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## The 1980 Moscow Olympic Boycott as a Tool of American Foreign Policy

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in History

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the American-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics as a tool of American foreign policy. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 which prompted US President Jimmy Carter to impose sanctions on the Soviets, including a boycott of the Moscow Games. The thesis examines why the boycott failed to achieve Carter's objectives and evaluates what the President may have considered to substantially increase its success. Carter's dealings with essential groups within the Olympic movement, such as the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the Olympic athletes, as well as foreign leaders, will be critically evaluated. The thesis argues that Carter failed at convincing these essential groups to support a boycott and offers some thoughts as to what the President might have considered to increase his chance of success. The thesis concludes by critically evaluating how Carter sought to promote the boycott and offers an analysis on the effectiveness of using the Olympics to advance a nation's foreign policy agenda.

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

This thesis explores the reaction of US President Jimmy Carter to the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union. It focuses on examining the US-led boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. The paper argues that Carter failed to meet the objectives the boycott hoped to achieve and offers some thoughts as to what the President may have considered to increase its chance of success.

## **Keywords**

Olympic Games, International Olympic Committee, United States Olympic Committee, Olympic boycott, United States, Soviet Union, Afghanistan, Jimmy Carter, US foreign policy

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

“My opinion of the Russians has changed most drastically in the last week [more] than even in the previous two and a half years before that.”<sup>1</sup>

– Jimmy Carter, December 1979

On December 24, 1979, Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), launched an invasion of Afghanistan. A few days later, Jimmy Carter, President of the United States of America (US) from 1977-1981, announced that his opinion of the Soviet Union had drastically changed. From 1947 to 1991, the US and the USSR were engaged in the Cold War; a geopolitical, economic and ideological rivalry between two superpowers and their respective allies and client states. The invasion of Afghanistan marked one of the turning points of the Cold War. Though the 1970s marked a period of relative understanding and cooperation between the Americans and the Soviets, the invasion of Afghanistan dramatically changed Carter’s impressions of the Soviet Union, causing the President to react strongly and pursue a foreign policy that was more combative and interventionist compared with US policy throughout the 1970s. Carter’s successor, Ronald Reagan, President from 1981 to 1989, engaged in a “second” Cold War with the Soviet Union. Throughout his first term in office, Reagan expanded the adverse and contentious policies adopted by Carter in 1980.

The most controversial American response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was Carter’s decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics held from July 19 to August 3, in Moscow. Carter interpreted the invasion as a major divergence of Brezhnev’s foreign policy and was concerned about the prospects of further Soviet expansion in the Middle East. A boycott of

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Mitchell, “The Cold War and Jimmy Carter,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84.

the Olympics was a sanction levied to punish the Soviets, force them to withdraw their troops, prevent them from achieving a propaganda victory, provide a deterrent for future aggression and contribute to America's long-term goals in the Middle East.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the American-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics as a tool of American foreign policy. The Olympic boycott was supported by President Carter, the US Congress and the American people but was unsuccessful at preventing the Games from being held in Moscow. Unlike traditional foreign policy prescriptions, the Olympic boycott necessitated cooperation among several nonstate actors, as well as support from the nations of the world to be successful. Thus, Carter needed to convince the Olympic movement and foreign countries to support American foreign policy by agreeing to boycott the Moscow Games. The thesis will answer the question as to why the boycott failed and what might have been done differently to increase its chances of succeeding. President Carter's dealings with essential groups within the Olympic movement, such as the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the Olympic athletes, as well as foreign leaders, will be critically evaluated. The paper argues that Carter failed at convincing these essential groups to support the boycott and offers some thoughts as to what the President might have done differently that may have increased his chances of success. The paper concludes that while an Olympic boycott was always going to be a challenge to achieve, Carter might have considered approaching the boycott differently.

This thesis will begin by discussing the structure and background of the Olympics, emphasizing the autonomy of the Olympic movement in all matters related to the Games. The history of Olympic boycotts will be explored; in particular, the failed boycott of the 1936 Berlin Games, which, before 1980, was the only edition of the Games that the US considered

boycotting. The Cold War expanded the importance of the Olympics for the Americans and Soviets beginning in the 1950s, a period of the conflict that was defined by an escalation of tensions between the two superpowers. By the 1970s, however, an era of détente had replaced the contentious period of the early Cold War. American foreign policy in the 1970s will be discussed, providing important background information on the state of US-Soviet relations before the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Chapter Two describes Carter's response to the invasion, emphasizing the most punitive sanction imposed by the US on the Soviet Union, the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Carter and his inner circle deliberated the details and merits of the boycott early in the new year, announcing their decision on January 20. There were several disagreements surrounding the terms of the boycott among Carter's inner circle and US intelligence. It was decided that the terms of the boycott would include an ultimatum imposed on the Soviet Union that if it did not withdraw its troops from Afghanistan within one month, the US would boycott the Games and encourage other nations to follow. The chapter analyzes Carter's boycott announcement, noting that the rationales the President provided for imposing the boycott varied across different platforms, encompassing both short- and long-term US foreign policy goals. The chapter concludes by evaluating the decision, offering a critique of how Carter approached the boycott.

The third chapter explores Carter's domestic efforts to garner support for the Olympic boycott. The boycott was debated in the US Congress and although it was widely endorsed in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, several of Carter's rationales were questioned. The chapter also evaluates Carter's dealings with the IOC, USOC and American Olympic athletes. It argues that the President did not respect the autonomy of the Olympic movement which damaged Carter's reputation among these essential groups that he required cooperation

with for the boycott to have a chance of success. Indeed, there was a backlash against Carter from the IOC, USOC and Olympic athletes because Carter failed to understand that the Games did not belong to the US, as he attempted to inject American foreign policy interests into the Olympic movement that were clearly against the politicization of the Games.

Chapter Four examines Carter's foreign campaign aimed at convincing the nations of the world to support the American-led boycott. It examines Carter's unsuccessful attempt at constructing a coalition of boycotting nations in Europe and analyzes how Carter may have better approached dealing with his European allies. Beyond US allies in Europe, Carter's campaign to convince developing nations in the Global South to support the boycott is discussed. The final section of the chapter explores Canada's response to calls from the US to support the boycott and explains how and why Canada chose to support its ally by abstaining from Moscow. The Canadian case is examined to provide an in-depth example of the challenge of recruiting the nations of the world to participate in the boycott. The thesis evaluates the positions of Prime Ministers Joe Clark and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, together with the opinion of the Canadian Olympic Association, offering insight as to why Canada chose to boycott. The paper concludes by critically evaluating how Carter sought to promote the boycott and offers an analysis of the effectiveness of using the Olympics to advance a nation's foreign policy agenda.



## Chapter 2: Background Information

### 2.1 The Structure and Background of the Olympics

The Olympic Games are an international athletics competition drawing the participation of athletes from most nations of the world. Athletes compete in a variety of individual and team competitions as representatives of their country. The scale and scope of the Games make the Olympics the world's foremost international athletics competition, drawing interest from around the globe. The mass appeal of these popular quadrennial Games elevates their status to a point where they command great significance in global political, cultural and economic life.<sup>2</sup>

The modern Olympics began with the founding of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), a nongovernmental organization based in Lausanne, Switzerland which is responsible for overseeing the Olympic movement. Pierre de Coubertin founded the IOC in 1894 and in 1896, the first Summer Games were held in Athens, Greece. Beginning in 1896, the Games have been held quadrennially in a host city selected by the IOC, except for the 1916, 1940 and 1944 Games which were cancelled due to the world wars. The recent outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the postponement of the 2020 Games scheduled to take place in Tokyo, Japan. The Tokyo Games were held in the summer of 2021.

The IOC adheres to the *Olympic Charter*, a set of rules, guidelines and principles that govern the organization and structure of the modern Olympic movement. The 1980 version of the *Olympic Charter* stated that the "IOC governs the Olympic movement and owns the rights over the Olympic Games."<sup>3</sup> The Charter outlines the roles of International Sports Federations (IFs), the governing bodies of sports played in the Olympics, and National Olympic Committees (NOCs), a group guided by the IOC which is responsible for organizing an Olympic team to

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Erich Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1999), xx.

<sup>3</sup> International Olympic Committee, *Olympic Charter*, 1980, 6.

represent each participating country.<sup>4</sup> Each city that hosts the Olympic Games is also represented by an organizing committee that reports to the IOC and is overseen by the *Olympic Charter*. As mandated by the *Charter*, the IOC “is the final authority on all questions concerning the Olympic Games and the Olympic movement.”<sup>5</sup>

Although the IOC is a nongovernmental organization, it participates in international diplomacy and is bound by a set of rules and regulations. Ideally, organizations affiliated with the IOC such as IFs and NOCs are autonomous and free from government intervention. In other words, the NOCs based in each nation that participates in the Games should theoretically only be obligated to adhere to the rules and policies of the IOC, immune from influence or pressure from their national government. Indeed, the *Charter* mandates that “NOCs must be autonomous and must resist all pressures of any kind whatsoever, whether of a political, religious or economic nature.”<sup>6</sup> However, the history of the Olympic movement has demonstrated that the ideals of the IOC, including the mandate that NOCs operate without influence from politics, was difficult to achieve.

The beginning of transnational sporting competitions emerged in the late nineteenth century, resulting in the establishment of governing bodies such as the IOC. The IOC maintains its legitimacy over the organization of the Olympics through a democratic system that elects individuals to operate the Committee’s business. NOCs are organized in the same way; however, NOC members are necessarily citizens of a state and operate within their host country. It is the organization of the NOCs within the boundaries of the nations of the world that can result in the association of a nation’s Olympic team with the values of its host state. Indeed, NOCs in

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey M. Marks, “Political Abuse of Olympic Sport,” *New York University of International Law and Politics* 14 (1981), 161.

<sup>5</sup> International Olympic Committee, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

democratic nations operate within the state and parallel to the state, with the same democratic organizing principles. The close association between the state and the NOCs allows sports to be closely linked with nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Although the values of the IOC stress the necessity for sporting bodies to be independent of the host government, the autonomy of NOCs from the country in which they reside and represent varies around the world.<sup>8</sup>

The growth of the Olympic Games in the twentieth century resulted in several issues and controversies that affected the quality and reputation of the Olympic movement. Concerns such as commercialization of the Games, amateurism versus professionalism, the use of performance-enhancing drugs and the relationship between sports and politics created numerous controversies, many of which remain unresolved. This paper focuses on one such controversy: the role of politics in sport, specifically the use of an Olympic boycott as a tool of American foreign policy. Despite the goals and ideals of the IOC, the *Olympic Charter* and the pioneers of the Olympic movement, the blending of sport and politics have affected the Games. Indeed, throughout the history of the Olympics, there have been numerous examples of nations boycotting the Games. Sports and politics were interwoven long before the Summer Games of 1980 and boycotts continued to plague the Olympic movement in 1984 and 1988.

## **2.2 The Berlin Summer Games of 1936**

The first major clash involving sports and politics at the Olympics emerged after the 1936 Summer Games were awarded to Berlin, Germany. Before 1936, there was a prevailing belief in the US that sports should be apolitical. However, Hitler's seizure of power in Germany in 1933

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<sup>7</sup> Trevor Taylor, "Sport and World Politics: Functionalism and the State System," *International Journal* 43 (1988), 536-38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 540.

and the subsequent laws passed by the Nazis raised concerns in America about US participation.<sup>9</sup> The IOC, though, troubled by Hitler's rise to power, received assurance from the German dictator that any laws passed targeting Jews or other minorities would not affect the standing and treatment of such athletes during the Games. Indeed, Hitler promised to abide by the *Olympic Charter*. Subsequently, the alpine town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen was awarded the 1936 Winter Games.<sup>10</sup> However, the passing of the antisemitic Nuremberg Laws in 1935 by the Nazis stripped German Jews of many civil and economic rights. These laws also applied to other minority groups in Germany.

Despite the growing concerns of civil rights abuses in Germany, Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee (AOC)<sup>11</sup> strongly opposed a boycott on the basis that sports and politics should not be intertwined.<sup>12</sup> The USOC and its predecessor, the AOC, served as the NOC for the US and, as such, it was supposed to be a body free of political interference, beholden only to the IOC and the *Olympic Charter*. Indeed, like the *Olympic Charter* of the IOC, the 1980 Constitution of the USOC mandated that the Committee had “exclusive jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to the participation of the United States in the Olympic Games, including the representation of the United States in such games.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the decision as to whether the US would send a team to compete at the Olympic

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<sup>9</sup> Brennan K. Berg, Seth A. Kessler and Thomas M. Hunt, “A Realist Perspective of Sport Management Program and the H.J. Lutch Stark Governmental Perceptions of Olympic Boycott Movements, 1936–2008,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 4 (2012), 309.

<sup>10</sup> Mario Kessler, “Only Nazi Games? Berlin 1936: The Olympic Games between Sports and Politics,” *Socialism and Democracy* 25 (2011), 127.

<sup>11</sup> The AOC changed its name to the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) in 1961, and since 2019, the organization is referred to as the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC); the first NOC in the world to add “Paralympic” to its name. This paper will refer to the organization as the AOC when describing events before the name change and as the USOC for matters occurring after 1961.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen R. Wenn, “A House Divided: The US Amateur Sport Establishment and the Issue of Participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics,” *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 67 (1996), 161.

<sup>13</sup> Marks, 164.

Games was at the discretion of the USOC. It was the job of the USOC to protect the “right of an amateur athlete to participate if selected as an athlete representing the United States in the Olympic Games.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the USOC was to be free of any outside form of interference, political or otherwise and was only permitted to withdraw from engaging in the Games if participation violated the Constitution of the USOC or the *Olympic Charter* of the IOC.

In 1936, the US government was concerned about the political implications of allowing athletes to attend the Berlin Olympics, an event hosted by a nation that was displaying increased expansionist, racist and authoritarian inclinations. George Messersmith, the Consulate General in Berlin under the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, provided the US with a jarring analysis regarding the use of the Games as part of a wider strategy of spreading Nazi propaganda. Messersmith stated that “to the Party and to the youth of Germany, this holding of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 has become the symbol of the conquest of the world by National Socialist doctrine.”<sup>15</sup> He supported a boycott on the basis that the Games would provide Germany with an opportunity for its government to legitimize and advance its political and ideological goals at home and abroad. The Berlin Games were the first example of the idea that American participation or non-participation at the Olympics would affect the national interests of the nation. Messersmith explained that if the Games were held in Berlin as scheduled, they would “play an important role in determining political developments in Europe.”<sup>16</sup> Messersmith also speculated that the US needed to take the lead in any initiative to boycott the Games, stating that “if we participate the other countries will. If we do not, the majority will follow our lead and only be too happy to do so.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>15</sup> Berg, 310.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 311.

President Roosevelt refused to involve the US government in Germany's affairs. In a 1933 conversation with William E. Dodd, the US ambassador to Germany, Roosevelt explained that "the German authorities are treating the Jews shamefully . . . but this is not a governmental affair."<sup>18</sup> Messersmith was unsuccessful at swaying Roosevelt. Indeed, the President was content to allow the amateur athletic community in the US to decide whether the AOC would field a team at Berlin.<sup>19</sup> However, the AOC relied on financial and moral support from the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the governing body of several Olympic sports in the US. Jeremiah T. Mahoney, president of the AAU, supported nonparticipation based on concerns regarding Hitler's racial policies targeting Jewish athletes.<sup>20</sup> In response to the AAU's opposition, Brundage visited Berlin and was given a tour of the Olympic facilities by Nazi officials. The Germans assured Brundage that despite the passing of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, Jewish athletes would be free to compete without persecution. Consistent with the *Olympic Charter*, Brundage admitted to the Germans that what happened to Jews outside of the Games was not a concern. Indeed, the IOC's emphasis on keeping sport separate from politics necessitated that human rights concerns outside the realm of sport were of little importance to the Olympic movement. Brundage reported back to the AOC and the AAU that they need not be concerned about the persecution of Jewish athletes as their rights to compete as equals would be respected.<sup>21</sup> Brundage's trip solidified support among the AOC and his appeals to AAU

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen R. Wenn, "A Suitable Policy of Neutrality? FDR and the Question of American Participation in the 1936 Olympics," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 8 (1991), 320.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen R. Wenn, "A Tale of Two Diplomats: George S. Messersmith and Charles H. Sherrill on Proposed American Participation in the 1936 Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 16 (1989), 42.

<sup>20</sup> Wenn, "A House Divided," 161.

<sup>21</sup> Anton Rippon, *Hitler's Olympics: The Story of the 1936 Nazi Games* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword Books, 2006), 50-51.

delegates were enough to garner approval for participation in Berlin from Mahoney and the Union. Consequently, the AAU voted narrowly in favour of sending a team to Berlin.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the influence of Brundage, there were other factors that made a boycott an unappealing position. For example, the political climate in the US in the 1930s did not favour a policy of strong opposition to Hitler. A policy of appeasement was adopted by the Western Allies in which concessions were granted to Nazi Germany to mitigate Hitler's aggression and preserve peace. The US maintained its neutrality throughout the 1930s, focusing on domestic issues related to the Great Depression. A boycott was thus unpopular in the US as such a policy would be contrary to its political objectives.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a Gallup poll conducted in 1935 found that 57 percent of respondents were opposed to a boycott compared to 43 percent in favour.<sup>24</sup> Before the Second World War, the prevailing sentiment in the US regarding the role of America in the world was much different than it was during the Cold War. The US was content to be isolationist and remain neutral regarding the affairs of overseas nations; there was skepticism surrounding the ability of American policy to change the political aspirations of foreign countries. Consequently, there was very little confidence that a US boycott would have any effect on the discriminatory policies adopted by the Nazis.<sup>25</sup>

In the US, labour unions such as the American Federation of Labour (AFL), as well as various Jewish associations, expressed support for a boycott.<sup>26</sup> Reactions to the idea of a boycott in the African American community were mixed. Civil rights groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) encouraged Black athletes not to

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<sup>22</sup> Wenn, "A House Divided," 163-67.

