

Mika Aaltola

DRAMA POWER ON THE RISE?

US SOFT POWER MAY INCREASE
AS A FUNCTION OF WASHINGTON DYSFUNCTION



Mika Aaltola
Programme Director
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs
Kruunuvuorenkatu 4
FI-00160 Helsinki
tel. +358 9 432 7000
fax. +358 9 432 7799
www.fiiia.fi

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JANE AND AATOS
ERKKO FOUNDATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an interview with Reuters on 17 October 2013, Professor Joseph Nye commented on the global impact of the government shutdown in Washington: “It’s clearly very damaging for American soft power in the sense that the reputation for effective management of government and of the world’s reserve currency are hurt”. On the same day, President Obama echoed this interpretation: “Probably nothing has done more damage to America’s credibility in the world, our standing with other countries, than the spectacle that we’ve seen these past several weeks”.

To argue against such an interpretation would seem counterintuitive. However, certain factors make it difficult to evaluate how much, if any, soft power the US is losing. The global economic markets can be used as counter-indicators. The indexes, which are often based on future ‘profit’ expectations, have not reacted strongly to the recent crises in Washington. On the contrary, US stock markets were achieving record highs and interest rates remained stable and historically low during the government shutdown and debt-ceiling crisis of late 2013. It seems there is no significant loss of faith in US credibility among financial market players. The drama was anticipated and already taken into account in market valuations. A similar mitigating effect of changed expectations concerning US politics may be at play in the broader political reactions to Washington crises. It is argued in this paper that the US soft power – especially in the form of popular culture products – has changed attitudes concerning what is expected and how negatively or positively the drama in Washington is evaluated. The mitigating soft power influences – the interpretative frames and discourses – have changed the overall narratives and interpretations concerning Washington’s political games. Thus, it is suggested that specific processes cushion and even counter the negative consequences of the Washington drama for the global status of the US. These include the exceptional position of the US in the current world order, the spread of new popular culture formats, and the emergence of social media. All of these serve to support new types of soft power.

Soft power is a purposeful toolkit, and a byproduct of overall societal and political dynamics on the other. Soft power refers to a set of policy instruments that co-opts other actors’ frames, under which they feel and understand themselves vis-à-vis others¹. Nye adds to this definition the need to attract others and bias their agenda in favourable ways². Soft power is a broad phenomenon that refers to capacities and potentialities beyond what is available to a single unitary actor. Soft power has institutional and structural characteristics that are socially diffuse, and which determine what is meant by agency and subjectivity in a particular context of meaning and signification. Namely, a single unitary actor’s ability to determine their fate is constituted, limited and enhanced in the fabric of relationships and of systems of signification³. As a strategic resource, diffused soft power requires the use of the Many-to-many model. Contrary to the One-to-many model, which concentrates on strategic governmental influence on different

1 Nye, Joseph (2011): *The Future of Power*. New York, Public Affairs.

2 E.g. Nye, Joseph (2002): *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

3 Barnett, M. and Duvall, R. (2005): ‘Power in International Politics’. *International Organization*, 59(1): 39–75.

peoples, the Many-to-many model presumes that communication involves multiple actors that influence each other in a multi-directional manner⁴.

Thus, besides having strategic capacity, soft power can be seen as a complex situational scenario with several changing characteristics. Many of these are not under the direct control of any government, such as global information technology or media culture. Soft power is never straightforward in its use. The outcomes of US soft power are often just the by-products of American society, economy, and technology rather than direct governmental action⁵. Furthermore, it is clear that the wider circumstances of soft power can change, and its practices have to adapt accordingly. Soft power appears to be linked to the changing shapes of the overall world order. The field of (dis)attraction experienced under a relatively unipolar power hierarchy is different from that of super-power rivalry during a bipolar order, or from the complex affective climates of more multipolar orders. In the challenged atmosphere of the present world order, the attraction towards the exceptionally positioned US is a complex sentiment. Much of the attention has centred on the overall US successes, such as the popularity of its actions, culture, celebrities, and its media. US failures, on the other hand, are often seen as signs of its decline and of rising multipolarity. For some, such fragilities translate into uncertainty and pose a cause for concern. However, these sentiments also reveal nuanced compassion towards the lone superpower and a type of identification with the US. It appears that in failing and being fragile, the US can win the sympathies of others and maintain unparalleled international presence and visibility.

