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**Carnegie Council**  
ON ETHICS AND  
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

170 East 64th Street, New York, NY 10021-7496

# National Interest in the Information Age

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

**Eighteenth Morgenthau Memorial Lecture  
on Ethics & Foreign Policy**



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## Introduction

Last year we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the publication of Hans Morgenthau's classic book *Politics Among Nations*. It was a book that defined the field of international relations as we know it, and in some important respects we still live with its legacy. This lecture series provides us with an opportunity to revisit the profound themes suggested in Professor Morgenthau's work, particularly the timeless themes of ethics and politics, conscience and power. Anyone who has spent time studying Morgenthau's thought knows that he was not only a great realist, but also a man deeply concerned with the moral dimensions of human affairs.

We at the Carnegie Council take pride in Hans Morgenthau's legacy, for he also played an important role in our Council's history. Through the 1960s and 1970s, he served first as an academic and editorial adviser, and later as a trustee. Professor Morgenthau once wrote that it is the task of each generation to reinterpret the perennial problems of political ethics to meet the challenges of its own era. That is precisely what we try to do in all of our work at the Carnegie Council. Our mission today is the same as it has been since our founding: to ask and answer for our times the tough questions of war and peace, justice and reconciliation.

It is especially appropriate that we have Joseph Nye with us today to help us in our task. Thirteen years ago, when then-Council president Robert Myers launched Volume 1 of our journal, *Ethics & International Affairs*, he turned to Professor Nye to write the first piece in that issue. That essay was titled "Superpower Ethics."

Let me read to you just a short passage of the editor's introduction to that first issue:

Since 1914 the Carnegie Council . . . has sought to promote world peace through strengthening the contributions of the moral and ethical forces in international affairs. It is not unusual in such endeavors to encounter the cry, "What does ethics have to do with international affairs?" The goal of this new annual is to answer that perennial question by showing the concrete application of ethics to various key international problems from a variety of perspectives. In the course of this enterprise, we will seek out the services and cooperation of the best minds in the world to address this general theme in specific ways.

Given these goals, it should be no surprise that Professor Nye was asked to write the first essay of the Carnegie Council's journal. What strikes me most vividly in rereading "Superpower Ethics" is how well the analysis holds up even with all of the momentous changes of the past decade.

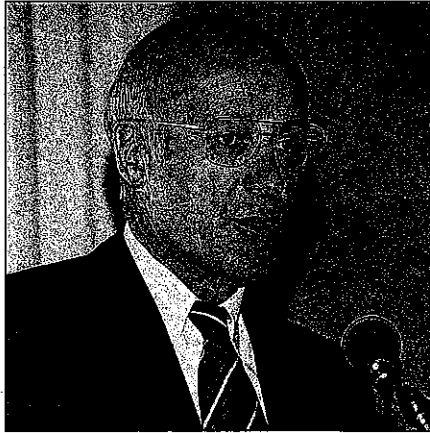
The essay ends as follows:

Thucydides put it well in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* when he had the Athenians say "those who really deserve praise are the people who, while human enough to enjoy power, nonetheless pay more attention to justice than they are compelled to do by their situation." Unfortunately, the Athenians later forgot this. Americans must not do the same. Balancing order and justice in a world of two superpowers will always present hard choices. The essence of superpower ethics is to confront those choices in their full complexity of motives, means, and consequences rather than to try to escape with one-dimensional rationalizations.

The circumstances have certainly changed in the 13 years since Professor Nye wrote this, but the analysis remains not only relevant but urgent. If by ethics we mean the consideration of the hard choices we face, then we certainly have a lot of new work to do. How are we using our power in light of the many demands of justice? This may be one of the most important questions of our time.

—Joel H. Rosenthal  
President  
Carnegie Council  
on Ethics and International Affairs

## National Interest in the Information Age



*Joseph S. Nye, Jr.*

It is an honor to give a lecture named after one of the leading figures in my field. I had the privilege of studying under Hans Morgenthau when he was a visiting professor at Harvard in 1960. He gave me an “A” even though I often disagreed with him in class. As Mark Twain said about his father, I used to think he was mistaken, but as I have grown older, I am amazed at how much he has learned. That is my ultimate tribute to Hans Morgenthau. He wears well. That cannot be said about much of political science!

