

The FIFA Scandal: Playing Hard Ball with Soft Power

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Global Research, June 11, 2015

[Counter Punch](#) 10 June 2015

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Law and Justice](#)

The FBI agents who broke the International Football Federation scandal in late May by getting a bunch of foreigners arrested in Switzerland are naturally convinced that their sole purpose is to combat corruption. American ideologues who advocate “R2P” – the “right and responsibility to protect” – have no doubt that U.S. armed intervention is a suitable way to protect human rights. Air Force officers who bomb people in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Yemen take it for granted that they are eliminating terrorism.

After all, bad things like corruption, violations of human rights, terrorism, exist in the world. Wasn't the United States of America created by the Founding Fathers, if not by God, to rid the world of bad things? FBI agents, mainstream editorialists, Air Force pilots, all enshrouded like space-walkers in the isolating cocoon of American self-righteousness, are not equipped to doubt their own good intentions.

Trouble is, a growing majority of people in the world outside that cocoon definitely have their doubts.

Extraterritoriality

In its perpetual mission to impose virtue on the world, the United States has three major weapons: its overwhelming killer arsenal, ideology, and the U.S. dollar. More and more people outside the self-styled “international community” (the English-speaking world and the European Union) perceive only one main purpose underlying the use of those weapons: the preservation and enforcement of U.S. world hegemony.

Thus, while Americans congratulate themselves for moving to “clean up international sports”, much of the world simply sees yet another instance of the United States using its power advantage to bully the world and get its own way.

The dollar is the primary U.S. “soft power” asset. The vast majority of international financial exchanges are in dollars, and must be cleared by a compensation chamber in the United States, enabling the United States to require that all dollars transactions conform to United States law. This in effect gives the United States unique powers of extraterritoriality.

As an example, the United States recently imposed a whopping fine of over eight billion dollars on the French bank BNP-Paribas simply for having done business with countries under U.S. embargo: Cuba, Iran and Sudan. The French bank's dealings were perfectly legal under French law. But Washington uses the dollar to require other countries to conform to U.S. sanctions and embargos.

Thus, aside from its almost infinite financial advantages, owning the world's main international currency also gives Americans the occasional opportunity to play their favorite

Hollywood role of virtuous sheriff who rides into town, breaks up the cheaters' poker game, disarms the bad guys with a few well-aimed shots, and rides into the sunset with the leading lady and the oil contracts.

This time the Hollywood scenario took the form of FBI agents charging officials of the International Football Federation (FIFA) with illegal financial dealings in the designation of World Cup host nations.

Bread and Circuses

All around the world, it seems that little boys love to kick balls around. But it isn't only fun. Thanks to the soccer business, skill at kicking balls arouses a dream of fame, fortune, luxury, among youth whose hopes are otherwise extremely slim. Football is a hope of escape for millions, while for millions of others it is a release from stress, a way to stimulate gratuitous excitement and strong emotions unrelated to real needs and dangers. For the players, it can mean rags to riches. For the owners, it means riches to riches.

Football is the ultimate bread and circuses of the globalized world.

Only the United States remains relatively aloof. And the United States wants to run the show.

FIFA is a hugely rich segment of the worldwide commercial entertainment business. Lots and lots of dollars slosh around in it. Its advertising and television rights are worth billions. International soccer has been subsumed into the globalized economy, which is rife with dubious deals, tax evasions and corruption. Nobody doubts for a second that large sums of money are exchanged "under the table" in FIFA. The main target for potential bribery is no doubt the choice of the World Cup host country. Pressures of all kinds are used to influence an essentially arbitrary choice. The prize can cost the host country a lot, but brings in business, advertising, prestige – and even the fun of watching the games.

This is a very big business, but it is not regarded as an American business. Americans call the game "soccer" and have their own "football", which looks more like rugby with padding. So – and this is the reaction in much of the world – what are the Americans doing barging into *our* game?

The West is Best, To Hell With the Rest

The hypothetic answer was not long in coming. Although reports of FIFA corruption have been circulating for years, especially concerning the 2010 games in South Africa, the timing of this sudden crackdown can only be used to discredit the two future World Cup events, scheduled for Russia in 2018 and for Qatar in 2022. Now, it so happens that the United Kingdom bid unsuccessfully for 2018 and the United States for 2022. At a time when the United States is doing everything imaginable to "isolate Putin's Russia", it looks very much as though the FBI has conveniently chosen to disrupt FIFA just in time to build a campaign to rescind, or boycott, the World Cup in Russia in 2018.