Soft power is also influenced by changing representations of drama and politics in popular culture and the media, such as the emergence of reality television, social media, and celebrity culture: “The background attraction (and repulsion) of American popular culture in different regions and among different groups may make it easier or more difficult for American officials to promote their policies”⁶. The changes in the media formats have shaped the shared expectations of what is normal in politics. Thus, people may believe there is nothing surprising about the political drama cycles in Washington.

First of all, drama has always been present in politics, and politics is a long-standing topic of any form of drama from Hamlet to House of Cards. Second, although drama has been a constant feature of US politics, it is undergoing a qualitative transformation. The nexus of television and social media can propel debates into viral frenzies and hyperbolic spectacles. Moreover, shocks of a different type have become increasingly defining characteristics of status in the new media formats, although the relative transformation of the media started as early as the 1950s⁷. Status is increasingly about visibility, fame, and celebrity. These often unintended dynamics may in the short term counteract some of the negative soft power effects of the lost reputation. Does the dissemination of contemporary American popular culture cushion the negative dynamics by, first, showing drama and crises in the world’s lone superpower as worrying yet also expected and entertaining, and, second, by making the highly visible and (in)famous US polity strangely attractive?

4 E.g. Roirdan, S. (2003): *The New Diplomacy*. Cambridge, Polity Press; White, Candace (2010): ‘Anti-American Attitudes Among Young Europeans: The Mitigating Influence of Soft Power’. *American Journal of Media Psychology*, 3(3-4): 119-141.

5 Nye 2002, 72.

6 Nye 2002, 72.

7 E.g. Schmidtke, Edward (2011): ‘The Tube Has Spoken: Reality TV and History’. *Film & History*, 41(1): 124-126.

2. REALITY MEDIA AND US SOFT POWER

It seems evident that selling performances and buying reputation are important modalities of power and influence⁸. For politics, the media provide the setting for the strategic staging of emotions and thoughts. For the media, politics supplies a constant stream of characters, topics, and drama needed to sell content. The key question from the perspective of soft power is how this co-optive relationship changes when new media formats spread and become popular?⁹ This question has wider significance as global audiences consume predominantly US-based formats such as reality television.

In the following section, I will examine how the reality shift in media culture influences the soft power resources of US politics. Reality television has exerted a major influence on the media images of our times.¹⁰ It has become an increasingly popular way of selling and consuming drama. Yet the reality shift remains as maligned as it is popular. It is often regarded as crass, and its popularity is seen to be based on cheap voyeuristic fascination – some watch because the ‘reality’ makes them feel superior, and others because they want to see the inevitable ‘humiliation’.

There has been considerable concern in the US over the negative and ugly image of the States that is being disseminated by American popular culture. There are worries that trashy reality TV together with violent movies and computer games are turning public opinion in many regions against the US and its interests. American cultural exports are seen to be undermining the previous admiration of American freedom and democracy¹¹. US public diplomacy is seen to be undermined by what is perceived as the decline and vulgarization of its popular culture. From this perspective, the high demand for the supposedly degenerate forms of popular culture is seen as negating US soft power. Bayles¹², for example, recommends a more strategic use of public diplomacy to counteract the negative onslaught of American popular culture on foreign images and attitudes. She claims that in interviews conducted in eleven countries she heard “many objections to the violence and vulgarity pervading today’s popular culture”, and asserts that “America no longer shares the best of itself”. On the other hand, the role played by the new forms of popular culture may be more complicated than these indictments would presume. Some authors have pointed out how American cultural forms have worked for US national interests, and how culture has been weaponized by the US¹³. In Zakaria’s

8 E.g. Street, John (2004): ‘Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation’. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6(4): 435 – 452. Guru to millions of American salespeople, Dale Carnegie concluded in his 1936 book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* that mere facts do not win customers: “This is the day of dramatization [...]. The truth has to be made vivid, interesting and dramatic. Movies based upon true stories do it, and radio does. And you will have to do it if you want attention.”

