

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

The U.S. Presidential Campaign as Public Diplomacy ^[1]

We Americans tend to take our presidential campaigns lightly. We see them as fodder for *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*, and we become so enamored with the incessant polling that we watch the candidates as if they were race horses approaching the finish line.

But for people in many other parts of the world, the American presidential campaign is a thing of wonder. No troops are in the streets; voting irregularities occur but are nowhere near the scope of those in numerous other countries; and when the balloting is completed an orderly succession takes place (rarely marred as it was in 2000).

As a public diplomacy tool, this process is invaluable, but how should it be presented? I once attended a U.S. election-night reception in a Middle Eastern country at which an earnest U.S. diplomat led a panel discussing the role of the American vice president. I thought the snoring would drown out the panelists.

That is not the way to go. People throughout the world are interested in the American experience, but principally in terms of how it might affect their own lives. That is one reason it was so discouraging to see the Egyptian police raid the offices of American and other NGOs that are in the country to help Egypt build its own electoral process.

This resort to strong-arm tactics certainly does not help Egypt's efforts to become a leader in a region where democratic aspirations are high, and the United States has correctly protested strongly. In overcoming such obstructions, America should lead by example in the following ways:

- Encourage international news media to thoroughly cover the U.S. elections. Some news organizations, such as Al Jazeera, already do this well, but new emphasis should be placed on providing access to politicians, academics, and others who will explain the process. Global news media are getting better journalistically and more influential politically. Public diplomacy must keep pace.
- Use websites and social media to reach reformers around the world. Although the Arab Awakening of this past year has drawn the most attention, activists in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and elsewhere are hard at work to change their own political systems. The U.S. electoral process is one of their models, and they need information about everything from finding candidates to getting out the vote. Interactive and innovative online communication about American politics would be especially important for the rising generation that will shape their countries' futures, and reaching out to them would be a useful way to expand student-to-student and other connections. Throughout any such efforts, the theme should not be "Look at how great America is," but rather, "Look for ways you might adapt the U.S. political process to your own

country's needs." This would underscore an emphasis in U.S. public diplomacy on service, not self-advertising.

The 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, as well as races for other offices, may well inspire people elsewhere in the world more than Americans themselves. Although it is unfortunate that Americans take their political system for granted, it remains a showcase that can enhance America's standing throughout the world. The U.S. State Department, which has shown itself willing to work hard on such matters, should take full advantage of the public diplomacy opportunities available during this election year.
