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Soft Power: US Silent Domination

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Abstract

This research focuses on the concept of soft power, which is defined as the ability of a country, the US in this case, to influence the behavior of other countries through cultural and economic influence, rather than through force; focusing particularly on American soft power. To this end, the concept is analyzed in depth, historically, from the period of the end of the World War II to the present day, and critically. In addition, the study offers different examples of its application, in order to analyze the effects of American soft power on international politics as well as on the US itself. The main objective of this thesis is to explore the idea of soft power itself as a concept, as well as to examine how it has shaped America's foreign policy along with their impact in other countries.

Key words: Soft power, United States, international relations, Joseph Nye, culture, influence

Resumen

Esta investigación se centra en el concepto de soft power o poder blando, que se define como la capacidad de un país, los Estados Unidos en este caso, para incidir en el comportamiento de otros países mediante una influencia cultural y económica, en lugar de por medio de la fuerza. Esto se lleva a cabo mediante un análisis profundo del concepto de "poder blando" tanto histórica, desde el periodo del final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial hasta la actualidad, como críticamente. Además, el estudio ofrece diferentes ejemplos de su aplicación, que pretenden analizar los efectos del poder blando estadounidense tanto en la política internacional como en los propios EEUU. El principal objetivo de esta tesis es profundizar explorar la idea del poder blando como concepto, así como examinar cómo ha configurado la política exterior estadounidense junto con su impacto en otros países.

Palabras clave: Soft power/poder blando, Estados Unidos, relaciones internacionales, Joseph Nye, cultura, influencia

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, we have been gradually seen how the United States has become more and more evident as a global, cultural and economic trend, a pole of international attraction. Everyone has at some point in their lives dreamed of living the American dream or at least visiting the country, and everyone knows multiple examples of the average American. However, as for the rest of the world, with most countries having a more intricate history and a culture spanning many more centuries, they have not reached the popularity of the United States. This is due to an international policy strategy known as “soft power”. This concept makes reference to the policy of sponsoring and disseminating the cultural and political traditions of a country in such a way that they become extremely popular internationally, to the extent that other countries are brought to admire them, to the point that perhaps unintentionally, they end up allowing themselves to be guided by these foreign traditions.

This dissertation intends to explain and to explore the concept of US soft power. In order to cover this concept in all its facets and to be able to explore it more fully, the study has been divided into two parts, with an initial theoretical overview followed by a practical analysis. The first part will discuss the concept of soft power itself. Within this section, not only the concept will be defined, but also it will discuss its evolution in addition to debate the various ways in which soft power has been used in foreign policy and perceived by both Americans and foreign countries of varying opinions, as well as its use as a political tool. It further explores the large role that the "public" plays, as it is vital in the sense that thanks to them, US objectives can influence the politics of other countries. Next, a historical context will be provided in order to trace the birth, development and evolution of this policy in terms of historical facts and foreign policy. Finally, for this first part, an example of another emerging soft power in the world such as the Japanese soft power will be given, for a more complete vision of the term even though the work centers on American soft power.

For the second part of the project, which, as already mentioned, provides practical analysis, this study addresses various examples in which US soft power has traditionally been perceived and used, and its use as a tool to achieve political objectives. These examples being comic books, of which the most representative, Captain America, has been chosen. The study also explores the evolution and spread of holidays such as

Halloween and Christmas as further forms of soft power, and finally, it also centers on the importance of Hollywood's film industry in the dissemination of soft power.

The final intention of this dissertation, is to define American soft power, to explore how it has been used since its beginnings after World War II, and its effects historically, and to give examples of it in the subsequent analysis. All of this, in order to show one of the most intriguing and exceptional foreign policy tactics used in the modern world and of which most people are unaware.

2. First Part- Theoretical Framework

2.1. Definition

In recent years, the term 'soft power' has become increasingly popular. The term was first coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, and has been used to describe the ability of a nation to influence other countries through projection of its values and the appeal of its culture, political ideals, and policies. As Nye claims, “Soft power grows out of our culture, out of our domestic values and policies, and out of our foreign policy” (Nye, 2004).

Soft power is often seen as a subtler form of power than hard power, which relies on coercion or the use of force. Soft power “occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants (...) in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants” (Nye, 1990). America's soft power often comes from the status of the US as a leading economic and military power, as well as its close relationships with other countries. The country's soft power has been used to encourage other nations to adopt American values. American soft power also relies on the fascination of its popular culture, which is often exported to other countries through movies, music, and other forms of media. “The proliferation of media”, Raini ponders, “plays a fundamental role in circulating and securing hegemonic ideological representations of the west under the veil of popular culture” (Riani, 2015).

In his *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Joseph Nye argued that soft power is an important element of a nation's power, and that the United States was successful in the past because it was able to combine hard and soft power. This combination of hard and soft power was aptly termed ‘smart power’, Nye claims, “a term I developed in 2003 to counter the misperception that soft power alone can produce effective foreign policy” (Nye, 2009). This concept would be regularly used by the Clinton and Bush administrations. Nye also argued that the idea of soft power is not recent, and it has always played a significant role in international affairs: "Soft power is not new, but it has become more important in a global information age" (Nye, 2004). Along similar lines, John G. Ruggie argues that "the use of persuasion and attraction to

produce a desired outcome is not new, but it has been gaining in importance in recent decades" (Ruggie, 2014).

The concept of soft power has been criticized by some, who argue that it is simply a form of cultural imperialism. This is the view of Richard Bernstein who argues that "A widespread and fashionable view is that the United States is a classically imperialist power" (Bernstein, 2003). Others have argued that soft power is difficult to define and measure saying that "Empire is merely a metaphor" (Nye, 2004). Despite the criticism, soft power remains a popular concept, both in political and social terms, nationally and globally, and Joseph Nye is widely considered to be the father of the concept.