9 The role that new media formats play in soft power has been recognized by, for instance, Kraidy, M (2010): *Defining Reality: Satellite Television’s Reinvigoration of Arab Politics Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

10 Reality television, which is generally considered to have originated in the late 80s (Fox’s *Cops*) or early 90s (MTV’s *Real World*), is not just one particular format. It represents a new blend of older genres such as documentary, social experiment, education, soap opera, psychodrama, and game show.

11 Bayles, Martha (2014): *Through a Screen Darkly: Popular Culture, Public Diplomacy, and America’s Image Abroad*. Cambridge, Yale University Press; DeFleur, M. L. & DeFleur, M. H. (2003): *Learning to hate Americans: How U.S. media shape negative attitudes among teenagers in twelve countries*. Spokane, Marquette Press.

12 Bayles 2014.

13 Zakaria, Rafia (2014): ‘Culture and Soft Power’. *Deccan Chronicle*, 30 January.

view, American popular culture makes a bold claim that it represents global culture. Therefore, we are living in a time that favours the US, as the forces of globalization underpin its popular culture formats.

Reality TV seems to glorify behaviour that was previously considered unworthy. Its critics point out that it is trashy, cheap, voyeuristic, and sensational: “Critics call the shows weapons of mass distraction. Pundits contend that the genre is a race to the bottom that, like Hollywood blowup movies and the tubs of popcorn consumed watching them, are causing us to become dumber, fatter, and more disengaged from ourselves and society”¹⁴. Yet, as dysfunctional relationships and lifestyles are highlighted and the personalities engaged in them are celebrated, the fascination with dysfunction can be helpful in rendering the political drama in Washington more palatable. Obscure figures are transformed into heroes of the moment and into instant celebrities soon to be forgotten, if not recycled in the public consciousness in the celebrity rehab type of shows. The impact of the reality shift has been felt in television news, in documentaries, and in the cyber realm – for example on YouTube – as well as in game and food shows, to name a few.

Reality television highlights a form of authenticity that is based on ‘seeming’ or ‘feeling’ because it appears to be unscripted. The ability to convey this sense of supposedly revelatory authenticity has impacted news and documentaries, which feel the pressure to accord with the audience’s sense of reality. The reality shift is increasingly undermining the practice of being or appearing to be ‘balanced’. A possible result is that the old and new media have become more argumentative, opinionated, and populated by pundits. The danger is that the media self-confirm what the audience already believes is real and authentic. Contemporary news and documentaries have to satisfy the public’s growing appetite for maximum emotional impact. The topics are no longer ‘found’, ‘discovered’, or simply ‘observed’ in their natural habitats. Instead, the context and people have to be made, tailored, and programmed to reveal supposedly ‘authentic’ moments. Hidden cameras, staged situations, entrapped people, misquotations, social experiments, and seemingly revelatory ‘oops’, ‘caught you’, and ‘Borat’ moments are becoming regular features of serious reporting.

Reality TV formats often involve audience voting and other forms of interaction and participation. These interactive – quasi-democratic – practices have often been viewed as influential in certain regions where such practices have not been present in the political framework. However, they have also impacted US media reporting on scandals in the States. As in reality television, there is a strong need to conduct polls and present audience opinions. For example, audience reactions were a vital part of the October government shutdown drama. The first opinion polls were anticipated with great suspense. Would they convey strong disapproval of congressional Republicans, or would they apportion the blame more evenly? The pressure increased enormously for the Republicans when polls led to headlines claiming that the Republican party was badly damaged by the shutdown. The search for an exit strategy intensified right after the audience had delivered its verdict. Thus, it seems that the reality shift engages, provides models for, and legitimizes participatory forms of competition resolution. In a more global setting, phone or online participation has influenced audiences’ understanding and legitimacy of voting. The soft power effect of popular culture is based on the often

14 *Businessweek* (2003): ‘American’s Reality-TV Addiction’. *Businessweek*, January 29.

subconscious dissemination of abstract Western concepts, which are demonstrated to be relevant and efficient in solving social problems.