Morgenthau was a great proponent of the concept “national interest.” But one of the problems Americans are wrestling with today is how to define our interests after the Cold War. We cannot even name this new world; we are still using the term “post-Cold War,” which tells us what our era is not—not the Cold War world, anymore—but doesn’t say what it has become. I suggest instead thinking of our era as the “information age.” The key question after the collapse of the Soviet Union as a balancing power is, what are the limits to our interests? Morgenthau would have answered, “the rational pursuit, within certain moral limitations, of power objectives.”<sup>1</sup> As science, this is not very helpful, because the appropriate limits can be determined only in hindsight. But it still stands as a rule of prudence for political leaders.

## Defining National Interest

“National interest” is a slippery concept, because it is one of those terms that has an instrumental as well as an analytic use. Advocates of various positions use it as an imperative to argue that fellow citizens “ought” to support their interests, no matter how narrow. James Schlesinger has

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 240.

recently argued that "pandering to ethnic constituencies has become an accepted norm. . . . To speak of the national interest in the abstract is to invite rebuke."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Samuel Huntington argues that the complexity of the post-Cold War world and the rise of multiculturalism at home have complicated matters. "Without a sure sense of national identity, Americans have become unable to define their national interests, and as a result subnational commercial interests and transnational and nonnational ethnic interests have come to dominate foreign policy."<sup>3</sup> And citing recent survey research, Steven Kull concludes that "the concept of national self-interest is not a clear guiding principle for many Americans."<sup>4</sup>

During the Cold War, containment of Soviet power provided a North Star to guide American foreign policy. From a longer U.S. historical perspective, however, the Cold War was the anomalous period (and even it involved bitter disputes). Confusion has been more common. For example, ethnic differences colored appraisals of whether the United States should enter World War I. In 1934, Charles A. Beard described how economic interests have been dominant in the making of American foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> In a recent study of American definitions of national interests in the 1890s, 1930s, and 1980s, Peter Trubowitz shows how realignments of regional economic interests inside the United States (the North, the South, the West) had more influence than ethnicity, culture, or the dialectic between the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian traditions. Trubowitz argues that "there is no single national interest. Analysts who assume that America has a discernible national interest

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<sup>2</sup> James Schlesinger, "Fragmentation and Hubris: A Shaky Basis for American Leadership," *The National Interest*, no. 49 (Fall 1997), pp. 4, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Erosion of American National Interests," *Foreign Affairs* 76 (September-October 1997), p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Kull, "What the Public Knows That Washington Doesn't," *Foreign Policy*, no. 101 (Winter 1995-96), p. 114.

<sup>5</sup> Charles A. Beard (with the collaboration of G. H. E. Smith), *The Idea of National Interest: An Analytical Study in American Foreign Policy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), passim.

whose defense should determine its relations with other nations are unable to explain the persistent failure to achieve domestic consensus on international objectives."<sup>6</sup>

With all that said, it would still be a mistake to discard the term "national interest." As the Commission on America's National Interests declared in 1996, "National interests are the fundamental building blocks in any discussion of foreign policy. . . . In fact, the concept is used regularly and widely by administration officials, members of Congress, and citizens at large."<sup>7</sup> The commission goes on to identify five vital interests that would justify the unilateral use of force: to prevent attacks on the United States with weapons of mass destruction; to prevent the emergence of hostile hegemons in Asia or Europe; to prevent hostile powers on our borders or in control of the seas; to prevent the collapse of global systems for trade, finance, energy, and the environment; and to ensure the survival of U.S. allies. Promoting human rights or democracy or exports of specific economic sectors is relegated to a lower priority.

Not everyone would agree with this particular list. Many would agree, however, that strategic interests are more widely shared than other interests and that they deserve priority because, if we were to fail to protect them, many people would be affected in profound ways. Leaders and experts are right to point out such dangers and try to persuade the public of them. However, the connection between a particular event (for example, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or Serbia's rejection of the Rambouillet Agreement) and one of the vital interests may involve a long causal chain where different people see different probabilities. And there are also trade-offs among values. Reasonable people can disagree, for example, about how much insurance they want to buy against remote threats to a

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Trubowitz, *Defining the National Interest: Conflict and Change in American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *America's National Interests: A Report from the Commission on America's National Interests* (Co-Chairs: Robert Ellworth, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser) (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1996), p. 13.

vital interest before pursuing other values such as human rights. In a democracy, political struggle over the operational definition of national interests is both inevitable and healthy. Foreign-policy experts can help clarify causation and trade-offs in particular cases, but experts alone cannot decide. The national interest is too important to leave solely to geopolitical strategists—even ones as wise as Hans Morgenthau. Elected political leaders must play the key role.

