

An American in Cairo



David Arnold

FOCUS

As the president of the American University in Cairo, David Arnold, '73, not only deals with the day-to-day issues of running a prestigious academic institution. He also serves as a kind of "second American ambassador" in the region.

Assuming the presidency of any US university is a daunting task in the best of circumstances. But to do so in Egypt two years after September 11 and a mere six months after the start of the Iraq war added a new dimension to the job for David Arnold, '73. The president of the American University in Cairo, however, stepped up to the challenge to lead an institution that is not just a university, but what he calls "one of the most significant bridges culturally between the US, the West and the Arab world."

And that bridge has served international relations well. "One of the only good things that came out of 9/11 is that there has been an enormous increase in interest on the part of American students and young people to understand more about the Middle East," he says. "So during my six years as president, we've seen a tripling in the number of study-abroad students coming from the US to study Arabic; to pursue courses in Middle East politics, Middle East history, Islamic studies; to really get beyond the headlines and beyond the stereotypes to understand Arab society and Arab culture in a much more fundamental way."

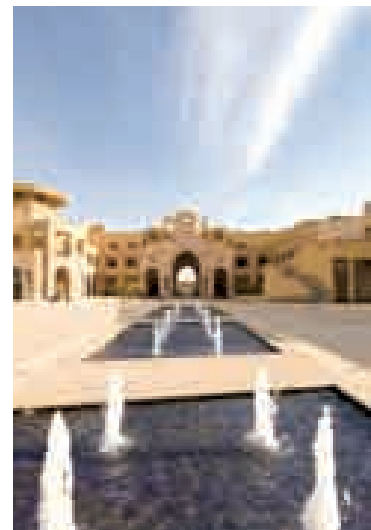
The political situation is a dramatic backdrop for the day-to-day job of running a prestigious university. AUC is a comprehensive university with nearly 6,000 undergraduate and graduate students from 100 different countries. Despite an international student body and faculty, all classes are taught in English. "This is as if you picked up an American university and transplanted it into the heart of the Middle East," says Arnold. AUC counts among its alumni Suzanne and Gamal Mubarak, wife and son of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak; Queen Rania of Jordan; Nabil Fahmy, the former Egyptian ambassador to the United States; and Juan Cole, U-M professor of history and Middle East expert. Its board boasts an equally impressive list of names, including Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and Nobel Prize-winner Ahmed Zewail.

This is exotic company to keep for a small-town boy from Michigan. But Arnold got a taste for international experiences when he was just 11 years old and went to live overseas. "He spent some time in the British West Indies when he was 11 years old," says Phil Arnold, David's father. "We didn't feel he was being challenged enough in school,"

he adds, so David spent six months with family friends who were setting up a business in Montserrat. His sojourn was cut short when he was hit by a truck, an accident that nearly cost him his life and required his return to Lansing, Michigan, for a long hospital stay. Despite the horrible outcome of that trip, "he said it gave him a flavor of overseas that he never forgot," his father says.

His career started on a more domestic level, though. After receiving his bachelor's from Michigan and his master's from Michigan State, he worked in the Michigan state government and then for the National Governors Association in Washington, DC. In 1984, he took a job with the Ford Foundation, first at its headquarters in New York and then abroad for seven years, providing Arnold with the initial international experience that would characterize his career. "Ford opened that door to our entire family when David became the representative for India, Nepal and Sri Lanka," says his wife, Sherry. "That move was transforming for all of us." Sherry herself taught at an international school in New Delhi and the couple's three daughters, Emily, Jessica and Kathleen, all attended high school there before moving back to the US for college.

In 1997, Arnold left the foundation and returned to New York to serve as executive



vice president of the Institute of International Education, an organization involved in international student and scholarly exchanges. "I was visiting Egypt fairly regularly as a part of my responsibilities with IIE. And my predecessor at AUC, John Gerhart, had been a colleague of mine at the Ford Foundation. And unfortunately, he became ill and had to step down and he encouraged me to consider applying for the presidency."

While many Americans might have hesitated before deciding to live in the Middle East,

Tahrir Square. The palace was a temporary location until the university could build a permanent campus. "So it's taken us almost 90 years to fulfill that vision. But by Egyptian terms, 90 years is nothing," Arnold says with a smile. The new campus, which sits on 260 acres in the city of New Cairo, opened in September 2008 to acclaim from Egyptians. "Everybody that sees the campus is just overwhelmed by it," he says of the \$400 million facility. He adds that the move has had its share of problems. "But we're getting through them."

"And part of what makes me a believer in that is the experience that I had as an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan." He calls himself "the classic liberal arts undergraduate. I think I changed majors three times during my time at Michigan. I started in philosophy and ended up somewhere between political science and history." He speaks fondly of his years as an undergraduate, especially the time he spent as a twirler with the Michigan Marching Band. But when he was a student, he had no idea where his career would take him.



Early in his tenure as president of the American University in Cairo, David Arnold faced the enormous challenge of moving the entire campus from downtown Cairo to this location 30 miles away.

the Arnolds have embraced the move. "David and I have been warmly welcomed in Egypt, in Saudi Arabia, in Lebanon, in Jordan, all the many countries of this region that value what an American-style education grants future generations," says Sherry.

Tim Sullivan, the university's former provost, acknowledges that Arnold took over the presidency during a time of political turmoil in the Middle East. "But David is a driven man and a driving executive. He gets up every morning with the intention of striving, achieving and excelling. That is exactly the kind of president we needed at that time. He concentrated on strategic issues, on getting the new campus built and worked tirelessly to raise funds for the University."


Atop Arnold's agenda when he became president in 2003 was moving the entire AUC campus from downtown Cairo to a location that, at that time, was just a stretch of desert sand 30 miles away.

At its inception in 1919, the university was located in a palace in the center of Cairo on

Arnold's leadership and temperament were an integral part of the success of the move, says Nanci Martin, AUC's associate vice president for communications and marketing. "David has an infinite amount of patience and what appears to be an unlimited amount of energy," she says. "Working in a multicultural environment in the midst of a major upheaval for the university, these two qualities really stood out."

Arnold also tackled reform of AUC's core curriculum almost as soon as he stepped onto campus. Sullivan traveled with Arnold during the summer of 2003, visiting several US colleges and universities to get ideas for improving AUC's core curriculum. "Woodrow Wilson likened attempts to do this to trying to move a cemetery," says Sullivan. "But David was willing to make this a very high priority of his presidency from day one." He adds that the reform project underscored Arnold's belief in American-style liberal education, which has been a central aspect of his presidency.

"The bedrock of AUC is a four-year liberal arts undergraduate program," says Arnold.

"I never dreamed that I would be president of a college or university. And when I was studying [at U-M] as an undergraduate student, I don't think I ever imagined spending a significant portion of my professional life working and living in the Middle East." But he wouldn't trade the personal and professional rewards he's received during the past five years. "The opportunity to experience another culture and to really make friendships and develop professional associations with people from backgrounds very different from one's own is tremendously enriching and really does give you a greater perspective on the extraordinary diversity of cultures and societies around the world. So it's been a wonderful personal journey." 

—Sharon Morioka, '84, MA'86, is a staff writer for *Michigan Alumnus*.