The reality formats tend to place many controversial issues under the microscope. This results in highly emotional, agitated, and polarized relationships, which can have a potentially destabilizing effect. Many governments caught up in the Arab Spring blamed satellite television and especially Al Jazeera for inflaming emotions by showing the ‘reality’ of the situation¹⁵. This has not only challenged the information monopolies wielded by states, it has also directly undermined the existing sense of what is proper in media and what is high-level media content. The previous high form, namely elite-level chamber politics, has become challenged by the activism of the street.

The changing formats not only influence the relationship between a non-US citizen and his or her state, they transform the way in which global audiences view and evaluate events in Washington. If a person – conditioned to understand public ‘reality’ through the lens of contemporary popular culture – turns to the actual political drama in Washington, chances are that he or she will see many similarities. This leads to a key suggestion: Many global audiences find it much easier to relate to the Washington political drama than they do to the commentators and political elites. It has come to be accepted. Its ‘script’ is highly readable and its forms and figures are recognizable and easy to identify with. The argument is not that the Washington political drama sells the US globally. That would be going too far. Rather, it may be suggested that the expectations and tastes of different global audiences have been transformed. It has made American culture and US politics more visible and readable in its dramatic format. This special relationship is not going to be turned off by drama and, in many cases, the spectacle may even strengthen the American status.

The reality shift is connected to the transformation of movies and TV shows towards bleak, cynical, and realistic content. Gone are the days of bleary-eyed idealistic struggles between good and evil, and of heroic ideal leaders. New content, such as *House of Cards*, *The Good Wife* and *Scandal*, portray a much harsher and Machiavellian image of politics where morality exists only in a feigned form. Although the American media industry offers economies of scale for the worldwide distribution of new shows and films, it is interesting to note that some of the formats originate from the UK and from Western Europe. The new format is perceived to be closer to the wheeling and dealing of actual politics. If this is the case, these shows can create an understanding of the complexities faced by modern political governance¹⁶. The appeal of these new bleaker portrayals partly derives from the viewer’s recognition that the interpretative frame is more transparent and honest when it comes to contemporary political life. Against this increasingly popular frame of reference, the polarization, paralysis, and friction of the actual Washington drama are expected and followable. Arguably, these emerging nuanced sensibilities can lead to a situation where they actually start to exhibit an allure similar to that which entertainment can offer. This situation is far from ideal. However, the dynamics of the new cultural influences and the soft power paradox are worth considering in evaluations of the US status and position.

15 E.g. Kraidy 2010.

16 Ratner, Ari (2014): ‘The House of Cards Hypothesis: Why London Understands Washington Better than Hollywood’. *The Atlantic*, February 5. [<http://m.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/02/the-em-house-of-cards-em-hypothesis-why-london-understands-washington-better-than-hollywood/283600/>]. Date accessed: 19.2.2014.

3. INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND US SOFT POWER

Turning next to the new digital technologies and social media, the key questions revolve around how they condition US attractiveness in the eyes of the world, and how they reinforce the mitigating influence of new media formats on US soft power.

The paradoxical effects of the often negatively regarded reality shift to a more compassionate attitude towards US failings may be further reinforced by the new media technologies and by social media. New technologies are challenging the older media formats. Many television companies are under pressure as new more technologically advanced competitors are emerging. The newer trends are based on the further personalization of media consumption and on the resulting Balkanization of the shared public spaces. What used to be a generally shared experience based on a few major media outlets and one viewing audience is now fragmented into a multiplicity of pay-walled online sites and apps¹⁷. US digital companies such as Netflix, which is focused on streaming shows and films, ensure that these shows can be consumed in countries where the local television channels and other distributors refrain from broadcasting them, often because of governmental censorship. This dissemination and diffusion of new media formats for understanding politics is further facilitated by the instant and large-scale piracy of shows and films.