In a democracy, the national interest is simply the set of interests that are widely shared by citizens in regard to their relations with the rest of the world. It is broader than strategic interests, though they are part of it. It can include values such as human rights and democracy, if the public feels that those values are so important to their identity or sense of “who we are” that people are willing to pay a price to promote them. The American people think that their interests include certain values and their promotion abroad. A democratic definition of the national interest does not accept the distinction between a value-based and an interest-based foreign policy. Values are simply intangible interests. Identity is an important interest to many people. Leaders and experts may point out the costs of indulging certain values, but if an informed public disagrees, experts cannot deny the legitimacy of its opinion. The democratic definition of the national interest is what a majority, after discussion and decision by legitimate institutions, decides are its long-term shared interests in relation to the outside world.

The national interest is more than just poll results. It is opinion after public discussion and deliberation. Nonetheless, it is sometimes hard to specify how long deliberation must persist before we decide that an opinion is more than a passing fashion. And even deliberated public opinion will not prove as immutable as the verities pronounced by geopoliticians. It also invites struggles in the institutions where the majority defines the national interest. And, as sometimes happens, majorities can make mistakes. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see a better way to determine who decides what is the national interest in democracies.

## The World in the Information Age

Even if the public were to follow Morgenthau’s advice that interests should be defined in relation to power, how would one describe the distribution of power in the information age? Some people see the end of the bipolar world leaving multipolarity in its stead, but that is not a very good description of a world in which one country, the United States, is so much more powerful than all the others. On the other hand, unipolarity is not a very good description either, because it exaggerates the degree to which the United States is able to get the outcomes it wants.

Instead, power today is distributed like a three-dimensional chess game. The top military board is unipolar, with the United States far outstripping all other states. The middle economic board is multipolar, with the United States, Europe, and Japan accounting for two-thirds of world product. However, the bottom board of transnational relations that cross borders outside the control of governments has a more dispersed structure of power. This complexity makes policy making more difficult. It means playing on several boards at the same time. Moreover, while it is important not to ignore the continuing importance of military force for some purposes, it is equally important not to be misled by the temptations of military unipolarity into thinking that American power in other dimensions is greater than it is. The United States is a preponderant but not dominant power.

Another distinction to keep in mind is the one between hard power, a country’s economic and military power to coerce, and soft power, the ability to attract through cultural and ideological appeal.<sup>8</sup> That half a million foreign students want to study in the United States each year, that Europeans and Asians want to watch American films and TV, and that American liberties are attractive in many parts of the world is

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), chap. 2.



important. Our values are a source of soft power. Both hard and soft power are important, but in the information age, soft power is becoming even more so than in the past.

Massive flows of cheap information have expanded the number of transnational channels of contacts across national borders.<sup>9</sup> Global markets and nongovernmental actors play a larger role. States are more easily penetrated and less like the classic realist model of solid billiard balls bouncing off each other. As a result, political leaders find it more difficult to maintain a coherent set of priorities in foreign-policy issues and more difficult to articulate a single national interest. Yet the United States, with its democratic society, is also well placed to benefit from the rapidly developing information age. Although the coherence of government policies may diminish because of these pluralistic penetrations, our institutions will be attractive and the openness of our society will enhance credibility, which is a crucial resource in an information age. Thus we will be better placed to make use of soft power. At the same time, the soft power that comes from being "a city upon a hill" does not provide the coercive capability that hard power does. Alone, it does not support a venturesome foreign policy.

Different aspects of the information age cut in different directions for American national interests. On the one hand, a good case can be made that the information revolution will have long-term effects that benefit democracies. Democratic societies can create credible information because they are not threatened by it. Authoritarian states will have more trouble. Governments can limit their citizens' access to the Internet and global markets, but they will pay a high price if they do so. Singapore and China, for example, are currently wrestling with these problems. Moreover, transparency is becoming a key asset for countries seeking investments. Governments that want rapid development will

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<sup>9</sup> Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Power and Interdependence in the Information Age," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (September-October 1998), pp. 81-94.

have to give up some of the barriers to information flows that were typical in the past. Such trends are favorable to the long-term interests of the United States in a more open and democratic world.

