

Occupy Wall Street and American Soft Power

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One of the most potent and devastating responses of assertions of American soft power is the accusation of American hypocrisy. This charge is so widespread that it has become axiomatic to both many on the American left as well as those seeking to resist American influence, even when it is benign or even positive, abroad. In general, this is a result of the uneven application of support for ideals such as freedom and democracy, the frequent prioritization of short term security and economic needs over these ideals or the inability of the U.S. to live up to its own lofty rhetoric.

Occasionally, there are specific events which make this hypocrisy more apparent. For example, the 2000 presidential election and the subsequent non-recount in Florida gave ample rhetorical ammunition to those who do not appreciate American intervention in the name of fair elections. Similarly, the cozy relationship between Haliburton and the Bush White House undermined American efforts to address issue of corruption through soft power and leading by example.

Soft power relies heavily on the image of the U.S. abroad as a tolerant, democratic, fair and open society. Any deviance from this image by the U.S. will be noticed and ultimately will undermine American efforts to assert soft power and achieve its diplomatic aims. It also allows foreign leaders, particularly authoritarian ones, to defend their own misdeeds by citing, and exaggerating, American ones. This is the situation the U.S. now faces with regards to Occupy Wall Street. The widespread images of abuses of mayoral power in cities like Oakland and New York which have been characterized by excessive force and little regard for the first amendment, as well as callous police brutality, most recently and visibly at the Davis campus of the University of California, have stood in stark contrast to American words of support for the brave demonstrators in North Africa during this past year.

Comparisons between the demonstrators who have participated in the Occupy movement and those who have demonstrated against dictators like Mubarak, Gaddafi or Assad cannot be taken very seriously, as despite the courage and principles of many demonstrators in the U.S., the contexts are not comparable. Freedom of speech, police restraint and democracy are exponentially stronger in the U.S. than in Egypt, Libya or Syria; and Barack Obama, Michael Bloomberg and others are not dictators. Nonetheless, it is difficult see the actions of an American president who speaks eloquently in support of those standing up to dictators overseas but is silent in the face of police brutality in American town squares and college campuses as internally consistent.

Freedom of speech and assembly are key elements of the liberalization and democratization which the U.S. seeks to promote abroad, but images, for example, of the media being excluded from covering the dismantling of Occupy Wall Street in New York City suggest that at home these freedoms are often only honored in the breach. At numerous Occupy demonstrations,

chants of “The Whole World is Watching”, have been heard. In the age of You Tube and Twitter, this is truer than ever.

Every image of a New York City or Oakland policeman abusing his position, every story about how a veteran or senior citizen was injured by one of these policeman, ever image of a university police officer casually pepper spraying a few college students doing nothing more than sitting quietly at a demonstration damages the ability of the U.S. to influence people and governments around the world and provides fodder for those authoritarian leaders who would like to ignore American entreaties before killing or beating up demonstrators in their own countries.