

From Berlin to Beijing: Politics and the Olympics

Jeremy Schaap

Jeremy Schaap is an American sportswriter, television reporter, and author who has covered seven Olympics, including the games in Beijing. Mr. Schaap is a regular contributor to ABC's Nightline and World News and has been published in The Wall Street Journal, Sports Illustrated, Time and The New York Times. He is also the author of a number of books, including most recently Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics and Cinderella Man, a New York Times bestseller. For his work as a host and reporter at the sports network ESPN, he has won six Emmy Awards, the American television industry's highest honor.

On 23 March 2008, Jacques Rogge, President of the International Olympic Committee, declared:

Awarding the Olympic Games to the most populous country in the world will open up one-fifth of mankind to Olympism. We believe that China will change by opening the country to the scrutiny of the world through the 25,000 media who will attend the Games. The Olympic Games are a force for good. They are a catalyst for change, not a panacea for all ills... NGOs and Human Rights activists want to leverage the Games and ask the IOC to act along by their side. The IOC is undoubtedly respectful of Human Rights. The IOC respects NGOs and activist groups and their causes, and speaks regularly with them—but we are neither a political nor an activist organization.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) might not be a political organization, but Jacques Rogge was being disingenuous when he suggested that the Olympics are not political. Whether he likes it or not, whether he and his predecessors at the helm of the IOC intended it or not, the Olympics have, for at least the last seven decades, been deeply political.

It could even be argued that the modern Olympics were founded on a political premise. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, a French nobleman, revived the games in 1896 at least in part as a response to the French defeat in the Franco–Prussian War a generation earlier. Like many of his compatriots, de Coubertin ascribed the defeat to the declining physical and moral attributes of young Frenchmen. The Olympics would encourage all those dissolute youth to get into shape, all the better to protect France's frontiers from the enemy east of the Rhine.

By the time he died, in 1937, de Coubertin had changed. After witnessing the carnage on the western front from 1914 to 1918, after seeing the flower of French

youth mowed down at Verdun, he hoped that the Olympics would unite humanity and promote peace. But by 1937, de Coubertin's Olympic ideal had been corrupted. More than anyone else, it was Josef Goebbels, the German propaganda minister, who turned the Olympics into a political spectacle, and, specifically, in 1936, a showcase for Nazi ideology.

At the games of the Eleventh Olympiad in Berlin, the Third Reich used the Olympics not to promote its agenda of ethnic hatred and global domination — but instead as a cloak to disguise from the world that agenda. During the games, overt displays of antisemitism were banned and Berlin was scrubbed to a high sheen. But the Nazi message was clear: We are building a happy society through purity of thought and blood; our people have traded their freedom for a higher good—and they are content. In Thomas Wolfe's novel, *You Can't Go Home Again*, his protagonist, George Webber, spends the summer of 1936 in Berlin, where he cheers for Jesse Owens, despite Owens's complexion, and feels the passion of the German masses as they embrace their Fuhrer. The Games of the Eleventh Olympiad were the most significant Olympics of the modern era and Wolfe captured the atmosphere with a novelist's eye. He described the scene in which Adolf Hitler approached the Olympic stadium: "At last he came, and something like a wind across a field of grass was shaken through that crowd, and from afar the tide rolled up with him, and in it was the voice, the hope, the prayer of the land."

Published posthumously, after the German invasion of Poland but before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Wolfe made clear that Americans, and everyone else, could ignore Hitler's Germany only at their own peril. "There seemed to be something ominous about it," Wolfe wrote about the prevailing mood in Berlin as the opening ceremony approached. "One sensed a stupendous concentration of effort, a tremendous drawing together and ordering in the vast collective power of the whole land. And the thing that made it seem ominous was that it so evidently went beyond what the games themselves demanded."

The International Olympic Committee enabled the Third Reich to politicize the games; by not taking the games away from Germany when the world learned the true nature of the Third Reich—which was not in power when Germany was awarded the games in 1931—the IOC allowed its games to become a tool of the German propaganda machine.

If Hitler intended to use the Olympics as a showcase for the Third Reich, it was during the Cold War that the games became a bloodless battleground between Western-style capitalism and Soviet communism. From 1952—when the Soviets first participated in the games—through 1988—their final games—the Olympics were largely a contest of ideologies. The Soviets, who from 1920 through 1948

had officially dismissed the games as a degenerate imperialist spectacle, reversed course and came to view the competition as a means of proving their superiority.

Far from damaging the Olympic movement, the politics of the Cold War—the United States versus the Soviet Union, West Germany versus East Germany—made the games globally relevant for the first time. In 1956 in Melbourne, for instance, the biggest story of the games was the bitter—and bloody—water polo match between the Soviets and the Hungarians. Just weeks before the games, Soviet tanks had rolled through Hungary, cracking down brutally on Hungarian efforts to break free from Moscow.

Then, in the 1960s, the political dimensions of the games extended beyond the dynamics of the Cold War to the plane of human rights. In 1964, the International Olympic Committee banned South Africa because of its systematic abuse of its black majority. South Africa would not return to the games until 1992, the year after apartheid was dismantled.