The cyber domain tends to diffuse the power of existing major states. It discounts them as the objects of political loyalties. As a result, digital technologies tend to support the Many-to-many model of soft power. The US ability as a unitary actor to effectively use its public diplomacy is overwhelmed by the effectiveness of US digital enterprises to condition the interpretative frameworks. The adaptive pressures inherent in cyberspace directly challenge the US soft power tools for maintaining its attractiveness. The US, like any other state, “will become much less central to people’s lives” as they “will live by multiple voluntary contracts and drop in and out of communities at the click of a mouse”¹⁸. Whereas the diffusion of power can be somewhat controlled by the bigger states, namely China’s infamous firewall, it poses a formidable challenge to many states with less bargaining power against the mostly foreign digital corporations and their cooperation with foreign states. Increasingly, US soft power is beyond governmental control. However, this does not necessarily mean that it is less affective. The days of centralized and direct governmental public diplomacy are gone¹⁹. What is needed is the dissemination of an American interpretative framework, which is something that the powerful American entertainment and digital industries seem to be very effective at.

Second, US-based actors enjoy privileged access to the cyber domain. By the same token, American ICT companies have acquired the central position in the global data flows. This not only relates to using cyber as a tool for hard power, as in the case of the STUXNET computer malware directed against the Iranian nuclear program. US centrality is constituted by the crucial importance of American enterprises for the global information, media, and entertainment economies. The architecture of cyberspace

17 E.g. Henick, Jonathan (2013): ‘What Can Public Diplomacy Learn from Netflix’. Blog of the Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication. [<http://takefiveblog.org/2013/12/19/what-can-public-diplomacy-learn-from-netflix/>]. Date accessed: 19.2.2014.

18 Nye, Joseph (2010): *Cyber Power*. Cambridge, Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center.

19 Hayden, Craig (2012): ‘Social Media at State: Power, Practice, and Conceptual Limits for US Public Diplomacy’. *Global Media Journal*, Fall.

favours US soft power and, partially, negates the power of new types of asymmetric cyber-enabled actors. American public culture products are widely accessible through legitimate and illegitimate channels. Even in countries where governments have imposed restrictions on access to the global internet, citizens have the knowhow to easily bypass them.

Third, the emerging cyber politics poses contrary challenges for the US, as it seeks to find an optimal balance between different interests – one of them being the need to appear as a non-benevolent superpower. The leaks concerning the National Security Agencies data collection methods became the hottest scandal involving the US during the summer of 2013, and lingered on especially in Europe long after that. On the one hand, the right to unfettered access to a single internet had become an official part of the US human rights policy during the Obama administration. On the other hand, the Snowden scandal revealed that the US largely controlled access to the internet and, in so doing, had challenged the right to privacy as a fundamental human right. Snowden emerged as a mobilizer that negated much of the soft power impact of the internet-as-human-right argument used against actors such as China and Iran, in that they should allow their citizens to have uncensored internet access. Thus, the cyber domain poses challenges for the US government irrespective of its privileged position. New transnational actors and their coalitions are emerging to undermine the US hegemonic position. Nevertheless, although US government activities might give rise to criticism and suspicion, the activities of the entertainment and digital corporations seem to escape most of the negative impacts.

