



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

Do US Presidents Matter?

Professor Joseph Nye

University Distinguished Service Professor, Harvard University

Chair: Dr Robin Niblett

Director, Chatham House

8 May 2013

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Robin Niblett:

I'm absolutely delighted to welcome Professor Joe Nye back to Chatham House once again, to talk to us on the suitably provocative title – I think, at least – of 'Do US Presidents Matter?' The great thing about Joe is that he is one of those individuals who has been able to do what you can do in America: combine a career in academia with time in government – and time in the very respectable world of think tanks as well, I might add. He is now a distinguished service professor at the Kennedy School of Government, where he served as dean.

He is one of the most prolific but also deep-thinking writers on issues of international relations of his era, and his writings on power in particular, starting from the 1970s – books on *Power and Interdependence* through to *Soft Power* – which in a way is a term I think it would be right to say that you coined – along with notions of *The Future of Power*, are bringing us right up to today, where his latest book – which is over there and which people can purchase afterwards if you would like – is on *Presidential Leadership and the Creation of the American Era*, which we have shorthanded down into 'Do US Presidents Matter?' I think that's probably one of the core themes you are taking there.

But apart from being a leading academic and scholar on international affairs, he has served as deputy undersecretary of state, assistant secretary of defense, and chairman of the National Intelligence Council, and he's worked in the National Security Council as well on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons – he chaired the National Security Council group on that topic. On the think tank side, apart from being director of the Aspen Strategy Group – where we've had the opportunity to participate in some fascinating events together – I learnt today, and I should have known earlier, that he also spent a brief stint as a visiting fellow of Chatham House.

So with that think tank combination, that government experience and the benefit of having thought a lot about these issues, we look forward to your remarks and then to having conversation afterwards. Welcome back to Chatham House.

Joseph Nye:

Thank you very much, Robin. It is indeed a pleasure to be back at Chatham House, a wonderful institution. What I'd like to do is lay out for you this question of whether leaders matter...

If one looks at the 20th century, the United States starts as a second-rate power and by the end of the 20th century, of course, it's the world's only superpower. One of the interesting questions is: was all that inevitable – just the forces of history, structural issues, continental scale, economy and so forth – or did presidents matter? One way of thinking of things is it's all in the cards; the other is that leaders matter. Where you stand on this question depends to some extent on where you sit. My former colleague at Harvard, Henry Kissinger, when he was teaching at Harvard, answered that question as 'it's all structural forces' – it's just in the cards. After he'd served in the White House he changed his position and said leaders matter.

So we're not going to settle this problem, but I thought it would be interesting at least to wrestle with it. So I've gone through the 20th century presidents and asked in this book: what would be the difference if instead of the president who you had, who made key decisions in the period of expansion of American power – suppose the next most likely person had been president and made decisions that would accord with their preferences. Would the outcomes have all been the same or not?

The other question that I'm intrigued by is not just do individuals or leaders matter, but what kind of leaders? In leadership theory, experts tend to make a distinction between what they call transformational leaders and transactional leaders. A transformational leader is somebody who makes a huge change – usually a charismatic figure, somebody with a grand vision who really changes things. I suppose a good example would be – whether one likes it or doesn't like it – Margaret Thatcher was a transformational leader in the way she changed Britain in the 1970s and early 1980s. We often think of leaders like Ronald Reagan as a transformational leader. But if you look at the way the leadership theory people talk, they say that transformational leaders are good, there is something wonderful about them, and transactional leaders – the people who just manage things, who make the trains run on time – well, they're just run of the mill. They don't matter so much.

So I was interested not just in whether leaders mattered but which kind of leaders mattered? I found to my surprise that while transformational presidents like Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan changed how Americans see the world, transactional presidents like Dwight Eisenhower or George HW Bush were sometimes more effective and more ethical. That is a counter-conventional wisdom conclusion and I don't think I would have come to that conclusion before I had written this book. It does suggest, however, that as we look at American foreign policy today, the lessons for President Obama and his successors are: be careful of just thinking that grand

transformational visions are what you need – it's actually something more complex than that.

Transformational leaders are people who place big bets. For example, George W Bush – who we sometimes call Bush 43, because he's the 43rd president, to distinguish him from Bush 41, his father – placed a big bet on the invasion of Iraq. But big bets involve big risks, and they raise important questions of costs that foreign policies impose upon their followers. The question is: should such bets at least meet the criteria of having a reasonable prospect of success? It's always difficult to tell this in advance. One of the great strategists of all history, Otto von Bismarck, made a big bet in 1870 – that engineering a war with France would allow Germany to unify under Prussian leadership. He won that bet, but he made another bet at the same time – that he could take Alsace-Lorraine – which turned out to be a disastrous bet in 1914. So these big bets have their dangers.

Woodrow Wilson, in the American setting, laid a very costly – and, I would argue, a mistaken – bet in the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations. He had a noble vision of replacing balance-of-power politics but the inability to implement that noble vision led to a setback which produced the isolation of the 1930s, which led to a much worse world than if Wilson had not initiated his grand transformational vision in the first place.

