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In Egypt, American soccer manager Bob Bradley embodies sports diplomacy ^[1]

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When I hear ‘sports diplomacy’ evoked in conversation I often wince, knowing that 99% of the examples do not live up to the standards of the term.

Athletes and coaches who work for a team outside of their country for no purpose other than for a love of the game and personal gain do not always qualify. There is no universal definition of public diplomacy, but from my perspective there must be intention on the part of the actor to influence opinion.

For example, over one hundred Venezuelans have played for Major League Baseball teams over the past decade, and yet relations between the United States and Venezuela have not improved at all since then. Many of these players are too consumed with their jobs on the field and the adjustment of a new culture to take on an additional role; they have no intention of being “sports diplomats”. For the fans, it may just be as Jerry Seinfeld said, that we are cheering for laundry.

The best example of sports diplomacy in recent memory is soccer manager Bob Bradley, who is in charge of the Egyptian national team. The recent unrest in the Muslim world over the crudely-made video disparaging the prophet Muhammad reminded me of his efforts to use sport to spread American goodwill abroad. The 54-year-old father of three is succeeding in a country where the State Department spends millions of dollars each year trying to engage with public diplomacy initiatives.

I interviewed Bradley on several occasions in 2001 when covering the Chicago Fire of Major League Soccer for a community newspaper. Like most professional managers, his focus never shifted from his team and its performance. I never figured that he had the potential to be a deft cultural ambassador.

After his dismissal in 2011 from the U.S. men’s national team, Bradley agreed to manage the Egyptian national team. People who follow soccer questioned the move as the New Jersey native had never worked outside of the United States. From the outside, it truly appeared to be a Faustian move by a journeyman desperate to remain relevant at any cost.

Bradley, however, did not see it that way and immediately immersed himself and his family into the culture, engaging in community outreach. He filmed commercials promoting children’s hospitals and regularly appeared on Egyptian talk shows, sprinkling Arabic phrases into his remarks. In February, a riot at a soccer match in Port Said led to 79 deaths as opposing fans attacked one another with sticks and knives. Bradley threw caution to the wind and marched

alongside thousands of Egyptians who protested the lack of security. He even donated money to the victims.

Some of his critics may see this as a self-imposed exile, but Bradley has proven otherwise. In a country that questions the motives of the American government, Bradley is adored. You could even say he has become a David Beckham type of figure, minus the celebrity wife and the underwear ads. He attaches no strings to his goodwill. Diplomats need to take note.

Athletes and managers often work abroad for money and fame, with little involvement in the community unless stipulated in their contract. Bradley's efforts appear genuine. Egyptians still expect Bradley to qualify their squad for the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, but he has become more than just a hired hand. His ability to gain acceptance by a skeptical foreign public requires further study by public diplomacy scholars and practitioners.

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