

Do Morals Matter: A Conversation with Joseph Nye

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00:00: Thanks Joe, nice to see you. I gather you're in New Hampshire?

00:04: Yes, indeed.

00:05: Okay. Well, greetings from London via Aspen.

00:11: I'm fine. This is good.

00:12: I thought... I really enjoyed reading your book, as you probably gathered, since I reviewed it. And I thought one interesting thing that's there, sort of by implication, is that in a way you treat Trump as a normal president. We're so used to, certainly in the UK, of thinking of him as a sort of aberrational figure, but you rate him... You use the same criteria to look at Donald Trump as to look at the other presidents that you examine. So for those of us, probably including me, I must say, who regard Trump as a sort of aberrational figure, what would you say?

00:48: Well, in looking at the 14 presidents since 1945, Trump is an aberration. He is by far the most amoral president that we've had. But as an analyst, I was trying to be as fair-minded as I could, so I used the same criteria and gave him the benefit of the doubt, in places where that was possible, for example, on his use of force and proportionality and so forth that he has done reasonably well. But on the questions of human rights or of the questions of his consequences by destroying international institutions, he really does stand out from the other 14 presidents. So I think that probably he is most amoral, or if you want, immoral, among the presidents. His closest competitor, I guess, would be Richard Nixon. But Nixon paid a lot more attention to the issues, at least the public appearances, of values and morality than Trump has. So yes, he does stand out. But in analyzing him, I tried to be as fair-minded as I could.

02:07: One of the things that you do in the book is draw a distinction between morality and moralism. In other words, the fact that people use moral language doesn't necessarily mean that they are moral or produce moral outcomes, and what does that...

02:21: The United States is based on a moralistic view of itself. I mean, we go back to Puritans and the founding fathers of the Enlightenment, we've always regarded ourselves as particularly moral. Even when we were stealing territory from Mexico or brutalizing rebels in the Philippines, we still saw ourselves as having good intentions. What I try to argue in the book is good intentions aren't enough. And you have to judge really in three dimensions as to whether actions in foreign policy or otherwise are moral. One is the intentions, it does matter what you're trying to do, but second is the means you use, and the third is the consequences, the question of whether you pay enough attention to potentially immoral, unintended consequences.

03:17: So when you look at all three dimensions, you have a better basis for judging. And that basically undercuts this sort of moralistic view. Ari Fleischer, who was George W. Bush's press secretary, praised Bush for his moral clarity. But he didn't look at the problem of the means that

Bush used in the invasion of Iraq, nor did he look at the unintended consequences, which were quite horrible in terms of reviving Al-Qaeda in Iraq and eventually ISIS. So basically, intentions are important, but they're not enough.

03:55: And how much time do you think policy makers, and of course you've been one, as well as being an academic, actually spend consciously or unconsciously thinking about the morality of their foreign policy? Because you'll have both theorists and practitioners who said, "Get real. States aren't moral actors. They guard their own national interests." And policy makers who say, "Look, we don't have time to think about this stuff." But you think that the morality is there in the background, at least?

04:24: Yeah. Well, it's interesting 'cause the answer to that is some do and some don't. When I was working on nuclear issues, I remember asking a French colleague, "Do you ever think about the moral implications of what we're doing?" And his response was, "No. There is no morality, there's only the interests of France." And I don't think he realized what a profound moral judgment he had just uttered, but... So there are some who are totally unconscious of it. But there are others who make... Where morality makes a big difference. I go into these questions since, particularly since we're approaching the anniversary of Hiroshima, of Harry Truman and the atomic bomb, who when he dropped the bomb felt that on a utilitarian calculation, he had no choice, it was the right thing to do.

05:18: But within a few days when he saw the consequences of the bomb, and the military asked him about dropping a third bomb, which was available on Tinian Island, I think, he said, "No, I'm not going to kill that many more women and children." So a moral judgment by the president stopped the military from following through on a plan to drop a third atomic bomb. So there's an example of where morals make a big difference, whereas in my French example it didn't matter at all.