<sup>23</sup> James Worrall, *My Olympic Journey: Sixty Years with Canadian Sport and the Olympic Games* (Toronto: Canadian Olympic Association, 2000), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Wenn, "A Tale of Two Diplomats," 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Kessler, 129-30.

compete in the Games. However, most Black newspapers supported participation, arguing that the success of Black athletes in Berlin would destroy Hitler's racist ideologies relating to the superiority of the "Aryan race."<sup>27</sup> Black athletes enjoyed much success in Berlin, capturing many medals. Jesse Owens, an African American competitor in athletics, provided one of the top performances of the Games, winning four gold medals. The American press was enamoured by Owens' performance, enthusiastically arguing that his success disproved Hitler's notions that those of Nordic descent were superior.<sup>28</sup>

The Summer Games in Berlin were held successfully without any nations boycotting. Several Jewish athletes from various countries decided to boycott Berlin individually, but their decision not to participate had little effect on the outcome of the Games.<sup>29</sup> From the standpoint of the Nazis, the Games were a major success domestically and internationally. The Germans were eager to host the Olympics, having been banned from participating in the 1920 and 1924 Games due to their involvement in the First World War.<sup>30</sup> Hitler recognized the importance of the Games as a propaganda tool and he appointed Joseph Goebbels to establish the Olympic Games Propaganda Commission. The Commission began meeting in 1934, strategizing ways in which to use the Games to advance Nazi ideology while maintaining cordial relations with participating nations and the IOC.<sup>31</sup> The façade created by the spectacle of the Games and the Olympic Village, which housed participating athletes, proved to be an effective means for Hitler to spread propaganda. International travelers to Germany were sheltered from life under Hitler's dictatorship outside of the Olympic bubble.<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to determine if a US boycott would

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>30</sup> Senn, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Rippon, 34.

<sup>32</sup> Kessler, 139.



have caused any significant dents in the Nazi propaganda machine. Lord Killanin, IOC President from 1972-1980, believed that holding the Games in Berlin drew the world's attention to the horrors of Hitler's regime. In his memoirs, he argued that "to claim that the Games in 1936 made the situation in Germany worse is wrong. Rather the opposite, for the fact that the Games were in Germany drew the world's attention to events."<sup>33</sup>

The failed campaign to boycott the 1936 Berlin Games marked the beginning of several successive boycott efforts that emerged throughout the twentieth century. After 1936, the Games would not be held again until 1948 due to the Second World War. Several nations boycotted the 1956 Melbourne Games, some in protest of the Soviet invasion of Hungary and others in solidarity with Egypt regarding the Suez Crisis. The 1976 Montreal Games were boycotted by several African nations due to the IOC's refusal to ban New Zealand from competing. These nations boycotted to protest New Zealand's rugby team competing in South Africa.<sup>34</sup> The IOC banned South Africa from the Games in 1964 due to concerns about their policy of apartheid. Indeed, the IOC demonstrated that it was willing to take political considerations into account in some cases, banning Germany and Japan from competing in the 1948 Games for their roles in the Second World War in addition to barring the South Africans from competing until the political structure of their country allowed for multi-racial representation in international sporting competitions. South Africa was readmitted into the Olympic movement in 1992 during its transition to a multiracial democracy. Each of the seventeen editions of the Summer Games staged between 1920 and 1992 was affected in some way by the exclusion of athletes, either through a boycott or the suspension of states by the IOC.<sup>35</sup> By 1980, it was clear that the lofty

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<sup>33</sup> Lord Killanin, *My Olympic Years* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983), 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Marlene Goldsmith, "Sporting Boycotts as a Political Tool," *The Australian Quarterly* 67 (1995), 11.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Olympic ideal of keeping the Games apolitical was under constant threat. The IOC appeared hypocritical at times, claiming that the organization superseded politics while concurrently choosing to ban certain nations for political reasons. The boycott efforts before the Moscow Olympics had a minimal impact on the competitiveness of the Games, but the 1980 boycott would be the largest and most comprehensive attempt at using the Games as a means to advance a political objective.

On ideological grounds, the Soviet Union chose not to participate in the Olympics from 1920-1952, viewing the Games as a bourgeois institution. After the Second World War, however, Moscow reversed its policy and vowed to participate in Western sports organizations, including the Olympic Games.<sup>36</sup> The Soviets joined the Olympic movement at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, capturing 71 medals compared to the US team that won 76. Soviet participation at Helsinki and its medal success became an immediate concern to US policymakers. Indeed, Soviet entry into the Olympic movement opened a new arena through which the Cold War could be fought.<sup>37</sup> American officials grew concerned that the Soviet Union could use its dominance in international sporting competitions such as the Olympics as an effective form of propaganda to support the idea that communism was superior to the capitalistic culture and values of the US.<sup>38</sup> The Olympics provided a platform for both nations to compete in front of a global audience and an opportunity for each country to extol the virtues of their competing social and economic doctrines to the nations of the world. The US and USSR both attempted to use values enshrined in the *Olympic Charter*, such as the spirit of fair competition and peaceful internationalism, to

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<sup>36</sup> Toby C. Rider, *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 43.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Moscow versus Los Angeles: The Nixon White House wages Cold War in the Olympic Selection Process," *Cold War History* 9 (2009), 137.

<sup>38</sup> Rider, 2.

suit their respective ideologies and ways of life. For example, the Soviet Union claimed that the Olympics could be compared to the values of communism whereas the US argued that the Games represented and promoted liberal democracy.<sup>39</sup>

The Soviet entry to the Olympics in 1952 changed America's relationship with the Games for the remainder of the Cold War. The Olympics were no longer viewed by the US government as an event that eschewed political agendas, as was believed at the Berlin Games. The government conceptualized the Olympics as a Cold War battleground and it was imperative that the Games not become an avenue for the Soviet Union to cultivate international goodwill through its sporting achievements.<sup>40</sup> America's new relationship with the Olympics in the 1950s was crucial to understanding why the Carter administration considered the Moscow Games an expendable event that could be boycotted to advance foreign policy objectives.

### **2.3 American Foreign Policy and Détente in the 1970s**

The consequences of America's changing relationship with the Olympics in the 1950s were not realized fully until the 1980 Moscow Games boycott. The decade preceding the Moscow Games, however, was dominated by a warming of relations between the US and USSR. The 1970s within the context of the history of the Cold War was a period of relative peace and cooperation between the two superpowers through the mutual policy of détente. Détente is defined as the "process of easing tension between states whose interests are so radically divergent that reconciliation is inherently limited."<sup>41</sup> The peaceful coexistence in the 1970s contrasted with the previous decade, in which major confrontations such as the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis were reflective of an era of tension and misunderstanding. Détente was an

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>41</sup> Richard W. Stevenson, *The Rise and Fall of Détente: Relaxations of Tension in US-Soviet Relations, 1953-84* (London: MacMillan Press, 1985), 11.

approach to American foreign policy employed by President Richard Nixon, who occupied the White House from 1969 until his resignation in 1974, and Henry Kissinger, who served as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under Nixon and his successor Gerald Ford, President from 1974-1977. The US chose to pursue détente to ensure peace and security through the maintenance of stability with the Soviet Union. The premise of détente was that it would be effective at limiting the nuclear arms race and contain Soviet expansionism. The policy was initially well received by the American public and it was believed that détente would restructure the Cold War in a less adversarial and more peaceful and cooperative direction.<sup>42</sup>

The era of détente produced several foreign policy achievements for the US. Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev reached a major arms reduction agreement at the Moscow Summit in 1972. The two leaders signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks Treaty (SALT) which controlled the expansion of nuclear arms, limiting each superpower to an equal number of weapons. The SALT treaty demonstrated that the US and USSR were capable of forging mutually beneficial agreements, promoting peace and understanding.<sup>43</sup> Beyond arms limitations, talks were also successful at creating increased trade between the two nations, in addition to greater cultural and scientific exchanges, including a joint mission in space.<sup>44</sup>

In 1975, the US and Soviet Union, along with Canada and the nations of Europe, met in Finland and signed the Helsinki Accords. The Accords consisted of several non-binding agreements aimed at furthering détente. They included agreements regarding border integrity and European security, the promotion of human rights and the free movement of peoples, and the continued integration of cultural and scientific knowledge across East-West spheres.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 172.

Additionally, the Accords mandated that the Eastern and Western Blocs pursue greater cooperation and participation in the field of sport, including international sporting competitions.<sup>46</sup> Détente in the first half of the 1970s was lauded widely by both the American and Soviet press and it was believed that the cooperative relationship between Nixon and Brezhnev was the start of a new era of US-USSR relations.

By the middle of the 1970s, however, cracks in the system of détente began to form, decreasing the amount of cooperation and increasing mutual suspicion between the two superpowers. Relations between the US and China, initiated during Nixon's tenure as President, disturbed Moscow. The Soviets interpreted the US harmonizing its relations with China negatively, expressing concern for an alliance between Beijing and Washington at the expense of Moscow.<sup>47</sup> Nixon's resignation in 1974 put the future of détente in question. Though Nixon developed a good relationship with Brezhnev, his resignation was met domestically with calls for a more aggressive foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. Gerald Ford vowed to continue détente, despite increased pressure from Republicans to adopt a more adversarial approach to the Soviets. In the 1976 Republican primaries, Ford narrowly defeated Ronald Reagan, who championed an anti-détente platform.<sup>48</sup> By the mid-1970s, many American voters began to question the logic of détente, critiquing the SALT treaty on the basis that it allowed the Soviets to achieve nuclear parity with the US, and the Helsinki Accords, for legitimizing Moscow's territorial claims in Eastern Europe. The US withdrawal of troops from Vietnam in 1975 further contributed to the belief that America was losing its strength and ability to project power

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<sup>46</sup> James A. R. Nafziger, "Diplomatic Fun and the Games: A Commentary on the United States Boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics," *Willamette Law Review* 17 (1980), 78.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Mitchell, "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 81.

<sup>48</sup> Olav Njolstad, "The Collapse of Superpower Détente, 1975-1980," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: Endings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140.

abroad.<sup>49</sup> Despite these challenges to détente from the burgeoning American neoconservative movement, its ideas and vision remained intact. Jimmy Carter defeated Ford in the general election and entered the White House in January 1977.

Carter, not desiring American-Soviet interests to further deteriorate, vowed to continue détente along new lines that were more favourable toward the US. He called for a “new and genuine détente” that placed greater emphasis on American values and national security interests.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Carter believed that détente under Nixon and Ford resulted in the US “giving up too much and asking for too little” and vowed to be “a much tougher negotiator” than his predecessors.<sup>51</sup>

A major point of contention between the two superpowers was the issue of human rights. Carter vowed to make the promotion of human rights the guiding principle of his foreign policy, departing from the policies of Nixon and Kissinger who were content to work with foreign leaders regardless of whether or not they valued and promoted human rights. In his memoirs, Carter stated that he “hoped and believed that the expansion of human rights might be the wave of the future throughout the world,” adding that he “wanted the United States to be on the crest of this movement.”<sup>52</sup> Guilty of human rights abuses, the Soviet Union under Brezhnev posed a problem for Carter, as he wished to maintain good relations with the Soviets while not abandoning his moral crusade against human rights abuses globally. Carter emphasized the human rights provisions in the Helsinki Accords and sought to hold the Soviets accountable for violating them. Upholding and promoting the Helsinki Accords would distinguish the US from the USSR in the eyes of the world, providing human rights foundations for other nations to abide

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 141-42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>52</sup> Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 144.

by and winning the ideological competition with the Soviets.<sup>53</sup> Speaking to Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in 1977, Carter cited the Helsinki Accords when questioning Soviet treatment of political dissenters. Gromyko dismissed Carter's concerns, stating that such disputes were of "infinitesimal significance" and "can only harm the climate of our relations" while questioning the legitimacy of the US to challenge the internal affairs of the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> Despite the steps Carter took to demonstrate to the Soviets that US human rights concerns were global in scope and not solely focused on Moscow, the USSR continued to interpret his campaign as an attack on their sovereignty, hindering superpower relations.<sup>55</sup>

Although the issues of human rights strained the relationship between the US and USSR, threatening the future of détente, Carter made progress with the Soviets on the issue of arms control. The President stated in his 1977 State of the Union Address that he hoped eventually to achieve a nuclear-free world and thus pledged to continue the arms reduction talks undertaken by Nixon and Ford.<sup>56</sup> The Carter administration negotiated terms with the Soviets for a new SALT agreement, culminating at the Vienna Summit of 1979, which was the first and only in-person meeting between Carter and Brezhnev. The two leaders signed the SALT II treaty in June 1979, which replaced the first SALT agreement, further curtailing the proliferation of nuclear arms.<sup>57</sup> Carter did not achieve the large reduction in arms that he hoped for and, due to disagreements lingering over the terms of the SALT II treaty, the negotiation process laboured throughout the first three years of his term before the Vienna Summit was held in 1979. Despite these obstacles

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<sup>53</sup> Christian Philip Peterson, "The Carter Administration and the Promotion of Human Rights in the Soviet Union, 1977-1981," *Diplomatic History* 38 (2014), 632-33.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 628.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 639.

<sup>56</sup> James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, "When Empathy Failed: Using Critical Oral History to Reassess the Collapse of US-Soviet Détente in the Carter-Brezhnev Years," *Cold War Studies* 12 (2010), 43.

<sup>57</sup> Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of Public Good* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 133-37.

and setbacks, the SALT II treaty was signed, ensuring that the hallmark of détente, arms reduction, remained intact.

Beyond the promotion of human rights and arms control with the Soviet Union, Carter was faced with several other difficult foreign policy challenges during his term. The US suffered a major foreign policy loss in 1978 when protests erupted in Iran calling for the overthrow of the Iranian Shah. The Shah maintained friendly relations with the US after being installed as the leader of Iran in 1953, with the help of a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored coup. By 1979, the monarchical pro-Western government was replaced by an Islamic theocracy that was hostile to the US. Furthermore, several American diplomats were kidnapped by revolutionaries and held in the US embassy in Tehran. The diplomats were held hostage from November 4, 1979, to January 20, 1981. Carter was unable to prevent the overthrow of the Shah and failed to rescue the American hostages.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the Soviet Union refused to support the American position, offering sympathy to the Iranian revolutionaries and further harming superpower relations.<sup>59</sup>

Although the situation in Iran was problematic for the US and its interests, Carter was successful in other foreign policy aspirations elsewhere in the world. The President reached an agreement to return ownership of the Panama Canal from the US to the Panamanians, improving relations with Latin America.<sup>60</sup> Carter also helped to facilitate the framework of a peace agreement between Egypt and Israel through the signing of the Camp David Accords, ending hostilities between the Egyptians and Israelis.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 142-43.

<sup>59</sup> Strobe Talbott, "US-Soviet Relations: From Bad to Worse," *Foreign Affairs* 58 (1979), 519.

<sup>60</sup> Hargrove, 124.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 130.



By December 1979, Carter had accumulated a mixed foreign policy record during his first three years in office. Soviet-American relations deteriorated, most notably due to differences over human rights, but the system of détente remained in place following the signing of the SALT II treaty. Carter, though he struggled to effectively respond to the Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage-taking, proved to be an effective negotiator and mediator as evidenced by his success in agreeing to the Panama Canal treaty and the Camp David Accords. In the final year of his term, however, Carter faced a major foreign policy challenge; one that would change the direction of US-Soviet relations into the 1980s.

## Chapter 3: The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the US Response

### 3.1 The Soviets Invade Afghanistan

On December 24, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The invasion was the first time since the Second World War that the Soviet military entered territory that was not under the supervision of Moscow. The Soviets intervened to quell uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, but both countries were part of the Soviet sphere of influence through their membership in the Warsaw Pact. Conversely, Afghanistan was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961 and had no formal alliances with either the US or Soviet power blocs. In 1978, Afghanistan's neutral government was overthrown by a communist revolution, but the new government had trouble consolidating its rule. The communist government instituted several unpopular reforms and used oppression against its political opponents, resulting in an uprising by the rival Mujahideen forces.<sup>62</sup> Not wanting to lose the establishment of a friendly communist government in Afghanistan, the Soviets decided to intervene on the side of the government to oppose the Mujahideen. Although Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership were concerned about US backlash to an invasion, they conceptualized the situation in Afghanistan as being similar to that in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, believing that a quick victory could be achieved which would not upset the West to the point of a major change in superpower relations.<sup>63</sup> The Soviets misjudged how the US would react, believing that the invasion would not alter the direction of US-USSR relations. Furthermore, Soviet forces encountered tougher resistance than anticipated, remaining in Afghanistan until troops were withdrawn in 1989, nine years after the invasion.

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<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 61.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

The US, aware of the political instability and unrest in Afghanistan, knew that the situation offered an opportunity for the Soviets to intervene. Zbigniew Brzezinski, US National Security Advisor during the Carter administration, warned the President that the Soviets had interests in intervening in Afghanistan to ensure that a friendly communist government would be installed. Carter was receptive to Brzezinski's evaluation and discussed the issue at the Vienna Summit. Addressing the Soviets, Carter stated that "there are many problems in Iran and Afghanistan, but the United States has not interfered in the internal affairs of those nations. We expect the Soviet Union to do the same."<sup>64</sup> Brzezinski was asked by Carter in September 1979 to weigh American options if the Soviets invaded.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Brzezinski was concerned that the US was being too passive when evaluating the Soviets' interests in Afghanistan. Carter's position put him at odds with members of the State Department who believed that public condemnation of the USSR would be met with hostility by Moscow. The US continued to monitor Soviet activity in the region, and Carter noted that he was aware that the Soviet Union was increasing its troop placement along the border with Afghanistan on December 14.<sup>66</sup> The US did not pressure the USSR on the issue of Afghanistan and the Soviets invaded on December 24, 1979, leaving the US unprepared as to how to respond.<sup>67</sup>

Despite Carter having been briefed on the prospect of the USSR intervening in Afghanistan, he was surprised the Soviets chose to invade, believing that the decision would be damaging to Moscow and harmful for superpower relations.<sup>68</sup> The US did not have any strategic interests in Afghanistan; the main concern was that Soviet occupation would lead to further

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<sup>64</sup> Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 254.

<sup>65</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of a National Security Advisor, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 427.

<sup>66</sup> Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 379.

<sup>67</sup> Brzezinski, 428.