For a better understanding of the concept, and of its roots in the American experience, it is necessary to understand the United States as if it were a new species. First the US had to discover itself, in a process which began with its independence in 1776, going through a Civil War; this process was followed by numerous explorations and conquests that entailed several wars against different nations to consecrate its territory. With the arrival of the 20th century and with it the World Wars, the United States began to understand its place in the world, its position in the food chain, so to say. So that by the end of the Second World War it had managed to position itself as one of the leading countries of the time in economic and political terms, competing only with the Soviet Union. As a nation, the USSR was completely opposed to the United States on many fronts and both fought to impose their system globally. Capitalism and communism fought for years in the well-known Cold War.

After putting an end to the long confrontation the Cold War was, Americans slowly started to comprehend their place in a post-Soviet world. Comparing the situation of the country at the end of WWII and the Cold War, by the end of the war in 1945, all the countries were devastated while the United States was triumphant, but by the end of the Cold War those countries had recovered and it was the United States that had just come out of a war, the tables had turned, but still saw the opportunity to expand soft power again. This global situation leads Nye to affirm that, "with the end of the Cold War, soft power seemed expendable" (Nye, 2004). But still with the aftertaste of glory days the country retook their role of the ruler as it was believed that if one of the most important nations fails to take a leadership role, it could have catastrophic effects on global stability.

In the second half of the twentieth century and the few decades of the twentyfirst so far, the world is changing and with it the way of seeing and exercising power. In the past, power was held by those who had economic and political control and military superiority; today, power is beginning to be based on stability and progress. That is why more and more countries are choosing soft power as an international policy. After the horrors of the various wars of the 20th century and the change in the mentality of the world's population, hard power is not deemed appropriate anymore.

And yet, after many years at the zenith, it seems that soft power is also faltering, as there has been a trend towards anti-Americanism since the beginning of the 21st century, "Anti-Americanism has increased in the past few years" (Nye, 2004). The once undisputed leader in soft power, the US now trails a number of other countries, according to the annual Soft Power 30 index compiled by PR firm Portland and the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy. The US ranks fifth on the list, behind France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Sweden.

Back in 2003 diplomat Thomas Pickering stated that that very year was "as high a zenith of anti-Americanism as we've seen for a long time" (Pickering, 2003). He considers that since Bush sent the country to war with Iraq without the support of the UN, the population outside the US began to have a perspective of the country as an imperialist power, "this has not been without controversy and its actions often aid imperialism rather than the country it claims its intervention is benefitting" (Wood, 2019).

According to The Soft Power 30, the world order is eroding, and with the United States as the promoter of that order, it is also the US that is suffering the most from this change. Even those who research foreign affairs are thinking about the best way to handle this problem, "foreign policy thinkers are looking at how best to respond to this new context" (Portland, 2019). However, this change has not been the only factor affecting the country's foreign policy. Another fact that has been a major blow to American soft power was the election of Donald Trump and his America First policies, as it has caused America's reputation to suffer around the world, as Portland claims "America First is unlikely to win many hearts and minds abroad" (Portland, 2019).

During his presidency, Trump showed little interest in promoting American values or engaging in the type of diplomacy that is necessary to build relationships with other countries. Instead, he was more interested in using force and coercion, the basic

ingredients of hard power strategies. His measures generated the rejection of vast sectors of the population across the globe, which is vital in the face of soft power, “Trump administration has called into question the value of long-standing security alliances” (Portland, 2019). For example, the decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement damaged America’s image as a global leader on environmental issues. Another measure that also damaged the country within its own borders was his proposed travel ban, which targeted Majority-Muslim countries. This plan also undercut America’s long-standing commitment to religious freedom. This has led to a decline in American soft power and has made it more difficult for the US to exert its influence on the attitudes and behavior of other countries.

Among other factors that have contributed as well to the decline of US soft power in recent years is the growing income inequality of the country, as well as to the increasing problem of gun violence. These issues have made the United States an unattractive country for foreigners, students, and tourists to live, and has made it perhaps even less appealing to business investment: “American business, universities, and civil society need to step up their active diplomatic reach and capabilities” (Portland, 2019).

The decline of America's soft power is a real and growing problem that should be a cause for concern in Washington. It has real-world implications for the country's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Whereas the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld claims “that popularity is ephemeral and should not guide foreign policy”, Joseph Nye thinks that “the recent decline in U.S. attractiveness should not be so lightly dismissed” (Nye, 2004). When America is no longer seen as a champion of democracy and human rights, it becomes harder to rally international support for efforts to promote these values. When America is seen as chaotic and unpredictable, it becomes harder to build coalitions to tackle global challenges, that is so that “when U.S. policies lose their legitimacy in the eyes of others, distrust grows, reducing U.S. leverage in international affairs” (Nye, 2004). And when America retreats from the global stage, it cedes ground to other countries that may not have the same commitment to democracy and human rights.

Anti-Americanism has increased in recent years, especially since the so-called “War on Terror” initiated by President Bush, and the subsequent “America First” movement of President Trump. Several surveys have been conducted in almost 30 countries, especially across Europe, which have shown the country's declining popularity.

That is why it needs a policy that is capable of reducing the antagonisms that arise when the rest of the world realizes the reality of the country is not as good as it is made out to be, “Soft power, therefore, is not just a matter of ephemeral popularity; it is a means of obtaining outcomes the United States wants” (Nye, 2004). For example, after World War II, the Washington administration used soft power to attract the rest of the countries, especially Europeans, to an institution and cooperation network that has existed for 60 years, “that is what Washington achieved after World War II: it used soft-power resources to draw others into a system of alliances and institutions” (Nye, 2004).