05:50: And didn't Eisenhower make a similar judgment when the military came to him asking to use nuclear weapons?

05:54: Absolutely. At one point he said, "You boys must be crazy to think we're going to drop this on Asians again within a decade."

06:05: And, I mean, so a figure who always seems to crop up in these conversations, your former Harvard colleague, Henry Kissinger. And some have portrayed him as almost an un-American figure, not just because of his accent, but because he was rooted in a more European view, maybe the one similar to the French guy you discovered, which sort of have a slightly more tragic view of history, maybe, or just didn't feel comfortable about moralism in foreign policy. How do you see Kissinger? Do you think he was an amoral figure? There's now a vogue for recategorizing him, as Niall Ferguson called him, the idealist.

06:43: Well, Henry is a very complex person. He was one of my professors when I was a graduate student. I think, in fact, he very much saw the world in European terms, and that meant that he discounted some of the moralism that was typical of Americans with their good intentions, but to

see him as an amoralist, I think, is wrong. Henry... His concern about world order, for example, represents a concern about the implications or the consequences, moral consequences of actions, including the structures that affect states. So when you read his book on world order, he says, yes, a world order depends on balance of power, but it also depends on legitimacy and values. So that's not the view of a pure amoralist.

07:38: But do you think it's right to see that America kind of swinging big pendulum, as though you have particularly moralistic figures followed by more amoral figures, so the Nixon-Kissinger period followed by Jimmy Carter?

07:54: Well, there is something in that. I'd take it back even further to saying that Woodrow Wilson, very much a moralist, justified our intervention in World War I on very American-type grounds. If Teddy Roosevelt had been president, which was a close call in 1912, he would have justified it more, I think, on balance of power terms, but the moralism of Wilson's approach to it led to a reaction in the 1930s that this had all been a mistake and we ought to stay out of that. And I think you can make a case that the ultra-isolationism of the United States in the '30s had very immoral consequences. It allowed the rise of fascism and the overturn of the existing international order.

08:45: That was followed by, if you want a term that I, well, Roosevelt and Truman, saying, we're going to create a world order because we have to promote certain values. After all, the Americans and the Brits never quite lived up to the Atlantic Charter, but it was indeed a very idealistic type of statement, and the creation of the UN followed in that vein. This carries forward into Kennedy, who I think had illusions about Vietnam, but then that's replaced by the amoralism of Nixon's view, we have to get out of Vietnam, even though we're not going to win it, but willingness to sacrifice another 22,000 American lives to get a decent interval, which turned out to be worth about two years.

09:39: And then that, of course, the reaction against that leads to the reforms of the 1970s and to Carter's election and Carter's elevation of human rights principles. So yes, there is something of a yin and yang or a cycle of the degree of morality on the surface of American foreign policy. Again, if you think of it in all three dimensions, both intentions and means and the consequences, there's a little more stability than appears from just the statement of intentions.

10:18: I'm interested that you mentioned Woodrow Wilson, because of course there's now this backlash against Wilson, largely based on, well, almost entirely, as I can see it, based on his domestic record on race. His name has been removed from the Woodrow, formerly Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, which made me think, particularly as someone who's written so much about soft power, is it possible to make a distinction between the morality of a president acting overseas and what he represents domestically given the importance of the country's image and what it represents domestically to what it's doing overseas?

10:52: I don't think you can sustain that separation for long. At the time that Wilson was president, he was very much a hero in Europe and was lionized, despite the fact that he was taking atrocious actions at home by resegregating the civil service. But at that time, the attitudes toward racism and imperialism were so different that the Americans didn't lose a lot of soft power because of Wilson's

retrograde attitudes on race at home. On the other hand, by the time that Eisenhower was president after World War II, Eisenhower was trying to press several of the Southern states to change their policies on segregation, because he said, we're trying to recognize these African countries, these newly independent African countries, and if they can't drive from New York to Washington without being prohibited from stopping at a rest stop because of segregation rules, we're going to lose internationally.