On the other hand, some aspects of the information age are less benign. The free flow of broadcast information in open societies has always had an impact on public opinion and the formulation of foreign policy, but now the flows have increased and the shortened news cycles have reduced the time for deliberation. By focusing on certain conflicts and human rights problems, broadcasts pressure politicians to respond to some foreign problems and not others—for example, Somalia rather than the southern Sudan in 1992. The so-called CNN effect makes it harder to keep some items off the top of the public agenda that might otherwise warrant a lower priority. Now, with the added interactivity of activist groups on the Internet, it will be harder than ever to maintain a consistent agenda of priorities.

Also problematic is the effect of transnational information flows on the stability of national communities. Marshall McLuhan once prophesied that communications technologies would turn the world into a global village.<sup>10</sup> Instead of creating a single cosmopolitan village, they may be producing a congeries of global "villages," with all the parochial hatreds that the word implies, but also with greater awareness of global inequalities. Global economic forces are disrupting traditional lifestyles, and the effects are to increase economic integration and communal disintegration at the same time. This is particularly true of weak states left in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet empire and the old European empires in Africa. Political entrepreneurs use inexpensive information channels to mobilize some of the discontented to adhere to subnational tribal communities, some to embrace repressive nationalism, and some to ally with transnational ethnic and

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

religious communities. This in turn leads to increased demands for self-determination, increased violence, and violation of human rights—all in the presence of television cameras and the Internet. The result is to put a difficult set of issues on the foreign policy agenda.

William Perry and Ashton Carter have recently argued that we should rethink the risks to U.S. security. At the top of the hierarchy are “A list” threats of the scale that the Soviet Union presented to our survival. The “B list” of imminent threats to our interests (but not to our survival) would include the Korean Peninsula or the Persian Gulf. The “C list” of important “contingencies that indirectly affect U.S. security but do not directly threaten U.S. interests” would include “the Kosovos, Bosnias, Somalias, Rwandas, and Haitis.”<sup>11</sup>

What is striking is how the “C list” has dominated the foreign policy agenda. Carter and Perry speculate that this is because of the absence of “A list” threats since the end of the Cold War. But another reason is the ability of “C list” issues to dominate media attention in the information age. Dramatic visual portrayals of immediate human conflict and suffering are far easier to convey to the public than “A list” abstractions like the possibility of a “Weimar Russia,” the possible rise of a hegemonic China, the importance of our alliance with Japan, or the potential collapse of the international system of trade and investment. Yet if these issues were to turn out badly, they would have far greater impact on the lives of most Americans.

## American Power and Priorities

How should Americans set priorities in such a world? Morgenthau would have advised us to start by understanding our power. On the

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<sup>11</sup> Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, *Preventive Defense: A New Security Strategy for America* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), pp. 11–15.

one hand, for reasons given above, American power is less fungible and effective than might first appear. On the other hand, the United States is likely to remain the preponderant country well into the next century. For a variety of reasons that I have spelled out elsewhere, the information revolution is likely to enhance rather than diminish American power.<sup>12</sup> As a wealthy status quo power, the United States has an interest in a degree of international order. Behind the abstractions about rising interdependence are changes that make it more difficult to isolate the United States from the effects of events in the rest of the world. More concretely, there are two simple reasons why Americans have a national interest in preventing disorder beyond our borders. First, events and actors out there can hurt us; and second, we will want to influence distant governments and organizations on a variety of issues, such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, drugs, and ecological damage.

To do so, first, we will need hard-power resources beyond just the good example we set. That will require an investment of resources in instruments that Americans have recently been unwilling to make—witness the decline in the foreign affairs budget and the reluctance to take casualties. It is difficult to be a superpower on the cheap. Second, we will have to recognize a basic proposition of public goods theory: if the largest beneficiary of a public good (such as order) does not take the lead in contributing disproportionate resources toward its provision, the smaller beneficiaries are unlikely to be able to organize to provide it. This is a different twist on Secretary of State Albright’s phrase that the United States is “the indispensable nation,” and one less palatable to the public and the Congress.

Third, we should make sure that top priority is given to those aspects of the international system that, if not attended to properly, would have profound effects on the basic international order and there-

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<sup>12</sup> Keohane and Nye, “Power and Interdependence in the Information Age.”

fore on the lives and welfare of Americans. Fareed Zakaria has suggested that we can learn something from the lesson of Great Britain when it was the leading power in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Three public goods that Britain attended to were: maintaining the balance of power among the major states; promoting an open international economic system; and maintaining open international commons such as the freedom of the seas. All three translate relatively well to the current American case (see Table 1). In terms of the distribution of power, we need to continue to “shape the environment” (in the words of the Quadrennial Defense Review) and that is why we keep 100,000 troops forward-based in Europe, another 100,000 in Asia, and some 20,000 near the Persian Gulf. Our role as a stabilizer and reassurance against the rise of hostile hegemonies in important regions has to remain a top priority, a blue chip or “A list” issue.

