

by Doug Thompson

# Surviving the War—and the Peace

Response to “Surviving the War: A College Counselor’s Journal” on page 80

Philip Clinton’s engrossing account of the 1990–91 school year at Cairo American College (CAC) gives us wonderful insights into the unusual challenges occasionally encountered by an international counselor. The year did not start well. Saddam Hussein and Iraq had invaded Kuwait, an American ally, and the US was weighing its options, both politically and militarily.

Clinton returned to CAC to greet a group of seniors almost twice as big as the previous year, a situation not unusual at an international school where enrollment can fluctuate sharply as companies and governments change their policies. However, Cairo is a long way from Baghdad, as Clinton reminded prospective college visitors worried about venturing into the Middle East at such a volatile time.

The first big change at CAC involved admitting students fleeing from schools in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, including 11 seniors, some of who had no school records with them. Clinton worried about these kids and how he could help them find colleges, even as they worried about their homes and parents. CAC agreed that admitting these students was the right thing to do.

As the application season geared up, the question of mailing college material became a more serious concern, especially after January 15 when the US began military action against Iraq. A comparatively safe fallback was the APO military mail system, but restrictions were soon placed on the APO system as more and more planes were diverted to the war. Finally a deal was arranged with Federal Express to have them handle all the college mail.

Mail is still a concern at an international school as many mail systems in other



countries are slow and unreliable. While modern technology has helped get around some mail problems, many colleges and universities are reluctant to send decisions electronically because of security concerns.

Clinton also had to deal with bomb threats. Security is still a concern for an international school, especially for one with “American” in its name. While it’s serious and scary, schools have become adept at carrying out emergency plans. Once I had just started a college fair in Asia when we were informed that our host school had gotten a bomb threat—I have never seen viewbooks, banners, catalogs, and inquiry cards collected so quickly. We were on sidewalks outside the school in minutes.

Still, many of the difficulties international counselors encounter are familiar to counselors in the US. Most international parents have no idea about the complexity, richness and diversity of the American higher education system. While everyone has encountered parents with unrealistic college expectations for their children, international parents often have no knowledge of institutions beyond the 20 to 30 “name brand”

places about which they have heard. Counselors are constantly called upon to explain that great educational experiences exist on literally thousands of campuses in the US.

Another more contemporary problem has been the proliferation of agents in many countries—especially China. Agents, often being paid by both institutions and families, purport to offer guidance through the complex American college admission and financial aid processes. Many are ill-trained and convey inaccurate or biased information. It falls on the international school counselor to correct and guide students past the incorrect information. NACAC is still discussing the ethical implications of agent compensation.

Over the years, guidance counselors in the US have often asked me about international jobs, usually operating on the assumption that such a job would be an easy way to wind down a counseling career. Clinton’s article demonstrates exactly why this is not always the case. For example, there were many comparable stories coming out of Cairo in 2011 but, in the reverse of Clinton’s story, students and faculty were fleeing from CAC and Cairo as Egypt went through its “Arab Spring.” Even changes for the better can be volatile, which makes the work of international counselors all the more crucial to international cooperation and advancement.



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