12:00: So by that time, Eisenhower was aware of the conflict between domestic policy attitudes and international soft power. And today, of course, it's very much in the forefront. The number of international protests which have reflected the American Black Lives Matter movement is quite fascinating. There is an interesting aspect to it, though, about American soft power, which is, sometimes American protests can help soft power. Indeed, I always cite the fact that during Vietnam when people were protesting through the streets internationally against our government policies in Vietnam, they weren't singing the Communist Internationale, they were singing Martin Luther King's We Shall Overcome. So that ability to protest, to rise above some of our problems, or at least to show that we're striving to change them, can produce a type of soft power, even if the policies in the short run produce protests at home.

13:12: I'd like to follow up on that in a second. I just want to remind the people listening in that you're also very welcome to ask questions. If you use the hand-raising facility, then hopefully, I will see that in my little panel and I will call up on questions in about 10 minutes time. Just picking up on, since it's so much in the news, Black Lives Matter's protests and so on, again, I was very interested to see the way in which Secretary of State Pompeo has attacked efforts to rewrite American... Rewrite American history, but to re-emphasize different aspects of American history, the 1619 Project, and all of that, as undermining America overseas. 'Cause he says, "You are saying to the world that America is not a moral actor, that America, even the foundation of America was built on immorality and that will damage us internationally." How do you see that argument?

14:10: Well, Pompeo is mistaken on that. It was best put yesterday morning in our Aspen's Strategy Forum by my co-chair, Condi Rice. And Condi said, "Yes, we've got these flaws, we've got these flaws. What makes this country different is the ability to admit it and to strive to change it. And the fact that we're continually struggling to improve ourselves and to deal with these problems is what really is the source of our attraction or our soft power." And I think that's right. I think protests, in that sense, are not something that damages us. It's something actually that helps us.

14:53: But, again, sticking with the current... Sorry, it's a slight journalistic sort of problem, but Trump, if he... The polls suggest it's unlikely that he'll be re-elected, but there's a long way to go. If Donald Trump is re-elected, do you think that represents a really permanent, possibly irrecoverable shift in what the United States represents to the rest of the world?

15:20: Well, I think if Trump is re-elected, there probably will be a more prolonged decline of American soft power. The public opinion polls worldwide show that our soft power, our attractiveness has gone down quite dramatically. There was a recent poll a week or two ago that showed we were about as attractive as Russia and China in many parts of the world, that was around 30% or so. On the other hand, a number of countries are saying that this is an aberration and the Americans will some day recover, but I think if Trump's re-elected that's going to be harder to

maintain those attitudes. As one of my European friends once put it to me, "You can hold your breath for four years. It's hard to hold it for eight years."

16:13: Yes, indeed. But I guess there is a sort of different in tone between the President, though, and Secretary of State Pompeo in that the President, as we were saying earlier, is almost gleefully amoral, likes to praise dictatorships. One of the few, possibly only American president I can think of, who doesn't talk of America as a shining city on the hill and all of that, whereas Mike Pompeo's argument with China is increasingly being cast in moral terms. How do you see, firstly, that tension within the administration? And also do you think it is inevitable, kind of following on the session we just had with the Singaporean foreign minister, that we are moving into an era where US-China is once again an ideological conflict and a moral conflict?

17:01: Well, I do think there is a difference in Pompeo and Trump. Pompeo appeals much more to ideals than Trump does. Trump is not a man, who, any time through his career, has paid a lot of attention to these issues of values, and read the recent book by his niece. And indeed, if you read his own autobiography, *The Art of the Deal*, and you look at the way Trump responded to the murder of Khashoggi, in which he said, "Well, get over it, these things happen." Pompeo has done much more, in terms of appealing to values and ideals, so it is a quite a different style. The question of how this will affect the relationship with China is still somewhat uncertain.