Table 1

**KEY ROLES OF A PREPONDERANT BUT NOT DOMINANT POWER**

Maintain the balance of power among major states

*Russia, China, Japan, Europe*

Promote an open international economy

*Money, trade, services, energy (NAFTA, WTO, IMF)*

Keep international commons open

*Oceans, space, global climate, species, cyberspace*

Support international rules and institutions

*Nonproliferation, peacekeeping, economic, environmental, humanitarian, human rights*

Act as convenor and mediator

*Coalitions of the willing; Middle East, Northern Ireland, Greece/Turkey*

<sup>13</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “The Superpower That Couldn’t Say No,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1999, section 4, p. 17.

Promoting an open international economic system is good for American economic growth, but it is good for other countries as well. In the long term, economic growth is also more likely to foster stable democratic middle-class societies in other countries, though the time scale may be lengthy. To keep the system open, the United States must resist protectionism at home and strengthen the international institutions that monitor the regime, such as the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the Bank for International Settlements. In regard to international commons, the United States, like nineteenth-century Britain, has an interest in freedom of the seas, but such commons now include new issues such as global climate change, preservation of endangered species, and the uses of outer space, as well as the “virtual commons” of cyberspace.

Beyond the nineteenth-century analogy, in today’s world the United States has a more general interest in developing and maintaining international regimes of laws and institutions to organize international actions to deal with not just trade and environment, but proliferation, peacekeeping, human rights, and other concerns. Those, like Charles Krauthammer, who denigrate the importance of law and institutions forget that the United States is a status quo power. They also ignore the extent to which legitimacy is a power reality.<sup>14</sup> Realists like Morgenthau would not have made such a mistake. Finally, as a preponderant power, the United States can provide an important public good by acting as a convenor and mediator. By helping to organize coalitions of the willing, and by using its good offices to mediate conflicts in places like Northern Ireland, the Middle East, or the Aegean Sea, the United States can help to shape the environment in ways that are beneficial to us as well as to other nations.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “A World Imagined: The Flawed Premises of Liberal Foreign Policy,” *The New Republic*, March 15, 1999, pp. 22–25.

## The "C List"

If we did not live in an information age, the foregoing strategy for identifying the priority national interests might suffice. But the reality is that issues like those in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and Kosovo will force themselves to the foreground because of their ability to command attention. And such issues raise moral concerns that the American people have consistently over long periods included in their list of foreign-policy interests. As Kull summarizes the polling results, "The two threads of self-interest and morality are woven together by the universalist belief that, in the long run, doing what is best for the world is also best for the nation."<sup>15</sup> Geopoliticians may deplore it, but that is democratic reality.

Some liberals, on the other hand, might object that the "A list" does not take account of the erosion of the Westphalian system of sovereignty that is occurring in the information age. It is true that sovereignty is eroding de facto through the penetration of national borders by transnational forces, and also in certain de jure situations such as the sanctions against South Africa's domestic policy of apartheid, the development of an international criminal court, and the bombing of Yugoslavia over its policies in Kosovo. But the erosion of sovereignty is a long-term trend of decades and centuries, and it is a mixed blessing rather than a clear national interest. While the erosion may help advance human rights in repressive regimes, it also portends considerable disorder. The Peace of Westphalia in the seventeenth century created a system of sovereign states designed to curtail vicious civil wars over religion. For all its limitations, sovereignty has the virtue that Robert Frost cited: "Good fences make good neighbors." It is true that sovereignty stands in the way of national self-determination, but that principle is far less moral than it first appears. In a world where there are some two hundred states but many thousands of often overlapping

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<sup>15</sup> Kull, "What the Public Knows That Washington Doesn't," p. 114.

entities that might eventually make a claim to nationhood, blind promotion of self-determination could have highly immoral consequences.