In 1968 in Mexico City, American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos—the gold and bronze medal winners, respectively, in the 200-meter dash—made perhaps the most powerful statement against discrimination in the annals of sport. On the medal stand, Smith and Carlos, wearing black socks but no shoes, lifted their fists, gloved in black leather, to the sky, to protest the poverty and discrimination that afflicted so many black Americans.

Four years later, of course, the games were invaded by terrorists. A Palestinian faction known as Black September killed eleven Israeli Olympic athletes and coaches. But under the leadership of IOC president Avery Brundage, even as the hostage crisis was still playing out, the games, obscenely, would go on. As the president of the American Olympic Committee forty years earlier, Brundage had worked against those agitating for a boycott of the Berlin Olympics. As the head of the IOC, he was similarly tone-deaf on the most important issues.

The games went on in 1976, too, but with thirty nations boycotting, twenty-eight of them African. The boycotters did not participate because the IOC had refused to ban New Zealand, which recently had sent its national rugby team to a tournament in South Africa. That boycott was merely a prelude, though, to the boycotts that would all but destroy two summer Olympics. Just as the Cold War had at one time made the Olympics so important, now the clash between East and West decimated the games. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter protested the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by leading a boycott of the only Olympics ever to be held behind the Iron Curtain. “To have gone ahead with that Games, participate as Americans, to validate the Soviet Union and allow them to showcase this to their

own people that everything's okay would have been a terrible mistake," said Walter Mondale, Carter's vice president. "I will always be grateful to those young athletes who lost for most of them their only chance. But I believe they gave to a higher cause. Because after all, such things as human rights and international civility go to the issue of war and peace and decency. And that's what the Olympics are really about."

Four years later, the Soviets led a boycott of the Los Angeles Games and it seemed that the Olympics might never again bring the youth of the world together. But then, *glasnost... perestroika...* the fall of the Berlin Wall... and the games recovered. Relatively free from politics from 1984 until the games were awarded to China in 2001, the Olympics were repositioned by the Chinese in the sphere of national image-building. The Chinese wanted *their* showcase, their chance to show the world how far they have come since 1978, when China finally started to modernize on a massive scale.

Of course, simply by awarding the games to China, the IOC made a political statement. Jacques Rogge said that he believed that China would "change by opening the country to the scrutiny of the world through the 25,000 media" in attendance. Interestingly, he never said Greece would change by hosting the Olympics in 2004, or that Italy would change by hosting the Winter Olympics in 2006 or that Canada would change by hosting them in 2010. In other words, he essentially expressed a desire to see the Olympics help change China; that, in itself, is a political goal. So much for the IOC being apolitical. What's interesting, though, is that the IOC did virtually nothing to pressure the Chinese to live up to the commitments they made at the time they were awarded the games.

If the Olympics are supposed to be about bringing people together from all over the globe, why award them to a nation that makes crossing into it as difficult as possible?

If the Olympics are supposed to be about giving Olympians the best chance to excel, why schedule them in brutal mid-summer heat and humidity? Why stage them in a city in which breathing can be hazardous to your health?

If the Olympics are supposed to be about the indomitability of the human spirit and the exercise of free will, why choose a host nation in which freedom of speech is limited and one party rules unchallenged and with impunity?

If the hope was that by awarding the games to Beijing, human rights here would be expanded, the Chinese government has a simple message: Ha!
Let us be clear: The International Olympic Committee is not now and has never

been an agent for liberal democracy and human rights, which is fine. What's not fine is that it continues to present itself as a humanitarian organization. It is not. It is a business. The hypocrisy rankles. The National Basketball Association does not pretend to be anything but a business, and neither does the Premier League, or the Association of Tennis Professionals, or Major League Baseball. Yes, all these organizations—including the IOC—have their designated charities and do good deeds, but they do not suggest to anyone that their primary goal is anything other than making money. The IOC does. But then it refuses to follow through.

Don't get me wrong. I am a true fan of the Olympics. I respect the competitors, from the high-profile swimmers and sprinters to the obscure equestrians and race-walkers. Just please spare me all the high-minded hooey about sport uniting humanity. There is an element of that at the Olympics, to be sure—but there are just as many examples of sport reinforcing the great cultural divides. For example, in Beijing, an Iranian swimmer, faced with the prospect of swimming against, and possibly losing to, an Israeli, instead decided to drop out of the games. (The IOC said the Iranian was ill. This explanation—like so much of what we hear from the IOC these days—strained credulity. In 2004, an Iranian judoka pulled the same stunt, refusing to compete against an Israeli, but at least he had the courage to be honest, explaining that he wished to show solidarity with Palestinians.)

Another telling example is “the Miracle on Ice”—the shocking upset fashioned by the American hockey team against the Soviets. It was perhaps the most stirring upset ever; it is certainly my favorite. I defy anyone to explain to me how it helped US–Soviet relations or eased Cold War tensions.