The current problem is that this system seems to be coming to an end, which is worrying for the country because, without these necessary alliances, it cannot face the terrorist threat that has been looming since the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. “The United States cannot confront the new threat of terrorism without the cooperation of other countries” (Nye, 2004). This was a reality check for a country that believed that after its victory in the Cold War it was free of enemies and had finished fighting what they themselves called "the great evil." For this reason, they lowered their guard and their soft power policies began to be reduced, “It took the September 11 attacks to remind the United States of this fact, (...) the need for public diplomacy” (Nye, 2004).

To confront the threat of international terrorism, the new enemy of the 21st century, the United States once again adopted the policy of soft power, this time with less effect than it had after the previous wars. According to Nye this is because “the United States' most striking failure is the low priority and paucity of resources it has devoted to producing soft power” (Nye, 2004). With Muslim countries, however, the US is using both powers. On the one hand, Americans are developing forms of hard power insomuch as they have been at war with Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and in general with the Islamic state. But on the other hand they continue to use soft power to teach the citizens of these countries that war is not right and what a true democratic system is like, to compare it with theirs and to rebel, thus attacking on all fronts. Nye disagrees with this policy and considers that they should focus only on soft power as it has already proven to be more effective than hard power: “U.S. policy makers will have to develop a few key strategic themes in order to better explain U.S. policies and ‘brand’ the United States as a democratic nation” (Nye, 2004).

Nye considers that a fundamental part of soft power as an international policy is to have efficient relations with other countries. This is not achieved on the basis of the

superiority, not military but rather moral, that the United States is showing, it is achieved through cooperation, “a fact that the United States has yet to recognize. To communicate effectively, Americans must first learn to listen” (Nye, 2004).

2.2. Historical Background: The Birth of Soft Power in the US

In 1941, two years after the outset of World War II, the Japanese forces, enemies of the United States, attacked the naval base of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. This was a brutal attack that caused great damage on the naval resources; fortunately, it did not reach the aircraft carriers that later on would be proven to be crucial for the development of the conflict.

In 1944 the US forces had the supreme authority on air and sea which made them powerful enough to reconquer the Philippines, as Jenkins indicates: "American forces had secured general supremacy at sea and air, which allowed the reconquest of Philippines" (Jenkins, 2017). They also fought against the Japanese and other countries in the Pacific. Although they battled in this Ocean for most of the war, they considered that the main leader or their enemies was Germany: "Despite the heavy involvement in the Pacific, US commanders had made the early decision that Germany remained the chief military enemy" (Jenkins, 2017).

US forces then moved to Europe where they helped British and Canadian soldiers in the D-Day or Normandy Landings, during the summer of 1944, "by August the Axis forces in France had been decisively defeated and Allied forces advanced into the Low Countries" (Jenkins, 2017). Since this moment Allied forces started to gain territories all over Europe winning the war in May 1945, when Germany surrendered.

But Americans still had an enemy standing despite their successful attacks and when Germany finally surrendered "American attention turned to the defeat of Japan" (Jenkins, 2017). In order to deal with the Japanese threat, they used two atomic bombs against the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. With these bombings they won the war, but in the years coming they would suffer the consequences of this atrocious decision. Aware that the attack was a brutality even for wartime, they tried to hide it from the world knowing that what they did would affect soft power, “such censorship reflected both the

general U.S. policy of secrecy concerning nuclear matters and, on a different plane, the broad agenda of media control pursued as part of U.S. occupation policy in defeated Japan itself” (Dower 1995).

After the war, Europe was devastated; its economy was suffering after the high expense of the war that could not pay for all the damage it had caused, in addition to which loomed over Europe what even after the war was the worst enemy of the United States, communism. In 1947, these events “caused President Harry Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall to devise the European Recovery” (Weissman, 2013). They started what today is known as the Marshall Plan, but was originally named ERP, which “was an economic stimulus program that injected over \$13 billion into the struggling economies of Western Europe” (Weissman, 2013). This decision represented a change at a global level – for Europe it was a new beginning and for the United States a change in its foreign policy. It was at this moment when soft power began to have a great relevance in international politics. The plan was devised by the United States ostensibly in order to improve the world, as utopian as it may sound, but perhaps more significantly to secure their leading role in international politics. To do so “They recognized the failures of the Treaty of Versailles as a primary reason for German nationalism and cause of WWII” (Weissman, 2013), creating a Plan focused on the wellbeing of all European countries. But not all countries were willing to accept this help “Unfortunately, the Soviets rejected the Plan, thereby deepening the divide between East and West and igniting the Sparks of the Cold War” (Weissman, 2013).

Despite been great allies during the war, the US and USSR had very different visions of the postwar world. Each wanted to impart its doctrine; Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union, tried to spread communism, which was hovering over Europe like an “iron curtain” (Churchill, 1946). This frightened the Americans which created NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) in 1949, reflecting the United States' commitment to protect Europe from the communist threat, in fear of what communism could do to the world. “These fears dominated American life and affected foreign policy, military strategy, urban planning, popular culture, and the civil rights movement” (OpenStax, 2021). Thus began the Cold War, a war of titans, since after the war, the two nations were among the few that had not been destroyed, and faced each other in a race to be the world leader, “the United States and the Soviet Union had soon come to the conclusion that the other constituted a threat to their security” (Jones, 1995).