Fourth, despite the challenges, the emergence of cyberspace has offered new tools for US soft power. Social media is increasingly effective in political mobilizations, as demonstrated by the Obama elections of 2008 and 2012, and by the rapid contagion of the Arab Spring. In many situations, social media activity, for example on Twitter and Facebook, has supported US national interests. In some cases, the digital companies have even cooperated with US governmental efforts. For example, during the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, the ruling elite was accused of election fraud. The allegations spread on Twitter, which agreed to facilitate this process by delaying the planned maintenance of its servers. People learned about the demonstrations through text-messaging or social media. What the uprising in Iran proved was that authoritarian states were losing their monopolies on information. This was seen to hold great promise for US public diplomacy. However, US practices have had to adapt to the ongoing information technology revolution. The challenge posed to US power by the Manning and Snowden leaks, and transnational actors such as WikiLeaks, proves that cyber is not just another space for national power. It is not only the totalitarian regimes that are losing their monopolies on information. The US is losing its ability to rely on the secrecy and confidentiality of its diplomacy. Its central position in the cyber architecture has been challenged by friends and foes alike, as those who leaked the information garnered a great deal of support and achieved global celebrity status.

The Snowden scandal illustrates social media's centrality in US soft power. It showed how new asymmetric actors or transnational allegiances can be rapidly formed between widely heterogeneous actors, and how the politics of a mouse click can seriously challenge and undermine the soft power strategies of the lone superpower. The global debate on the merits of US cyber surveillance and Snowden's actions opened up a transnational political space. It comprised a network of actors with diverging interests, which included privacy advocates and critics of US policies. During the twists and

turns of the scandal, the network gained supporters in European Union institutions, especially in Germany. However, the scandal can also be read within the suggested drama power framework. It provides another example of a political crisis that puts Washington at the centre of the drama. It highlights US principles as well as US failings. It offers a good example of the political reality drama that is increasingly anticipated and then discounted. Paradoxically, it might offer yet another example of the silent acknowledgement of the crucial role than the US plays in the contemporary world.

Fifth, the participatory and interactive qualities of the social media networks redefine what is meant by social trust, political loyalty and solidarity. This directly influences the effectiveness of the US attraction-oriented soft power toolbox. The multiplicity of news and entertainment sources creates a dilemma over which information is trustworthy. Before the social media age, the establishment actors, such as politicians and the press, had an important role in creating trust. Now it is increasingly the task of 'trusted' sources like Facebook friends and those followed on Twitter. The referrals and curating of these nodal points are valued in the fragmented and personalized world of social media. These central figures act as 'fact checkers' who have become a visible part of social media, where the criteria for honesty and truth are notoriously shaky. On the other hand, the older media formats are rising to the challenge. They have started to reconnect to the more demanding audiences by developing their content and technological ways of consuming it. Moreover, they are forging alliances with prominent figures in the new media. The leaks by Snowden received extensive coverage in established newspapers such as the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*. These same newspapers also provide an important channel for WikiLeaks in the publication of US diplomatic cables. With the help of the new media, some older news outlets are regaining their relevance. Certain newspapers and columnists are also gaining a major following on Twitter. They have acquired a nodal status in the economies of 'truth' and 'relevancy'. Their commentary is globally visible due to the high visibility of the US in cyberspace. It can be suggested that the domestic debates in the US are being followed in connected corners of the global digital space. Debates on topics such as Snowden or WikiLeaks are seen as highly relevant, while at the same time, the word of the US government has started to be increasingly doubted as headlines often highlight the contrast between US official statements and the 'facts' revealed in the leaked documents. Thus, even though US honesty has been called into question, the debates and clashes themselves are being followed and deemed relevant for the global community.

Content can go viral in cyberspace. The community of mouse clicks has accentuated the viral nature of certain types of information. This results in a sudden outburst of issues and debates that are relatively transitory for two reasons. Firstly, they do not have a real-life stake or ownership in the local organization of people's everyday lives. In other words, they lack the social depth needed. Secondly, the viral processes cannibalize each other as the shock or scandal value wears off. Furthermore, the virulent cyber mobilizations tend to simplify matters to fit Manichean or even hate-based world views. There is also a growing recognition that virulence can be stage-managed and manipulated. However, despite their transitory nature, viral phenomena are inherently highly visible. Again, it is more likely that American content goes viral because of the underlying distribution of cyber assets. The US-based viral content proliferates across the web to other countries where it mingles with the local or national viral phenomena. This follow-ability of American content conditions the local and national mindsets. It has a soft power effect interrelated to the overall American systems of signification.