<sup>68</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, 383.

expansion of the USSR's sphere of influence. In his memoirs, Carter stated that the "Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was a threat to the security of the United States. If they consolidated their hold and moved into adjacent countries, I would have been forced to use military intervention."<sup>69</sup> A Soviet takeover of Afghanistan meant that nations such as Iran and Pakistan would be vulnerable to influence from Moscow. Thus, it was imperative that the Soviets did not consolidate their rule in Afghanistan because this would have a destabilizing effect in the region.<sup>70</sup> Brezhnev attempted to temper what he believed to be an overreaction from Carter, telling the President that Soviet forces had been invited by the Afghan government for assistance against the rebels.<sup>71</sup>

### **3.2 Initial US Sanctions**

On January 4, 1980, Carter gave a public address to the nation on the situation in Afghanistan. He denounced Brezhnev's claim that Soviet forces were invited to Afghanistan to preserve peace, condemning the Soviet Union for invading a non-aligned nation.<sup>72</sup> Carter announced several sanctions the US decided to impose on the Soviets; planned scientific and cultural exchanges were cancelled, and US exports to the USSR were affected, the most punitive of which was an embargo on the sale of grain. Beyond economic sanctions, Carter also pledged to "defer further consideration of the SALT II treaty so that Congress and I can assess Soviet actions and intentions."<sup>73</sup> Although the SALT II treaty was signed by Carter at the Vienna Summit, it had yet to be ratified by the US Senate. Carter vowed to reconsider the treaty's

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>70</sup> Cyrus R. Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 385.

<sup>71</sup> Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 210.

<sup>72</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, Book I* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1981), 22.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 23.

ratification “as circumstances change in the future.”<sup>74</sup> He instructed the Senate to keep the treaty on the “calendar of pending business” hopeful that it may be reconsidered following a change in Soviet policy.<sup>75</sup> By January 4 an Olympic boycott of the 1980 Summer Games had yet to be considered seriously. Carter stated that “the United States would prefer not to withdraw from the Olympic games scheduled for Moscow this summer,” ominously declaring that continued Soviet aggression in Afghanistan would endanger “both the participation of athletes and the travel to Moscow by spectators.”<sup>76</sup>

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan drew widespread condemnation around the world. The United Nations (UN) was quick to denounce the invasion; its General Assembly voted on the measure in early January. Opposition to the invasion overwhelmingly carried the vote; 104 nations condemned the invasion compared to 14 against. The UN Security Council also voted on condemnation; however, the Soviets, a Security Council member, vetoed the resolution demanding that troops be withdrawn.<sup>77</sup> A US task force examined the invasion and gauged that the Soviets’ intrusion in Afghanistan was met “with varying degrees of condemnation from the Arab states.”<sup>78</sup> American allies in the Persian Gulf were concerned that the invasion reflected a new direction of Soviet foreign policy, blaming “the weakness of American policy” as a reason why Moscow thought it could intervene without repercussions. Another American ally, Pakistan, was also concerned with the potential Soviet takeover of Afghanistan, as the two nations shared a protracted land border.<sup>79</sup> Iran and China were among the other major powers in Asia that voiced displeasure at the Soviet invasion. US Allies, including Canada, Western Europe and Japan,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>75</sup> Vance, 389.

<sup>76</sup> *Public Papers, Book I*, 23-24.

<sup>77</sup> Afghanistan Task Force, “Afghanistan: Soviet Invasion and US Response,” The Library of Congress, 1980, 21.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 12.

began immediately strategizing potential responses and sanctions to impose on the Soviets. The task force concluded that the “Afghanistan incident is likely to contribute to a further cooling of relations between NATO countries and the Soviet Union.”<sup>80</sup>

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan challenged the logic of détente. The withdrawal of troops from Vietnam in 1975 and the Iranian Revolution in 1979 were major blows to US foreign policy objectives, and the Soviets entering Afghanistan was viewed as another setback. The mood of détente in the 1970s resulted in the US withdrawing from foreign commitments; however, the response by Carter was much more aggressive and combative compared to the policy of détente. The task force believed that “the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan appears to have triggered a major reassessment of the role of the United States in the world.”<sup>81</sup> The Iranian Revolution coupled with the Soviet invasion highlighted US vulnerabilities in the Middle East, compelling a reversal of détente of the 1970s to a more interventionist approach to foreign policy during Carter’s final year in office. The sanctions imposed on the Soviets by Carter represented a major shift in American foreign policy.

Brezhnev interpreted the sanctions imposed by Carter on January 4 as an extreme diversion of US policy. A January 14 memo by the CIA documented Brezhnev’s reaction to American sanctions. The report found that Brezhnev was anticipating further measures to be taken by the US to punish the USSR, noting that Soviet countermeasures were being considered.<sup>82</sup> Brezhnev justified the invasion on the basis that political instability in Afghanistan was a danger to Soviet security. He assured the Soviet people that American sanctions would not

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>82</sup> United States Department of State, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XII: Afghanistan” (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2018), 474.

hurt the economy of the Soviet Union and concluded that US actions had a “dangerously destabilizing impact” on global affairs.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.3 The Olympic Boycott Debate

The most punitive sanction, however, was not immediately levied on the Soviets after the invasion. Indeed, the cancellation of scientific and cultural exchanges, the economic measures imposed and the delay of the ratification of the SALT II treaty were announced by Carter on January 4. Throughout the first three weeks of January, the Carter administration debated the logic of an Olympic boycott, announcing the decision on January 20. Although the decision took longer to reach than the other measures, boycotting the Moscow Games was a policy option that was given consideration years before the Soviets invaded. In 1976, Senator Bill Bradley, a former gold medal Olympian, wrote an article in the *New York Times* arguing that political tensions between the two superpowers would increase by 1980 and predicted that the US would boycott the Games. He suggested that the US cease to participate in the Olympics because they had become too political. Critiquing the inherent nationalism of Olympic competition, he believed the Games should be dramatically reformed to avoid the war-like atmosphere between the US and USSR at each festival.<sup>84</sup>

The Olympics were awarded to Moscow by the IOC in 1974 and the USSR became the first totalitarian nation since Nazi Germany in 1936 to host the Games.<sup>85</sup> Justifying the decision, Lord Killanin argued that the agreement to award the Games to Moscow was made purely on the evaluation of the facilities offered and the ability of the Organizing Committee to successfully prepare and host the Olympics. However, Lord Killanin admitted that the IOC members

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>84</sup> 96<sup>th</sup> US Congress, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 96<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session*, Vol. 126-Part 1, January 3-30, 1980 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1980), 827-28.

<sup>85</sup> David B Kanin, “The Olympic Boycott in Diplomatic Context,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 4 (1980), 4.

responsible for voting may have been swayed by political considerations (contrary to the values of the *Olympic Charter*), noting that the 1974 vote was held during the height of détente. The timing of the vote suggested that some IOC members may have voted for Moscow based on the belief that the Games would run smoothly and would not be opposed by the West, thereby reflecting the temporal values of détente.<sup>86</sup> However, superpower relations deteriorated in the second half of the 1970s, and the heightened tensions between the US and the USSR placed the success of the Games in doubt.

During Carter's term, US intelligence suggested that the Moscow Olympics become a tool that the US should utilize to advance its foreign policy goals because the Soviets would be forced to open their nation to the thousands of attendees travelling to Moscow for the Games. For example, a 1978 National Security Council (NSC) memo suggested that the US should prepare for the opportunity to exploit the Moscow Games for the benefit of American intelligence gathering.<sup>87</sup> The memo advised that the Soviets would be planning to use the Games for political purposes, necessitating a response from the US. It was argued that "in winning their bid to host the Olympics in Moscow the Soviets scored a great potential coup for both their foreign exchange earnings and international prestige and propaganda interests."<sup>88</sup> In line with the Carter administration's policy of advancing human rights, the memo stated that the opening of the USSR to the world would provide the US with a great opportunity to "exact the highest possible price in terms of advancing our own human rights interests."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Christopher R. Hill, *Olympic Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 121.

<sup>87</sup> United States Department of State, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume II: Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs" (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2013), 532.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.



Human rights abuses in the Soviet Union accelerated as Moscow was preparing to welcome the world to the 1980 Olympics. The Soviet Union was anxious about foreign visitors viewing life in the USSR outside the Olympic Village or interacting with citizens not involved with the Games. The Soviets addressed this problem by arresting political dissidents who they thought would try and interact with Westerners during the Games. The most famous case was the 1978 trial of Anatoly Shcharansky, a Jewish scientist and activist, who was arrested for allegedly spying for the Americans. It was believed that his arrest was part of the Soviet campaign to censor dissidents in preparation for the Games, leading some members of Congress to endorse sanctions against Moscow, such as relocating or boycotting the Olympics.<sup>90</sup> Similar to the case of the Berlin Games, concerns regarding the safety of Jewish athletes and spectators emerged given the oppressive policies adopted by the Soviets. A report by the CIA stated that the Soviet Union “continues to view the various dissident groups as a serious political problem. But rather than incurring the costs of draconian policies to root out all dissenters, the regime has adopted a strategy to contain the dissent.”<sup>91</sup> The US was concerned about the Soviet Union’s treatment of its Jewish population as well as political dissenters, two minority groups whose rights the Carter administration sought to uphold through the Helsinki Accords. Despite the concerns surrounding Soviet propaganda efforts and human rights abuses, the boycott movement remained small and uninfluential until the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

The idea of boycotting the Olympics as a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was first communicated by Vice President Walter Mondale, who believed that a boycott would “capture the imagination of the American people.”<sup>92</sup> Carter and Mondale met with the NSC on

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<sup>90</sup> Kanin, “The Olympic Boycott in Diplomatic Context,” 5.

<sup>91</sup> United States Department of State, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume VI: Soviet Union” (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2013), 509.

<sup>92</sup> FRUS, Volume XII, 381.

January 2, 1980. Carter was hesitant to entertain the idea of a boycott, stating that such a policy “sent cold chills down his spine.”<sup>93</sup> Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher shared the President’s reservations, stating that an Olympic boycott would “take us too far down the road.”<sup>94</sup> Christopher expressed concern about interfering with the IOC, a nongovernmental organization, and encouraged the NSC to consider the impact of a boycott on American athletes. Furthermore, it was proposed that the US organize an alternate athletics competition for boycotting nations to send their athletes to instead of Moscow.<sup>95</sup>

Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested that the US would be able to convince its allies in Western Europe against participating in the Olympics, arguing that a boycott effort would require the support of other nations to be successful. He stated that “if thirty countries stay out of the Olympics then we will have accomplished something. If only three stay out, we should not do it.”<sup>96</sup> Brzezinski’s position highlighted the importance of a multilateral front against the USSR. This approach necessitated that the US communicate and work with its allies, reflecting Brzezinski’s rationale that Western European nations would be receptive to a boycott. The meeting ended when Carter decided that the US would adopt the public position that it was considering a boycott of the Moscow Games, and his position was articulated during the January 4 public address. Mondale continued to pressure Carter to endorse a boycott, stating in a January 3 letter to the President that “I hope we would really go after the Olympics – I don’t see why that is sacrosanct.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>97</sup> FRUS, Volume VI, 730.

The NSC meeting did not discuss the terms of a boycott or what the US hoped a boycott would achieve. Brzezinski believed that a boycott should only be imposed if the Soviets refused to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. In a January 2 memorandum to Carter, Brzezinski stated that the US should ask its allies to “withhold participation in the Moscow Olympics pending Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.”<sup>98</sup> Brzezinski’s statement also highlighted the necessity for the US to adopt a multilateral approach to boycotting the Games, as this would be more effective at pressuring the Soviets than if the US was the only nation to boycott.

Brzezinski’s belief that America’s Western European allies would support a US-led boycott was challenged by the CIA. The Agency released a report on January 7 that assessed European responses to the invasion. The report emphasized the importance of continuing détente among American allies in Europe, noting that their geographic proximity to the USSR necessitated preserving peace. Western Europe was pleased with the Helsinki Accords, as increased trade and cultural exchanges with the Eastern Bloc nations resulted.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, policies that would strain superpower relations or pose a serious threat to the future of détente would likely be opposed by European nations. The report noted that “because they have so large a stake in East-West harmony, the Europeans have often been reluctant to support the US when they believed the issues in question were peripheral rather than central to the East-West relationship.”<sup>100</sup> The CIA suggested that the invasion of Afghanistan would likely be conceptualized by Europe as a localized conflict that had little bearing on the West. The Soviet invasion “might be thought to have rather limited significance in the long run, and to call for only quite restrained actions on the part of the West.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> FRUS, Volume XII, 367.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 426.

The report recommended that the Europeans would be more receptive of the long-term strategic implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, such as the prospect of Soviet dominance of the Middle East oil-producing regions. However, in the short term, the CIA believed that “Europeans emphasize that the Afghan crisis is primarily a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the Third World.”<sup>102</sup> Although the CIA memo did not explicitly mention the Olympics, it is implied that a policy such as a boycott may not be as palatable among US allies in Europe as Brzezinski suggested. The memo argued that European nations “will certainly hesitate to reinforce East-West tension. They will try instead to limit and confine it, to ensure détente in Europe is not damaged at the core.”<sup>103</sup> The CIA report highlighted that in Western Europe, the invasion was viewed much differently, compared to its reception in the US. Carter understood the invasion as an unprecedented act that demanded a strong American response. American allies in Europe considered the conflict a minor regional clash – a war not worth opposing if it meant abandoning détente. Furthermore, Carter did not consult with his European allies before the boycott was proposed, resulting in feelings of alienation and disrespect among nations the President needed for support.<sup>104</sup>

A point of agreement between Brzezinski and the CIA was the necessity of formulating a long-term US strategy to respond to the invasion of Afghanistan. In a January 9 letter to Carter, Brzezinski noted that the invasion “cannot be dealt with in only a few weeks or with a series of short-term measures.”<sup>105</sup> He suggested that the US increase its arms budget and bolster military commitments to allies in the Middle East, asking the President to consider formulating a “Carter

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 428.

<sup>104</sup> David B. Kanin, *A Political History of the Olympic Games* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 124.

<sup>105</sup> FRUS, Volume XII, 441.

doctrine” to explicitly outline a long-term American response plan.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, he argued that the US needed to “plan for the desire of our European allies to set the Afghanistan issue aside as soon as possible so as not to do permanent damage to European détente.”<sup>107</sup> Brzezinski’s position contradicted his statements during the January 2 NSC meeting, at which he confidently expressed that American allies in Europe could be swayed into supporting a boycott. In his January 9 letter to Carter, he acknowledged that dwelling on the Afghanistan issue would trouble US allies in Western Europe. His intent to compel Carter to focus on a long-term strategy to address the invasion was also confusing considering the proposed Olympic boycott was necessarily a temporary response. Indeed, the threat of boycotting the Games would only be a short-term policy consideration because after the Games closed the US would lose its leverage, as the Olympics are held in a different host city every four years.

Beyond encouraging Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, economic and political justifications for the boycott were also considered by the Carter administration. The CIA questioned the rationale of boycotting to hurt the Soviets economically. A January 1980 report stated that boycotting the Games would “have almost no impact on Soviet hard currency earnings because most of the earnings from tourism and broadcast rights have already been prepaid.”<sup>108</sup> The Agency did suggest, however, that a boycott “would humiliate the leadership and deprive the USSR of the prestige and propaganda opportunities it clearly hopes to extract from a well run, noncontroversial Olympics.”<sup>109</sup> Marshall Brement, a member of the NSC, endorsed the idea that a boycott would achieve a propaganda victory for the US. In a January 12 memo, he argued that the US should levy a boycott, stating that “no single action by the US

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 444.

<sup>108</sup> FRUS, Volume VI, 725.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 725.

would have a greater impact on the Soviet people,” which suggested that Soviet citizens would be critical of their government if the Games were not held as planned.<sup>110</sup>

Several opinion polls were conducted during the deliberations between Carter, the NSC and the CIA. For example, a poll conducted by the *San Francisco Examiner* on January 11 found that 75 percent of respondents supported a boycott. Additionally, a survey conducted by the *Washington Star* revealed that 86 percent of respondents endorsed a boycott.<sup>111</sup> With the support of American public opinion, the decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics was made at a January 18 NSC meeting. It was agreed that Carter would announce the decision during a scheduled television interview on January 20.<sup>112</sup> USOC president Robert Kane and USOC executive director F. Don Miller convened with officials in the Carter administration during the NSC meeting and were briefed on the President’s upcoming announcement of the decision. Carter did not discuss the planning of the boycott with the USOC before January 18 and seemingly had little desire to understand the position of Kane and Miller, who opposed the politicization of the Olympic movement. There was no attempt to consult or work with the USOC, reflecting ignorance or indifference of the status of the organization as the exclusive body responsible for determining whether the US Olympic team attended the Games.<sup>113</sup>

### **3.4 Carter Announces the Boycott**

On January 20, Carter appeared on NBC’s *Meet the Press* to announce his decision. The President stated that he did not support sending a US Olympic team to Moscow if the Soviet troops continued to occupy Afghanistan. He announced that “if the Soviets do not withdraw their

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<sup>110</sup> FRUS, Volume XII, 471.

<sup>111</sup> Derick L. Hulme Jr., *The Political Olympics: Moscow, Afghanistan and the 1980 US Boycott* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 36-37.

<sup>112</sup> Brzezinski, 434.

<sup>113</sup> Teri. Hedgpeth, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: The USOC, the Carter Administration, and the 1980 Olympic Games Boycott,” *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 28 (2019), 83.

troops immediately from Afghanistan within a month, I would not support the sending of an American team to the Olympics.”<sup>114</sup> Carter cited the UN condemnation of the invasion as well as the popular support domestically for a strong response as justifications for the boycott. Although Carter called on the nations of the world to support his initiative, he confirmed that the US was prepared to boycott the Games “regardless of what other nations might do.”<sup>115</sup> The President was conscious that he was using the Games for a political purpose, rationalizing the decision by underscoring that “it’s very important for the world to realize how serious a threat the Soviets’ invasion of Afghanistan is.”<sup>116</sup> Carter hypocritically claimed he did “not want to inject politics into the Olympics,” adding that he supported the establishment of a permanent site for the Games such as Greece to prevent their future politicization.<sup>117</sup>

On January 20, Carter, finally acknowledging the USOC’s mandate in American Olympic affairs, sent a letter to Kane. Carter urged Kane to withdraw from participation in the Moscow Olympics, as the decision to send or not send athletes to the Games was at the discretion of the USOC, not the federal government. The President offered several justifications for his reasoning; the first of these noted that the Soviet invasion was more than a threat to world peace, arguing that US security was at stake.<sup>118</sup> Other reasons included the belief that a boycott would economically hurt the Soviets and serve as a deterrent to future aggression. Carter also cited propaganda considerations, arguing that “in the Soviet Union international sports competition is itself an aspect of Soviet government policy,” adding that “the Soviet government attaches enormous importance to the holding of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.”<sup>119</sup> Carter

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<sup>114</sup> United States Department of State, “The Department of State Bulletin. Volume 80, Issues 2034-2039” (Washington: Office of Public Communication, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1980), 204.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>118</sup> *Public Papers*, 107.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

followed these statements with a naïve and hypocritical request. He called for Kane to be an agent in lobbying the White House position, urging the USOC “in cooperation with other National Olympic Committees, to advise the International Olympic Committee that if Soviet troops do not fully withdraw from Afghanistan within the next month, Moscow will become an unsuitable site for a festival meant to celebrate peace and goodwill.”<sup>120</sup> Carter was ostensibly concerned that holding a successful Olympics in Moscow would be a propaganda win for the Soviet government, noting how closely intertwined sports and politics were in the USSR. His belief that that the USOC should embrace and promote the foreign policy objectives of the US in front of the IOC suggested that he viewed the purpose of the Games similarly to the Soviets. The Olympics were a Cold War arena and the advantage the Soviets may gain from successfully hosting them should be opposed with any means possible.