The cold war, as its name suggests, was not a direct confrontation but rather a competition to see which country was better in the eyes of the world: “it was a battle of ideologies rather than bullets” (Jones, 1995). In order to ensure global dominance, the US had to change its foreign policy for a more cooperative one, for which soft power was imperative, “the United States realized that it would have to make a permanent change in its foreign policy, shifting from relative isolation to active engagement” (OpenStax, 2021). For this, propaganda was created; the government used propaganda to increase patriotism and spread democracy to demonstrate the superiority of US capitalism, democracy and economy. It portrayed an image of innocence, committed values, liberty and moral uprightness, both to its own citizens and to the world. This was mainly through the media, “movies and television, sought to entertain, while reinforcing values such as religious faith, patriotism, and conformity to societal norms” (OpenStax, 2021).

Moving on to the 1960s, the Cold War remained the leading player in international politics, although American soft power had fallen after the Vietnam War in which they took a more defensive foreign policy, “Eisenhower believed that Indochina was the strategic key to Southeast Asia; if it fell, he claimed, the neighboring communist countries would collapse like a row of dominoes” (Jones, 1995). This was solved after Kennedy's investiture as the 35th President of the United States, who gave an image of youth and modernism to the country and resumed a foreign policy of solidarity. It was in this light that “The first group of Peace Corps volunteers departed for the four corners of the globe in 1961, serving as an instrument of soft power in the Cold War” (OpenStax, 2021).

As for the situation in the country, the new decade was a time of change. Minority groups fed up with the official propaganda, began to stand up for their rights. The image of innocence of the 50's began to be replaced by inconformity during the 1960s, when “many people rejected traditional roles and expectations” (OpenStax, 2021). It was the birth of the Civil Rights movement, the most outstanding of them being the so called black power: “Black Power (...) grew out of the concrete demands of Black people's everyday lives—racial violence, segregation, poverty, and political marginalization” (Nadasen, 2015). The black population of the country was tired of not having the same rights as whites and living in much worse conditions, so they created this movement which, according to Kwame Ture, who baptized it as Black Power, “Black Power the slogan adopted by black nationalists, (...) for some was merely an assertion of black consciousness and pride; for others, the demand that blacks control the businesses,

schools and public offices of their own communities; and for a handful of extremists, a call for guerrilla warfare” (Jones, 1995). What was to begin as mainly a peaceful movement would be radicalized after the deaths of two of its most important representatives, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, even creating the idea of the black separatism that argued that “African Americans should live apart from White people and solve their problems for themselves” (OpenStax, 2021).

Also noteworthy were the movements for women's, gay's and Native American's rights, “in the late 1960s and 1970s, Native Americans, LGBTQ people, and women organized to change discriminatory laws and pursue government support for their interests, a strategy known as identity politics” (OpenStax, 2021). In counterpoint to these movements, the hippie movement was born. A subculture that, unlike the movements mentioned above, promoted peace and nonviolence. They were not against rights; on the contrary, they promoted freedom in all areas, but they were against the violent methods sometimes used. They were “centered on a desire for peace, the rejection of material goods and traditional morality, concern for the environment, and drug use in pursuit of spiritual revelations” (OpenStax, 2021).

The 1970s were a continuation of the conflicts and revolts of the 1960s. During the Vietnam War, the crimes performed by American soldiers against the Vietnamese disgusted the American population who in turn demanded the end of the war, “Americans were horrified to hear of atrocities committed by U.S. soldiers such as the 1968 massacre of villagers at My Lai” (OpenStax, 2021). The war ended with a peace treaty between North Vietnam and the United States, not without complications, and the surrender of South Vietnam two years later, “armistice negotiations began near the Korean battlefield in July 1951, which were marked by bitter disputes and repeated breakdowns, and it took almost two years before a cease-fire agreement was reached later” (Jones, 1995).

In national politics, the Watergate affair was a major scandal in the country. Republican Richard Nixon, who was elected president in 1969, was accused of being “involved in the break-in at the DNC's headquarters at the Watergate office complex” (OpenStax, 2021). After the scandal he faced impeachment after which he was forced to resign, being the first president in the country's history to do so.

The 80's brought a great change thanks to the arrival of technology, as well as the improvement of existing devices such as television and telephone and the arrival of the computer as a more everyday element. On the national scene AIDS became a severe

health problem, commonly associated with the homosexual community, although straight people could also get infected, “the fact that the first recorded cases appeared among homosexuals reinforced prejudices against them and put on the defensive again a minority that had increased its self-affirmation” (Jones, 1995). This led to several protests against the LGBT community. There was a movement of Christians who believed America had lost God and fell into perversion. They felt the need to fight against what they considered perversions, one of the most controversial, the abortion law, "pro-life organizations spent large sums on advertising, bombarded politicians with literature, attracted the support of television preachers (...)" (Jones, 1995). But AIDS was not only spread by sexual intercourse but also by the sharing of drugs that made possible the exchange of different bodily fluids. Drugs were, in fact, the big problem at the time, “in 1986, according to a presidential commission, drug trafficking was the most serious organized crime problem in the country” (Jones, 1995). It is important to highlight that after 28 years, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, an important symbol of the Cold War since it divided Germany into the Soviet part and the European part, and thanks to the fall of the wall, this distinction ceased to exist, which marked the beginning of the end of the cold war.