Non-Western commentators such as Sukant Chandan see the campaign to unseat Sepp Blatter, as yet another "regime change" directed from Washington.

The 79-year-old Swiss President of FIFA, Sepp Blatter, was never a loyal servant of the

Anglo-American “international community”. By hook or by crook, his policy was to spread the football cult to the rest of the world, moving in the direction of the rise of the non-Western developing countries.

Blatter opened things up to the Third World, which would hardly be possible without monkey business somewhere. Europe with the US normally control everything “honestly”, or at least legally, because they naturally have the power and influence, as well as the lawyers.

Corruption is the way business is done in South Africa, as South Africans themselves are the first to admit and deplore. However, is it up to United States courts to punish the corruption that is endemic in African countries?

The choice of Qatar for the 2022 matches was asking for trouble, since only bribes could explain such a choice. Here is a country with no football tradition, no players, no fans, nothing but heaps of money and above all, with a climate so inappropriate that it must be artificially cooled for the event. Plus the fact that the infrastructure is being built by semi-slave labor. It was the *reductio ad absurdum* of FIFA corruption. That one really gave the game away.

The choice was so weird that Swiss authorities opened an investigation last March 10. The United States might have settled for assisting that investigation instead of leaping into the spotlight. But that would avoid raising questions about Russia.

It may well be that money has passed “under the table” in every case of World Cup attribution. In France, by the way, there are serious suspicions about the use of Anglo-Saxon influence to attribute the 2012 Olympics to unprepared London against a perfectly prepared Paris. However, from the imperial viewpoint, the choice of Great Britain or the United States will always look “normal”, and any baksheesh would be considered superfluous. In contrast, one can expect great scrutiny in the search for some funny business in regard to Russia, even though Russia is a great sports nation equipped in every way to host the games.

What Is Corruption?

The United States has encouraged a certain “globalization”, meaning privatization and deregulation, giving financial institutions and major corporations endless opportunities to exploit and cheat countries in the global South, as well as their own citizens. The whole system is a breeding ground for bribes and corruption. It favors a vast and deadly arms trade, with its “percentages”. The drug trade flourishes, along with all sorts of illicit trafficking.

There is strong evidence that it took bribes to get the World Cup to South Africa. That’s corruption. But is it or is it not corruption when Coca Cola, Adidas and McDonald’s threaten not to sponsor FIFA if things don’t go their way? That is done openly, but isn’t it a form of corruption?

And speaking of corruption, is bribery only bribery when it is secret? What about the American electoral system, which has a much greater effect on the world than football games? What about an electoral system in which billionaires can openly “fix the game” thanks to perfectly legal campaign contributions?

What about the haste with which Congress changed its position last May 14 and hastily adopted the Trans-Pacific Partnership “fast track” legislation – *without debate or*

amendments – as soon as Congress members had been generously sprayed with dollars from Goldman Sachs, UPS, Citigroup, FedEx, Coca Cola, Boeing, Pfizer, Northrop Grumman, Morgan Stanley, Walmart, Disney, Monsanto, etc., etc., etc. This vote will affect the lives of millions of Americans, their jobs, their quality of life. It is infinitely more important than where soccer games are played.

And what is the FBI doing about it?

The United States decides what is or is not corruption. It decides what are or are not human rights. Extraordinarily long prisons sentences are not violations of human rights because they are practiced in the United States, as an example. Big corporations buying “the people’s representatives” is not corruption: it’s called freedom.

The United States seeks to impose moral rules on the immoral practices it fosters. While waging wars all over the planet, Washington seeks to impose “humanitarian” rules on war by having its weak opponents branded as war criminals and hauled before international courts and tribunals (from which the United States itself is exempt).

By the same token, United States insists on imposing a system of global “free enterprise” that inevitably breeds all kinds of unmanageable corruption, but then tries to make it look good by cracking down selectively on corruption.

This American mixture of righteous crusade and self-interest risks giving virtue a bad name.

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