

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

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

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Morals and foreign policy share a tenuous relationship. Whether engineered by realist or liberal leaders, foreign policy is almost always accompanied by a veneer of moral reasoning. Even for the most rational realist leaders in democracies, a morally bankrupt foreign policy is a hard sell to the electorate and parliament. While historians and academics routinely pick apart the foreign policies of leaders, with an eye for ethics and morals, rarely is a comparison made across decades of administrations.

In Joseph S. Nye Jr's new book, *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*, the author illuminates the morality of US foreign policies throughout the post-World War Two 'liberal international order' period. Nye, an influential proponent of liberal international relations theory and former senior US official, is well placed to provide this view. Acknowledging that presidents are "trustees" (p. 17) and have an obligation to protect their citizens, sometimes moral double standards are appropriate, and presidents should not always be held to the same standard as ordinary citizens. From Franklin D. Roosevelt to Donald Trump, Nye judges foreign policy (and provides a scorecard for each administration) by its intentions and motives (moral vision and prudence), means (force and liberal) and consequences (fiduciary, cosmopolitan and educational).

Nye's analysis of the liberal rules-based order is a feature of this publication. He acknowledges that the order has become "obsolete as descriptions of the US place in the world" (p. 216). Rather than advancing wide-ranging foreign policies, as was popular during the rare moment of post-Cold War unipolarity, Nye warns future presidents that their foreign policies will be judged ethically on "where and how to be involved", as "American leadership is not the same as hegemony or domination or military intervention" (p. 217). This point raises questions for policymakers in Canberra. How should Australia's foreign and defence policy—which is dependent on the US-led rules-based order as a guiding principle—respond, when even this prominent liberal theorist is warning of its end?

While this publication only analyses US leadership, the same principles can be extended to all nation-state leaders. While some policy choices are unique to hegemons (global power projection capabilities, wide diplomatic networks, recognition as a security provider), the moral framework can be translated to the narrower foreign policies of weaker nations. Notions of American 'exceptionalism' aside, an analysis of Australia's foreign policy through a moral lens—from Lyons to Morrison—would make for compelling reading.

An objective analysis of how Australia's prime ministers have conceptualised, and applied ethics to, foreign policy choices, through the Cold War and the fleeting period of US unipolarity, may undercut Australia's self-proclaimed 'global citizen' status.

Unfortunately, Nye's methodology, particularly his selection of case studies, in addition to his indifference to potential bias and cognitive fallacies, is the book's Achilles' heel. Foreign policies cited in the book focus on Cold War politics and proxy conflicts, but do not include the less consequential foreign policy decisions made by presidents. While perhaps these consequential decisions and policy domains were the sole responsibility of presidents, I would suspect a more encompassing analysis of decision-making would have provided a richer analysis. By not providing a dataset, one wonders how cognitive bias played a role in this work. Nye does acknowledge (p. 186) that due to his public service and involvement in various presidential decisions (Carter and Clinton administrations), his analysis may be biased. But Nye does not detail a framework to counter these biases, which detracts from the publication as a political science reference. Rather, Nye notes that scorecards are intended as more "illustrative" than "definitive", and that "my personal rankings are less important than the scorecards which readers can alter for themselves" (p. 186). However, by following and recommending a more objective and transparent methodology, perhaps Nye's and his readers' scorecards could be sharpened, and less subjected to biases and fallacies. At a mere 254 pages, in which only 138 pages are dedicated to analysis of the thirteen complete and one partial (Trump) presidential administrations, this book is more of a glance rather than a deep dive into each president. Its accessible style is at the expense of a more thorough analysis grounded in a sound methodology.

As Nye notes, "interests bake the cake; morals are just some icing presidents dribble on to make it look pretty" (p. 182). Despite some relatively minor shortcomings, this book provides a fascinating and up-to-the-minute window into presidential decision-making through a moral lens. While this book does not break theoretical ground, it reminds even the most strident realists that morals and interests in foreign policy can and should mix.

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