During the 90's and in the following decades, technology would not stop growing and reinventing itself. In particular, this decade saw the implementation in the everyday life of a tool that would change everything, the internet, "much of the prosperity of the 1990s was related to technological change and the advent of new information systems" (OpenStax, 2021). In addition to this, at this time the Cold War finally came to an end, after almost 50 years of conflict, due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union into today's Russia and several independent countries, “as some have argued, to the inherent long-term inviability of the communist system or, as others have maintained, to the pressures of four decades of U.S. policy and the resulting arms race” (Jones, 1995)

After the end of the Cold War, the United States established itself as the only world leader and as such took on the task of helping countries in need, whenever it was in its interest to do so, “he (Clinton) envisioned a post-Cold War role in which the United States used its overwhelming military superiority and influence as global policing tools to preserve the peace” (OpenStax, 2021). It tried to mediate in the Middle East wars, which led to the terrorist group al-Qaeda crashing several planes in the country on September 11, 2001, the most recognized attack on the Twin Towers in New York, which caused a total of almost 3,000 deaths, “On the morning of September 11, 2001, hopes that

the new century would leave behind the conflicts of the previous one were dashed when two hijacked airliners crashed into the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center" (OpenStax, 2021). In 2003 the United States went to war with Iraq after accusing it of possessing weapons of mass destruction and being complicit in the 9/11 attacks. The conflict continued until 2011 without a clear outcome during Barack Obama's moderate presidency. After the 2007 real estate boom, a collapse of banks and a deregulated bond market in 2008 there was a major recession that triggered a worldwide crisis, "Many resented this bailout of the rich, as ordinary citizens lost jobs and homes in the Great Recession of 2008" (OpenStax, 2021). Due to the crisis and the popular policy of Obama, the president implemented the so-called Obamacare, a measure to provide health care for any pocketbook, "the goals of Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) were to provide all Americans with access to affordable health insurance" (OpenStax, 2021)

After two consecutive candidacies Obama had to step down as President of the United States and, in November 2016, one of the most contested elections in the history of the new century took place "the 2016 presidential campaign was one of the most contentious and confrontational in nation's history" (Jenkins, 2017). Hillary Clinton for the Democratic party and surprisingly the "buccaneering business-man and property developer" (Jenkins, 2017), Donald Trump for the Republican party. The latter emerged victorious, becoming the forty-fifth president of the country. Trump's arrival to power was a jolt to soft power, since, as his slogan "make America great again" said, Trump stopped focusing on the image that the country gave to the world to focus on his own ideals, "The Trump administration has demonstrated little interest in soft power, multilateralism, or solving the major challenges facing the world" (Portland, 2019).

Due to Trump's aforementioned isolationist policy, and his withdrawal from the international scene, the soft power of the United States continues to be challenged to this day. International politics, accustomed to American soft power, is being countered by the emergence of other national powers that are developing a renewed interest in soft power.

2.3. New Soft Powers – Japanese Soft Power

Despite the turn to isolationist policies initiated by the Trump Presidency, it is clear that the United States continues to be the major representative of soft power, but it is certainly not the only one. More countries are growing in terms of external influence, one of the most notable being Japan.

The history of Japan's soft power can be traced back to the 19th century, a period in which the country saw an increase in the influence of their culture, due to a rapid industrialization. In this century, the land of the rising sun became a cultural focal point through its literature, music, art, and technology, which were embraced by many countries across the globe. As Smith claims, “Japan has been able to leverage its soft-power assets by increasing economic, educational, and cultural interactions with foreign countries” (Smith, 2013). After World War II, Japan continued to be a driving force of global culture and technology, with its economy becoming the second largest in the world. In addition, Japan's culture has become an important element of global entertainment, with its manga, anime, and video games becoming popular across the world: “Japan has emphasized pop culture as soft power to augment its influence” (Smith, 2013).

Japan's approach to soft power focuses on promoting the country's culture and values, as well as its technological and economic status, not to mention that the country is known for its strong brand of diplomacy, as Smith argues: “The country's stable democracy and vibrant civil society, however, are the core of its strength” (Smith, 2013). Another fact that makes Japanese soft power so relevant, especially in the East-Asia region, is its economy, as Otmazgin claims, “Japanese popular culture industries have massively penetrated East Asia's markets and their products have been widely disseminated and consumed” (Otmazgin, 2008). Japan has been able to expand its national products and culture and sell it all over the world, being the first buyers its neighbors in the continent where Japanese products sell better than even within the country making the national economy grow enormously. “The 'power' that the Japanese popular culture hitherto generates in East Asia lies in the shaping of this region's cultural markets rather than in exerting local influence” (Otmazgin, 2008). These efforts have helped to increase Japan's soft power, making it an attractive power both economically and culturally. Smith argues that “Japan can expand the constituency for a new ‘Japan model’ through enhanced trade, academic exchanges, and other indicators of international openness” (Smith, 2013).

Japanese soft power is largely viewed as a product of its culture. This is coupled with a high degree of technological innovation and cultural production that has led to Japan being a leader in many areas, including animation, fashion, and video games, as Smith contends: “A science and technology powerhouse, Japan remains a leading innovator that hosts and develops an array of competitive companies” (Smith, 2013). By contrast, American soft power is seen as being rooted in the country’s political, economic, and military sectors, as well as its global influence. From Hollywood films to global fast-food restaurants, American soft power is often viewed as having a greater reach and impact than its Japanese counterpart. While both countries have their own unique strengths and weaknesses, many argue that the two nations’ soft power can be used in tandem to create a more effective and balanced global order “the U.S.-Japan alliance can facilitate Japanese—and U.S.—soft power by making global issues a more prominent pillar of the overall alliance” (Smith, 2013). Both the United States and Japan have a solid base for soft power as they are nations with significant cultural and technological developments. The two of them have a strong democratic system and important values to export. “Japan and the United States hold common values and goals for democracy, prosperity, and stability in the Asia-Pacific region and globally” (Smith, 2013).

