. The enormous industrial drive of the 1930s, also led by the second Roosevelt, was his method of spending his way out of the Great Depression. Ramping up manufacturing through government contracts with select private firms was meant to reduce unemployment and increase the American industrial base.

Only a decade after the great Wall Street crash, the U.S. was mining twice the coal and producing twice the amount of steel as Germany, and the national income was double that of Italy, Japan, and Germany combined. Roosevelt increased military spending to build bombers and ships to ostensibly support Britain and what remained of France to build his famous “arsenal of democracy.”^[ii] In order to be prepared to defeat Germany in the war, Roosevelt realized he would have to out-manufacture Adolf Hitler. The use of U.S. financial power and industrial might, plus the use of mass hardware and manpower once we entered the war was another clear expression of hard power.

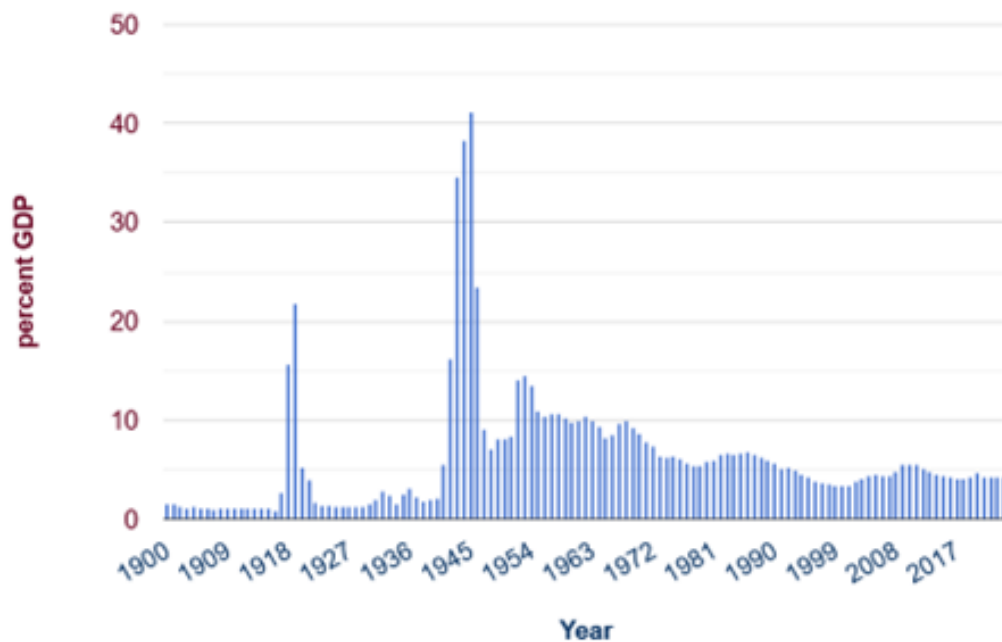


Chart of U.S. defense spending, 1928-2012

After the war, the U.S. maintained its arsenal and grew it in terms of nuclear weapons and continued military spending but never near the rate of the World War II ramp-up as illustrated in the graphic, despite the costs of the 2001-2022 War on Terror.^[iii] Also, after the World War II, the U.S. continued to enhance its relationship with its allies, except for the Soviet Union with the near immediate onset of the Cold War. In 1948, the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, and its subsequent expansion, solidified U.S. military power projection in the region and around the world. U.S. military strength provided crucial security for Europe while the Marshall Plan armed it with the financial support needed to rebuild — an example of hard power. Along the lines of Theodore Roosevelt’s maxim to “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” the projection of U.S. power in that period began to change as it built up the capacity of the State Department and learned to more astutely apply diplomacy as a lever of subtler influence.

In the late 1980s, Joseph Nye coined the term “soft power” to describe the ability to “attract and persuade as a means to success in world politics.” This approach to attracting allies and others is meant as a careful use of a nation’s financial support, culture, policies, and political ideals. In 1963, social scientist Seymore Lipman famously described the concept of “American exceptionalism” to explain not that the U.S. is superior to other countries but to refer to its base ideals; that the country was created not by allegiance of people to a historical geographic space or common ancestry but by its universal human right to “life, liberty, and

the pursuit of happiness.”^[iv] This was the first country, he wrote, that was united only by a common creed, the first tenet of which is liberty.

Those of us nostalgic for the seemingly black-and-white, good-vs.-evil clarity of the Cold War saw the Soviet Union as a prison surrounded by its famous iron curtain. In opposition was the bright, sunny, productive, and happy American world of openness and freedom. Whether this was fully true is welcome to debate, but it was the ideological construct that kept Americans on the side of liberty in that period. Through our movies, literature, fashions, music, political rhetoric, and humanitarian activities around the world, America became the shining city on a hill that President Ronald Reagan spoke about in his 1988 farewell address: The land of opportunity open to all with the heart and the will to come.^[v] A pair of Levi jeans could be used as a beacon of hope and freedom in a world yearning to breathe that freedom and be just like us.