The January 20 letter to Kane was the first time Carter communicated directly with the USOC president regarding the Olympic boycott. Indeed, there was little discussion among Carter and the NSC members surrounding the role of the USOC while the boycott was being deliberated. That the boycott was publicly announced on the same day Carter contacted Kane demonstrated that the President neither understood nor respected the autonomy of the USOC, believing that Kane would readily sacrifice participation in the Olympics to support the foreign policy goals of the White House. Both interpretations were problematic and reflected a large degree of overconfidence and ignorance by the President, who seemingly believed that the USOC was wholly in line with the national interests of the US.

Carter elaborated on his decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics in his January 23 State of the Union Address, a speech that focused on foreign policy challenges. He argued that

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 106.



the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan “could pose the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War.”<sup>121</sup> The President justified the economic sanctions and Olympic boycott as part of a long-term American strategy to prevent Soviet dominance of the Middle East, stating that the “Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world’s oil must flow.”<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, Carter stated that the “Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position, therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.”<sup>123</sup> Carter’s concluded the portion of his speech addressing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan by stating: “let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>124</sup>

The justifications for the Olympic boycott were different in Carter’s State of the Union Address compared to his *Meet the Press* interview and letter to Kane. Compared to the interview and letter to Kane, the State of the Union Address focused exclusively on how the Olympic boycott contributed to America’s long-term goals in the Middle East. There was no emphasis on the ultimatum placed on the Soviets to withdraw their troops or the role of propaganda at the Games. The State of the Union Address instead rationalized the boycott as a condemnation of Soviet foreign policy and as a deterrent against future aggression in the Middle East. Indeed, Carter’s interview, letter to Kane, and State of the Union Address varied in that each platform emphasized a different rationale for imposing a boycott. During the *Meet the Press* interview,

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 197.

Carter highlighted the necessity for the US to impose an ultimatum on the Soviets, suggesting that the boycott may be retracted if the USSR withdrew its troops from Afghanistan. The letter to Kane stressed the importance of preventing the Soviets from a propaganda victory by hosting the Olympics in Moscow, calling on the USOC to support this position. The State of the Union Address outlined the Carter Doctrine, a long-term strategy to protect American oil interests in the Middle East. It was unclear how a boycott of the Games would contribute to the long-term success of this policy, as the US would lose its leverage after the Olympics was held in the summer of 1980.

Carter's announcement of the boycott on *Meet the Press*, his letter to Kane and his subsequent State of the Union Address reflected the policies conceived by Secretary of State Brzezinski. He suggested that the US adopt a multilateral approach in which allied nations were recruited in the boycott effort. Brzezinski also recommended that the US use the threat of a boycott to convince the Soviets to withdraw, suggesting to Carter that the primary objective of the boycott was to achieve a strategic victory against the Soviets militarily by forcing the USSR to leave Afghanistan. Brzezinski's idea that the President should formulate a long-term strategy or Carter Doctrine was also prevalent in Carter's State of the Union Address, as evidenced by his commitment to protecting America's oil interests in the Middle East.

It is important to note a major difference between the economic sanctions levied on the Soviets on January 4 and the decision to boycott the Olympics. In the case of the Olympic boycott, it was decided that an ultimatum would be placed on the Soviet Union: the Soviets were to withdraw their troops or the US would boycott the Games and encourage other nations to follow. The economic sanctions, however, were not applied in the same way; there was no ultimatum levied that would suggest the US would withdraw the embargos if the Soviets left

Afghanistan. In a January 8 briefing to Congress, Carter stated that “we anticipate that this withholding of grain will not force them to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan. We understood this from the beginning. We don’t think that economic pressure or even condemnation by the United Nations of the Soviet Union will cause them to withdraw their troops.”<sup>125</sup> The President justified the sanctions on the basis that withholding grain exports would “let them know that they will indeed suffer, now and in the future, from this unwarranted invasion.”<sup>126</sup> Carter did not believe that economic pressure or global condemnation would change Soviet foreign aspirations in Afghanistan. However, based on Carter’s statements uttered on *Meet the Press*, the President seemed confident that threatening to boycott the Olympics would achieve a reversal of Soviet foreign policy. Indeed, Carter acknowledged the futility of an ultimatum regarding economic sanctions and simultaneously publicly declared that imposing a deadline on the Soviets would compel them to withdraw their troops. It was unclear how imposing an ultimatum for troop withdrawal would result in a different outcome compared to a deadline for the lifting of economic sanctions.

### **3.5 Evaluation of the Boycott Decision**

The one-month deadline passed without any indication that the Soviets considered withdrawing their troops. Consequently, on February 20, the White House released a statement that the US team would withdraw from participation in the Moscow Olympics.<sup>127</sup> The US briefly tried to organize an alternate sporting event for athletes of boycotting nations to attend but cancelled this plan, focusing instead on forming a coalition of nations to join the boycott regardless of whether alternate Games were scheduled.<sup>128</sup> A meeting was held at the White

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<sup>125</sup> The Department of State Bulletin, 209-10.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>128</sup> Brzezinski, 434.

House on February 26 to formulate a response to Soviet forces remaining in Afghanistan after the ultimatum deadline passed. The meeting discussed the prospects of convincing allied nations to participate in the boycott. The report of the meeting concluded that “one of the problems is that the West Europeans, Canada, New Zealand and Australia do not have direct governmental control of their respective National Olympic Committees.”<sup>129</sup> It is telling that American officials in Carter’s administration did not fully consider the challenges of forming a global coalition of boycotting nations before announcing the policy on January 20. It was not until after the Soviets refused to withdraw their troops that the US began to consider how they would enforce the ultimatum that was imposed by Carter. There was little discussion among Carter and his advisors in January, when the Olympic boycott was being considered, of the institutional challenges associated with a foreign policy response that required the cooperation of several foreign governments in addition to nonstate actors at home and abroad.

The decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics was never likely to be successful. The Carter administration deliberated on the prospects of a boycott for several weeks compared to the other sanctions that were announced in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan. However, Carter and his inner circle appeared to conceptualize the boycott in a similar way as economic sanctions: as a response that could be made unilaterally without the consultation of other actors. The nature of a boycott necessitated cooperation from other nations, the IOC and the USOC; but there was little if any communication between Carter and these essential groups until after the boycott announcement. Carter did not consider the work that would be needed if the Soviets refused to accept the ultimatum for troop withdrawal. Brzezinski believed that a boycott should only be levied if the US could ensure that other nations would

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<sup>129</sup> FRUS, Volume VI, 753-54.

join, arguing that a solo American boycott would be ineffective. However, Carter adopted the public position that the US would boycott even if it were unable to convince any other nations to participate.

Despite the President announcing that the US was willing to boycott alone, in the months following the ultimatum deadline the Carter administration undertook a campaign to persuade allied nations to support the US by abstaining from attending the Games. This was a major misstep, as Carter wasted valuable time in January by not discussing with other world leaders the importance of a multilateral boycott. Additionally, by not consulting friendly nations in Western Europe before the boycott was announced, Carter alienated his allies. The deadline for NOCs to formally accept their invitation to the Moscow Olympics was May 24, which left little time for the President to convince other nations to join the US. Further complicating the goal of forming a boycotting coalition was that other Western democratic nations had a similar relationship as the US between their governments and NOCs. Indeed, like the US, democratic nations could not mandate the direction that their NOC pursued, meaning that even if Carter was able to convince foreign leaders to support his position, it would not ensure that the athletes of other countries would abstain from attending.

There was also little communication between Carter and the USOC until the day of the announcement. It was expected by Carter that the USOC would readily comply with raising the issue of relocating or boycotting the Games to Lord Killanin and the IOC. The lack of respect demonstrated by the Carter administration towards the autonomy of the USOC and IOC was evident in Carter's letter to Kane. The President appeared to view the USOC as a lapdog of American foreign policy interests, believing that the USOC held a special status in the eyes of the IOC. Indeed, Carter believed that the USOC raising the concerns of the US government to

the IOC would compel Lord Killanin to change the location of the Games six months before they were scheduled to be held. Ironically, Carter lambasted the Soviets for their use of sport and the Olympics as an extension of the Kremlin's policies but had no problem with the USOC becoming a tool to advance the foreign policy goals of the US. Carter's ignorance and arrogance surrounding the operational structure between the USOC and IOC caused resentment among Kane, Lord Killanin, and American athletes towards the position of the US government.

Beyond the problem of a lack of communication between Carter and other key groups, there was disagreement among the NSC, CIA and Carter's inner circle of advisors surrounding the objectives and terms of the boycott. There was controversy over whether a boycott should be imposed and what the scope and objectives of a boycott should be. Carter was initially hesitant to support a boycott, whereas Mondale and Brzezinski were confident that such a policy would be successful. Brzezinski appeared to have held the most influence over Carter, convincing the President that a boycott would be appropriate, and helping to formulate its details and objectives. There was also disagreement between the NSC and US intelligence. The two groups frequently provided divergent analyses of the prospects for the success of the boycott.

Disagreements in the White House affected the goals and conditions of the boycott. A major problem of the boycott initiative was that it lacked a clear purpose or objective. Was the boycott levied to force the Soviets to withdraw their troops? Or, as punishment for Soviet aggression in Afghanistan? Or, to prevent Moscow from achieving a propaganda victory by hosting the Summer Games successfully with all nations attending? Or, was it simply a deterrent for future aggression as part of a long-term strategy? It was clear that the Carter administration initially hoped that a boycott would force the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan, hence the one-month ultimatum that was imposed. However, Carter also appeared to conceive the boycott

in other ways, including as a means to deny the Soviets a propaganda victory as well as part of his administration's long-term plans in the Middle East. The absence of any clear and consistent purpose of the boycott resulted in confusion in the Carter government, in Congress, among allied nations, the USOC and the IOC. Such disagreements and inconsistencies evident in the decision had a detrimental impact on the ability of the Carter administration to execute its goal of convincing the USOC of the necessity to boycott the Olympics, as well as formulating a global coalition of supporting nations.

## Chapter 4: Domestic Problems – Congress, the USOC and the Athletes

### 4.1 The Boycott Debate in Congress

The disagreements and varying rationales for boycotting the 1980 Summer Olympics evident in the White House deliberations and announcements extended to the House of Representatives and Senate. Discussions in Congress were held from January 22 to January 29 and both chambers passed resolutions supporting Carter's decision to boycott the Olympics. The resolutions overwhelmingly favoured the President's decision, 386 to 12 in the House and 88 to 4 in the Senate.<sup>130</sup> The votes, although nonbinding, sent a strong message to the USOC that both chambers of Congress were in favour of a boycott.<sup>131</sup> The results and margins of the Congressional votes delivered Carter an important victory in his quest to boycott the Games. However, a close examination of the congressional debates revealed much disagreement and confusion surrounding the objectives and purpose of the Olympic boycott.

Many members of Congress who supported the boycott were compelled by Carter's argument that the Soviet Union would enjoy a propaganda victory by successfully hosting the Olympics. Senator David Pryor noted that the Soviets used sports to promote communism and the Kremlin's policies. Pryor referenced an excerpt from the Soviet "Party Activists' Handbook," a document that contained a section discussing the importance of hosting the Olympics to the Soviet Union. The Handbook stated "the decision to offer the honoured right to hold the Olympic Games in the capital of the first socialist state in the world was convincing proof of the universal recognition of the historical importance and correctness of the course of our country's foreign policy, the vast contribution of the Soviet Union in the struggle for peace, and its contribution to

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<sup>130</sup> Baruch Hazan, *Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games: Moscow 1980* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982), 124.

<sup>131</sup> John M. Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics, and the Moral Order* (New Rochelle, NY: A.D. Caratzas, 1986), 66.



the international Olympic movement and the development of physical culture and sport.”<sup>132</sup> The importance of hosting the Olympics to the Soviets was corroborated by Annette Roush of the US embassy in Moscow. She reported that hosting the Olympics was “probably the most important single event in national Soviet life since World War II.”<sup>133</sup> The idea that the Soviets viewed the Olympics as an opportunity to achieve legitimacy and respect on the world stage was used as a justification for the boycott. It was imperative that the Olympics did not become a platform for the Soviets to promote their way of life to the nations of the world in Moscow.<sup>134</sup>

Congress debated whether the US made a mistake attending the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and it was generally agreed that the US should not have attended the Games. Representative John Buchanan believed that the US should not send a team to Moscow, arguing that like the Berlin Games, the Olympics should not be held in authoritarian regimes as this violated the spirit of the *Olympic Charter*.<sup>135</sup> Further comparisons to Berlin were made by Pryor, who argued that like the Nazis, the Soviets were cleansing the country of dissenters in an attempt to purge Moscow of any citizens who would interact with Western attendees, ensuring that life in the Soviet Union outside the Olympic village was hidden.<sup>136</sup> Representative Dante Fascell endorsed the boycott, claiming “the Soviets, as did the Nazis during the Berlin Olympics of 1936, have attached their national prestige to the Games, and clearly anticipate utilizing the event to display to the world the power and excellence of their ideology and their social system.”<sup>137</sup> The alleged mistake of

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<sup>132</sup> Excerpts from the Soviet “Party Activists’ Handbook,” 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Counsel’s Office, Cutler, “Olympics – Memos 1-2/80,” Box 102, 8.

<sup>133</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 570.

<sup>134</sup> During a May 5, 1980 meeting with Leonid Brezhnev, Lord Killanin pointed out that the “Party Activists’ Handbook” was wrong to state that the Games had been awarded to Moscow for political reasons. He affirmed that the IOC selected Moscow based entirely on sporting merits. See International Centre for Olympic Studies, *IOC Executive Committee Minutes: Volume III (1969-1981)*, trans. Wolf Lyberg, 1992, 274.

<sup>135</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 48.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

attending the Berlin Games was a common theme found in several other Congresspeople's statements. Such comparisons implied that American and global security was in danger if the Moscow Olympics were held as scheduled, as it was only three years after the Berlin Games that war broke out in Europe. Indeed, it was believed that the Soviets, like the Nazis, attached enormous importance to hosting the Olympics, and if the nations of the world attended it would legitimize Moscow's aggressive foreign aspirations.

The boycott was opposed by Representative Ron Dellums, a Democrat who defied Carter and supported participation. Dellums argued that boycotting the Games over the invasion of Afghanistan was an overreaction, suggesting that a boycott would merely be a symbolic gesture and not accomplish anything tangible. Dellums defended the rights of the athletes, noting that "we have made a big thing out of this government not being involved in the athletics of the Olympics. That is a private situation."<sup>138</sup> Indeed, he believed that the Carter administration should follow its own rules and ensure that sports and politics remained separated in the US. It was hypocritical for the US to condemn the USSR for politicizing the Olympics when American athletes were being sacrificed to advance foreign policy goals. Dellums was joined by Representative Barry Goldwater, Jr., who also endorsed participation in the Olympics on the basis that sport and politics should remain separate. Goldwater cautioned that "we are going to sink to the level of the very countries we are criticizing and politicize the Olympic Games."<sup>139</sup> Goldwater concluded his statement, imploring the House to remember "that in 1936, Jesse Owens did more to show Hitler's Aryan theory for the manure that it was than any boycott ever could. Let's give our kids a chance to show the communist tyrants that individualism is a better

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 576.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 577.

system than collectivism.”<sup>140</sup> Goldwater was one of a small number of Congresspeople who believed that sending US athletes to Moscow would produce a greater positive impact for American propaganda interests than it would for the Soviet Union.

Senator Ted Stevens, a Republican from Alaska, articulated the most comprehensive opposition to the boycott movement. Stevens believed the decision on whether the US attended the Olympics should be left to the USOC without any influence or coercion from the President or Congress. He noted that Carter “departed from the realm of traditional and accepted foreign policy questions” by exerting direct political pressure on the USOC, an organization that was not controlled by the government.<sup>141</sup> He opposed the boycott on the basis that American participation in the Olympics provided an opportunity for the media to infiltrate the USSR and expose the Soviet system. Thus, the US would be able to exploit the Games for propaganda purposes better than the Soviets. Stevens also disagreed with the comparison that the Moscow Olympics were similar to the Berlin Olympics, as well as Carter’s assessment of the strategic importance of the Soviet invasion. Indeed, Stevens argued that the hostages being held in Iran was a more pressing foreign policy issue than the invasion of Afghanistan and thus should be prioritized.<sup>142</sup> Beyond critiquing the boycott from a foreign policy perspective, Stevens supported participation on the basis that it was unjust to punish the athletes by interfering with their right to attend the Olympics. Stevens was also concerned regarding how the IOC would react to Carter’s announcement. He argued that the IOC would oppose the American boycott initiative and would

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 578.

<sup>141</sup> 96<sup>th</sup> US Congress, *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1980), 4.