3. Second Part – Analysis

3.1. Soft Power in Comics

The world of comics is a very important part of the American pop culture, especially of the so-called geek culture. Before the existence of content platforms, comics were an important means for the international dissemination of this culture. Superheroes in particular project a vision of the United States to the rest of the world as saviors. Comic books, especially superhero comics, as mentioned above, help with the soft power image the country wants to give. This is nothing new, as Paul S. Hirsch states in *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*: “comics have always been entwined with capitalism, race, and foreign policy” (Hirsch, 2021). Comic books, became extremely popular after World war I, and so they began to be used as a method of securing a collective opinion of the US population, in this case, on the war, “(...) comics (were) such an attractive propaganda tool for the federal government during World War II and the Cold War” (Leanza, 2021). The government and especially the CIA began to use them as a weapon of war, as Leanza contends, “federal agencies such as the CIA took a more active role in using comic books to win allies” (Leanza, 2021). Comics were written to penetrate the mentality of the population in such a way that they would make them think what the government wanted, both at home and in foreign countries, where they were used to convince the native population of the power of the United States and how it should lead the world, “convinced that people of color would be more susceptible to comic book propaganda, the United States unloaded millions of anti-communist comics to cities across Africa, Asia, and Latin America” (Leanza, 2021).

Some of these "federal comics" were clearly sponsored and published by the government; however, many others were disguised under other names and were left at meetings or even stuffed into transient bags, “in some cases, (...) comics were clearly marked as products of the U.S. government; in others, the source was obscured and (...) often distributed discreetly at union meetings or shoved into shoppers' hand- bags at food markets” (Leanza, 2021).

Undoubtedly one of the best examples of this is the Captain America comics. Captain America is a superhero created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and later

reinterpreted by Stan Lee. These comics, which take place during World War II, talk about Steve Rogers, a man so weak and light-bodied that they do not even let him enlist in the United States army. But they offer him to undergo an intervention, led by President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself: “Roosevelt leads the officials to a heavily guarded laboratory where they meet a frail young man named Steve Rogers” (Watts, 2015). In this intervention, through liquids injected into him, Steve becomes a super soldier, “Steve may have transformed into a robust superhero, but he also knew what it was like to be powerless, a feeling that probably would have resonated with many young readers” (Daniels, 1971). Tall, strong and very skilled in fighting but with high values of peace and kindness that only allow him to fight when it is strictly necessary, in most cases, to defend his country from the Nazis, “The average boy-turned-superhero takes on Hitler in the first issue, leaving no question as to where his allegiance lies” (Watts, 2015).

Despite the character's characteristic warm-heartedness, the comics showed the hard times of the war and its consequences, as the creators had fought in World War I and were victims of the Great Depression that shook the country after it. The creators believed it was necessary to create a national hero so that the country would feel united in knowing the horrors of war, thus supporting their country and valuing their soldiers more, “Great Depression ideals, and nationalism all come into play in Captain America Comics, often revealing the darker side of wartime patriotism” (Watts, 2015). And so, Captain America was originally made as a propagandistic character whose purpose was to awaken patriotic sentiments in the American society.

Therefore, as already mentioned, Captain America's main enemy was Hitler. This is due to two reasons: the first is that Captain America was a representation of American values and the country itself, and Nazi Germany led by Hitler was one of the main enemies of the country during the war. In addition to this, both comic writers were Jewish and, therefore, felt a personal struggle against Hitler who was murdering their people. “Kirby’s love for American diversity and his Jewish heritage later motivated him to draw a patriotic superhero who would take on the greatest anti-Semite of all time, Adolf Hitler” (McLaughlin, 2005)

With this idea in mind to create a patriotic hero defender of the United States and all its inhabitants, the question now was which medium to use. Since the early 1920's comic books had been gaining popularity and they decided that this would be the best

way to share their ideas. In Kirby's own words, "Comics is [sic] an American form of art that anyone can do with a pencil and paper" (Watts, 2015).

After the first volume of the comic book (Captain America Comics #1, was released in 1941) these comics became highly popular, reaching such a level that the War Office took it upon itself to distribute them, "The Office of War Information issued directives to news outlets and suppliers of popular culture, asking them to raise America morale" (Watts, 2015). With such popularity, it did not take long for competitors to appear. The competition began to create characters similar to Steve with the aim of reaching the same level of influence of the Captain, the best known example of this is Uncle Sam. "Rival comic book publishers took advantage of Captain America's success by filling newsstands with their own flag-waving superheroes, including Uncle Sam" (Watts, 2015). And while some also achieved fame, as both soldiers going off to war and their families back home read these comics, "The *New York Times* estimated that one fourth of the magazines read by servicemen were comic books" (Lieutenant, 1942), none achieved as much popularity as Captain America.

This comic series was not only successful with military or war-conscious people, but also with younger audiences. In the comics, children were encouraged to serve their country just like soldiers but without going to war. For example, in the comic *Captain America Battles the Camera Fiend and His Darts of Doom*, the captain breaks what is called the fourth wall and speaks directly to his child readers by saying: "All boys and girls are Sentinels of Liberty whether they wear the badge or not. America is safe while its boys and girls believe in its creeds!" (Kirby and Simon, 1941).

As the war evolved, new enemies joined the United States and this was also reflected in the comics. In *Meet the Fang, Arch-Fiend of The Orient*, the Japanese, the main enemy of the USA in addition to the Nazis, are shown as disturbing beings both physically and in personality, "The Japanese (...) have apish faces, sharp teeth, and claw-like hands. They talk openly of torturing and executing their enemies" (Kirby and Simon, 1941).