17:53: Indeed, Americans are going to need to express their value differences with China over things like Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and so forth. On the other hand, we're going to have to learn, and I try to deal with this in the last chapter of my book, with a different world, in which we're going to have to understand a what I call a cooperative rivalry, because if you go back to what Minister Balakrishnan was saying a few minutes ago, there's some issues where we're going to have to work with China, even while there are other areas where we'll be competing with China, and we're going to have to learn to do that simultaneously, for example, on climate change. There's no way we can solve that problem alone, there's no way China, or Europe, or anybody can solve it alone.

18:43: And if you look forward to the agenda of world politics in, let's say, 2030, it's hard to believe that climate change and pandemics are not going to play a much larger role than they are today. So a strategy that looks only at great power competition and thinks of it in traditional terms is going to miss the importance of this change in the agenda. So we're going to have to learn to deal with what I call power with others, as well as power over others. And that ability to do both simultaneously is not easy and we haven't begun to resolve that.

19:24: So when you look at the moralistic language that is now becoming more and more prominent in the... Suddenly, as we were saying, Pompeo's discourse on China, do you think that's in some ways a welcome development that the US is returning to being true to itself and speaking up on issues like Xinjiang or are you worried? As I was talking to a friend on the other side, on the Democratic side, he said that while he shared some of Pompeo's concerns, he was also worried that America tends to overshoot, that it will... Once it discovers a new moral crusade, won't be able to retain that kind of balanced approach that you were describing earlier. How do you see it?

20:06: Well, there is a danger that if you overdo the ideological component you make it impossible

to work on things where you have the need to have power with others. On the other hand, the last thing we want to do is give up our expression of values, which is a very important part of our soft power, but it's also who we are, and keeping that in balance is going to be the difficult issue. So I think the interesting question, if you have a Biden presidency next year, will be whether you get a better balance on these issues than we've seen in this administration.

20:48: Yeah. Before I come to the participants, slightly off topic, but related to it, there's a lot of talk now about this being a new Cold War and a second Cold War. Somebody who's been writing about foreign policy throughout the first Cold War, does that analogy make sense to you?

21:07: I think the Cold War analogy doesn't make sense. We should get out of our mind historical analogies, whether it's the Peloponnesian War or the Cold War, and realize that the agenda of world politics is changing. And if you look at the real Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union had virtually no trade with each other; now if anything, we have too much trade with China. We had virtually no social contact with each other. Now, there's something like 370,000 Chinese students in the United States, and there's a whole new set of global issues that technology has put on the table, such as climate change and pandemics and so forth, which weren't there in the Cold War. So to use the metaphor of the Cold War is not the best way to think of a strategy.

22:01: And yet there are elements of it. The military confrontations side of it seems to be becoming more accentuated. I saw Kevin Rudd, who we were talking about earlier, has written about this in the last couple of days. And you were, I think, in the Pentagon at the time of the Taiwan Straits crisis. Are you, specifically on Taiwan, are you concerned now that that's the next front line after Hong Kong and how do you think America should handle it, because there are... I think there's a warming to Taiwan, is that something you welcome?

22:34: Well, we definitely want to keep the policy we've had on Taiwan, which is no unilateral declaration and no use of force. So within that box, let the two sides sort of work out their arrangements. The danger I see is really miscalculation. After all, if we go back to 1914, none of the great powers wanted the four years of devastation which toppled three empires and which essentially set the world back drastically. It was based on a miscalculation. They expected the Third Balkan War, what they got was World War I, which was a much worse thing.

23:21: So my worry is that if we overdo the great power competition and miscalculate, we can have profoundly moral consequences, so that ability to keep a perspective and manage a relationship which has both competitive and rival risks as well as cooperative elements is going to be the key to a good strategy and a good foreign policy. The danger, of course, is it, as Lyndon Johnson once said about Gerry Ford, Americans aren't very good at walking and chewing gum at the same time. So the key question is going to be whether we're going to have the sense of balance that we need to avoid that type of miscalculation, not just over Taiwan, but also over the South China Sea.

