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Back-Scratching With a Global Reach

By **GEORGE VECSEY**

The United States is overwhelmingly the best candidate to hold the 2022 World Cup of soccer.

Which may not matter.

The American bid will be judged by FIFA, the world soccer body, whose expressed idealism often scurries around the corner and merges with crassness.

In classic form, FIFA has ensured that [vote-trading is inevitable](#) on Thursday, when [members will choose](#) from among four European entries (two are joint bids) for the 2018 World Cup and from among five candidates for the 2022 tournament.

Voting will be a trifle light in Zurich because two of [the 24 potential voters](#) on the executive committee [have been suspended](#) for appearing all too willing to take gifts from bidding nations during a sting operated by a British newspaper. Four former FIFA executive members were also suspended.

On Tuesday, FIFA's president, Sepp Blatter, stonewalled the suggestion that FIFA [postpone the vote](#) after the [BBC reported on Monday](#) that [bribes were paid](#) to three executives, from Brazil, Cameroon and Paraguay, who will be voting Thursday. The money is said to have gone through International Sport and Leisure, the defunct marketing arm of FIFA. On Tuesday, FIFA issued a statement that the case was beyond the statute of limitations, a highly reassuring view of FIFA ethics.

Putting the two bids in the same process has guaranteed previously unknown alliances among the candidates — England, Russia and joint ventures from Belgium/the Netherlands and Spain/Portugal for 2018; and the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Qatar for 2022.

The assumption in recent years was that England — the mother ship of soccer — was due to host the World Cup for the first time since 1966. Lately, Russian money and power has asserted itself, and financially strapped Spain and Portugal have been rumored to form a new and special friendship with oil-rich Qatar and the South American voters, giving the United States cause to be quite nervous.

For most nations, hosting the World Cup is a dubious prize, as proved by the recent World Cup in

South Africa, which mustered great talent and energy but was stuck with **new stadiums yawningly empty** in the aftermath.

Major sports events are often ruinous to the fragile economies of the hosts — Greece after the 2004 Olympics comes to mind. The rising economic power Brazil is holding the 2014 World Cup and Rio de Janeiro is hosting the **2016 Olympics**, and we will see how that works out.

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FIFA is on record that it wants to move the World Cup from continent to continent — admirable on one level, risky on another. Some European nations with modern stadiums and rail systems and hotels could hold the World Cup on six months' notice, but the economic meltdown in Spain and Portugal could be a warning to the delegates, or not.

The United States would seem to be a no-brainer for 2022; it sold a record 3.5 million tickets during a highly successful World Cup in 1994.

The United States is proposing to sell an unprecedented five million tickets in stadiums that are already built, using hotels and roads already in place.

Which may not count for much.

Americans also bought copious numbers of tickets to the South African World Cup while stay-at-homes packed urban pubs for just about every game. Also, the American national team has played in six consecutive World Cups, getting past the first round three times.

Which may be almost as irrelevant as the claim that another World Cup would help build the United States as a soccer power.

One impediment to an American World Cup is that FIFA loves American dollars and American vacations, but cannot control American government and American corporations the way it does in other parts of the world.

FIFA, ever crafty, noted in **its evaluation** that the United States government had not provided written assurance of financial support for 2022. One would like to think FIFA leaders are sophisticated enough to know the United States already has more than enough American football stadiums in place, needing only to remodel the corners to allow for the wider soccer field.

The United States is not a walkover for 2022. Japan and South Korea, co-hosts in 2002, are probably blocked by China's potential candidacy for 2026. Everybody loves Australia, but its distant time zones may be inconvenient for television.

Then there is Qatar, which has never qualified for a World Cup but is perfectly willing to build as

many as nine new stadiums in a cluster by 2022, and dismantle most of them after the last whistle, and move them to disadvantaged countries. Qatar is talking up a green World Cup, but at the same time is promising to air-condition stadiums against 110-degree Fahrenheit temperatures, which somehow does not sound very green.

The vote in Zurich will be complicated by celebrity lobbyists, a growing trend. In 2004, the frail [Nelson Mandela](#) was forced to fly to Trinidad and Tobago to lobby a World Cup vote from the manipulative delegate Jack Warner. In 2005, [Tony Blair](#), the British prime minister, flew to Singapore and worked the room of Olympic delegates, helping London gain the 2012 Games over Paris.

Prime Minister [Vladimir V. Putin](#) of Russia attended the subsequent vote for the 2014 Winter Games, and the city of Sochi was chosen over a more prepared region of South Korea.

Last year, [Brazil's president](#) traveled to Copenhagen to support [Rio de Janeiro](#) for the 2016 Olympics, and [President Obama](#) flew there to represent Chicago. It was Rio's time, South America's time, and only a political opponent could fault Obama for sticking up for a great American city.

This time, England will be represented by [Prince William](#), [David Beckham](#) and Prime Minister [David Cameron](#). Putin is expected to attend, as is the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and top officials of other countries.

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Former President [Bill Clinton](#) and the actor [Morgan Freeman](#) (who portrayed Mandela in the film "Invictus") are traveling to Zurich as the face of the American bid. Clinton has been an enthusiastic supporter, particularly in South Africa, where he celebrated with the players after the last-minute rally against Algeria.

"He is one of a handful of truly global figures who is highly respected," said [Sunil Gulati](#), the president of the United States Soccer Federation.

How helpful can this well-known former American president be in the thicket of FIFA?

"President Clinton has been in politics and knows how to approach an election," Gulati said, adding, "This is, after all, an election."

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