So what do we do about the humanitarian concerns and strong moral preferences that Americans want to see expressed in their foreign policy? Americans have rarely accepted pure realpolitik, and human rights and the alleviation of humanitarian disasters have long been important and legitimate aspects of our national interest and our foreign policy. But foreign policy means trying to accomplish varied objectives in a complex and recalcitrant world. This entails trade-offs among objectives, trying to obtain as much of as many as possible. A human rights policy is not a foreign policy; it is an important part of a foreign policy. In the Cold War, this often meant tolerating human rights abuses by regimes that were crucial to balancing Soviet power—witness South Korea before its transition to democracy. Similar problems persist in the current period—witness our policy toward Saudi Arabia, or our efforts to balance human rights in China with our long-term strategic objectives.

In an information age, humanitarian concerns can dominate attention to a greater degree than before, often at the cost of diverting attention from Class A issues. Also, since moral arguments are used as trumps and pictures are more powerful than words, arguments about trade-offs are often emotional and difficult. Acting on humanitarian values is entirely appropriate. Few can look at television pictures of starving people or miserable refugees on the evening news just before dinner and not say that our country should do something about it. And we often do. Some cases are quite easy: witness hurricane relief to Central America or the early stages of famine relief in Somalia. But apparently simple cases like Somalia can turn out to be extremely difficult, and others like Kosovo are difficult from the start.

The problem with such cases is that the humanitarian interest that instigates the action often turns out to be a mile wide and an inch deep. The impulse to help starving Somalis (whose food supply was being

interrupted by various warlords) vanished in the face of dead Americans being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. This is sometimes attributed to popular reluctance to accept casualties. That is too simple. Americans went into the Gulf War expecting some ten thousand casualties. More properly expressed, Americans are reluctant to accept casualties when their only interests are unreciprocated humanitarian interests. Ironically, the reaction against such cases may not only divert attention and limit willingness to support "A list" interests, but may also interfere with action in more serious humanitarian crises. One of the direct effects of the Somalia disaster was a failure by the United States (along with other countries) to support and reinforce the United Nations peacekeeping force in Rwanda that could have limited a true genocide in 1994.

There are no easy answers for such cases. We could not simply turn off the television or unplug our computers even if we wanted to. The "C list" cannot simply be ignored. But there are certain rules of thumb that may help in the integration of such issues into the larger strategy for advancing the national interest (see Table 2). First, there are many degrees of humanitarian concern and many degrees of intervention, such as condemnation, sanctions targeted on individuals, broad sanctions, and various uses of force. We should save the violent end of the spectrum for only the most egregious cases.

Table 2  
"C LIST" RULES

1. Distinguish degrees of intervention and proportionality
2. Determine that there is just cause and probable success
3. Reinforce humanitarian interests with other interests
4. Involve other regional actors
5. Be clear about "genocide"
6. Be wary of civil wars over self-determination

Second, when we do use force, it is worth remembering some principles of just war doctrine: having a just cause in the eyes of others; exercising discrimination in means so that we do not unduly punish the innocent; using means that are proportional to our ends; and finding a high probability of good consequences (rather than engaging in wishful thinking).

Third, we should generally avoid the use of force except in cases where our humanitarian interests are reinforced by the existence of other strong national interests. This was the case in the Gulf War, where we were concerned not only with the aggression against Kuwait, but also with energy supplies and regional allies. This was not the case in Somalia. In former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Kosovo), our other interests flow from our European allies and NATO.

Fourth, we should try to involve other regional actors, in the lead if possible. In Africa, the United States offered to help with training, intelligence, logistics, and transportation if African countries would provide the troops for a peacekeeping force. If African states are unwilling to do their part, we should be wary of going it alone. In Europe, we should welcome the idea of combined joint task forces that would be separable, but not separate, from NATO and encourage a greater European willingness and ability to take the lead on such issues.

Fifth, we should be clearer about the egregious case of genocide. The American people have a real humanitarian interest in not letting another Holocaust occur. Yet we did just that in Rwanda in 1994. We need to do more to organize prevention and response to real cases of genocide. Unfortunately, the Genocide Convention is written so loosely and the word is so abused for political purposes that there is danger of the term becoming trivialized. But a strict historical interpretation can help to avoid such pitfalls.

Finally, Americans should be wary about intervention in civil wars

over self-determination. The principle is dangerously ambiguous. Atrocities are often committed by activists on both sides ("reciprocal genocide"), and the precedents can have disastrous consequences.

