

SOFT POWER USA

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Many inside and outside the US feel troubled about where its domestic politics has come to. You do not have to be a US citizen to feel concerned: it is not good for the US or for the world. How to pull back from this is a major challenge for which there are no simple recipes. One important component will be to support its internal connectors and their soft power. Before we reach them, we need to pass through two other soft powers of the USA.

The first soft power: Following the storming of the US Capitol by a threatening mob on 6 January 2021 and subsequent political developments, many commentators have lamented how this erodes the USA's ability to promote democracy around the world by serving as an inspiring role model. This is what Joseph Nye referred to as 'soft power', *'the ability to shape the preferences of others to want what you want'*. Call it 'influencing', through attraction, persuasion, seduction. 'Soft power' plays out in many spheres: it underlies community-policing which seeks to create a climate wherein the community wants to help the police achieve shared objectives. 'Winning hearts and minds' is the military's framing of 'soft power'. Arguably, US global leadership as a beacon of freedom had been eroding rapidly during the whole Trump administration, which became more a role model of a playbook to discredit the independent press and create a post-truth world in which narrow-interest populism and authoritarianism thrive. Indeed, we have seen some authoritarian governments rejoice in the current situation and twist it to justify their own repression, for example of the Hong Kong democracy movement. In that sense, the US continues to influence through example, only now an example of democracy-undermining politics.

The second soft power: Less reflected on is whether the widely held idea of the USA as a beacon of liberal democracy actually corresponded to reality? Unless you believe that reasonably free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power are sufficient to call a political culture 'democratic', that image is more problematic. From a European experience, the massive influence of campaign financing in US elections raises doubts about the 'free and fair'. Also after its elections, narrow-interest lobbies continue to have disproportionate policy influence. These include corporate giants but also others like the National Rifle Association. Historically, democratic politics implied fierce competition during elections, but policy compromises afterwards to ensure win-win outcomes for a broad section of the population, not just a narrow interest group. Opposition political parties would largely act as a 'responsible opposition'. We have not seen that for years in the US, most notably from the Republican Party who systematically blocked all policy initiatives from the Obama administration, irrespective of its potential merit for sections of the US population or its national interests on the global scene. Worse, for years particularly Republican officials have been redrawing boundaries of voting precincts, to tilt voting results in their favour and tried to prevent those who they believed might vote Democrats from registering as voters or casting their votes. Republicans currently arguing that Trump should not be further pursued as it would only "deepen divisions" cannot be taken seriously: for years the party has been actively fostering the deepening divide and for the past four years it has stood unconditionally by its ringleader. We must also ask what the quality of a democracy is where there are deep and persistent socio-economic inequalities, and a significant part of the population cannot meet its basic needs? The 'American dream' idea that every individual, if sufficiently enterprising, can achieve anything may be partially true. But the other truth is that this requires a large and docile underclass of people that are structurally excluded and can be exploited. The militarisation of US policing needs to be seen in that context of extreme inequality and would, in more deeply democratic countries, have been a major public and political concern. Whose interests are most served by it? Read Zinn's *'A People's History of the United States'* to get a different perspective on the American dream through a proper social history. US democracy has historically favoured a small elite, which benefits from economic policies of maximum deregulation and rallies against 'big government' if it touches their interests.

The '*model of democracy*' image should also be tested against a country's foreign policy. Proponents of democratic politics have argued that democracies are more peaceful than authoritarian regimes, at least they do not go at war with other democracies. Yet in past decades, the US has often supported authoritarian regimes and actively aided and abetted coups to overthrow democratically elected ones if it suited its 'national interest' - as defined by its military-commercial-political elite. In a globalized capitalist system, democracies as a whole seem unable to adopt a fairly ethical foreign policy if it clashes with their short-term economic interests (some countries will try to arms-trade themselves out of the

