

Nov 04, 2016 by [Jade Miller](#)

World Cup Diplomacy ^[1]

USC Ph.D candidate Jade Miller explores soccer's ability to unify and divide nations, and draws upon examples from this year's World Cup tournament.

As a new member of the blog team, I'd like to note [this report](#) I recently published regarding the public diplomacy implications and opportunities surrounding the 2006 FIFA World Cup. A summary follows.

Soccer, arguably the world's most popular sport, has the power both to unite the people of the world in a shared passion, and to divide citizens of opposing countries in unfettered nationalist zeal. While the 2006 World Cup did not produce any political results as dramatic as the "Football War" of 1969 (wherein a rancorous qualifying match between El Salvador and Honduras erupted into a full-on war which left 6000 dead and many more injured), much has been written in the world press about both the positive and negative implications of the tournament in today's climate.

The potential of the Cup to bring about global unity and peace have been extolled by many. Commentators, including Kofi Annan, have acclaimed the tournament's potential to unite citizens of different nations, so often at odds, in a shared passion. Some have suggested that the World Cup might even work towards peace in countries engaged in civil war, such as the Ivory Coast, by uniting warring parties under one shared flag. Others have suggested that the Cup can bring about increased liberties in authoritarian countries now forced to exist on world stage, as has been the case for Iranian female sport spectators.

Of course, the flipside of this international shared passion for soccer is the nationalistic fervor that goes along with national team World Cup fandom. In the traditionally ethnically homogenous nations of Western Europe, the appearance of immigrant players on national teams has challenged conceptions of what constitutes national identity, and spawned some anti-immigration taunting and even demonstrations. The controversial head-butting incident involving France's star player Zinedine Zidane has been linked to such sentiment.

Other controversies dividing teams have also caused or highlighted consternation and resentment between the people of competing nations. Although neither the Israeli nor Palestinian national teams qualified for the World Cup, for instance, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still made it to the tournament. When Ghanaian player John Pantasil waved the Israeli flag after scoring a goal (he plays for an Israeli team and said he waved the flag to thank his many Israeli supporters), much of the Muslim world was aghast, and some declared the end of their support for Team Ghana.

Nowhere has the specter of strong nationalism been as troubling as in Germany, the hosts of this year's World Cup and a nation reticent since World War II to display overtly patriotic sentiments. Yet the tournament was, by most reports, full of German national pride and

patriotism, exhibited on a world stage. External commentators praised this as an opportunity for Germans to rise above the constant shadow of World War II and shed their uptight image in favor of an image of a fun-loving rejoicing people. Within Germany, however, this rejoicing was controversial, with some (largely older Germans) finding such patriotic celebrations inappropriate while others (largely younger Germans) saw no problem with such behavior.