However, after their great popularity during wartime, Captain America comics saw their decline after the end of the war, "Allied victory in Europe signaled the end of Captain America Comics' golden age" (Watts, 2015). Stan Lee, the now writer of the comics tried to save them by having Cap fight the few remaining Nazis, "For a full year

after the war's end, Captain America would carry on fighting Hitler's minions" (Watts, 2015), but the public knew that war was already won and had no interest in reading those stories. However, even though that war was over, another one was being born, the fight against communism. The comic reinvented itself "by making Captain America's new enemy the forces of communism" (Watts, 2015). This change of fight not only kept the figure of Captain America alive but also gave him a new meaning. World War II was an event that marked the world and changed the United States, just as communism would do later, and this is reflected in something as simple as some comic strips, "Captain America's evolution reflects the transformation of American society during and in the decades following World War II" (Watts, 2015).

3.2. Soft Power in Holidays

Although Christmas and Halloween are ancient holidays of European origin, over the years they have been Americanized. The media and the high influence of the country's culture in our society has shaped our way of celebrating these festivities to mimic theirs. This has caused holidays to lose its cultural origins and adopt a new perspective that has gradually been absorbed by other countries, "this influence is such that we have come to supplant many of our own customs with those that most attracted us from that country" (Cañero, 2018). Of all the variety of holidays, the most noteworthy in this area, as already mentioned, are Halloween and Christmas. Being Halloween a novelty in a great number of countries, and Christmas, although already known, readapted to a capitalist setting.

Although it is true that Christmas has been subjected to the forces of global capitalism, there are different opinions about it. There are those who believe that Christmas and capitalism are antonyms and that the current Christmas is not something catholically correct, "It is very difficult to argue that the civic rituals of modern Christmas reflect Jesus's way of living" (Strain, 2015). But on the other hand, *Wall Street Journal* experts say it was the holiday's capitalization that saved it. In the late 19th century, Christmas became so radicalized that it was even outlawed in the state of Massachusetts because of the holiday's high crime and drunkenness rates, but capitalization organized it and put an end to the anarchy, "The commercialization of the holiday, a familiar lament

this time of year, helped rescue Christmas from the grip of violent street gangs” (Zweig, 2020).

All this progressive change and capitalization of Christmas is linked to the figure of Santa Claus, originally created as a marketing tool for Coca-Cola. Santa Claus as such was not an invention of Coca-Cola, but it was to this company that father Christmas owes his current appearance and popularity. Back in the 1920s, Coca-Cola started using Santa Claus in Christmas commercials, but it was not until 1931 that was created the image we know nowadays of a chubby, happy, rosy-cheeked man with white beard and all his accessories such as a reindeer sleigh and a big red bag, “But in 1931, Coca-Cola commissioned illustrator Haddon Sundblom to paint Santa for Christmas advertisements” (Coca-Cola, 2023). The original images showing St. Claus drinking a coke while reading letters from nice children or handing out presents, were used until 1964 when his designer created a new version that would later be adapted for television as well as magazines, posters, calendars, billboards, etc. “Sundblom created his final version of Santa Claus in 1964, but for several decades to follow, Coca-Cola advertising featured images of Santa based on Sundblom’s original works” (Coca-Cola, 2023)

Due to soft power and the influence, especially in the media, of American culture, the figure of Santa Claus began to make its way into the culture of many countries that originally did not have it, as Cañero contends: “Other traditions have also taken hold precisely because their proximity has allowed them to do so: Santa Claus” (Cañero, 2018). An example of these countries is Spain, where the role of Santa Claus or “Papa Noel” was traditionally represented by the Three Wise Men of the Orient. Currently, Santa Claus is one of the main figures surrounding Christmas in many Spanish families, mainly because he appears in Christmas advertising and Christmas carols and specially because of Hollywood productions, “Hollywood has served as the perfect medium to entrench these celebrations in contemporary societies” (Cañero, 2018), all originating in the United States. US has given Spanish Christmas a less Christian meaning, as it was traditionally in Spain, and has replaced it with a meaning more related to ordinary people and the spirit of sharing and celebrating.

But Christmas is not the only holiday that has been transformed by the influence of the United States. Another important celebration is Halloween. Halloween was originally a Celtic pagan holiday that celebrated the beginning of darkness and bad weather. This festivity was changed by the Christian church who decided that it would be

all hallows eve, “All Hallows' Eve (hence the abbreviation Halloween)” (Cañero, 2018), since the following day, November 1st, the Christian church celebrates All Hallows' day. But the Christian origins of the tradition are hardly remembered anymore in the United States where Halloween has overtaken it. The meaning of this holiday is now to dress up in costumes, trick-or-treat, watch horror movies and decorate houses in a spooky way, nothing to do with the Christian tradition but slightly similar to the pagan one. “This celebration has gradually lost its religious component, like many other aspects of life today, being replaced by traditions as distant as American Halloween” (Cañero, 2018).

As we already know, soft power has made the influence of the United States in the culture of different countries much more intense. This has made that the holidays of countries like Spain have been modified by the great cultural influence of the country, “the United States is today, whether we like it or not, the cultural epicenter of the world (...). The capacity for cultural influence of American society is infinite” (Cañero, 2018).

3.3. Soft Power in Hollywood

If one thing is clear, it is that the influence gained for soft power has been obtained mostly from the television industry, as Riani claims: “In fact, the proliferation of media plays a fundamental role in circulating and securing hegemonic ideological representations of the west under the veil of popular culture” (Riani, 2015). There has been nothing more influential than the series and movies coming out of this country and of these the Hollywood industry is queen. The world of cinema, as its name suggests, is a universe apart, with its movies, characters and actors creating a completely different world where everything seems possible and reality is easy to alter, in the words of Robert Clarke: “comforting cultural metonyms in a fantasy of superiority” (Clarke, 2009).