globally recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) but it does not normally go as far as to overthrow other regimes. Secondly, as a former member of an Israeli security service once told me: *'the foreign policy of the US is made in Tel Aviv'*. That may not be the case globally, but it is certainly so for the Middle East. The heavy focus on Russia influence in US political life seems to have totally obscured the influence of Israel, via the powerful pro-Israel lobby. The continued demonisation of Iran, combined with unconditional support for a Saudi Arabia (whose Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is a foundational inspiration for many on the global 'terrorist' lists) is the amplification of a Netanyahu strategy since years. It conveniently distracts attention from Israel's apartheid regime in the Occupied Territories and the discrimination against its own Arab Israeli citizens. Whether this is in the US's longer-term national interests has been questioned already years ago by Mearsheimer and Walt. Thirdly, if democracy is associated with the rule of law (laws that should protect fundamental human rights and prioritise human security over state security), how democratic then is the US's refusal to have its military and civilian citizens tried by any non-US court, even for alleged mass murders, and its active opposition to the International Criminal Court? This is not support for international rights-based norms or standards, but a signal that US citizens (with the right connections) are above these laws. Beacon of democracy?

The above are just some examples to indicate that the quality of US democracy requires some serious reflection, among US citizens in the first place. Yet the prevailing view, also around the world, remains that the US is a global leader in democracy. Soft power continues to be exercised very effectively here. The narratives that spin the beacon of democracy image, and which cover up all the narrow-interest machinations at work, continue to persuade.

The third soft power: Smarter political analysts than me draw attention to the fact that the sudden apparent dissociation from Trump by a few Republicans, some corporate sponsors and even the Deutsche Bank, should not distract from the fact that 74 million voted for Trump as President. For an outsider, it is hard to understand why someone would vote for a man whose has amply demonstrated his massive character-flaws; who speaks with utter disrespect about women; who has weakened America by actively fueling partisan divisions (to the point where wearing a protective mask during a pandemic became a political choice) so that its political energies are absorbed internally rather than globally; who unashamedly tells lie upon lie; who intimidates also Republican officials to change repeatedly confirmed election results; whose incompetence has resulted in 350.000 COVID-related deaths while the Republic Party is pressing the Supreme Court to undo the Affordable Health Care Act and deprive more Americans of access to health care etc.? Such massive political support seems to make the idea of 'healing the nation' and 'working across the aisle' more an idle hope than a practical possibility.

The large majority of these 74 million people are not dumb and unsophisticated, or violent nationalists or aggressive white supremacists. So what shapes their thinking and emotions, and drives their political choices? However far I may feel from them, I need to understand.

For almost two decades, I have been supporting peacebuilders in various war-torn societies to create the spaces and atmosphere in which people from across deep divides meet to have the difficult conversations needed to restore at least basic functional relationships and a minimum of acceptance and trust. Facilitating such conversations requires much personal maturity and self-management, and an ability to feel and show empathy with all sides. Empathy does not require agreement, but a principled willingness to treat the other with basic respect. Such facilitators can and must use their soft power, to get participants to -eventually- listen with attention and respect to each other. Who can facilitate such conversations among US citizens? Who can be acceptable to all sides?

There are at least two factors that create an atmosphere that is not very enabling for such difficult but needed conversations. One is the demonisation, in certain circles, of anyone not wholeheartedly believing in the narratives and conspiracy theories that have been actively promoted for years, including now that the 2020 election has been 'stolen'. Questioning such beliefs can render you vulnerable to being labeled 'unpatriotic', a 'socialist' or 'crypto-communist' or an 'antifa' militant. How can such 'believers' be made to open, a bit, the mind and the heart, to at least hear someone else's point of view and accept that other perspectives too have some truth?

