

**Thumbnail Image:**



Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

## Joseph Nye's "American Century" <sup>[1]</sup>

In a February 1941 editorial in *Life* magazine, *Time* and *Life* publisher Henry Luce called on his readers to "create the first great American Century." The term radiates hubris, but it has proved long-lived. In today's hyper-partisan America, embracing or rejecting the concept has become a measure of patriotism.

At the idea's heart, however, is the basic truth of American exceptionalism. For much of the twentieth century, the United States was a stabilizing force, with its military and economic power dominating world affairs. There have been plenty of ups and downs: anchoring the fight against Nazi Germany on one hand, becoming embroiled in a debilitating Southeast Asian war on the other; championing a global human rights agenda, while failing to ensure basic freedoms for minority Americans.

Harvard professor Joseph Nye, well known for his explorations of soft power, considers the American prospect in his newly published book, *Is the American Century Over?* (Polity, \$12.95). His answer is a carefully constructed "No," which is based partly on the fact that there is no logical successor to convincingly claim dominance over the next century. Even the United States finds itself sharing the world stage with a growing cast of states and non-state

actors, all with influence enhanced by new information and communication technologies.

China is most often cited as the leading superpower for the coming century, but Nye skillfully points out that there might be less to China than meets the eye. He notes that 46 percent of the top 500 transnational corporations are owned by Americans, and that 19 of the top 25 global brands are American. Further, writes Nye, "China remains weak in science and technological innovation." He adds that Chinese complain that they "produce iPhone jobs, but not Steve Jobs."

China has emphasized soft power as a way to become a more significant player in world affairs, and has spent vast sums on international broadcasting, Confucius Institutes, and other means of reaching the rest of the world. But the soft power tools that China wields are mostly manufactured by government, while American soft power is rooted in civil society – universities, popular culture, private foundations, and such. China, continues Nye, "makes the mistake of thinking that government is the main instrument of soft power. In today's world, information is not scarce but attention is, and attention depends on credibility. Government propaganda is rarely credible."

Setting China aside, the continued prominence of the United States is partly attributable to an innate appeal that is best appreciated by those living outside the country. Nye notes that "the upward mobility of immigrants is attractive to people in other countries." As evidence, Nye cites the fact that 25 percent of high-tech startups have an immigrant founder, and 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.

In a society in which power is often a function of information dissemination, soft power is ever more important. Nye writes, "Conventional wisdom has always held that the government with the largest military prevails, but in an information age it may be the state (or non-state) with the best story that wins."

Soft power is closely tied to multinational cooperation, and in an era of a "multipartner world" (Hillary Rodham Clinton's term) skillful collaboration is essential. Nye writes: "If the American century is to continue, it will not be enough to think in terms of American power *over* others. One must also think in terms of power to accomplish joint goals, which involves power *with* others." (Nye's emphases.)

Nye concludes that "we have not entered a post-American world," and that "the American century is not over." In this short, thoughtful book, he presents his case convincingly. It is a case that policymakers should ponder carefully.

---