

Americans Embarrassed?

By [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

Region: [USA](#)

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“Aren’t you people in the States embarrassed by all this?” It’s my sister in Canada again. She seems unable to ignore news from the US—the continuing recriminations and anxieties emitting from our presidential election process.

In the grip of Canada’s prevailing Presbyterian morality (Toronto-the-good of our childhood), she is concerned for our embarrassment.

Americans embarrassed? Never. If Americans were, first we’d never admit it; secondly it would be concealed within piles of satire generated in cartoons and nighttime television comedy.

Are Americans fearful? Yes. Despondent? Certainly. Are people sinking into a malaise? Possibly. Are they confused? That too. Are they revolted by the spectacle? At least many women are. Have they decided to forgo voting altogether? So we hear.

If we were not embarrassed by what American soldiers did in Vietnam, by our treatment of Iraqis illustrated in the Abu Ghraib revelations, by our amnesia over 13 years’ murderous embargo on Iraq, by suicide rates of our veterans, by our bullying the United Nations, by Snowden’s exposure of mass surveillance, by the imprisonment of 2.3 million US citizens, by class and racial prejudice revealed in the treatment of Hurricane Katrina victims, by the racism underlying police brutalization and murder of our Black citizens, why should we be embarrassed by personal stories and statements associated with candidates for the land’s highest office?

Political discomfiture is however an issue worthy of attention. Embarrassment would indicate a moral sensibility; in politics here, that doesn’t exist. Or if it does, it’s dismissed and quickly buried in a deluge of trivia introduced by media as more newsworthy.

I don’t recall media critics or concerned friends expressing embarrassment about what’s going on here. Outside the USA, attitudes diverge from ours. Many Canadians, I suspect, view the issue similar to how my sister sees it—: Americans *ought to be* embarrassed.

Further afield, some associates in the Middle East and Asia are laughing at this democracy-media spectacle while others unequivocally say Americans should feel ashamed. One displeased colleague in Nepal suggests the deteriorating situation results from too much campaigning; he says all of the substantial issues were raised and addressed during the primaries, so that a depleted, exhausted press is resorting to personal issues to keep the conflict active. (A worthy point.) A veteran journalist in Iraq asks me: “Why all this debate? We know that for us and our neighbors there’s certain to be more war, whichever candidate wins. Why are they prancing and posturing like this?”

We can expect that people around the world, not only viewers in Russia, Venezuela, or Iran—especially where Americans have interfered with their elections—must be watching with a certain glee? Others will doubtless be dismayed however. A few may be uncomfortable for their American friends.

I'll tell you one group of Americans who surely feel chagrined:- our diplomatic corps who has to face counterparts at their posts across the globe. I really pity US diplomats. Normally, on election night US embassies host parties at their (walled-in) residences and consulates to share their congratulatory democratic process with professors, journalists and officials.

Private US citizens living abroad often invite foreigners to witness the selection of their 'leader-of-the-free-world' (a term no one but Americans uses). Before satellite TV, an embassy invitation was the only way one could see election coverage live. Even with every house now hooked to multiple satellite news channels, election night at US embassies across the globe would be a festive occasion. This week, will US embassies dim their lights, pretending they're not home?

And what about those global citizens traditionally invited to the US to witness the process firsthand? I think it was at the 1980 election between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan that I met Nepalese leaders who'd been flown to D.C. and New York solely to observe and join in the pre-election atmosphere. They noted that invitations were regularly extended to dignitaries from across the globe for this four-yearly event. One assumes the practice continues today, embarrassing or not.

Just a few days ago, a Palestinian friend in Jordan sent this ode by poet Kahlil Gibran: here are some notable lines from it:

*Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion.
Pity the nation that wears a cloth it does not weave
and eats a bread it does not harvest.*

*Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero,

and that deems the glittering conqueror bountiful. ...
Pity the nation whose statesman is a fox,
whose philosopher is a juggler,
and whose art is the art of patching and mimicking...*

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