The second one is that determined action is needed now to stop those who intentionally seek to undermine democracy in the US. Democracies struggle with their principled protection of freedom of belief and of speech, yet also need to ward off threats from those relying on these freedoms to try and

undermine and overthrow democracies from within. Recent European history provides ample examples where democratic governments were too hesitant or weak to do so, and the violent consequences. As Charles Tilly has warned: democracy is not a guaranteed gain, de-democratisation happens more easily than believed. For some years now, domestic intelligence services in e.g. Germany, the UK and now also the US have been signaling that right-wing extremism has become a greater threat than Islamic extremism. Yet democracies struggle to accept they have been affected by a potentially lethal virus and put at times exaggerated hope in their immune system. Maintaining a healthy body and mind requires more active care than that. It is politically imperative to hold accountable those who incited and organised the 'Stop the Steal' campaign and overtly threaten violence against any political figure that does not actively support it. The 'freedom of speech' principle must be weighed against the nefarious influence of hate-speech, deliberate falsification of facts and promotion of unfounded conspiracy theories. *People are entitled to their opinions but not to their own facts*, as the saying goes.

In such atmosphere, who can initiate and guide such reflective conversations, first internally on each side of the divide, then in encounters where adherents to different sides meet? From experience, three profiles come up: individuals who adopt a third way, individuals seen as belonging to the group that is invited to reflect more deeply, and mixed teams.

Individuals who adopt a third way are those who do not find their values, views and wishes adequately expressed by either Republicans or Democrats' politics and policies, and who therefore can engage in critical but also reflective and constructive conversation with adherents to both sides. There are probably many more than is assumed and if the US had more than two dominant political parties, they would have found political homes that suit them better.

Individuals that are seen as belonging to the group that is asked to reflect more deeply, is a more general principle. We need men to promote gender equality and gender equity; we need white people such as Jane Elliott to lead conversations about racism among white people (acknowledging that racism also lives among those not considered white Caucasians); just as angry youth on the street in Chicago suburbs need former gang leaders, some of whom have spent jailtime for serious crime, as 'Interrupters' to prevent violence or cool it down as soon as it erupts; and Muslim youth attracted to radical ideas and behaviours can be engaged by brothers and sisters of the same faith who have personally experienced radicalization, but come to understand where it comes from and stepped back from where it might lead. That means Conservatives and Republican Party voters are needed to invite fellow believers to reflect more critically about the policies and practices that their leaders, and other followers, have been pursuing for many years now - and supporters of the Democrats to invite their fellow believers to reflect on how they contribute to the polarisation of American society, and must also make an effort to try and understand the sources of the others' beliefs.

When social groups that feel in opposition to each other agree to meet, a mixed team of facilitators whose composition reflects the relevant groups (including those who feel part of a third way) is helpful. It sends a signal that the facilitator team is not biased towards one or the other, increases the ability of the team to empathise with all sides, but also models the ability of people with different group affiliation, in this case political persuasions, to work together as a team.

There is a fourth possible profile. One person exemplifying it is Daryl Davis, a black American musician who went to speak with, and listen to, a high official in the Ku Klux Klan, with the deliberate intent to try and understand the sources of the other's beliefs. They kept talking, obviously not agreeing on everything but treating each other with basic respect, and developed a relationship that enabled them to come to each other's home. Daryl's thesis was that underlying the hate towards and fear of the 'other', lies ignorance. So he sought out 'the other' to listen and learn. Contemporary social media, which drive us to meet and only exchange with those who share and reinforce our own beliefs, make that increasingly difficult. We need to step away from our apps and have the courage to meet and speak with 'others'.

The US has many such individuals who can and will act as such connectors and facilitators, from across the political spectrum. In the years to come they will need to step up and step in, even more than they undoubtedly have already been doing. Their soft power is key to slow down and reverse the trends of division in US politics that will only lead to the destruction of its societal cohesion, leaving America much weakened and definitely not 'great' again. To be effective, they mostly need to be able to play their roles out of the spotlight. And yet, we must hope that the media in the US and abroad devote attention

also to their existence and work, as it contributes to the creation and protection of a genuine, inclusive, democratic culture, that we can all be inspired by.

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Charles Tilly 2007: Democracy

Mearsheimer, J. & S. Walt 2007: The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy

Zinn, H. 2015 edition: A People's History of the United States

Jane Elliott 2016: Being Black <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yrg7vV4a5o>

The Interrupters 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOwPuhMiqqM>

Daryl Davis 2017: Why I, as a black man, attend KKK rallies.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORp3q1Oaezw>