Similarly, John F Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson made mistaken bets that Vietnam was a game of dominoes when actually it was a game of chequers. In chequers, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, so you do Russia, China, Vietnam, Cambodia – instead of dominoes, in which they all fall in the same direction. By misdiagnosing what was going on in Vietnam we paid a terrible price and had another period of withdrawal in the 1970s. So that was a bet gone wrong. Richard Nixon bet successfully on an opening to China in 1971, which was a transformational move. He also made a bet on the destruction of the Bretton Woods monetary system at about the same time, which unleashed inflation and created grave problems for his successor presidents in the 1970s. So in that sense, I think we have to be very careful as we look at the kinds of bets that our leaders make.

The two leaders that I see as having made the most important transformational bets of the 20th-century presidents were probably Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. If you look at Franklin Roosevelt, in 1938 he decides that Hitler is a threat to the United States. After Munich and Kristallnacht he thinks we have to do something about it, but he can't persuade the American people to follow him. He's got this leftover from

Woodrow Wilson's vision, which is this intense isolationism. So Roosevelt basically has to decide what to do, and as he put it to one of his advisers: if you're a leader in a democracy and you know the direction you want to go, you look over your shoulder and nobody's following, what do you do next? He tried to engineer certain incidents which would lead America into the war – couldn't do it. So instead of that, what he did was prepare America for the time when an incident would occur. That included things like a draft, increasing military expenditure – not least to Britain, and keeping Britain alive in its struggle with Hitler. Then when the Japanese attacked at Pearl Harbor, American public opinion – the followers – were transformed and Roosevelt could use this transformational vision.

But you could say: why does that matter? The answer is if there had been an isolationist president who had been in Roosevelt's shoes at the same time, who might have left Stalin and Hitler to fight it out – so you'd have a Europe that was divided between these two totalitarian regimes and Japan in control of the Co-Prosperity Sphere in Asia – you might have wound up with a multipolar world rather than the world which we saw at the end of World War II.

That's the other transformational decision, which is Harry Truman's decision. Truman made a radical departure in American foreign policy. Woodrow Wilson made a big departure by bringing 2 million American troops to fight in Europe, but he brought them home. Harry Truman left them there, and they are there to this day. If you think back to George Washington's tradition of 'no entangling alliances' and focusing on the Western Hemisphere, that was a hugely transformational change. You say: well, yes, but wouldn't anybody have done it? Not necessarily. In 1944, Franklin Roosevelt decided to replace his vice president, Henry Wallace, with a relatively unknown senator named Harry Truman. Wallace was very sympathetic to the Soviet Union – not clear that he would have taken the same position that Truman took in 1945.

So we have this question of two different types of leaders, the transformational and transactional, but I haven't yet given you an argument for why the transactional leaders matter. In other words, I've given you two good examples of successful transformational presidents as well as a failed one – in the form of Woodrow Wilson. I would argue that the two successful transactional presidents were Dwight Eisenhower and George HW Bush, or Bush 41.

Eisenhower was a man who was really an incrementalist – he didn't have a transformational vision. But he did see that if the United States returned to

isolationism – if, for example, Senator Robert Taft, who was a probable Republican nominee in 1952, had come into power, he might indeed have brought American troops back home. Eisenhower felt that was a mistake, and Eisenhower therefore kept in place this radical change that Harry Truman had brought about of a permanent American presence. As a consolidator, that's important, but that's not the reason why I say we have to pay attention to him as a critical leader in the 21st century. He also did something extremely important which nobody pays enough attention to. In 1955, the Joint Chiefs of Staff came to Eisenhower and said: we should use nuclear weapons against China. We then had a dispute over the offshore islands near Taiwan. Eisenhower said: 'my God, we can't use those things against Asians again within 10 years'. Absolutely critical decision. Imagine what the world would look like today if instead of a seventy-year-long nuclear taboo, nuclear weapons had become regular, tactical, usable weapons.

So in some ways, when we look at the importance of presidents and individuals making decisions, we have to be careful to look at what I call the 'Sherlock Holmes effect' – the dogs that don't bark, as well as the dogs that do. Eisenhower's decision not to do something was probably as important as some of the decisions to do something. In that sense, he became a critical figure. Had there been another president who decided to go ahead and use the weapons – for example, General MacArthur, another World War II hero who had presidential aspirations – nuclear weapons would have been used and the world today would be very different.

I would make an argument that the first Bush, George HW Bush, is similarly a transactional figure who made some decisions which were crucial to the way the world looks today. You remember Bush the father used to say, famously: 'I don't do the vision thing.' He was in fact very embarrassed, very cautious, very transactional. He presided over an extraordinary transformation in world politics but he didn't engineer it, he didn't design it. What he did was to manage to make sure it didn't go off the tracks.