24:11: Sure. Okay, we've got a couple of questions. The first person to put his virtual hand up was Michael Nelson, so if you... I think it takes a few seconds and then he should appear to ask you a question.

[pause]

24:33: Thank you very much for the opportunity to ask a question. So happy that this topic was on the agenda. I work on technology and international affairs, and so I wanted to ask whether you see any new moral questions arising as artificial intelligence becomes more common, as we have a way to reach three billion, four billion people through social media, particularly interested in your thoughts on the moral implications of disinformation and the kind of things we've seen in the last four years in terms of election meddling.

25:09: Well, those are great questions, and I conclude my book in the ninth chapter by saying, what are the big challenges in the future? And one is what I call the power shift from East to West or West to East, rather, which is a traditional from the West Asia and how do we manage that. But the other is the change in technological parameters, which is putting a whole new set of issues on the agenda, and we have much less experience in dealing with that. You mentioned AI, we already have seen the problems of having to deal with various forms of cyber conflict, so yes, I think these are going to be the big issues of the future.

25:56: Okay, next question is, I believe, from Thomas Pickering. Tom Pickering.

26:15: Joe, can you hear me?

26:18: Yes, Tom.

26:20: Great to join you. Joe, it seems to me that the thing we haven't talked about, but the great ghost at the picnic here, is the question of deterrence, the immorality of planetary genocide to preserve planetary life. And what one seems to be is the comfortable nature of where we are and the directions of shooting off toward a nuclear arms race in one way or another, and the absolute failure of any alternative arrangements, thoughts, policies, to deal with this huge contradiction, the frightening difficulty of accidents leading us, in fact, to the immoral end in order to preserve, but inadequately, the moral end.

27:16: Joe, did you...

27:18: Did you hear me at all?

27:19: Hello? Are you there?

27:22: I am here.

27:23: I'm having problems, and I'm hoping that Joe Nye also heard you, but he does not appear to be...

27:30: No, Joe looks frozen, but I'm not sure that the quality of my question made that possible.

27:37: No, no, it's a big question, isn't it, nuclear deterrence. Maybe it's frozen in horror, at the thought of nuclear holocaust, but... So, well, I guess we'll just leave it to the computer team and

hopefully he will reappear. Tom, can I do something unfair while we await Joe to return?

27:58: Sure, Gideon.

28:00: What's your answer to that question?

28:01: My answer, obviously, is that we need to reverse the process of destroying the arms control agreements and increase the necessity of dealing with them. We need to very, very carefully limit the nuclear arms race, which seems to be getting us nowhere. We need to find alternative ways of increasing the confidence against accident and miscalculation. And despite the fuzzy, wobbly nature of the other long-term answer, we do need to look again, as the team of four told us years ago, at the zero possibility, which is made a great deal harder by the increasing skepticism of the rampant mistrust in the world community. But I think there are no other solutions that are out there, but the failure to tend the garden, so to speak, a George Shultz phrase, on the nuclear accident issue should not be something that should totally disappear behind the miasma of US-China competition.

29:19: Okay, well, I don't think we've got Joe back, but I do see Nick Burns appearing on the screen, who I think was...

29:25: I'm a poor substitute for Professor Nye, but it's... When I came on, I think we've lost connection with Joe, I hope he'll come back before the end of the hour, but what a pleasure to welcome Ambassador Pickering. And Tom, I just caught the last end of your comment. I thought, Tom, your comments were so important, because we heard from Ambassador Cui Tiankai yesterday kind of the cool confidence, I would say, of the Chinese leadership, that they have the momentum in the world, and the United States is a little bit on the back foot. We heard from Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia that the Australians, very concerned, obviously, with the push for power of China, building up their own military. And Tom, you have so much experience... What we're trying to debate here in Aspen is, of course we're in a competitive phase with China, militarily, ideologically, economically. There has to be a balance, and we do need to work with the Chinese on climate change and the pandemic. Your views on that, Tom?