<sup>142</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 75-76.

not entertain calls to relocate the Games from Moscow to another city outside the Soviet Union.<sup>143</sup>

Stevens had a history of examining amateur sports and the Olympics in the US. During the Ford administration in 1975, Stevens served on the President's Commission on Olympic Sports,<sup>144</sup> a group established "to determine what factors impede or tend to impede the United States from fielding its best teams in international competition."<sup>145</sup> The results of the study were published in 1977. The Commission noted "with deep regret the declining ability of the nations of the world to separate sport from politics."<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, the Commission deplored "the actions of governments which deny an athlete the right to take part in international competition" and called "upon world sports leaders to take whatever steps are necessary to eliminate this misuse of the Games."<sup>147</sup>

The Commission's findings and recommendations were codified in the *Amateur Sports Act of 1978*. The purpose of the Act was "to promote and coordinate amateur athletic activity in the United States, to recognize certain rights for United States amateur athletes, to provide for the resolution of disputes involving national governing bodies, and for other purposes."<sup>148</sup> The Act outlined the purpose of the USOC, declaring that the organization exercised "exclusive jurisdiction over all matters pertaining to the participation of the United States in the Olympic Games, including the representation of the United States in such games."<sup>149</sup> Additionally, the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 789-90.

<sup>144</sup> For an analysis of the President's Commission on Olympic Sports, see Nevada Cooke and Robert K. Barney, "Preserving 'the American Way:' Gerald R. Ford, the President's Commission on Olympic Sports, and the Fight against State-Funded Sport in America," in Toby C. Rider and Kevin B. Witherspoon, eds., *Defending the American Way of Life: Sport, Culture, and the Cold War* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2018), 67-82.

<sup>145</sup> United States President's Commission on Olympic Sports, *The Final Report of the President's Commission on Olympic Sports, 1975-1977* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1977), ix.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>148</sup> 95<sup>th</sup> US Congress, *Amateur Sports Act of 1978*, Public Law 96-606-Nov 8, 1978, 1.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 2.

USOC should promote and support US amateur athletes competing in international sporting events held outside the US, unless participation in a foreign nation would be dangerous to the well-being of the athletes attending.<sup>150</sup>

The findings of the Commission on Olympic Sports and the provisions in the *Amateur Sports Act* supported Stevens' stance on the boycott. Stevens referenced the Act in Congress, arguing that a boycott would undermine the autonomy of the USOC and would inject politics into amateur athletics in the US.<sup>151</sup> He concluded that "the action that is being taken by our government in injecting itself into these Games for the summer of 1980 will in fact lead to the downfall, to the decline of the Olympic Games."<sup>152</sup> The USOC and IOC shared Stevens' position, believing that the Olympics should be free from political interference. Indeed, the USOC should serve as the final authority on whether the US sends a team to compete in any given Olympic Games.

David Pryor was among many in Congress who argued that aside from military intervention against the Soviets, a boycott was the strongest policy the US could impose as a response to the invasion. He noted that a boycott was a move that would affect Soviet citizens and may compel them to question the leadership of the USSR. Quoting an article in the *Washington Post*, Pryor stated "the collapse of the Olympiad would send a genuine shock through Soviet society . . . The failure of these Olympics could cause the first serious challenge to the legitimacy of Soviet power in many years."<sup>153</sup> He believed the boycott would have a profound effect on Soviet society and did not think that the Kremlin could formulate a narrative to explain the US absence from the Olympics.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>151</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 836.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 1052.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 60.

The Soviet press explained Washington's impending absence from the Games without mention of the invasion of Afghanistan, noting that Carter had considered boycotting Moscow before the attack. A February 1 article in *Izvestia* argued that the boycott was systematically planned, stating "that what we have here is a premeditated and coordinated act of hostility directed against mutual understanding and friendship among peoples and against peace and progress."<sup>154</sup> The Soviets also explained the boycott as an attempt by Carter to improve his standing with the American electorate and corporate community, as 1980 was an election year in the US. The official Soviet press agency, Tass, stated the boycott was "clearly in the nature of an electoral campaign move designed to gain the support of the powers that be – those 'moneybags' who finance Presidential campaigns and candidates."<sup>155</sup> The Soviet press highlighted the negative consequences of the boycott, such as the threat it caused to world peace and détente, and how it damaged the Olympic movement, although it also stressed that the absence of the US and other nations would not detract from the quality and importance of hosting the Games.<sup>156</sup> The press also emphasized that the boycott would be a failure, noting that there was international support among the NOCs of the world for hosting the Games in Moscow as planned.<sup>157</sup> The Soviet press effectively navigated around the reason the US decided to boycott the Olympics, the invasion of Afghanistan, by forming alternate narratives containing varying degrees of truth to explain to their citizens the reason for American absence. Considering the ease by which Soviet narratives were constructed to avoid mention of the invasion of Afghanistan, it was unreasonable to assume that American absence at the Games would produce widespread civil disobedience towards Soviet foreign policy.

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<sup>154</sup> Hoberman, 67.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>156</sup> Hazan, 132-33.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

The idea that American nonparticipation would have impacted what Soviet citizens thought of their government was questionable. Indeed, Congresspeople correctly explained that the media in the USSR was state-controlled and thus Soviet citizens received very little factual news. Despite this, these same Congresspeople also believed that an Olympic boycott would have a major impact on Soviet citizens, as they would question the policies of their government regarding the absence of athletes from the US and other boycotting nations. The idea that an absence of several major Olympic nations would be noticed by Soviet citizens, reducing the quality and prestige of the Games which would prevent the USSR from a propaganda victory and cause individuals to criticize the Kremlin's policies, was highly problematic. This perspective was flawed because it did not consider that, just like any event or issue that reflected poorly on the Soviet Union, the press in the USSR would have immediately formulated messages to explain American absence from the Olympics. A report from the US embassy in Moscow noted that "the average Soviet citizen has no idea of the criticism directed at the Soviet government by the rest of the world when the Soviet Union continues its efforts at world domination as it has in the recent invasion of Afghanistan. They know nothing of the truth of this matter."<sup>158</sup> Consequently, it was unclear how a boycott of the Olympics would change Soviet citizens' perception of their government.

Senator David Durenberger agreed with Carter pertaining to the long-term concerns of Soviet aggression threatening US interests in the Middle East, but disagreed that the boycott would compel the USSR to withdraw troops. He voted in favour of a boycott on the basis that it would deter future Soviet aggression in the region.<sup>159</sup> Senator Carl Levin agreed, arguing that "boycotting the Moscow Games will probably not cause the Soviets to withdraw their troops.

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<sup>158</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 570.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

But it will demonstrate to the Soviet people and government precisely what we think of their troops in Afghanistan.”<sup>160</sup> Support for the Carter Doctrine was also evident in the House.

Representative Bob Dornan believed that the invasion of Afghanistan demonstrated that the US needed to increase its military spending and pursue a more aggressive foreign policy to protect its interests in the Middle East. Believing that détente was over, Dornan argued that the “boldness of the Soviets’ move into Afghanistan suggests a new aggressiveness on their part, and a confidence that they can with complete impunity ignore and humiliate not only the United States, but the world community as well.”<sup>161</sup>

Several members of Congress were critical of the rationales for boycotting the Olympics, begrudgingly voting in favour of withholding American participation. Representative Benjamin Gilman rejected the idea that the boycott would serve as an effective deterrent against future Soviet aggression, hence supporting the boycott on the basis that it would prevent the Soviets from a propaganda victory but questioning the idea that it would have an impact on Soviet foreign policy. He argued that “our action to prevent Moscow from hosting the Olympics will not restore Afghanistan to its former independence, nor will it provide protection for the other nations in the region or safeguard Western interests in the Middle East. It would, however, . . . cost them prestige at home and abroad.”<sup>162</sup> Representative Kenneth Kramer was critical of how the boycott was announced. He was displeased that the boycott was unilaterally decided, noting that “neither the Olympic Committee nor our allies were consulted, and as a result, we could face a situation where the United States is one of the few countries not represented at the Olympics, while the Soviets remain in Afghanistan.”<sup>163</sup> Senator Richard Lugar was unconvinced that the

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 566.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 573.



boycott would achieve anything tangible. He supported nonparticipation on the basis that the US needed to appear united in opposition to the Soviet invasion, adding that a boycott would merely be a “symbolic gesture.”<sup>164</sup>

Of those who were in favour of a boycott, there was agreement that the Carter administration needed to form a coalition of nations that would join the US in boycotting the Olympics. For example, Representative Lionel Van Deerlin believed that “other nations who have been sickened by the Afghanistan move will not be emboldened to show their feelings unless we take the lead.”<sup>165</sup> Senator Joe Biden supported the boycott, agreeing that “it is extremely important for the United States to have the full support of the Western Alliance because it sends a clear and strong message around the world that the Soviet Union should be punished.”<sup>166</sup> Ted Stevens was concerned that the US might not be able to form a large coalition of boycotting nations, reflecting poorly on the Americans if the US was one of a small number of nations to abstain. He argued that “if the IOC does not move these Games the athletes of the world will vote with their feet. They will go to Moscow and it will be such a propaganda victory for Moscow we will never see the end of it.”<sup>167</sup> Indeed, because the Carter administration had yet to convince allied nations of the necessity of boycotting the Olympics, it was unclear how many nations would agree to follow the US.

It is important to note that the wording of the resolution passed in the House was later amended by the Senate. The House passed resolution 249, which referenced Carter’s one-month ultimatum for Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>168</sup> Consequently, the resolution was bound

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 826.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 578.

<sup>166</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 11.

<sup>167</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 839.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 564.

by whether the Soviets complied with the ultimatum, meaning that if the Soviets withdrew their troops the Olympics could be held in Moscow as planned. The Senate affirmed the House resolution but made a key amendment: the boycott should not be tied to whether the Soviets withdrew their troops.<sup>169</sup> Stevens noted the discrepancy between the position of the House and Senate, asking “does this mean that the Senate recommends contrary to what the President recommended that if the Soviets do in fact withdraw in Afghanistan, we would pursue this course of boycotting the Olympics?”<sup>170</sup> Senator Frank Church replied to Stevens, arguing that it was the opinion of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that it was very unlikely that the Soviets would withdraw from Afghanistan. It was believed that a boycott of the Olympics would be warranted regardless of whether the Soviets withdrew their troops.<sup>171</sup>

The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations supported boycotting the Olympics regardless of whether the Soviets withdrew their troops from Afghanistan. Church noted that the Committee found that “the decision to boycott the Moscow Games should be a clear policy stand, a firm response to the invasion itself, and to the fact that the Soviet breach of international law had made it unfit to host.”<sup>172</sup> Pryor, a member of the Committee, believed that the one-month ultimatum “might send the wrong signal to the Russians,” arguing that the purpose of the boycott should be to punish the USSR for the invasion.<sup>173</sup> Pryor added that a boycott of the Moscow Olympics would have been justified regardless of whether the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, based on their human rights abuses.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 1066.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 828.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 828.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 1053.

<sup>173</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 12.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 14.

Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher testified before the Committee, affirming that Carter was not abandoning the one-month timeframe for withdrawal. Christopher expressed doubts that the Soviets would withdraw under threat of a boycott, but defended the President's decision, arguing "there is tremendous stress placed by them [the Soviet Union] on the Olympic Games and I think the period of 1 month set by the President does give them an opportunity to reverse course."<sup>175</sup> He explained Carter's reasoning for selecting one month as opposed to a longer timeframe, stating that a month provided the President more time after the deadline to consider the next steps before the athletes were invited to the Moscow Olympics. The Committee rejected Christopher's calls to support the ultimatum, proposing that the House resolution be amended to ensure that a boycott would still be levied if the Soviets withdrew. It was agreed that the language would be changed, eliminating reference to the one-month ultimatum.<sup>176</sup>

The findings of the Senate Committee and subsequent amendment of the House resolution revealed that there was widespread skepticism and confusion of Carter's one-month ultimatum. The statements by the Carter administration suggested that forcing the Soviets to withdraw their troops was one of the main purposes of the boycott. Conversely, the Senate conceptualized the boycott differently, believing that it should not be contingent on Soviet withdrawal; its main purpose should be to condemn and punish the Soviets for the invasion.

The Congressional records revealed that although there was a significant degree of disagreement surrounding the justifications for boycotting the Olympics, there was widespread agreement in Congress that American athletes should not attend the Moscow Games. Partisan politics may explain some of the reasons for the high degree of variance among Congresspeople. Among the small number of Congresspeople who opposed a boycott, most were Republican,

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 83.

including Stevens and Goldwater who formulated the most comprehensive opposition to the initiative. Democratic members of Congress were more likely to support the boycott because they agreed with Carter's foreign policy agenda, supporting the Carter Doctrine and the hope that the Soviets may be compelled to withdraw their troops. Conversely, Republicans were more critical of the boycott as a tool of American foreign policy in the Middle East. Republicans' reasons for supporting the boycott tended to focus on the potential for a propaganda victory by not attending the Games, conversely expressing less enthusiasm that the Soviets would withdraw from Afghanistan.

Stevens, Goldwater and the other small number of Congresspeople who opposed the boycott were closely in line with the positions of the USOC, American Olympic athletes, and the IOC. Apart from this small group of Congresspeople who opposed the boycott, there was very little discussion of how the boycott would affect the athletes. Furthermore, there was also no consideration of how the boycott would be executed. Similar to the discussions among the Carter administration and the NSC, Congress was ignorant of the challenge involved in convincing the USOC, IOC, foreign governments and their NOCs to endorse American foreign policy towards the Soviet Union by agreeing to boycott the Olympics.

#### **4.2 The USOC Testimonies in Congress**

Although Carter was successful in obtaining his desired boycott resolutions in Congress, the decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow also required the support of the USOC and its athletes, the IOC and the nations of the world to have a chance of success. Following the announcement of the decision on January 20, the Carter administration sought to convince the USOC to abandon the ideals of the *Olympic Charter* and support the President's foreign policy agenda. USOC President Robert Kane was interviewed on January 21 by *US News*

*and World Report*. He affirmed that the USOC opposed a boycott on the basis that sports should be separate from politics, arguing that the future of the Olympic movement was in jeopardy if boycotting the Games became commonplace, noting the possibility of Soviet retaliation in 1984 when Los Angeles was scheduled to host the Summer Games. A boycott should only be considered if the situation in Afghanistan worsened and Moscow became a dangerous place for athletes and spectators.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, there was no evidence that Carter considered the ramifications of the boycott on the Olympic movement and the impact that it would have on the previously awarded 1984 Los Angeles Games, in particular.<sup>178</sup>

Kane was skeptical of Carter's belief that threatening to boycott the Olympics would affect Soviet policy in Afghanistan. In an interview, Kane argued that "there are other means that could be far more discouraging to the Soviets and their desires. It seems to me that a boycott would not do the job its advocates would like to have done."<sup>179</sup> Carter's claim that the Soviets would achieve a propaganda win by successfully hosting the Olympics was accepted by Kane, although the USOC president believed any nation hosting the Games would use them to present the host country favourably. Thus, Kane did not think the Soviets were acting any differently than democratic hosts. He affirmed that the US did the right thing by sending athletes to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, citing the success of American participants and their impact on the image of Nazi Germany. Kane's interview demonstrated that he was hesitant to accept Carter's rationales for imposing a boycott; however, he confirmed that the USOC would speak with the IOC, as requested by Carter in the President's January 20 letter.

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<sup>177</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 62.

<sup>178</sup> Kim Richard Nossal, "Knowing When to Fold: Western Sanctions against the USSR, 1980-1983," *International Journal* 44 (1989), 705.

<sup>179</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 62.

Following Kane's interview, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs met on January 23 to discuss the issue of US participation in the Moscow Games. The Committee summoned Kane to Washington to testify, beginning the hearing by reading Carter's January 20 letter to the USOC president. Kane began his opening statement noting that he had received the letter from Carter and took his recommendations seriously. He emphasized that the Olympics belonged to the IOC, noting that the USOC was merely 1 of 137 NOCs and that each had an equal vote. Although he acknowledged that the Olympic movement was "outraged" by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he resented Carter's request to convince other NOCs to support the boycott.<sup>180</sup> Kane stated that the USOC could not "control what other nations do in retaliation," adding that "we do not have that cooperation from other Olympic committees of the world."<sup>181</sup>

Furthermore, Kane noted that the IOC believed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a small regional conflict that did not warrant a global response, explaining that the organization interpreted it similarly to the US intervening in Vietnam.<sup>182</sup> Additionally, under the rules of the *Olympic Charter*, the invasion was not grounds for relocating or cancelling the Games. Kane explained that "the Soviets have not violated any of the rules connected with the Games. So not having violated the rules of the IOC, there is no reason to forbid them to host the Games."<sup>183</sup> Kane was pressed throughout his testimony on the IOC's rationale for not boycotting or relocating the Olympics due to the Soviet invasion. The USOC president repeated that under the rules of the IOC, the invasion was not grounds for revoking Moscow's right to host.

Congressman John Mica replied to Kane, asking "if the Russians invaded the United States they

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<sup>180</sup> 96<sup>th</sup> US Congress, *Hearings and Markup before the Committee on Foreign Affairs* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1980), 4.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

would not violate any IOC tenants?” Kane sardonically replied: “I will ask Lord Killanin when I see him.”<sup>184</sup> Kane’s testimony in front of the House Committee demonstrated that much like Carter and the NSC, members of the House Committee were also ignorant of the rules, policies and procedures that guided the USOC, IOC and Olympic movement.

The House Committee questioned Kane on the likelihood of other NOCs joining the USOC in a boycott. Kane informed the Committee that the USOC was in contact with NOCs from most of America’s major allies and none had committed to a boycott, expressing concerns on the prospects of forming a global coalition.<sup>185</sup> Included in the report written by the House Committee were two letters from the Canadian Olympic Association (COA)<sup>186</sup> and Mexican Olympic Committee. Each one rejected a boycott. Dick Pound, president of the COA and member of the IOC, forwarded a copy of a letter he wrote to Lord Killanin to USOC executive director F. Don Miller. Pound strongly questioned the notion of a boycott, stating that “our friends from the US government seem to have an unerring instinct for doing precisely the wrong thing in all delicate international matters.”<sup>187</sup> Pound called on Lord Killanin’s leadership as IOC president to make a statement addressing the boycott, noting the dire implications on the Olympic movement if calls for a boycott gained momentum. Mario Vazquez, president of the Mexican Olympic Committee, also wrote to Kane, urging him “to do everything possible in order to avoid the possible boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games.”<sup>188</sup> These letters from America’s neighbours highlighted the immediate concern and dissatisfaction with Carter’s decision to boycott the Olympics, calling into doubt the ease at which NOCs in allied nations

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>186</sup> Known as the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC) since 2002.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 7.

might be persuaded to follow the lead of the USOC. Although the letters were presented to and read by the House Committee, Congress continued to press Kane in an attempt to gain the support of the USOC for the boycott.

