

Nov 04, 2016 by [Adam Clayton Powell, III](#)

# Egypt: Technology, Jazz and the Common Wealth <sup>[1]</sup>

WASHINGTON -- From events of the past three weeks a number of lessons can be drawn, some old and some new:

First, the phrase "the Arab street" has been redefined by Tahrir Square. We don't need acute listening agents or polling to see what the Arab world wants.

Second, more than ever, technology is the new jazz. If you google that phrase, you can trace it back to a 1994 book, *Democracy and New Media* to which I was a contributor, and that was already becoming clear seventeen years ago when the World Wide Web was still new.

In the Cold War, American jazz and later rock music was welcomed throughout the Soviet empire, particularly by young people, even or especially where U.S. foreign policy was not the order of the day. Today it is American technology that is welcomed throughout the world, even and especially in parts of the world where U.S. foreign policy is not in favor.

Half a century ago, it was Willis Conover on the Voice of America that brought such U.S. artists Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman to young people throughout the world. Today, it is the US-invented Internet that brings U.S.-created Facebook, Twitter and Google to young people throughout the world, even or especially where U.S. foreign policy is not in favor.

And so with science diplomacy: Half a century ago, the U.S. State Department dispatched Dizzy Gillespie and Louis Armstrong to entertain eager audiences in hostile parts of the world. Today, the U.S. government sends leading scientists and engineers to visit eager audiences in countries where even American diplomats are viewed with suspicion.

There is another, related U.S. outreach to countries worldwide that echoes the appeal of American jazz and American technology: American higher education. From every part of the world, young people in increasing numbers are competing to enter U.S. colleges and universities.

USC has more international students than any other major American university - more than 7,000 are from other countries - but the number of students entering the U.S. from other countries is rising sharply. In my years as USC's vice provost for globalization, it was obvious that there was no country in the world that did not eagerly court our and other high-ranking U.S. universities.

Instead of the lady in the harbor's "give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," today it is send us your best and your brightest, taking classes. Think of Oxford and Cambridge at the height of the British Empire: that is the position held worldwide by U.S. universities.

Unfortunately, once these talented visitors receive their diplomas and are ready to be

productive and innovative men and women, they are expelled from the U.S. by post-9/11 American visa policies, but that is another issue. Perhaps it is a new form of U.S. foreign aid, supplying our friends and enemies worldwide with highly trained graduates, with the price paid in American competitiveness.

Which brings us to, well, competitiveness -- and to Tahrir Square. Egypt now has a great opportunity, but it is not only, and perhaps not even primarily, political. The crowds in the streets of Cairo, Tunis and Algiers are asking for more than political freedom.

The one thing that everyone in the Arab world wants, according to Gallup CEO Jim Clifton, citing every one of the Gallup surveys in the Arab world, is that people there want what people everywhere else want: jobs. The Arab world has some of the largest percentages of young people in the world - and some of the highest unemployment numbers. For Egypt to realize its potential, including its political freedom, the country must expand opportunities for employment. And that will take more than just a change of presidents.

One problem is the very size of the Egyptian bureaucracy: more than a third of the country's workers are employed by the government. In Jordan, it is even higher - 50%. By contrast, in economically more vibrant Turkey, the percentage is 13%, in China it is 8% and in Singapore, consistently at the top of the global rankings of business-friendly countries, it is 3%. Writing Thursday in the *Wall Street Journal*, columnist Daniel Henninger asked, "What more do you need to know?"

Mubarak's answer last week was exactly the wrong one: he decreed a 15% pay increase - but only for government workers. If anything that may have infuriated the crowd in Tahrir Square last week, and it didn't satisfy government workers, who took to the streets today to ask for more. But in the end, despite his missteps last week, Mubarak finally left, and in that act he becomes the Arab world's Gorbachev.

Now the question is whether Egypt can emerge as an economic leader in the region. And the question for Washington is how the U.S. can help make that happen. With large numbers of educated young men and women, now largely unemployed, if Egypt can become as productive as, say, Turkey, the impact on the Arab world would be immense. The opportunity now is for Cairo to leverage the enthusiasm and the people of Tahrir Square to become the leader of a regional common wealth.

---