Meanwhile, the reciprocal boycotts of 1980 and 1984 demonstrated the depth of the East–West chasm. Those Olympics were victims of politics; they certainly did not bring the world together. And neither did the 1956 Melbourne games, which were defined by the aforementioned Soviet–Hungarian enmity, or Munich 1972, the massacre games, or Berlin 1936, Hitler's games. The point is that the Olympics do not drive the global agenda, whatever it may be; the global situation drives the Olympics.

Do the athletes occasionally get emotional when they are standing on the medals podium listening to their national anthems? Of course. They also tend to get emotional when someone hands them the NHL's Stanley Cup, or the NFL's Vince Lombardi Trophy, or a fat paycheck after winning golf's Masters.

In other words, the Olympics are a great spectacle of sport, but don't expect to find in their athletes' oaths and elaborate ceremonies any keys to world peace. My father, Dick Schaap, who wrote five books about the Olympics and Olympians,

might have put it best. “The Olympic Games are a gift to modern civilization, a gift from the Greeks,” he wrote, “and that is fair warning.”

As for the games of the Twenty-Ninth Olympiad, in Beijing, long before the opening ceremony, they were subjected to attacks from those eager to embarrass the Chinese regime. Celebrities such as the American actress Mia Farrow and the American Olympic gold medalist Joey Cheek hoped to pressure the Chinese to end their support of the regime in Khartoum, which has been accused of genocide against its citizens in Darfur. The epic torch relay, which crisscrossed the globe on its way to and from China, was also subjected to attacks, by, among others, supporters of Tibetan independence.

In the days leading up to the games, China did everything it could to prove that it was not taking orders from the IOC. Western journalists covering the Olympics were alarmed to discover that access to certain websites—such as Amnesty International’s, which had just posted a report critical of the Chinese authorities—were temporarily blocked, despite assurances that no such action would be taken. Promises to allow journalists to travel the country freely were not honored. Joey Cheek’s visa was revoked—keeping him at home in the US. And the guarantees made by the Chinese to allow peaceful protests in Beijing turned out to be a joke, as richly documented by Nicholas Kristoff of *The New York Times*, who tested the system by applying at a police station for a permit to stage a protest:

Three police officers sat across from me... The officers were all cordial and professional, although one seemed to be daydreaming about pulling out my fingernails. Then they spent nearly an hour going over the myriad rules for demonstrations. These were detailed and complex, and, most daunting, I would have to submit a list of every single person attending my demonstration. The list had to include names and identity document numbers. In addition, any Chinese on a name list would have to go first to the Public Security Bureau in person to be interviewed (arrested?). The policemen did say that if they approved, they would give me a “Demonstration Permission Document.” Without that, my demonstration would be illegal. I surrendered. The rules were so monstrously bureaucratic that I couldn’t even apply for a demonstration.

Kristoff was lucky. As he and others reported, many Chinese were arrested merely for applying for protest permits. Just before he traveled to Beijing for the opening ceremony, President George W. Bush, speaking in Thailand, assailed China’s record on basic human rights such as freedom of religion and assembly. “The United States believes the people of China deserve the fundamental liberty that is the natural right of all human beings,” Bush said. “So America stands in firm

opposition to China's detention of political dissidents, and human rights advocates, and religious activists."

For seven years, the Chinese had planned, bulldozed and built. For seven years, they had conceived the Games of the Twenty-Ninth Olympiad as a showcase for the world's most dynamic economy. They had weathered the attacks and now it was time for the games to commence.

Their opening ceremony was epic, a celebration of China's ancient achievements and its more recent strivings. But the good vibes were fleeting and the first full day of the games anything but auspicious.

Just twelve hours after the lighting of the Olympic caldron, two Americans were attacked at the ancient Drum Tower, one of Beijing's most cherished landmarks. Todd Bachman was dead, his wife Barbara critically injured and the American Olympic family devastated. The Bachmans' son-in-law coaches the men's volleyball team, which would go on to win the gold medal. Their daughter played volleyball for the US at the Athens Olympics. The attack on the Bachmans was not any fault of the regime. The last thing it wanted was this kind of random violence. Still, the mood was darkened dramatically.

Then, six hours after the attack on the Bachmans, the man who would come to dominate the games swam his first race. Over the next nine days, Michael Fred Phelps swam seventeen races, setting seven world records, winning a record eight gold medals. Then it was Usain Bolt's turn. The Jamaican sprinter, who won three gold medals, setting three world records, made the second week of the games as compelling as the first.

But while Phelps and Bolt emerged from Beijing as the newest gods of the games, it was the host nation that was clearly the biggest winner. For seventeen days, China was able to control the Olympic message, to drown out the critics, to chase away issues such as Tibet and freedom of speech. It drove home its message forcefully, proving it was capable of staging an international event on an unprecedented scale and showing the world that the China of the twenty-first century was vibrant, proud and formidable. Winning the medals race was the least of its victories.

From a logistical and sporting standpoint, the Games of the Twenty-Ninth Olympiad were a success. Whether they will edge China closer to true democracy no one yet knows. Whether they will instead bolster the current regime no one yet knows. Twenty years ago, South Korea hosted the Olympics and it is widely believed that that event helped spur change and sparked a democratic revolution. But China is not South Korea and the legacy of the Beijing games is uncertain.