

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Obama's Missed Public Diplomacy Opportunity in Egypt ^[1]

Not much was needed; just some phrasing such as, "President Mubarak has served his country well, and ensuring peaceful transition to new leadership would continue that service."

If President Obama had said something like that, Hosni Mubarak would have been furious and probably ignored the advice, but Egyptians and others throughout the Arab world and beyond would have seen that for once the United States was not defending a dictator, but rather was standing on the side of democracy.

Instead, Obama was overly cautious, and the moment was lost. There are times when caution should be set aside, and this was one of them.

The essence of public diplomacy is communicating directly with people in other countries. Through Al Jazeera and other news organizations, words from the White House reach not only those in the streets of Egypt, but millions of others throughout the region whose mistrust of America is profound. When Obama gave his heralded speech in Cairo in 2009, its impact was short-lived because of too little follow-up. Now, by facilitating historic change in Egypt, Obama could put some substance behind his words.

Mubarak is finished. The only question is when will he leave and who will replace him. If it is a member of his inner circle, such as newly anointed vice president Omar Suleiman, the people's demands for change will only grow louder unless this successor is clearly just a transition leader and a firm date is set for truly open elections. Post-Mubarak politics in Egypt will be messy, but a certain level of messiness is at the heart of democracy.

With Mubarak's departure, the United States will lose an ally who has been pliable and reliable, but if the United States helps Egypt move smoothly into its new era, the loss of Mubarak will be mitigated by new friendship with the Arab people.

This will happen only if Obama does not allow himself to be perceived as Mubarak's defender to the bitter end. Would shoving Mubarak out the door be betrayal? In Mubarak's mind, yes. But the era of relying on bought-and-paid-for dictators is passing. It would be nice, for a change, to see the United States ride the crest of a wave rather than splash forlornly in its wake.