Another way of thinking about that is: in 1989, if somebody had asked you, would it be possible to unify Germany inside NATO and witness the collapse of not only the Soviet empire but the Soviet Union itself, with no violence occurring – you would have said, of course not. Indeed, Margaret Thatcher, who I cited earlier, had that view. She thought Bush was crazy to go ahead with this. Bush's view on German unification was relatively simple. He said he had talked with Helmut Kohl earlier, before the Wall collapsed in 1989, and Kohl had convinced him that Germany was now a different country and that

Germany was now democratic. Bush said: 'Just as a principle of fairness, if you've had a fellow down long enough, you let him get back up again.'

So it wasn't a grand vision, it was a simple intuitive feeling. Yet that accomplishment of basically ending the Cold War, ending the division of Germany – when there were 400,000 Soviet troops in East Germany – and witnessing the end of the Soviet Union was an extraordinary change. If Bush had failed on any of that, or if any of that had gotten derailed and violence began, the world we're living in today would look very different.

So again you have a transactional leader. It wasn't the vision or the transformation that he made, it was simple managerial competence which was absolutely critical. If we had had an alternative president – let's say Michael Dukakis, who I supported at the time – but Dukakis had less experience than Bush and it's not 100 per cent clear that the management of the process would have been as smooth as it was.

So this is not an argument against transformational leaders as such. Transformational leaders are often very important. Indeed, in fluid situations like South Africa or India, Nelson Mandela or Mohandas Gandhi could make a huge difference as transformational leaders. In American foreign policy, as I said, both Truman and Roosevelt made a big difference.

But I am convinced that as we think back on history and the role of agency or human decisions, we have to look at the dogs that don't bark, as well as the ones that bark. That's why I place so much emphasis not only on two transformational leaders in the creation of the American era, but on two transactional leaders.

Now obviously you could say that this is a lesson from history, but what does it tell us about today? I think one of the things it tells us is that when we're looking at issues in foreign policy, we have to realize the enormous complexity of foreign policy issues. Not only do you have to think of the variety of different ways in which different societies and polities are organized, but you also have to think of the international system as a whole. In that sort of complexity, perhaps a first virtue is prudence, and a hubristic vision in that kind of context can present a grave danger.

I would argue that in foreign policy, as in medicine, it's important to start with the Hippocratic Oath: above all, do no harm. For these reasons, the virtues of transactional leaders with good contextual intelligence and management skills – such as Bush 41 – are extraordinarily important. Or another way of putting it: a Bush 41 without the ability to articulate a vision but who is able to steer

successfully through crises turns out to be a better leader than a Bush 43 with a powerful vision but little contextual intelligence.

In trying to explain the role of secretary of state, Ronald Reagan's secretary of state, George Shultz, once compared it to gardening. In Shultz's words, it's 'the constant nurturing of a complex array of actors, interests and goals'. But as one observer put it, Shultz's Stanford colleague, Condoleezza Rice, wanted a more transformational diplomacy when she succeeded to his office. Her view was not accepting the world as it is but trying to change it – or, as this commentator put it: 'Rice's ambition was not just to be a gardener; she wanted to be a landscape architect.' Now, there's a role for both, depending on the context. But we should avoid the common mistake of automatically thinking that transformational landscape architects are better leaders than careful gardeners. Good leadership in this century may or may not be transformational but it will be based on a clear understanding of the context of international politics.

To conclude this, let me just say that as I try to summarize the context of American foreign policy today, I don't think that we're living in a post-American world. I don't believe the view that the United States is in decline is a useful metaphor for describing the current context of American power. Certainly the United States is not going to return to the kind of primacy which it held in the 20th century but neither is it going to be declining into a post-American world. Instead I think what we're likely to see is something that was described by the National Intelligence Council – a body that I once headed up – which issued a report recently called 'The World in 2030', and what they said is essentially the United States is most likely to be *primus inter pares* in 2030 – but the difference is we'll be first but not sole. There will be a lot more attention that will need to be paid to *pares*.

In that sense, as we look ahead for presidential decision-making, the US will be faced with a rise in the power resources of many others, both states and non-state actors, and presidents will face an increasing number of issues in which obtaining our preferred outcomes will require power with others as much as power over others. A good presidential capacity – a good leader – will be one who maintains alliances and creates networks and will use both our hard and soft power. The problem of America's role in the 21st century is not one of poorly specified decline but developing the contextual intelligence to understand that even the largest country cannot achieve the outcomes it wants without the help of others. Educating the public to both understand and operate successfully in the context of a global information age will be the real task of presidential leadership.

So to conclude as I do in the book: leaders do matter. About half the leaders I looked at in the 20th century made a difference. But it wasn't always the half that you thought. It wasn't always the flashy and more transformational ones. Pay equal attention to the managerial capacity and transactional capacity of the presidents we seek to elect. That essentially is the moral of the story of my little excursion into counterfactual history of the 20th century. Thank you very much.