The House Committee turned its attention to the prospects of relocating the Olympics, questioning Kane on the possibility of holding the Games at a site other than Moscow. The USOC president again reminded the Committee that the USOC did not own the Olympic movement; such decisions could only be made by the IOC. He explained that because the Olympics were only six months away, “I really do not believe that it is feasible to have the Games in any other site in the summer of 1980.”<sup>189</sup> Transferring the Olympics to Montreal, the host in 1976, was discussed, and Kane confirmed that although the city had the sporting facilities available it did not have enough housing to host the thousands of attendees. Kane was also questioned on the logic of boycotting for financial reasons. He explained that a boycott would do little to hurt the Soviets economically, noting that Moscow had already received the majority of the sum for their collective television contracts, a claim that corroborated a January CIA report presented to the Carter administration.<sup>190</sup>

Kane’s testimony included a discussion of the timeframe of Carter’s decision. Carter imposed an ultimatum that if the Soviets did not withdraw from Afghanistan within one month the US would boycott the Olympics. Kane did not believe that a month was enough time for the USOC and IOC to respond to the proposed boycott. A longer timeframe would have provided the opportunity for more conversations between the USOC and other NOCs.<sup>191</sup> Because the USOC was not briefed on the prospect of a boycott during the early weeks of January when it was being

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 27.



discussed by the Carter administration, the announcement came as a surprise. Reflecting on the time between when Kane received the letter from Carter to the day he was testifying, he stated that “we are trying to exert leadership” but “we have just been installed into this position and we have had 3 days.”<sup>192</sup> Kane requested that Congress consider other options apart from boycotting or immediately transferring the Olympics. He stated that although plans to relocate the Games in 1980 were not possible, they could “possibly be feasible in the summer of 1981. We would have a chance to talk with other nations and to appraise the possibilities. We really have not had much of a chance to do so.”<sup>193</sup> Kane acknowledged that it would still be difficult to convince the IOC to support this position, although it was probably the most likely path to success.<sup>194</sup>

That Kane and the USOC were not consulted before the decision made by Carter symbolized a lack of respect and understanding regarding how the USOC and the IOC operated. It was apparent in his statements in front of the House Committee that Kane not only resented the idea of a boycott but was displeased with Carter that the USOC was not involved in his deliberations. Had Carter spoken with Kane and the USOC when considering a boycott, many of these procedural and logistical problems could have been avoided. Indeed, the Carter administration was committed to either boycotting or immediately relocating the 1980 Olympics, whereas Kane believed that the only feasible possibility would be to have the Games held at another site the following year, 1981. He expressed doubts regarding the ability of the USOC to be able to convince the IOC and other NOCs to boycott the Olympics and thus the US risked not achieving its goal of forming a coalition of boycotting nations.

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 34.

Warren Christopher spoke during the afternoon session of the January 23 House Committee on Foreign Affairs meeting. Although Christopher was initially hesitant to support boycotting the Olympics, he was determined to assist Carter and advance the boycott effort. Christopher reaffirmed the President's position to the House Committee, explaining that if the Soviets did not withdraw their troops from Afghanistan within one month the US would not participate in the Moscow Olympics.<sup>195</sup> Asked about the rationale for the one-month deadline, Christopher responded that "there is not any magic behind 1 month," adding that "a month seemed like a reasonable period of time."<sup>196</sup> Christopher's admission that the one-month deadline was arbitrary, decided without much thought, demonstrated the lack of communication between the Carter administration and the USOC. Indeed, as noted by Kane, the one-month timeframe was not enough for the USOC to advance Carter's case to the IOC and other NOCs. Furthermore, because of the emerging problem of convincing other nations and their NOCs to support the US, Christopher reaffirmed that Carter was willing to boycott the Olympics without support from other nations.<sup>197</sup>

Despite Kane's recommendation that the US should pursue relocating or postponing the Olympics until a new site could be found for 1981, Christopher insisted that the US would not change its policy of "immediate" relocation. Contrary to Kane, Christopher believed it was possible to find a new host and relocate the Games in time for the summer of 1980, stating that "I personally have confidence that if within a month the International Olympic Committee were to take a decision to move the Games from Moscow, that arrangements could be made to stage them in Montreal."<sup>198</sup> Christopher also doubled down on the confidence held by the Carter

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 65.

administration that threatening to relocate or boycott the Olympics would produce a reversal of Soviet policy in Afghanistan. He stated that “I think the removal of the Olympics from Moscow is probably the strongest single step we could take to persuade them to withdraw their troops from Afghanistan.”<sup>199</sup> Christopher’s statements revealed that the Carter administration was not considering amending or moderating its position. Despite the concerns and challenges raised by Kane, Christopher was committed to endorsing Carter’s plan, arguing its merits in front of the House Committee. Kane did a thorough job explaining the positions of the USOC, IOC and defending the sovereignty of the Olympic movement. However, it was clear that the majority of the House Committee members were in favour of the President’s decision.

On January 24 Kane received a letter from Lord Killanin. The IOC president informed Kane that he believed a boycott or transfer would be damaging to the Olympic movement, noting that governments such as the US that had indicated their intention of using the Games for political purposes did not understand the autonomy of the movement and the values in the *Olympic Charter*. Lord Killanin also confirmed that he had “no indication of support for a boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games, or a transfer of the site of the Games, from any member of the International Olympic Committee, any International Sports Federation, or any National Olympic Committee,” adding that most members of these bodies were strongly opposed.<sup>200</sup> The following day F. Don Miller received a letter from Monique Berlioux, General Secretary of the IOC, which contained an extensive list of NOCs that had informed the IOC that they were against a boycott.<sup>201</sup> These letters confirmed the position that Kane articulated in front of the House Committee. The IOC and NOCs were overwhelmingly opposed to a boycott and it was

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>200</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 61.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 61.

clear that Carter would have an exceedingly difficult task forming a coalition of boycotting nations.

Lord Killanin communicated his reaction and displeasure with Carter's proposed boycott to Julian Roosevelt and Douglas Roby, US members of the IOC. In letters to Roosevelt and Roby, Lord Killanin stated that "as members of the IOC we signed an agreement with Moscow in 1974, which we cannot break unless Moscow enters into any breach of this agreement, which has not been done so far."<sup>202</sup> Responding to the suggestion that it would be possible to remove the Games from Moscow, Lord Killanin stated "it would appear that President Carter and members of your government are not aware of the Olympic rules."<sup>203</sup> In an interview, he continued to argue that the Carter administration was uninformed and ignorant regarding Olympic matters. He explained that the boycott demonstrated the "virtual ignorance of sport by President Carter and his aides," suggesting that they "have virtually no knowledge of any sports other than American football and baseball which, if they'd been in the Olympic Games, we wouldn't have had the boycott."<sup>204</sup>

Carter dispatched White House Counsel Lloyd Cutler to meet with Lord Killanin at his home in Dublin, Ireland on February 2. In his memoirs, Lord Killanin recalled that Cutler visited him to instruct the IOC president regarding the necessity to either postpone or cancel the Games. He explained to Cutler that the IOC cannot change the host city or the date of the Olympics based on political concerns. To the disgust of Lord Killanin, Cutler also informed the IOC president that the USOC was planning to formally request that the IOC postpone, relocate or

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<sup>202</sup> Lord Killanin, Letter to Julian Roosevelt and Douglas Roby, Member of the IOC, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Domestic Policy Staff – Human Resources (Berenson), Subject Files, "Olympics – Boycott, 1/80 – 2/80," Box 14.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Counsel's Office, Cutler, "Olympics – Cables, Important, 6-11/80," Box 101.

cancel the Moscow Games. Lord Killanin was critical of the American position, stating that “it was this sense of arrogance, not personally shown by Cutler, but the high-handed nature of the approach of the White House, which raised my hackles.”<sup>205</sup> Indeed, the Carter administration was ignorant of the rules governing the Olympic movement. The *Olympic Charter* mandated that the “Games must take place during the first year of the Olympiad which they are to celebrate. In no circumstances may they be postponed to another year.”<sup>206</sup>

F. Don Miller was also called to testify to Congress, appearing in front of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on January 28. He emphasized several of the points that Kane had discussed before the House Committee, including the prospects of a successful boycott. Miller stated that “there is doubt within the amateur athletic community that refusing an invitation for American athletes to compete in the Games will seriously affect Soviet policy and lead to the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.”<sup>207</sup> The list of NOCs that informed the IOC of their refusal to support a boycott as informed in the letter from Berlioux was presented to the Senate Committee. Miller explained that the USOC was bound to the *Olympic Charter*, noting that “our commitment to the IOC includes resisting, to the greatest extent possible, political, religious, and racial intrusions into the Games.”<sup>208</sup> He concluded by stressing the USOC’s commitment to supporting US athletes and preserving the future of the Olympic movement.<sup>209</sup> Similar to the effect of Kane’s testimony before the House Committee, the Senate Committee remained strongly in favour of a boycott, dismissing Miller’s concerns surrounding the prospects

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<sup>205</sup> Killanin, 173.

<sup>206</sup> International Olympic Committee, 20.

<sup>207</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 55.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

of success of the ultimatum and the ability of the Carter administration to recruit other NOCs around the world.

### 4.3 The Lake Placid Olympics

As requested in Carter's letter to Kane on January 20, the USOC agreed to present the US government case to the IOC, despite its minuscule chance of success. Kane subsequently met with the IOC before the start of the 1980 Winter Olympics that were held in Lake Placid, New York, from February 13 to February 24. Meeting with the IOC, Kane stated that he did not accept Carter's recommendations, but acknowledged that the American people were strongly in favour of a boycott. Although he did not want to defy Carter's wishes, Kane expressed concern "with sports being used as a political weapon."<sup>210</sup> Notwithstanding this concern, Kane upheld his promise to Carter, stating that he believed that the Games should not be held in the USSR, a country at war. He argued that Games should be moved to another site or postponed if necessary, to allow for more time for an alternate site to be found. "If neither of these alternatives are feasible," he stated, then "I suggest that the 1980 Olympic Games be cancelled."<sup>211</sup> Lord Killanin recalled that Kane put "forward the US government case . . . without any heart."<sup>212</sup> Lord Killanin responded to Kane's statement, asking him if the "USOC had borne in mind the fact that USA were involved in foreign interventions at the time of several earlier Games."<sup>213</sup>

Carter did not personally attend the Lake Placid Olympics, delegating Vice President Walter Mondale and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to be present on his behalf. On February 9, during the opening ceremonies of the Games, Vance delivered a speech outlining Carter's

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<sup>210</sup> International Centre for Olympic Studies, *IOC Executive Committee Minutes: Volume III (1969-1981)*, trans. Wolf Lyberg, 1992, 261.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>212</sup> Killanin, 182.

<sup>213</sup> International Centre for Olympic Studies, *IOC General Session Minutes: Volume IV (1956-1988)*, trans. Wolf Lyberg, 1992, 274-75.

decision, to the disgust of the IOC. Lord Killanin referred to the speech as “the most embarrassing opening ever held.”<sup>214</sup> Contrary to tradition, a copy of Vance’s speech was not made available in advance to the IOC which heightened Lord Killanin’s suspicion that “we were in for a political diatribe.”<sup>215</sup> Vance lectured the IOC regarding the tenants of the *Olympic Charter* and the spirit of the Games, claiming that it was the Soviets who were destroying the ideals of the Olympics and the future of the Games through their invasion. Indeed, he claimed that by refusing to participate, the US was abiding by the *Olympic Charter* and preserving the integrity of the Games. Vance concluded by stating that “we will oppose the participation of an American team in any Olympic Games in the capital of an invading nation.”<sup>216</sup>

Vance’s speech was not well received by the IOC. Lord Killanin recalled that “Vance’s speech was greeted in absolute silence by everybody.”<sup>217</sup> He noted that “some of my members were so incensed they did not attend the reception given later by Vance.”<sup>218</sup> However, his speech backfired, uniting the IOC in opposition to the position of Carter and the American government. Lord Killanin argued that “Vance’s speech had drawn the IOC membership together as though someone had lassoed them with an enormous rope.”<sup>219</sup>

The poor reception of Vance’s speech prompted Assistant to the President of the United States Al McDonald to question whether Carter’s direction and methods for enforcing a boycott was the correct course of action. In a February 15 letter to Cutler, McDonald suggested that “there may be resentment in the USOC about our methods and even more so among the

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>215</sup> Killanin, 177.

<sup>216</sup> The Department of State Bulletin, 50.

<sup>217</sup> Killanin, 181.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 181.

Committees of our allies.”<sup>220</sup> Regarding the prospects of convincing other nations to join the boycott, McDonald favoured a collaborative approach, stating that “when independent National Committees have the final word, we are in a delicate series of international negotiations in which conciliation and cooperation must be our approaches rather than hard-line stances.”<sup>221</sup> McDonald highlighted the concern that the US was intervening too forcefully in the affairs of the USOC and IOC, cautioning that backlash may emerge if the autonomy of these organizations was not respected.

As expected, the IOC refused to entertain calls to postpone, relocate, or cancel the Games, affirming that Moscow would host the Olympics as scheduled. At Lake Placid, the IOC drafted a resolution that “unanimously recommended that the Moscow Games should take place as decided.”<sup>222</sup> The IOC released a statement that explained that it signed a contract with Moscow that could not be broken over the concerns levied by the US government and the USOC. The document was supported by all 73 members of the IOC that attended the Lake Placid meeting.<sup>223</sup> The White House released a statement on February 12 in response to the IOC decision. The statement cemented Carter’s decision, noting that “under these circumstances neither the President, the Congress, nor the American people can support the sending of the US team to Moscow.”<sup>224</sup> Undeterred by the IOC’s rejection of the idea of postponing, relocating, or cancelling the Moscow Olympics, Carter sent a letter to Kane on February 15, thanking him for the “earnest and patriotic efforts that you and your colleagues have made in presenting the case

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<sup>220</sup> Al McDonald, Memorandum for Lloyd Cutler from Al McDonald. February 15, 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Counsel’s Office, Cutler, “Olympics – Memos 1-2/80,” Box 102, 11.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>222</sup> *IOC General Session Minutes*, 275.

<sup>223</sup> Killanin, 184.

<sup>224</sup> The Department of State Bulletin, 298.



for transferring, postponing or cancelling the Games to the International Olympic Committee.”<sup>225</sup> The President informed Kane that he was committed to his decision to boycott the Olympics, asking the USOC to “act promptly” and hold a formal vote on participation.<sup>226</sup> However, the USOC was not in a rush to vote on whether American athletes would attend the Olympics, deferring the decision until the scheduled meeting of the USOC on April 12.

The public position of the Carter administration portrayed the USOC as a willing partner in the boycott effort. On February 20, the White House announced its intention to boycott the Games, as the one-month ultimatum passed without the Soviets withdrawing their troops from Afghanistan. The press release stated that Kane and the USOC would “of course accept any decision the President makes as to whether a team should be sent to Moscow.”<sup>227</sup> The statement claimed that the “President thanked the Committee for its earnest and patriotic efforts to present the case for transferring, postponing or cancelling the Games.”<sup>228</sup> The public statements by the President presented the relationship between the Carter administration and the USOC as cooperative and harmonious. Kane and the USOC viewed the relationship with Carter much differently. Asked if he would accept a ruling from Congress regarding participation, Kane stated in an interview that the USOC “would not be bound to obey,” although the Committee “would of course be receptive to any admonition from our government.”<sup>229</sup> The Carter administration put Kane and the USOC in a difficult position. Kane had to balance supporting the Olympic movement, the athletes and the autonomy of the USOC against not completely revoking the President and his calls to boycott the Games, as this would make the USOC appear unpatriotic.

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<sup>225</sup> Jimmy Carter, Letter to Robert Kane, February 15, 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Counsel’s Office, Cutler, “Olympics – Letters 1-2/80,” Box 102.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> The Department of State Bulletin, 305.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>229</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 62.

Indeed, the USOC relied in great part on donations from individual Americans to fund its operation, and it was clear that the US population favoured a boycott. Kane was forced to begrudgingly accept the President's decision to boycott the Olympics after a series of coercive measures were applied by the US government to force the USOC into submission.

#### **4.4 The USOC Decision**

The USOC, as representatives of American athletes and the Olympic movement, was strongly opposed to the idea of a boycott. Carter recognized that it would be difficult to persuade the USOC to endorse the boycott through appeals to national security and patriotism, as the Committee was supposed to operate independently of political concerns and American foreign policy interests. Receiving the support of the USOC was essential because Carter realized it would be impossible to form a coalition of nations to boycott without the support of the USOC. Consequently, the President relied on forms of economic coercion to force the USOC into supporting the boycott. The White House noted in a press release that the USOC “depends for its funds on the generosity of American citizens and American business.”<sup>230</sup> Thus, the White House targeted American corporate contributors to the USOC and requested that they cease donating to the organization until a successful boycott vote was passed. Over fifteen corporations were contacted which resulted in \$175,000 of donations being withheld.<sup>231</sup> Other measures included threatening to remove the USOC headquarters from federal land as well as revoking the tax-exempt status of the organization. If imposed, these measures would have crippled the financial health of the USOC.<sup>232</sup> Cutler was especially draconian, suggesting that withdrawing passports could be used to prevent athletes from travelling to Moscow.<sup>233</sup> The US government did not need

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<sup>230</sup> The Department of State Bulletin, 305.

<sup>231</sup> Hedgpeth, 88.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>233</sup> FRUS, Volume XII, 381.

to pursue this measure, as the economic blackmail was enough to force the USOC into supporting the boycott.

The USOC scheduled a vote on April 12 to determine whether the organization would boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics. Before the vote, Carter sent a letter to Kane on April 5, reaffirming that “a USOC decision to send a team to Moscow would be against our national interest and would damage our national security. It would indicate to the Soviets – and the rest of the world – that the US lacks the resolve to oppose Soviet aggression.”<sup>234</sup> The President did not attend the vote, but the US government sent a delegation to the proceedings, headed by Mondale.