4. THE US AS A CELEBRITY POWER

It is suggested that if global audiences internalize the standards ingrained in popular culture and social media, then their appreciation of American politics and status can increase. Another important element is the increasingly close relationship between politics, celebrity, and fame²⁰. The larger than life Americans used to be celebrated because of their high achievements in public life. As Thomas Carlyle put it when writing about significant people: “The history of mankind is the history of its great men.” He went on to say that it is important to find these exemplary figures and to “clean the dirt from them” in order to make them models for others to follow. Today’s popular culture, new media formats, and social media have a cumulative effect that favours ‘dirt’ aspects such as dysfunction, personal failures, lies, or supposed conspiracies. The famous for being famous phenomenon has become the antithesis of anonymity, and has turned into a benchmark for high achievement²¹. This ongoing change is not confined to American soil. It is a global phenomenon partly catalyzed by the spread of US popular culture. This has repercussions for the global image of the US and begs the question: “Has the overall image of the US started to acquire celebrity-like qualities?”

As a marker of status, fame is often a fleeting phenomenon. However, it can also have longer-term characteristics. On the one hand, celebrity politics seems to require a constant stream of new figures. New dramatic personalities are needed and the audience often expresses its dissatisfaction with the present scene or candidates. This might give rise to politicians who represent a narrow yet curiously extreme interest and who are capable of being publicly vilified, humiliated, and shamed. On the other hand, some actors have become Teflon-like. In politics, this Teflon status has been achieved by scandal-ridden presidents such as Reagan and Clinton. Moreover, this quality also seems to apply to the overall soft power standing and attractiveness of the US. In other words, despite the constant string of scandals and crises, it can be argued that US soft power has suffered no permanent damage. The negative news is mitigated by new cultural realities²². From this perspective, the US seems to have acquired almost Teflon-like qualities in its imperviousness to blame or criticism.

This paradoxical situation could result from the coexistence of two status scenarios. Status as reputation sets the longer-term mood, while fame and celebrity are characteristics of the shorter-term episodic cycles of the political drama. It appears that the general long-term mood is resilient and relatively stable. It sets the overall positive or negative frames about the US. Moods are inventories of the overall global reputation, honour, and future of the US. Up to now, the US has had a stable enough global stature to withstand domestic and international shocks. It can be argued that the US status has been based on the perceptions of an honourable outcome (e.g. winning ‘great’ wars), on successfully fighting totalitarianism and defending freedom, and on the general appeal of the American experiment. But this appeal might be on the wane as the US has been losing smaller wars, the battle against ideological enemies has been replaced by skirmishes

20 E.g. Braudy, Leo (1997): *The Frenzy of Renown – Fame and its history*. New York, Vintage; Corner, John and Pels, Dick. (eds.) (2003): *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*. London, Sage.

21 Braudy 1997, 7-8.

22 E.g. White 2010; Murphy, S., Hether, J., Felt, L. and Buffington, S. (2012): ‘Public Diplomacy in Prime Time: Exploring the Potential of Entertainment Education in International Public Diplomacy’. *American Journal of Media Psychology*, 5(1-4): 5-32

with religious zealots, and the experiment has been submerged by the rise of Asia and other alternatives to the American dream. Global audiences are still intrigued by the US, but the reasons for this are increasingly connected with its ability to captivate global attention for reasons less connected with the old-fashioned idea of stability and order.

