

Views from the Pews. Soft power

When I was learning (years ago) to touch type on an ordinary typewriter, any mistake inevitably involved stopping, extracting the paper, applying correcting fluid and waiting for it to dry before trying to find the right place again. This rigmarole cost precious minutes, and much more if carbon copies had to be corrected as well. Fear of making mistakes punished by unpleasant consequences made my typing nervous and progress slow.

The same logic often applies to the use of force to correct any perceived fault. It is always resented and usually counter productive, because those of its victims not inhibited by fear are less likely change their behaviour than to find ways to avoid punishment for ignoring the rules. At a more serious extreme, such “Right-handed, hard power” was used by the medieval church to threaten sinners with hell fire, but it didn’t stop people sinning. And only 200 years ago, convict settlements in Australia still used brutal methods to “grind rogues into honest men”.

When I switched to learning to type on a word processor, the cost of a mistake could be erased in seconds on screen, which encouraged much more confidence in practice, and faster navigation around the keyboard. Likewise, dogs and small children recoil from punishment, but repeat whatever behaviour gets an encouraging response. Therefore, training them is quicker and easier if mistakes are ignored and the right responses rewarded. Children who have learned that bad behaviour is the only way to get inattentive parents to listen to them were actively taught by their parents to be that way.

In international politics, the consequences of misusing hard power in the nuclear age are extreme enough to make old ideas of survivable warfare too dangerous. Instead, nations try to operate under the concept of ‘soft power’, in the various ways of spreading the influence of their particular culture or set of values. Examples of ‘soft power’ include the vast number of foreign students enrolled in western countries; the extent of academic exchanges; and the worldwide spread of American culture in their media products.

‘Political capital’ describes the soft power of a strong leader to rally the electorate around political goals. In the business world one would use the term ‘goodwill’. Jesus used soft power to shame the complaining labourers into understanding the immense, unmeasurable generosity of God. The whole of the natural world represents God’s use of soft power on us.

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