Since the rise of Hollywood at the beginning of the 20th century, it has been used as a means of propaganda both inside and outside the country. From the glamorous image of Hollywood in the 1920's, through the propaganda of the 50's, to the fact that practically all teenagers wanted a high school with cheerleaders and proms, television has been one of the main means of propagation of the so-called American dream and one of the main reasons why the culture of the country is as acclaimed as it is widespread. It all started with post-war propaganda movies as *America's Answer*, “America's Answer had an

enormous impact on wartime audiences; according to film historian Kevin Brownlow, the film broke attendance records in movie theaters across the country” (TV Guide, 2023). Since then, Hollywood has been crucial to share American culture and make the country more appealing for soft power purposes. Hollywood has been, and continues to be, an indispensable tool not only for sponsoring American culture but also for whitening it so to say, as Riani contends, “many of contemporary Hollywood films are produced to paint a positive image of the US and to contribute to the universalization of American values” (Riani, 2015).

As an example of the previous statement, we have the well-known movie, *Rambo* (1982). Rambo, a Vietnam War veteran, returns home to look for the family of a fellow soldier. As he is emaciated after the war, he is easily recognized as an ex-combatant so, when he arrives at the town he was heading to, the sheriff acknowledges him as a veteran and kicks him out of town. This is because the ex-combatants of Vietnam were mistreated, due to two different reasons: on the one hand, they had lost the war and on the other, because of the atrocities committed in Vietnam that turn the majority of the population against the war. However, Rambo returns to the village to try to fulfil his mission; there he is persecuted, imprisoned and tortured, which reminds him of the harshness of the war. In this way, you see another reality of the conflict and feel pity and sympathize with an ex-combat such as Rambo, which made the population slowly change their minds into liking the soldiers they used to hate. As Hana Riani says, “Many propaganda movies (...) are released to push a political agenda and sway particular perspectives to diffuse and reproduce American hegemony” (Riani, 2015).

In contrast, directors such as Oliver Stone and Michael Moore offer a different vision. In their films they decide to show reality as it is, without any kind of overt propagandistic purpose. In films such as *Born on the Fourth of July* or *Platoon*, by director Oliver Stone, a more realistic and crude vision of the Vietnam War is given without any kind of subliminal message. Or in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* where the country's continuing gun problem is shown. This shows that although a large part of cinema is advertising, there is another part where it is used as a condemnation. However, there are also visions such as those of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam that consider the propagandistic use of films and TV as forms of modern colonialism, “The colonial/imperial paradigm did not die with the formal end of colonialism... Indeed, one could speak of a “submerged” imperial presence in many films” (Shohat and Stam, 1994).

The Vietnam War, shown in the above examples, is a conflict that ended long ago. We have been able to observe how over time movies have managed to change the vision about this conflict. However, if we look at a more recent example, such as *Iron Man* (2008) we can see more closely the creation of this propaganda. Tony Stark is a selfish millionaire who is dedicated to selling weapons to the highest bidder, no matter who he is or who he works for, which is how he ends up being attacked by one of his own missiles used by a terrorist gang in Afghanistan. After the incident that almost ended his life, he decides to reinvent himself and become a hero fighting against his own creation. Despite being a haughty character and collaborator of terrorists, Iron Man is one of the most beloved characters in the Marvel film industry, as it “offers a faux critique of America’s imperialism; yet the images, the spectacles and the narratives boost and reaffirm a neocolonial context” (Riani, 2015).

All of these examples demonstrate how Hollywood has become yet another soft power strategy, perhaps one of the most influential, in Riani’s words, “Hollywood movies become one aspect of this soft cultural hegemony where the US has the will and ability to apply its leadership and voice its ideals” (Riani, 2015).

4. Conclusion

On the final analysis, we can conclude that soft power has been a very powerful tool with a fundamental role in international politics, not only in the United States but also worldwide. Even with its ups and downs, it has been crucial in the formation of the modern world. Although it is true that since the arrival of Trump to power in 2016 it is not living its best moment, we can still affirm that it is still a deeply rooted strategy and that, if nothing changes, it will probably continue to be so, not as in its beginnings, when an entire continent depended on it but in a more silent but apparently effective way.

One could say that soft power is a power based on the people's conviction of an idea, that they in turn transmit to their leaders. This concept is based on three fundamental pillars, the American people, the population of the rest of the world and the bridge between the two of them. To begin with, at the end of the Second World War, the first to absorb this policy was not the European population that was being aided by the Marshall Plan, but the American population, as it was pivotal to establish the basis of soft power within their borders before expanding to the international scene. With the Marshall Plan, not only the Europeans were grateful to the United States, but the American citizens themselves were proud of their work, which was enhanced by the popular culture of comics such as Captain America, which evidently promoted patriotism and, more quietly, soft power. In addition to this, the post-war period also saw the so-called propaganda that created the world-famous American dream.

Once the American population already ingrained the idea of the greatness of the United States, the next step would be to convince the rest of the world of this view. This would be done with the intention of creating and disseminate an image of the United States that would make other countries also believe in the greatness of the country and therefore put it on a higher level. Here comes into play Hollywood, whose movies inspired the world not only to like America but to want to be like it.

Being a figure of admiration and authority, the rest of the countries began to adopt some American customs, the most noteworthy of which are festivities. Holidays such as Christmas, with the same background but culturally slightly different, are unified with figures such as Santa Claus. And new holidays emerge, such as Halloween, which in the last couple of decades has begun to be celebrated in many more countries. It is used as a

kind of vehicular language, a link between different cultures so that they can feel represented.

But what is the point of all this? It is the creation of a complex system of influence. US power is exercised through the persuasion of American ideals, values and culture. In this way, by means of development assistance, humanitarian aid and cooperation in addition to the aforementioned cultural products, it is achieved a carefully spun system of alliances of which the US is the one who calls the shots.

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