30:30: I think entirely right, Nick. I don't believe, in fact, that we have to adopt a totally soft, compliant and wobbly position to China to lure them into a new adherence to the progressive international order. We need to have our feet on the ground, firmly planted and put down, on those issues we feel are most important. But I do believe that your suggestion of climate change takes us to the point where over the period of time, great power competition has been tempered by existential concerns with which they both have to deal.

31:12: The US and the Soviet Union after the Cuban Missile Crisis sharpened the concern I expressed in my original question, and the second question is, is climate change existential? I believe it is a slow-rolling but inexorably existential problem. Therefore, we ought to find a way to deal with it. We are not exclusive, neither US nor China nor the two of us, in doing that, but our relationship if we in fact adhere to a set of actions that helps us avoid existential catastrophe, that in itself can cover over the second-order problems we have, which are legion, in a way that does two things. It helps enhance the do-no-harm aspect of that, and secondly creates an environment for

further solution.

32:09: So it has an offshoot as well in terms of the US-China relationship. It will never be perfect, we know that, and we will have to live with a competitive activity with China, as Joe has said, but at the same time, it doesn't mean we are condemned, as Americans are wont to do, to substitute demonization for foreign policy and find the solution in complete cut-off isolation, further military confrontation, and the prospect of a nuclear catastrophe between us as the only outcome.

32:46: Tom, thank you very much, and Tom and Gideon, we have just a couple of minutes left. We still don't have Joe. Let me just say...

32:53: I think we do, actually. I think he's...

32:56: Gideon, maybe ask you to react to this. At the end of the interview with Cui Tiankai yesterday, and I've known him for 25 years because we interacted as respective diplomats, I felt it important to warn him that in the United States, there is a high degree of... There's much agreement between Democrats and Republicans that China's push for power, Hong Kong, Uighurs, the Indian border, the harassment and use of force against the Philippines and Vietnam in the South China Sea, against Japan in the East China Sea, has gotten the attention of both Democrats and Republicans. I think there's a high degree of unity in the United States that we have to stand up to the Chinese. Yes, we do want to cooperate on those issues, but there's also a competitive factor here, and I just felt it was important to say that to Cui Tiankai. And now we have for the last two minutes of this interview, Professor Nye is back. Gideon, I'm going to turn this back to you.

34:00: Okay, well, thank you very much. I will come back to Joe Nye, but I think as an outsider, that description of what's going on in Washington seems accurate to me and I would add there's actually been a shift in mood in London, really in the last couple of months where we saw a reversal of the decision on Huawei, concern about Hong Kong, and so on. So I think you could almost supplement your kind of slight warning to the Chinese that I think there's a shift in mood across the West now about what China's up to. So perhaps we can end on that note with Joe. What's the moral way of guiding our way through this and balancing the issues that Tom Pickering was talking about, and indeed the Singaporean foreign secretary, Dr. Balakrishnan? How do you balance these planetary concerns, the absolute imperative to cooperate on climate change, with the more traditional moral concerns about human rights and great power competition? Is there a way of balancing?

34:58: Well I think that is key. I apologize for the technical failure, which apparently happened right after I had answered a question about technology. But there is, I think, extraordinary moral significance to this ability to have a sense of balance, to be able to... If you think of a cooperative rivalry, to pay attention to both terms, cooperation and rivalry, at the same time. Right now, the political mood in Washington is all on the rivalry, and we're forgetting the cooperation. And the key to success for a moral foreign policy is being, having that sense of balance and prudence that will require looking ahead to a strategy for 2030 in which the agenda is going to look somewhat different than it does today. So I think we'll hope that after the silly season of elections is over that we'll get more discussion of what that balance means.

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36:01: Okay, well, thank you very much, Joe, and thanks for coming back to round off the session, and I will now hand over back to the Aspen team. Thanks to all of you.

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