

When Values No Longer Matter: America's Fading Soft Power

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It is not our affluence . . . that grip(s) the imagination of others. Rather, it is the values upon which our system is built. These values imply our adherence not only to liberty and individual freedom, but also to international peace, law and order, and constructive social purpose. When we depart from these values, we do so at our peril.

J. William Fulbright

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the United States launched a myriad of programs aimed at supporting democratic transitions across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. These programs focused primarily on education, media, democratic governance, and market economics. I oversaw the technical legal assistance program undertaken by the American Bar Association's Central and East European Law Initiative (CEELI) during this period. CEELI played a pivotal role in shaping the legal foundations in the region and was the most extensive *pro bono* legal assistance program in U.S. history. Its work showcased the commitment of the United States to these transitions and signaled its crucial support for democratization.

I didn't know it then, but I was witnessing first-hand one of the most effective applications of "soft power."

I remember one poignant moment while in Romania, soon after the death of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the country's dictator. At one of my meetings, an elderly law professor approached me, pulling from his pocket a small, worn copy of the U.S. Constitution — battered but cherished — a guiding document for him for more than forty years. This was the embodiment of America's soft power.

Throughout history, American leaders have eloquently articulated national values that inspire hope and foster change beyond our borders. Democrats and Republicans alike have shared this vision. President [John F. Kennedy](#), speaking of these values, said, "[T]he glow from that fire can truly light the world." During the 1984 D-Day commemoration in France, President Ronald [Reagan](#) said, "[I]solatism never was and never will be an acceptable response to tyrannical governments." [Madeleine Albright](#) spoke about the United States as "the indispensable nation." These statements and others stem from intangible sources of influence: the ethos, political institutions, culture, and education that are the gravitational pull of American ideas. This is soft power.

[Joseph Nye](#) coined the term in the 1990s, giving a name to the global strategy pursued by the United States for much of the 20th and early 21st centuries. While it does not replace military strength ("hard power"), Nye argued that soft power is fundamental to legitimating U.S. leadership on the world stage and inspiring others to align themselves with America's goals by encouraging democratic alliances and promoting the rule of law. The attractiveness of these goals, according to [Nye](#), complements hard power, strengthening America's overall strategic position.

During President Donald Trump's first term, it quickly emerged that he did not share these goals. During his second term, however, the United States has completely discarded any reliance on soft power. Trump's approach, characterized by his aggressive rejection of soft power, is dramatically diminishing the country's influence in the world. This abandonment is purposeful, central to his "America First" strategy, but the ill effects are broad and palpable. More than 170 executive orders, many focused on U.S. influence abroad, are causing America's persuasive "voice" to fade into silence.

Consider the Voice of America (VOA). Founded in 1942 to counter Nazi propaganda, it played a vital role in promoting democratic values [worldwide](#). Providing news and information in 50 languages, the VOA reached an estimated [360 million](#) people in countries lacking independent media. Yet Trump has labelled the VOA "anti-American" and shut it down.

Similarly, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been dismantled. Its [mission](#) — to save lives, reduce poverty, and strengthen democratic governance — is essential to U.S. soft power. It would be hard to argue that this mission does not elevate the country's reputation and interests abroad. Ending USAID will disproportionately harm vulnerable groups, including women, girls, sexual violence survivors, and [refugees](#). Around [640,000](#) women and girls in Ukraine, for example, will lose access to vital services. More than [19.5 million](#) Yemenis, roughly half of the country's population, rely on foreign aid; half of that aid, some \$768 million in 2024, came from the United States. USAID's closure will erode America's credibility and profoundly diminish its influence, widening global disparities and weakening U.S. soft power.

Education traditionally has been a cornerstone of this power. Educational exchanges have always fostered global goodwill. The United States has attracted more international students than any other country, more than [1.1 million](#) foreign students in 2022-2023 alone. As former Secretary of State Colin Powell noted, "I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here," highlighting the fact that international students tend to have favorable views of the countries where they have studied.

One of the most significant casualties of Trump's attack on educational opportunities is the Fulbright Program. Created in 1946, in the aftermath of World War II, the program was once the jewel in the crown of American soft power. It has provided opportunities for some 400,000 students and scholars from [160 countries](#) since its inception. It played a significant role in advancing democracy after the fall of the Berlin Wall. I was fortunate to be a Fulbright scholar twice in the 1980s; it was an experience that transformed my life.

Under Trump, this program is facing catastrophic cuts. The proposed FY2026 federal budget includes a [93%](#) cut in educational exchange programs, like Fulbright stipends and grants for thousands of U.S. and international [Fulbright students](#). Fulbright grants for group projects, doctoral dissertation research, and faculty research abroad for 2025 have all been [canceled](#). Not surprisingly, many students and professors no longer view the United States as a viable place for the pursuit of knowledge.

As the United States closes its doors to academic and research opportunities for international students and professionals, other nations have opened theirs. The United Kingdom has launched a [\\$72 million](#) "Global Talent Fund" to attract top international

researchers. Canada and the European Union are initiating similar programs to draw the talent the United States is pushing away.