On the day of the vote, Mondale addressed the USOC, repeating the same rhetoric expressed by the Carter administration and Congress in January and February. He stated that the “President and Congress have made it clear that the Olympic boycott is a genuine element of America’s response to the invasion of Afghanistan.”<sup>235</sup> Ironically, he noted that the US did not want its athletes to be “cast as pawns” in a “tawdry propaganda charade,” while discussing the insinuation of sports and politics in the Soviet Union. Mondale also justified the US position through castigations of human rights abuses in the USSR and the belief that it was a mistake not to have boycotted the Berlin Games of 1936.<sup>236</sup> Speaking to the athletes, Mondale highlighted the need for personal sacrifice to support the nation, concluding his speech by stating that a boycott of the Games was necessary to preserve the Olympic movement. He finished by arguing that “the Olympic idea has been rescued from the remote past. You have the opportunity to rescue it from the immediate present – and to safeguard it for posterity.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *Public Papers, Book I*, 616.

<sup>235</sup> United States Department of State, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume I: Foundations of Foreign Policy” (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2014), 714-15.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 715-16.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 718.

Mondale's speech demonstrated that despite the opposition of a boycott from the USOC and IOC, the US was committed to its decision and was not willing to work with either to amend its stance due to concerns raised by Kane and Lord Killanin. The results of the vote were 1,604 delegates in favour and 797 opposed, a decisive victory for Carter and the boycott effort.<sup>238</sup> Despite the various appeals to patriotism, national security and the alleged mistake of attending the Berlin Games that were expressed by Mondale, it was clear that the USOC was compelled to support the boycott through the coercive measures levied by the US government. On May 24, 42 days following the USOC vote to boycott the Games, the IOC formally invited the world's NOCs to participate in the Moscow Olympics. Lord Killanin made a final attempt to persuade Carter to abandon the boycott, meeting the President for the first and only time in Washington on May 16. In response to calls from the US to undermine the rules of the IOC throughout the boycott campaign, Lord Killanin remarked to Carter that it was a pity that the US constitution could not be changed so that presidential election years would not coincide with Olympic years.<sup>239</sup> Carter was unwilling to change his position and a White House statement confirmed that the USOC would not attend the Games. The White House noted that "the President reaffirmed that the United States will continue to urge other governments and Olympic Committees to oppose participation in the Olympic Games in Moscow this summer."<sup>240</sup> Although the vote produced a large margin of victory for those in favour of a boycott, the USOC's decision did not reflect the position of American Olympians.

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<sup>238</sup> Hulme, 27.

<sup>239</sup> Killanin, 214.

<sup>240</sup> *Public Papers, Book I*, 929.

#### 4.5 The Olympic Athletes Respond

Unsurprisingly, US Olympic athletes were almost universally opposed to boycotting the Games and were skeptical of the rationales provided by the Carter administration. A group of US Olympians released a joint statement in opposition to the boycott. It declared that the athletes were concerned that the Olympic movement was being hijacked by the US government for political purposes. Similar to the USOC, American athletes were also skeptical regarding the ability of a boycott to force the USSR to withdraw its troops, stating that “the Soviet Union will not alter its foreign policy under a threat of a boycott.”<sup>241</sup> The athletes suggested that the US should focus on levying other forms of coercion to advance its foreign policy objectives, such as an economic boycott of the Soviet Union. The statement further highlighted concerns surrounding the future of the Olympic movement and the belief that athletes who opposed the boycott would be viewed by the American public as unpatriotic.<sup>242</sup>

American athletes did not view participation in the Moscow Olympics as a sign of approval for Soviet foreign policy. The Olympics were understood differently by the athletes than the US government. For example, Anita DeFrantz, captain of the 1976 US women’s rowing team, stated that “for those of you who have not participated in an Olympic Games I must explain that the location of the village and the various other competition venues are inconsequential to the athletes during the competition.”<sup>243</sup> Indeed, there was little emphasis or importance associated with the nation and city in which the Games resided each Olympic year, the focus was on the athletics competitions and not the political situation of the host country.

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<sup>241</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 60.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

For many athletes, the Moscow Olympics was their only chance of competing at the Games. Thus, the prospects of a boycott were especially difficult to accept considering an athlete may have spent years training for their only opportunity to compete for a medal at the world's most prestigious sporting event.<sup>244</sup> Gene Mills, a wrestler, stated that "I worked my whole life for a dream and he [Carter] took it away. And he wasn't even a wrestler. It's not like I got beat by a wrestler – I got beat by a peanut farmer."<sup>245</sup> Indeed, athletes were displeased with Carter's lack of respect and understanding of the effort and training required to compete at the Games. Athletes were also disappointed in Carter for not consulting with them or the USOC before announcing the boycott. Bill Hanzlik, a basketball player, noted that the Carter administration handled the boycott badly, stating that the "thing I thought was poorly done was that none of the athletes were ever consulted."<sup>246</sup> Isiah Thomas, a college basketball player who later turned professional, enjoying a successful career in the NBA, expressed disappointment with the President's decision.<sup>247</sup> Thomas, however, was a highly ranked prospect and had a future playing professionally. Thus, the boycott did not deprive him of the same fame and fortune that Olympians in other sports were prevented from a chance of achieving.

Although the majority of athletes favoured participation, some supported Carter's position. Al Oerter, a discus thrower, acknowledged that a boycott would do little to force the Soviets to withdraw their troops but supported the President regardless. He stated that "I am very much in favour of a boycott and I would hope that we would get tremendous support from the international community in this effort."<sup>248</sup> It is worth noting that Oerter competed in four

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<sup>244</sup> Jules Boykoff, *Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics* (London: Verso, 2016), 122.

<sup>245</sup> Tom and Jerry Caraccioli, *Boycott: Stolen Dreams of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games* (USA: New Chapter Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>248</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 65.

Olympic Games, capturing four gold medals, and failed to qualify for the US team in 1980. Thus, he was thus not deprived of his only chance at competing because of the Moscow boycott, unlike many other American athletes. Additionally, it was likely that several athletes who openly endorsed the boycott were privately opposed to it, but they did not want to risk ostracization and condemnation by the American public. Polls showed that American citizens endorsed the boycott and believed it was the patriotic duty of the athletes to support Carter.<sup>249</sup>

Although the President, Congress and public opinion favoured a boycott, many athletes continued to oppose Carter; their resentment of the Games being taken from them resonated well beyond 1980. Members of the 1980 US boxing team trained for the Olympics hoping that their exposure and potential success at the Games would lead to a professional career. Several athletes on the boxing team were deprived of competing in 1980. Nearly 40 years later, while watching the 2016 Summer Games on television, some lamented that their only opportunity to compete at the Olympics was taken from them by the US government.<sup>250</sup>

Their widespread resentment of the boycott resulted in several athletes attempting to defy Carter's decision through legal challenges. Anita DeFrantz led a lawsuit of twenty-five athletes, contending that the USOC's decision to boycott the Olympics violated the rights of US athletes under the *Amateur Sports Act of 1978*. Although the plaintiffs did not believe the lawsuit would be successful, it demonstrated their anger with the decision to boycott the Games.<sup>251</sup> Carter became concerned that the lawsuit might be successful and force the USOC to send athletes to Moscow. The President contacted Benjamin Civiletti, the Attorney General, to inquire about the

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<sup>249</sup> Phillip P. Shinnick, "Progressive Resistance to Nationalism and the 1980 Boycott of the Moscow Olympics," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 6 (1982), 18.

<sup>250</sup> Walter Webster, "Why Us, Mr. President? The US Boxing Team and the Boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games," MA Thesis, Department of History, Kansas State University, 2018, 68-69.

<sup>251</sup> Caraccioli, 134.

legality of the lawsuit. Civiletti informed Carter that it was unlikely that the plaintiffs' argument that the *Amateur Sports Act* imposed a legal duty on the USOC to send athletes to Moscow would be accepted by the judge. The Attorney General argued "it is my opinion that no tenable argument can be made that the USOC is required to send an American team to the Moscow Games."<sup>252</sup> The judge ruling the case agreed, stating that the USOC decision to boycott the Olympics did not violate the *Amateur Sports Act*, and arguing that the athletes' "right" to compete as stipulated by the Act was not guaranteed.<sup>253</sup> Although the judge ruled against the athletes, the lawsuit was successful to the extent that it accomplished the plaintiffs' goal of making their voice heard. The lawsuit, intently covered by the American press, caused Soviet officials to express sympathy for the position of the US athletes.<sup>254</sup>

The Carter administration was successful at preventing the USOC from sending its athletes to the Moscow Olympics. The President made appeals to the athletes, arguing that competing would be unpatriotic and attending the Games would result in a propaganda victory for the Soviets. However, Carter demonstrated that he was willing to use the success of American Olympians for political purposes, a move that perhaps inadvertently supported the arguments of those in Congress who supported attending the Games. As discussed, a major argument advanced by those in Congress who supported participation was the idea that the success of American athletes at the Olympics would serve as a propaganda victory for the US. Conversely, some who opposed a boycott argued that American athletes participating would do

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<sup>252</sup> Benjamin R. Civiletti, Letter to President Carter. Washington, Office of the Attorney General, April 10, 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Office of the Secretary, Presidential Handwriting File, "[4/10/80 – Not Submitted – DF]," Box 180, 3.

<sup>253</sup> Marks, 168.

<sup>254</sup> Caraccioli, 148.



more harm than good, claiming that US presence at the Games would result in a propaganda victory for the Soviets.

Kane supported the position that the US should not boycott the Olympics, arguing that in 1936 the government was correct to leave the decision to the AOC to determine whether it sent a team to the Berlin Games. In an interview, Kane stated that “we came out not only looking good but making the Nazis look bad. Jesse Owens and six other Black American athletes won more medals in track and field than the whole German Olympic team.”<sup>255</sup> Owens passed away on March 31, 1980, amid the Carter administration’s boycott effort. Owens rejected the President’s decision to boycott the Olympics, resenting that the Games and his legacy had become politicized. A *Washington Post* obituary stated that “the link between international politics and sports was despised by Mr. Owens, and most other world-class athletes seem to feel that way. They want to be free to compete against each other without regard to nationality, race or political view.”<sup>256</sup> The obituary added that “it is sad and ironic that the name of Jesse Owens has become so bound up with events that demonstrated the political ramifications of international sport.”<sup>257</sup> Commenting on the life of Owens on the day after his death, Carter stated that “his personal triumphs as a world-class athlete and record holder were the prelude to a career devoted to helping others.”<sup>258</sup> Speaking in 1979, Carter proclaimed that Owens was “a young man who possibly didn’t even realize the superb nature of his own capabilities went to the Olympics and performed in a way that I don’t believe has ever been equalled since.”<sup>259</sup> Carter’s praise of the athletic success of Owens and how it shaped the remainder of his life was ill-timed, considering

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<sup>255</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 62.

<sup>256</sup> “Jesse Owens – Obituary,” *The Washington Post*. April 1, 1980.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> J.Y. Smith, “Olympic Track Great Jesse Owens is Dead at 66,” *The Washington Post*. April 1, 1980.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

the ongoing boycott campaign was attempting to prevent contemporary US athletes from enjoying the same opportunity for success and recognition achieved by Owens at the Games.

Carter also expressed support for the American athletes competing at the 1980 Winter Olympics. Similar to Owens' record-setting performance in 1936, the US hockey team accomplished one of the most impressive achievements in American Olympic history, defeating the heavily favoured Soviet team. Carter phoned American head coach Herb Brooks following the semi-final victory over the Soviets and called again after the US team won the gold medal against Finland, congratulating the team on its success. Speaking to team captain Mike Eruzione, Carter stated "we're all proud of you. I was hoping this victory and the gold medal were an omen of better days ahead."<sup>260</sup>

The enthusiasm for the unlikely American victory against the Soviets extended to Congress, and several representatives spoke, congratulating the team. Representative Jim Courter stated, "in one way or another we all felt good about beating the Soviets at something that would affect their pride and ego."<sup>261</sup> Representative Gary Lee remarked that the US "had very little to cheer about for some time now," adding that the Olympics "showed us and the world some astounding things about these United States."<sup>262</sup> Representative Barry Goldwater, Jr., argued that the success of American athletes at Lake Placid demonstrated that it would be more beneficial for US interests if the USOC sent a team to Moscow. He argued: "I believe that the US participation at Lake Placid did more to refute the propaganda efforts of communism than any boycott would ever do."<sup>263</sup> Goldwater believed that the efforts of the summer Olympians "have

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<sup>260</sup> Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 11.

<sup>261</sup> 96<sup>th</sup> US Congress, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 96<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session*, Vol. 126-Part 3, February 13-27, 1980 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1980), 3611.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, 3904.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 3824.

become a pawn for politicians, and their attainments will become a sacrifice to symbolism, that will produce no concrete results.”<sup>264</sup> Despite disagreements in Congress regarding whether US success at the Winter Olympics was evidence that a boycott would either be effective or not effective, the Senate passed a resolution on February 27 congratulating all participating athletes.<sup>265</sup> President Carter and the US Congress conceptualized American success at Lake Placid as an event that captured the imagination of the nation and boosted morale.

Although the US government lambasted the Soviet Union for not separating sport from politics, Carter and Congress were eager to utilize American success at Lake Placid for political purposes. Indeed, the President invited the US Winter Olympic team to the White House following the closing ceremonies to formally congratulate the athletes on their success. Bob Berenson, assistant director of the White House Domestic Policy Staff, cautioned that inviting the Winter Olympians to visit the President would be resented by the summer athletes. In a February 22 letter to Lloyd Cutler, he stated that “the summer athletes have yet to hear the President offer any words of solace for their predicament,” suggesting that “bringing in the Winter team to the White House to congratulate them could produce bitter anger on the part of the summer athletes.”<sup>266</sup> In addition to increasing the amount of communication between the Carter administration and the USOC, Berenson believed that the President should make a public statement in support of the sacrifices he was asking the summer athletes to make by agreeing to a boycott.<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 3824.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 4003.

<sup>266</sup> Bob Berenson, Memorandum to Lloyd Cutler from Bob Berenson. February 22, 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Counsel’s Office, Cutler, “Olympics – Memos 1-2/80,” Box 102, 18.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 19.

Despite Berenson's concerns, the ceremony was held as planned. Carter declared "for me, as President of the United States of America, this is one of the proudest moments that I've ever experienced."<sup>268</sup> Carter's plan to use the athletes' success at Lake Placid as a means to improve national morale backfired. Eric Heiden, a speedskater who won five gold medals at Lake Placid, lamented Carter's decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics. He appeared in a televised interview following his trip to the White House, stating that "the winter athletes in general just don't feel that a boycott is the right thing."<sup>269</sup> Lord Killanin was unimpressed with the athletes' visit to the White House, as he believed they were being used for political purposes as opposed to attending a sincere celebration of their success at the Games. He argued the decision antagonized the USOC and bred further resentment among the summer athletes toward the decision to boycott the Olympics.<sup>270</sup> Furthermore, the success and subsequent publicity of the winter Olympians damaged public support for boycotting the Moscow Games. A Gallup poll taken after Lake Placid found that 63 percent of Americans were in support of a boycott. Although still a majority, the US public was less in favour of boycotting Moscow compared to the polls conducted in January when the decision was announced.<sup>271</sup>

The examples of Owens and the US hockey team demonstrated that Carter believed that athletic success at the Olympics could be used to boost national morale and support American patriotism. At the same time, the US government was quick to denounce the Soviets for the blending of sport and politics, pointing out that the USSR's Olympic team was an extension of the Kremlin. However, the US government conceptualized the role and purpose of the USOC and the Olympic athletes it represented in a very similar way as its adversary. Indeed, Owens

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<sup>268</sup> Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 134.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>270</sup> Killanin, 187.

<sup>271</sup> Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 133.

was remembered and celebrated as a figure larger than sporting accomplishments. His success at Berlin was a triumph against Nazi racial policies, exposing the flawed ideology of the Third Reich. The gold medal won by the US hockey team represented a victory for the American way of life over the corruption of the Soviet system. Although their successes and legacies were politicized by the White House, Owens and numerous winter Olympians rejected Carter's boycott and supported the right of the summer Olympians to compete in Moscow.

Carter utilized the success and legacy of Olympic athletes to bolster American patriotism and national pride, blurring the line separating sport and politics in a way that reflected the policies of the Soviet Union. The coercive tactics used to undermine the autonomy of the USOC and force them to comply with the foreign policy decisions of the US government further supported the idea that both the US and USSR conceived the role of the Olympics politically. The White House and Congress were hypocritical for condemning the USSR for using the Games for propaganda purposes because it was evident that the Soviets' concerns that the Olympics were an arena in which the Cold War was fought was a position shared by a majority of Americans.

Carter's struggles to form a clear and united position in Congress, in addition to his political shortcomings in convincing the USOC, IOC and American athletes to support the boycott, illustrated several poor decisions. Carter's ultimatum for Soviet troop withdrawal was questioned in the Senate, as it was believed that a boycott should be levied on the USSR regardless of whether troops remained in Afghanistan. The ultimatum was also a major point of contention among the USOC, IOC and the athletes. These groups did not believe that a boycott would have any impact on the direction of Soviet foreign policy and resented that Carter was politicizing the Games for a foreign policy goal that was unlikely to succeed. Congress did not

take the concerns of the USOC and IOC seriously and vowed to continue to push for a boycott even though it was unpopular among American athletes. Carter's decision to honour the winter Olympians was problematic because it demonstrated that the President believed the Games could be used for political purposes, a crime of which the Soviet Union was frequently accused. Honouring the athletes who competed at Lake Placid was also insensitive to the summer Olympians who were forced to comply with the President's political decision through coercive measures.

## Chapter 5: Foreign Problems – Canada and the Global Boycott Campaign

### 5.1 Human Rights and Europe

Carter remained undeterred by the several domestic hurdles he faced and simultaneously worked to secure international support for the boycott throughout the early months of 1980. Indeed, the Carter administration viewed international support imperative for the boycott to be deemed successful. It was thus necessary that the nations of the world be recruited to participate in the boycott, as a larger coalition would send a stronger message to the Soviets that the world disapproved of the invasion of Afghanistan. However, like the missteps throughout his domestic campaigns, the President overestimated his ability to persuade other nations and their NOCs of the necessity to boycott the Olympics.