## Conclusion

None of these rules of prudence will solve the problems of determining national interest in the information age. Hans Morgenthau's approach warned against the folly of idealism in the face of a world where power was differently distributed than it is today. He did not allow enough leeway for expression of the humanitarian concerns of the American people in their foreign policy. But his view remains correct—that better consequences will flow from a starting point that relates interests to power and rationally pursues those interests within moral limits. Determining national interest has always been contentious in American history, and that is both to be expected and healthy in a democracy. Nonetheless, the debate about our national interest in an information age should include more attention to Hans Morgenthau's prudent advice.

## Discussion

**Question:** If Kosovo is a "C list" issue, to what extent do we risk making it an "A list" issue by putting the credibility of NATO on the line?

**Professor Nye:** I think we already have. One of the interesting things is how issues get from the "C list" to the "A list." Once you have a situation that tests the credibility of the United States, the credibility of NATO, and the credibility of the relationship between the United States and its European allies, who are as forward-leading or more so than we are on this—countries like Britain, France, and Germany—then whether to pull the rug out from under these players becomes an "A list" question.

That begs another question: Should we have gotten to that stage in the first place? My answer to that is no, I would not have gotten to that stage. But since we did get to the stage where Milosevic called our bluff, it would have been an "A list" disaster not to have carried through as we have.

**Question:** How would you have dealt with Kosovo to begin with?

**Professor Nye:** It's a long and difficult story. Our commitment in Kosovo started in December 1992, when George Bush, in his last month in office, said to Milosevic, "Don't do anything in Kosovo, or else," but it's not clear what the "or else" was. We were saved from having to do anything about that by the presence of a moderate leader in Kosovo, Ibrahim Rugova, who was something of a pacifist. He wanted autonomy for Kosovars but was not somebody who was going to fight.

With the rise of the Kosovar Liberation Army, which involved a very mixed group of people, some of whom would be properly defined as “terrorists” in the sense that they assassinated Serbs and moderate civilians, came a very different set of politics. I think when it got to the stage of the KLA driving out the middle, we should have been much more wary about taking sides.

In particular, I think that, after the first Rambouillet negotiations collapsed, rather than going back and pretending that we were making the KLA into democrats who were going to accept the autonomy of Kosovo rather than independence and then putting the burden entirely on Milosevic, it might have been better for us to have stepped back at that point and said, “This is a war of national self-determination; we deplore the means that are used on both sides, which is the killing of innocent civilians, and we will do our best to mediate, to alleviate, to help refugees, to condemn and criticize, but we are not going to get in the middle of it.”

We didn’t do that. Instead, we said that we were going to put all the pressure on Milosevic—either he went along with Rambouillet or we would bomb him. He called our bluff. At that point, I think I would have to say that he had transformed the “C list” into an “A list” issue for the reasons I gave earlier. But I would have been much more leery about getting so deeply involved at the earlier stages.

**Question:** I’m intrigued with your approach to who defines the national interest in a democracy in the information age. I can understand, after Vietnam, your not wanting to give its definition to “the best and the brightest,” the experts. I’m a little more puzzled by your not mentioning the possibility of elected leaders’ defining the national interest.

I would like to pose a few specific cases to illustrate my concern. Did the United States not have a national interest in supporting England in 1939–41 until democracy came to support it? Did we not have an interest in stopping Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait until President Bush was able to persuade Congress to support it?

So it raises the question of who decides and when, and then also implicitly who decides to act. It seems to me that by deferring comfortably to democracy you run two risks: (1) that democracy will be too slow in responding to a threat to our vital national interests; or (2) that the definition of the national interest might be susceptible to a kind of manipulation. Some people would argue that our expansion of NATO was not in defense of our national interest but was a manipulation for a narrow cause, or that our incursions in Central America similarly were not a reflection of national interest but were a manipulation by leaders.

I was therefore reassured that, after saying that it is up to the majority of the people to define the national interest, you then went on yourself to define it very effectively in your priority section. But I would appreciate your comments on that.

**Professor Nye:** It’s a good question. I probably should have been more explicit about the role of leaders. When I said that the national interest—or the democratic definition of the national interest—is basically the interests that are widely shared by citizens, I did say that it has to be as deliberated through the legitimate institutions, which essentially means the Congress and the presidency. Implicit in that is the role of leaders in defining it.

What I was rejecting was the idea that somehow geopoliticians, who spend their lives in ivory towers, have a right to rule out a humanitarian concern because it doesn’t fit what they have read in their textbooks—or written in their textbooks, to put it more aptly.