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department's annual Country Reports on [Human Rights Practices](#), which for almost 50 years scrutinized governments on issues such as fair elections, corruption, gender-based violence, and prison conditions, no longer do so. Under Trump, it apparently is no longer in the interest of the United States to challenge other regimes on these issues. Human rights organizations have harshly condemned this shift. As [Paul O'Brien](#), Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, remarked, "What this is, is a signal that the United States is no longer going to [pressure] other countries to uphold those rights that guarantee civic and political freedoms."

The Trump administration's renunciation of soft power extends to its decision to halt support for international entities and to abandon platforms that once projected American ideas. In FY 2023, the United States provided more than [\\$16 billion](#) to 160 global organizations and multilateral entities. But it has now [withdrawn](#) from the World Health Organization (WHO), the [UN Human Rights Council](#), the [UN Relief and Works Agency](#) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, and [UNESCO](#), to name just a few, with potentially life-threatening consequences for humanitarian efforts and global health coordination, particularly in disease eradication and outbreak prevention. The decision to withdraw from the 2015 Paris Agreement and other climate-change commitments further diminishes the country's credibility and influence.

These changes have led to a seismic shift in the global perception of the United States. Its international image has plummeted to historic lows. No longer is it a country that inspires admiration and emulation.

When 111,273 individuals across 100 countries were [surveyed](#) in April 2025, the net favorable perception of the United States had dropped from 22% in 2024 to 5%. And respondents in more than three-quarters of those countries viewed China more favorably than the United States. Another [survey](#) found that 55% of 23,800 people 75 years old or less across 31 countries now view the United States as using its influence for "neutral or bad ends."

As recently as November 2024, an [Ipsos poll](#) found that [52% of Canadians](#) saw the United States as a positive influence, but in April 2025, only 19% felt the same. Not surprisingly, considering Trump's desire to annex their country, among nationals of 29 countries Canadians had the lowest view of America. "Our old relationship with the United States, a relationship based on steadily increasing integration, is over," Prime Minister Mark Carney has [declared](#).

In the United Kingdom, where I live, an [Ipsos poll](#) revealed that 41% of Britons believe that the United States uses its influence "for bad" rather than "for good," a dramatic increase from 16% just a year ago. An alarming [72% of Britons think](#) the United States poses a "very" or "quite serious" threat to global peace, greater even than Iran, North Korea, Israel, and China.

Trump's image also remains overwhelmingly negative. More than [75% of respondents in five western European nations](#) now view Trump as a threat to peace in Europe. [Majorities in 19 of 24 countries surveyed by the Pew Research Center](#) said in June 2025 that they had no confidence in his leadership of world affairs, while 82% of respondents worldwide view him

negatively. This is higher than the negative views of both President Vladimir Putin of Russia (61%) and President Xi Jinping of China (44%).

[Claudia Schmucker](#), head of the Center for Geopolitics at the German Council on Foreign Relations, summarized the sober mood: “We always thought we could depend on the United States as a partner. Especially the people who grew up after World War II, the older generation, they feel such a huge sense of loss. They would never have expected the U.S. to turn against Europe.”

Underlying these perceptions of the United States is a fundamental concern. Trump has created an environment antithetical to the founding ideals of the post-World War II order: principles rooted in democracy, respect for human rights, and liberalism. I don’t mean liberalism in the American sense of conservatism’s opposite, but as the philosophy grounded in the work of Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, and John Locke that cherishes equality, individual liberty, and fairness in law, and — most importantly — that exhibits a healthy disdain for authoritarian governments. That liberalism aims to build institutions that protect individual freedom by limiting political power, a vision encapsulated in the United Nations Charter and the modern international legal framework.

Today, that framework is facing an existential threat. The American retreat signals a move toward political relativism, where the norms that once underpinned international behavior are being discarded. European countries are no longer confident of the United States’ security guarantees, or of its leadership.

One of the most devastating examples of Trump’s abandonment of American soft power has been his unconscionable acceptance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia’s aggression represents the most egregious military assault on European soil since World War II. Trump’s willingness not only to tolerate but even to endorse Russia’s actions marks the single most flagrant capitulation of U.S. foreign policy in modern history.

Trump demonstrates a profound ignorance of history. It was the United States, under President Franklin Roosevelt, that championed the creation of the United Nations and the new international legal order. At the heart of the U.N. Charter lies Article 2(4), which declares: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”

Trump apparently has no grasp of this critical provision or of what it represents. His readiness to abandon the NATO transatlantic alliance in favor of an authoritarian regime, headed by an indicted war criminal, reveals not only a betrayal of America’s historic role in shaping the international order but also a disregard for the principles that have preserved global stability for nearly eight decades.

This shift will embolden and strengthen autocratic states and authoritarian ideologies worldwide. Although the preponderance of power is still held by states committed to democratic norms, the number of states with authoritarian leaders is increasing dramatically. Data from 2024 show that more countries, some 81, have regressed in the rule of law than [improved](#), with democratic performance declining in nearly half of all nations. The year 2024 was the 19th consecutive year of decline in political rights and civil liberties. Only 45% of the world’s population now lives in a democracy, while 39% live under [authoritarian rule](#). The

rule of law has declined globally for the seventh year in a row. More than six billion people now live in countries where the rule of law is [weaker](#) than it was in 2016.

The norms of international law are being rewritten, and the global order is being dismantled. The Trump administration bears the principal responsibility. Restoring America's commitment to the values of soft power is essential to international stability and prosperity. The stakes could not be higher.