Now, this does not mean that the U.S. traded its hard power entirely for soft power. The people of Korea, Vietnam, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Angola, Grenada, Panama, and elsewhere experienced the brunt of American hard power, but the dream lived on despite violent times. As outlined in a previous [essay](#), President John F. Kennedy’s creation of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) expanded scientific agricultural techniques and products to end the threat of famines and provided more health care and political training and support for people in places yearning for their own freedom from oppression. The Peace Corps brought bright-faced, idealistic Americans with their show of robust health and willingness to teach English, build wells, and support universal human rights. In the mid-1980s, the U.S. commissioned the hospital ships *USNS Comfort* and *USNS Mercy* that traveled the world providing necessary health care to the most desperate places.

American presidents and other statesmen used the same language for a century to describe for the world what it meant to be an American. Even President George W. Bush and his disastrous adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq sought to make the world safe for democracy by stirring up the belief that individuals could change their governments and end the oppression and stagnation caused by their leaders’ avarice and incompetence.

By the 1990s, the West and its ideals ostensibly won the Cold War and achieved peace by reinvesting American resources previously dedicated to undermining and halting Soviet dominance. . The U.S. expanded its overseas influence campaigns to try and post-conflict states using its soft power backed up by its hard power capabilities to ensure the smooth flow of global trade and continue building democracy. In 1993, the U.S. Defense Department carved out part of its army budget (a very small part) to create a Peace Keeping and Stabilization Operations Institute to support United Nations, NATO, and African Union

operations to shore up fragile states and halt and prevent violence. This project morphed into military doctrine that by the 2010s mandated a responsibility to protect civilians in conflict areas and integrate the role of women maintaining peace and security.

During the administration of President Barack Obama, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reconsidered American power projection with the concept of “smart power,” describing it as “the full range of tools at our disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural – picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation.”^{[vi][vii]} The announcement of this approach included examples of U.S. foreign policy tools to include:

- Negotiating, persuading, and exerting leverage
- Cooperating with our military partners and other agencies of government
- Partnering with non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and international organizations
- Using modern technologies for public outreach
- Empowering negotiators who can protect our interests while understanding those of our negotiating partners

This comprehensive approach was not new. It had been in long use but was now repackaged and codified as a direct strategy using a “whole of government” effort to coordinate the objectives and activities of multiple agencies that may have been acting within silos in the past.

In the past month, President Donald Trump has been using all of these levers, although his divisive rhetoric is different from that used by past presidents and is openly less collegial and more transactional, making U.S. support contingent on clearly stated advantages for the U.S. This is not a new way of determining which countries or actions to support, it is the terminology and presentation of the “deals” that are new, and which sound cringeworthy in some cases because the terms are set so starkly. Historically, statesmen couched many of the same demands in more Jeffersonian language about supporting freedom and democracy when pursuing similar concrete ends.

It is important to remember today that there have been presidential plans considered to be outlandish in the past. President Richard Nixon’s announcement in 1972 that he would visit communist China and open diplomatic negotiations was considered ludicrous two decades after the disruptions caused by the Red Scare that he helped Sen. Joseph McCarthy propagate as a fellow member of the House Un-American Activities Committee.^[viii] This diplomatic effort was considered anathema to U.S. containment policy to oppose any communist regime but had the positive effect of dividing China and Russia in their shared quest for global dominance. Today, those two countries are still working to shore

up that broken relationship, but with China in ascendance, thanks to its historical access to the American market.

Reagan's announcement in 1983 of the creation of the Strategic Defense Initiative, a space-based system to defend the U.S. from incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles intended to make nuclear weapons obsolete, was widely mocked as "Star Wars."^[ix] Its massive-estimated cost and its technical impossibility at the time drew criticism from many observers. While the collapse of the Soviet Union ended the project in 1991, fear of its very existence forced Soviet leaders to consider how they too could develop such a system. The onerous cost is often cited as a key reason for the Soviet collapse, as it revealed the truly dire economic conditions in the country at that time.

Trump has recently made equally outlandish-seeming pronouncements about Gaza, Greenland, tariffs, and Ukraine. In the first case, the announcement that the U.S. would "take over Gaza," and move its current inhabitants out while demolition and reconstruction take place^[x] are more crassly stated than previous efforts, such as President Joe Biden's more delicately stated intention to "create humanitarian corridors" so that civilians can safely escape conflict and deprivations. Trump's language echoed the words of a hotel and casino developer to "turn Gaza into the Riviera," and grates as it feels like the plan is to make Gaza a playground for billionaires and not a place for Gazans to live in peace and security.

As an optimist, I would like to see what happens. Perhaps this is not a land grab at all and only a pressure tactic to get the wealthy Gulf States to say, "NIMBY! WE will invest in Gaza and make it a place where our fellow Arabs can live peacefully and not a place of Western vice." By doing so, perhaps they can negotiate security guarantees with Israel by creating a place that provides physical security, education, health care, civil liberties, and economic opportunity. This could reduce the traumatic violence under which Palestinians have lived since 1948 and which has been inflicted upon them not only by Israel and the West in making them leave their homes in the first place, but by their own leaders who have propagated the conflict and protected their own terrorizing and organized criminal organizations.

I will address the issue of tariffs in a future essay, but this space is committed to making an effort to reveal motivations or find silver linings in seemingly scary transitions taking place globally. As power is dynamic and the outcome of its application unpredictable, much like the Trump administration itself, perhaps I am more than an optimist and really a hopeless idealist. But as an American whose sense of identity is built around a creed of ideals, one thing we always do well is hope for the best. Let fly the rotten tomatoes and cabbage heads to pooh-pooh such utopian prognostications!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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