Celebrity tends to have a limited shelf life. Due to its ephemeral nature, it has not been seen as a significant resource in politics or global affairs. This might be changing, however, as the fame industry becomes increasingly important in the light of popular culture and social media, and celebrity becomes one of the most translatable global commodities. Its existence is already visible on the global stage. It provides what can be described as a global cultural resource to be exploited in global affairs and cultural diplomacy. A case in point is the UN's practice of using celebrities as ambassadors for different causes. Increasingly, it seems, you need someone with star power, someone who will make the domestic or global public starstruck. Yet it is evident that American celebrity power turns off some educated elites, the more critically minded, and those who want to avoid mainstream behaviours. They criticize the shallowness of this aspect of American soft power. At the same time, however, the same elites often attempt to calibrate their own political celebrities to be better propaganda models.

In contrast with the American political drama, the branding machinery of other major states seems to focus on giving more monolithic impressions. For example, the new generation of leaders is depicted largely as an iteration, or an evolution of the previous generation. The cumulative effect of this kind of branding can be strong. However, times might be changing. In terms of overall soft power, China lags far behind the US. Besides acting as an economic model, its main influence is confined to the neighbouring states with ethnic Chinese communities. The appeal of China's national branding may lead to a loss of the thrill and lack of buzz because the element of drama is missing on the treadmill of general iteration. Some audiences may feel a lack of interest and attraction. With its drama-less political life, paradoxically, China loses a part of the world's public mindshare and attention-grabbing buzz. It seems that a country can fall into the trap of sticking too closely to the script. Instead of endless replays, people want emotional engagement, political entertainment, signs of human fragility, and new forms of authenticity since many of them believe that genuine and legitimate politics must involve passion. For China's current regime, drama of this type might indicate an existential threat, whereas in the US such episodes may be read as signs that the country is still on the worthy road to perfecting itself.

To a degree, the lack of fame-based soft power stems from US-influenced media formats that persistently portray China and, to a lesser extent, Russia as cultures of passivity. This bias was influenced by at least two historical experiences. First, the manner in which Nazi Germany managed to indoctrinate its population has often been explained in terms of a passive society willing to accept the sense of purpose offered to it by 'demonic' leaders. The second formative experience was the Western encounter with Soviet Communism. The Soviets were often viewed as passive, docile and fully susceptible/submissive in the face of their government's ideological machinery. Americans understand their culture as being one of spontaneity and freedom. The American drama highlights the need for a revolutionary spirit, spontaneous events, dramatic turns, critical points, and signifiers of human frailty. Since the global media format mainly disseminates the American version, the overall effect favours the US soft power and status.

5. THE PARADOXICAL APPEAL OF A DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

Crises and democracy, particularly US democracy, seem to be intimately intertwined. Because of this dramatic format, the US may appear to be in a worse state than it really is. The democratic drama is a key media format for narrating election cycles, yearly budget negotiations, and continuously and openly clashing interests²³. The increasing over-dramatization of politics in Washington – the short-term crisis and flirtations with financial calamity and political mismanagement – may sour the longer-term mood about the US and seriously tarnish its national status. On the other hand, the crisis-, shock-, and scandal-prone format of narrating US politics is to a degree taken as just that – an interesting drama, yet ultimately much ado about nothing. When talking with policymakers and commentators on both sides of this divide, it became clear that almost everybody upheld one central tenet: the US will, in the end, resolve its problems and muddle through.

The Washington political drama resonates with global audiences. The lone superpower's crises and fate hold interest because they tell us something about the current status of the US and the vitality of the US-led world order. While witnessing the drama unfold, viewers may be concerned, yet they also get engrossed in the events. Paradoxically, then, the dramatic gesticulations in Washington facilitate global comprehension of what is relatively incomprehensible: What it means to be a lone superpower in an unpredictable global world where markets rule, cyberspace has become a part of daily life, and climate change is heating up the planet. Even if the drama is not Shakespearean high art, it may be enlightening and potentially lead to feelings of affinity and a sense of identification. At a superficial level, it leads to recognizability and fame for US politicians. Yet, at the very least, the continuing drama also disseminates a sensitized understanding of Washington. This is something that no other state has been able to achieve to such an extent and with such intensity.

23 Runciman, David (2013): *The Confidence Trap: A history of Democracy in Crisis from World War I to the Present*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.