But I think your case is well taken, that if you go for a democratic definition of the national interest, then you do run the risk that democracies sometimes get things wrong; they sometimes react too slowly. For example, Roosevelt’s leadership in the 1930s on seeing the dangers of Hitler was severely curtailed by a strong strand in American public opinion that was represented in the Congress. And I think Bush’s role in 1990 of defining the national interest in the Persian Gulf was appro-

priate, and I said so at the time.

I guess where my disagreement lies is with those people who say that "the public is wrong." At some point in a democracy you have to say, "If I have tried to persuade them, and I have tried my hardest to persuade them, and they are still not persuaded, they are the public." You know the famous quip that if the government and the public disagree, the government should fire the public. I disagree with that.

**Question:** Would you expand on the importance of regionalism in the American self-interest? For example, the fact that Jesse Helms, as the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is having a great effect on our policy toward the United Nations; or the fact that there are different opinions about different races depending upon where people live, whether it is in the South about Mexicans or on the West Coast about Asians, and so forth.

**Professor Nye:** The book that I mentioned by Peter Trubowitz, which was published last year, is very interesting, because he argues that regionalism is the single most powerful factor defining how we see our national interest, and that the shifting of coalitions between regions has been critical. The regional shifts that have occurred in the last decade or two have included the West and the South aligning with a Republican majority in the Congress and the Northeast becoming less influential. So I think, in Trubowitz's terms, you can argue that the shift of regional interests and regional power balances in the United States has had a strong effect on American foreign policy.

**Question:** Historically, our system has played a strong international role and responded to crises by producing strong executive leadership. In this postwar environment, when power is flowing back from the executive to the Congress, and indeed from Washington back to states in a restoration of our traditional form, are we going to be able to take the

initiative, to act in a vigorous way internationally, notwithstanding the recent events in Washington? We may be in a situation where there is a great need for the United States to act internationally, but for a variety of reasons, in terms of our political system, unless there is a perceived crisis, we may not be able to do so.

**Professor Nye:** On some of the issues that I mentioned as what I would consider my "A list," the United States, as the preponderant but not dominant power, hasn't done that badly in maintaining the balance among the major states—Russia, China, Japan, and Europe—though you may disagree with some aspects of the policy.

There is a question as to whether the Congress is driving the administration off course on its China policy. The failure to conclude the WTO agreement with Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji may be a case where a "C list" priority, the war over Kosovo, interfered with an "A list" interest, which is to get China into a framework in which it is constrained by international institutions.

But, by and large, I think that, in promoting an international economy with the establishment of the WTO, with NAFTA, and so forth, the record hasn't been all that bad.

On maintaining open international commons, again I think that while particular interests would object here and there, we don't do that badly. In acting as a convener and mediator in the Northern Ireland conflict, the Middle East peace process, and the relations between Greece and Turkey, we have not done all that badly.

I think we have fallen down more on support for international rules and institutions, particularly in relationship to the United Nations and the failure to pay our dues. That, I think, is partly reflective of a split between the executive and the legislative branches and the shift of power that the previous questioner raised.

I would say that if you ask for a report card for the major subjects I have talked about in my lecture, it is probably something like a B or



B+, which is not as good as it should be, but it's not terrible either. And this has not been a period of remarkably strong leadership.

So I think that if you set the objectives of foreign policy in these broad terms, you actually can see a country like the United States playing a significant role, despite the vicissitudes of changes in leadership on the domestic front. That is not a ringing endorsement, but it is not a depiction of gloom and doom either.

## About the Speaker

Joseph S. Nye, Jr., is the Dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He received his Ph.D. in political science from Harvard and joined its faculty in 1964. He has also worked as Deputy to the Under Secretary of State for Security Assistance, Science and Technology; chaired the National Security Council Group on Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the National Intelligence Council; and served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. In recognition of his service, he received the Distinguished Honor Award—the highest Department of State commendation—and two Distinguished Service Medals from the Department of Defense.

A fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the Academy of Diplomacy, Professor Nye has also been a Senior Fellow of the Aspen Institute, Director of the Aspen Strategy Group, and a member of the Executive Committee of the Trilateral Commission.

Professor Nye is a member of the editorial boards of *Foreign Policy* and *International Security* magazines and the author of numerous books and articles in professional journals and newspapers. His most recent books are *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990) and *Understanding International Conflicts* (1997). He is the co-editor of *Why People Don't Trust Government* (1997). He has appeared on many American and overseas television shows, such as ABC's *Nightline*, CNN's *Larry King Live*, and PBS's *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*.

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