On January 22, 1980, Andrei Sakharov, a Soviet dissident and human rights activist, was arrested in Moscow for protesting the invasion of Afghanistan. A distinguished nuclear physicist and Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1975 in the Soviet Union, Sakharov, concerned about the moral implications of his work, turned to activism and supported nuclear non-proliferation. In response to his arrest, the White House released a statement on January 23 condemning the Soviet Union for violating the Helsinki Accords. The statement claimed that “the decision by Soviet authorities to deprive Nobel Laureate Andrei Sakharov of his honours and to send him into exile arouses worldwide indignation.”<sup>272</sup> Sakharov sent a letter to Carter the day before his arrest, receiving a reply on February 5. The President reassured him that “human rights is a central concern of my administration.”<sup>273</sup>

Support for Sakharov extended to Congress and several members used his arrest to justify the Olympic boycott. Senator Frank Church stated that “no punishment of Andrei Sakharov can

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<sup>272</sup> The Department of State Bulletin, 238.

<sup>273</sup> FRUS, Volume VI, 17.

be free of cost to the Soviet Union.”<sup>274</sup> Representative Lawrence Coughlin reflected on Sakharov’s arrest, asking “can there be any question now that the Summer Olympic Games should not be moved from Moscow?”<sup>275</sup> Representative Mario Biaggi remarked that “the Soviet Union is hosting an event that signifies world peace, and yet, they are aggressively threatening this peace by their actions against Afghanistan, and their failure to recognize basic human rights.”<sup>276</sup> The arrest of Sakharov brought human rights back into the forefront of American foreign policy. Early calls for boycotting the Moscow Olympics before the invasion of Afghanistan frequently underscored human rights concerns, but Carter did not initially justify the boycott on human rights grounds. The Sakharov case injected the issue of human rights into the boycott issue, providing the Carter administration and Congress with an additional rationale for not participating in the Summer Games. Indeed, Warren Christopher argued that his views were “reinforced by the really ugly face of Soviet repression which has been reflected in their treatment of Sakharov.”<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, Sakharov was one of the reasons why the Senate chose to support a boycott of the Olympics, regardless of whether the Soviets withdrew their troops.<sup>278</sup>

An April 7 letter to Zbigniew Brzezinski from the Acting Director of the International Communication Agency, Charles Bray, suggested that the US amend its justifications for the boycott to make it more palatable to Western European governments. The letter recommended that the US emphasize the importance of NATO unity and morality as opposed to focusing on American foreign policy goals such as punishing the Soviets and deterring them from further attacks in the Middle East. Indeed, there was a desire in Europe to uphold the human rights

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<sup>274</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 151.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 550.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 579.

<sup>277</sup> *Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, 50.

<sup>278</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 1, 828.



provisions in the Helsinki Accords; the arrest of Sakharov was strongly condemned. Thus, in Bray's mind, branding the boycott as a means of opposing the Soviets for domestic human rights abuses, as well as for invading Afghanistan, an innocent nonaligned nation, would be an approach more likely to garner support for the boycott. Bray recommended that changing the narrative in this way would produce the best chance of success for its acceptance by US allies in Europe.<sup>279</sup>

The Sakharov case was alarming to American allies in Western Europe because these nations shared the importance Carter ascribed to denouncing Soviet human rights abuses. The United Kingdom (UK), led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, strongly condemned Sakharov's arrest.<sup>280</sup> The UK was the only nation in Europe that had enthusiastically supported the boycott initiative and, like the US, the Sakharov case emboldened Thatcher to continue rejecting participation in the Olympics. It must be remembered that like the USOC, the British Olympic Association (BOA) operated independently of government and thus was not subservient to Thatcher's view. Carter encouraged Thatcher to pressure the BOA to support the boycott and the British government applied similar tactics that the President used to force the USOC into submission.<sup>281</sup> On March 18, the House of Commons voted 315 to 147 in favour of the boycott; however, unlike in the US, the BOA defied the government and voted to attend the Games.<sup>282</sup>

Human rights were especially important to West Germany, a major US ally and Olympic nation that Carter hoped would support the boycott. However, West Germany also desired to continue détente and improve relations with the Eastern Bloc. The West German government

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<sup>279</sup> United States Department of State, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XXX: Public Diplomacy" (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2016), 604-05.

<sup>280</sup> Thomas K. Robb, Steve Marsh and Alan P. Dobson, "The End of Détente," in *Jimmy Carter and the Anglo-American Special Relationship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 122.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>282</sup> Allen Guttman, "The Cold War and the Olympics," *International Journal* 43 (1988), 561.

oscillated on the issue of the boycott, finally deciding in March to abstain from participation. The NOC of West Germany followed the position of the government and agreed not to attend the Olympics. Sakharov and the broader issue of human rights in the Soviet Union was a major factor in its decision to boycott. Indeed, West Germany, in general, did not share Carter's impetuses for imposing the boycott; the Sakharov case was the most salient issue in Bonn.<sup>283</sup>

Although Carter was successful at achieving support for the boycott in West Germany, few other European allied nations abstained from participation. Norway, Turkey, Monaco and Liechtenstein, together with West Germany, were the only European countries that boycotted. The Italian government agreed to join the boycott but, like the situation in the UK, Italy's NOC voted to participate.<sup>284</sup> The boycott was strongly opposed by France. The French did not want to escalate superpower tensions over the invasion of Afghanistan and permitted full autonomy for its NOC to determine whether athletes would attend the Games. The French case demonstrated the benefit of an autonomous NOC for nations that did not want to boycott but also did not want to harm their relationship with the US. Knowing that their NOC would favour participation, France was able to maintain a middle position, offering support for the US but refusing to interfere with its NOC.<sup>285</sup> Additionally, France did not believe it had an obligation to support US foreign policy, opposing Carter because the invasion of Afghanistan was not a threat to European interests.<sup>286</sup>

Despite Carter's success in West Germany, support for the boycott did not extend to many other European nations. The loss of the UK, France and Italy, three major US allies and

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<sup>283</sup> Kanin, "The Olympic Boycott in Diplomatic Context," 13.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>286</sup> Milton F. Goldman, "President Carter and Afghanistan: A Reassessment of American Responses in 1980 to the Soviet Union," *Il Politico* 51 (1986), 578.

Olympic nations, was devastating for the boycott movement in Europe. The Sakharov case and ongoing concerns regarding human rights in the Soviet Union was a major concern in Western Europe but it was not enough to convince major US allies to boycott, other than West Germany. In his memoirs, Carter stated, “while improving diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union was an important goal of mine, I had made it clear in the campaign that I was not going to ignore Soviet abuse of human rights, as I believed some previous administrations had done.”<sup>287</sup> The President made human rights a cornerstone of his foreign policy but did not initially reference human rights as a justification for imposing the boycott when it was planned originally. Sakharov was arrested on January 22, two days after the boycott was publicly announced but before Carter’s State of the Union Address. Thus, Carter missed an opportunity to justify the boycott on the basis that the Soviet Union needed to be punished for its human rights abuses.

A focus on human rights might have made the boycott proposal more appealing to America’s Western European allies that were skeptical of the threat of the Soviet invasion on European interests in the Middle East. Carter and his staff were aware of how salient human rights were to Western European nations and, given the necessity of foreign support required for the success of the boycott, the President missed an opportunity to tailor the rationales for imposing the boycott beyond what was popular in the US. Additionally, emphasizing human rights might have demonstrated that Carter was consistent in his foreign policy goals, aiding to counter criticisms levied by opponents of the boycott who believed the President took advantage of the Soviet invasion to boost domestic morale and improve his perception by the US electorate. As discussed in Chapter One, a boycott was suggested years before the Soviet invasion based on human rights abuses by Moscow. Thus, Carter missed an opportunity to initially reference

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<sup>287</sup> Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 146.

human rights as a justification for the boycott. The response to the arrest of Sakharov might have demonstrated continuity and consistency in Carter's foreign policy and made the case for nonparticipation in the Olympics stronger.

Aside from American allies in Europe, Israel and Japan agreed to boycott the Olympics, deciding immediately before the IOC formally invited NOCs, on May 22 and May 24, respectively. The last-minute abstentions suggested that geopolitical dependence on the US may have played a role in the decision to boycott.<sup>288</sup> Like the UK, the Australian government supported Carter and the boycott initiative but was unable to convince Australia's NOC to refrain from participation. The executive members of the NOC voted six to five to attend the Olympics and, despite further protest from Australia's Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, Australian athletes attended the Summer Games.<sup>289</sup>

## **5.2 The Developing World**

Beyond Carter's efforts with key American allies, the President also worked towards broadening the coalition of boycotting nations by convincing countries in the Global South to support the US. Although many developing countries were not strong competitors at the Olympics, the Carter administration believed their absence from the Games was important because it demonstrated that they supported the US position and opposed Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. Thus, the boycott campaign expanded beyond US allies to developing nations in all continents of the globe. Additionally, unlike the US and many of its Western allies, the governments of developing nations had greater control over their NOCs, meaning Carter would

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<sup>288</sup> Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 153.

<sup>289</sup> Hulme, 71.

have an easier path of achieving reassurance from these nations in preventing their Olympic teams from travelling to Moscow.

Carter hoped he could translate the overwhelming condemnation at the UN for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan into support for the boycott among the nations of the developing world. The US was successful in the sense that many nations in the Global South committed to boycotting the Games; however, several developing nations chose not to attend the Olympics for reasons beyond supporting American foreign policy. For example, several Arab states agreed to boycott in solidarity with the population of Afghanistan which was predominately Muslim. Egypt boycotted in support of a strong coalition of Islamic nations which rejected Soviet imperialism in Afghanistan.<sup>290</sup> Indonesia, another Muslim-majority state, supported Islamic solidarity, and also hoped to improve relations with the US. Indonesia did not win an Olympic medal until 1988 and thus had little to lose by not attending the Games in 1980.<sup>291</sup> Pakistan agreed to join the US boycott, participating with other Islamic nations in condemning Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. Carter implored Pakistani President Muhammad Zia to remain committed to a boycott, stating in a letter he hoped Pakistan “will exercise equally firm leadership at the Islamic Foreign Ministers’ Conference in May to demonstrate that the Islamic world remains united in its condemnation of Soviet actions.”<sup>292</sup> Elsewhere in Asia, the Philippines boycotted to improve its ties to the US, as did China, a nation that was moving towards Washington and away from Moscow geopolitically since the 1970s.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Joseph Eaton. “Decentering US Sports Diplomacy: The 1980 Moscow Boycott through Contemporary Asian-African Perspectives,” in Simon Rofe, ed., *Sport and Diplomacy: Games within Games* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 208.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 204-05.

<sup>292</sup> United States Department of State, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XIX: South Asia” (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2019), 1004.

<sup>293</sup> Eaton., 206-08.

Carter attempted to convince African nations to support the boycott through appeals to solidarity among non-aligned developing nations over the plight of the Afghans. The President chose an unconventional method to engage with Africa, recruiting world heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali to participate in a tour across several African countries to garner support for the boycott among these nation's leaders, the press and public opinion. A champion of civil rights and African American pride, it was believed that Ali could assist in convincing hesitant African nations that the Soviet invasion was unjust and warranted a boycott. Ali condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, declaring his support for a boycott three days before Carter's announcement.<sup>294</sup> In a letter to Warren Christopher, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Richard Moose stated "it is our assessment that the Ali mission is exactly the kind of energetic public diplomacy we need to employ to have a fighting chance at bringing the 40-50 African nations around to our point of view."<sup>295</sup> Moose believed the trip would be supported in Congress in addition to generating much publicity and public support in the African nations he visited.

Ali met with government officials in Kenya, Liberia and Senegal, but Tanzania and Nigeria, offended that Carter did not engage with them through an official government diplomat, chose to send their athletes to Moscow. The President of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor, met with Ali but affirmed that a Senegalese team would participate in the Games.<sup>296</sup> Tanzanian and Nigerian government officials did not meet with Ali, mocking the boxer for participating as a lobbyist for US foreign policy interests.<sup>297</sup> Ali had not been properly briefed on the US decision

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<sup>294</sup> Stephen R. Wenn and Jeffrey P. Wenn, "Muhammad Ali and the Convergence of Olympic Sport and US Diplomacy in 1980: A Reassessment from Behind the Scenes at the US State Department," *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 2 (1993), 45.

<sup>295</sup> FRUS, Volume XXX, 594.

<sup>296</sup> Wenn, "Muhammad Ali and the Convergence of Olympic Sport and US Diplomacy in 1980," 55.

<sup>297</sup> Boykoff, 121-22.

and was unable to answer questions regarding the details of the boycott and American foreign policy in Africa.<sup>298</sup>

Ali's trip was not well received in Congress. Representative John Ashbrook critiqued the decision, stating "I do not know why in the world the President sent someone like that to Africa to represent this country."<sup>299</sup> Representative Robert Bauman echoed Ashbrook's sentiment, questioning Carter as to why someone like Ali with no political or diplomatic experience was being recruited to promote American foreign policy interests.<sup>300</sup> The international press did not view Ali's trip favourably. Western European newspapers overwhelmingly viewed the Ali mission as a failure and embarrassment for the US.<sup>301</sup> The mission received limited coverage by the press in the developing world and did not produce any shifts in opinion in Africa towards supporting the boycott.<sup>302</sup> The domestic press in the US also was unimpressed with Carter's decision, questioning why Ali was chosen over an experienced official White House diplomat, believing that the boxer's presence was condescending to the African nations he visited.<sup>303</sup>

Although the Ali mission helped to prevent Liberian athletes from participating in the Games, other nations viewed his presence as an insult. His visits received poor press coverage and did little to sway public opinion abroad towards America's position. Ali was well received in Kenya, but the nation had committed to a boycott before his visit.<sup>304</sup> Furthermore, other African nations supported the boycott due to financial reasons. For example, Ghana agreed not to send a team to Moscow because it believed the funds required could be better spent on domestic

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<sup>298</sup> Hill, 130.

<sup>299</sup> US Congress, Vol. 126-Part 3, 1859.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 2302.

<sup>301</sup> Ken Lefkow, Ken Lefkow to Lloyd Cutler, Washington, The White House, February 8, 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Staff Offices, Domestic Policy Staff – Human Resources (Berenson), Subject Files, "Olympics – Boycott, 1/80 – 2/80," Box 14, 3.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>303</sup> Sarantakes, 117.

<sup>304</sup> Hulme, 68.

needs.<sup>305</sup> The Ali mission demonstrated how anxious Carter was to quickly construct a coalition of boycotting nations in the developing world. However, his gamble to use unconventional diplomacy backfired and he did not receive the support in Africa for the boycott that he had wanted. Elsewhere in the world, several nations boycotted in support of their role in the Non-Aligned Movement to oppose Soviet aggression against an independent nation. The idea of Islamic solidarity was compelling to nations in the Muslim world. Several nations wanted to improve their standing as friends of the US, whereas others did not want to spend the required funds to send a team to Moscow. Indeed, although Carter was moderately successful in convincing developing nations to support the boycott, support for American foreign policy was not a major reason why nations in the Global South did not attend the Olympics.

### **5.3 Canada Joins the Boycott**

Together with the UK and West Germany, the US viewed Canada as one of the more important Olympic nations and it was thus necessary that Ottawa be convinced to support the boycott. For the US, Canada was a major trading partner, military ally and embraced a strong sporting and Olympic tradition. Montreal hosted the 1976 Summer Olympics and in 1980 Calgary was a candidate to host the 1988 Winter Games. Considering the close political, cultural, economic and military ties between Canada and the US, Ottawa would have to seriously weigh any overtures by the US to support Washington's foreign policy agenda.

Canada was one of the first countries to publicly announce its support for the boycott. Prime Minister Joe Clark, a Conservative who was elected in May 1979, initially stated on January 4, 1980, that Canada would not support the boycott. Dick Pound, president of the COA, declared that Canada would participate in the Games regardless of what the government decided,

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<sup>305</sup> Eaton, 213.



affirming that the organization operated independently of government.<sup>306</sup> However, Clark changed his position, announcing on January 26 that Canada would follow the US and boycott the Olympics if the Soviets did not withdraw their troops from Afghanistan by February 20. Like the US, sanctions were imposed on the Soviet Union by Canada, such as cancelling scientific and cultural exchanges. Unlike the US, however, Clark did not impose an embargo on the sale of grain, assuring Carter that Canada would not increase grain exports to the Soviet Union to compensate for the American embargo.<sup>307</sup>

On February 18, Clark was defeated in the federal election by Liberal Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who had served as Prime Minister from 1968 to 1979. Trudeau was sworn into office on March 3 and his government continued the sanctions imposed by Clark.<sup>308</sup> However, Trudeau was much less enthusiastic than Clark regarding the Olympic boycott. Mark MacGuigan, Secretary of State for External Affairs (known as the Minister of Foreign Affairs since 1993), recalled in his memoirs that “Trudeau’s immediate reaction to the boycott was negative and he was completely opposed to the deadline set by Clark.”<sup>309</sup> Trudeau quickly amended his position, however, declaring that “Canada would accept a boycott if there was massive participation from both the West and the Third World.”<sup>310</sup> The vote by the IOC in response to Cyrus Vance’s appeal at the Lake Placid Olympics to reject the US proposal to postpone, relocate or cancel the Moscow Games influenced Trudeau’s position. The Prime Minister acknowledged the unpopularity of the vote within the IOC and did not want Canada to be one of the only nations to

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<sup>306</sup> Sandra Kereliuk, “The Canadian Boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games,” in Gerald Redmond ed., *Sport and Politics* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1986), 156.

<sup>307</sup> Donald Macintosh and Michael K. Hawes, *Sport and Canadian Diplomacy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 94.

<sup>308</sup> Mark MacGuigan, *An Inside Look at External Affairs During the Trudeau Years: The Memoirs of Mark MacGuigan* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002), 35.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

support the US.<sup>311</sup> Throughout his several terms as Prime Minister, Trudeau prioritized improving Canada's relationship with developing nations.<sup>312</sup> Thus, his decision to consult developing nations before deciding whether Canada would boycott the Olympics was consistent with his foreign policy outlook.

Similar to Western Europe, Canada did not view the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a major threat to world peace or the nation's security. The 1980 election focused on domestic issues such as the Canadian Constitution, Quebec sovereignty, energy and the economy.<sup>313</sup> Indeed, there was no mention of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or the Olympic boycott in the platforms of the Liberals, Conservatives or NDP.<sup>314</sup>

Trudeau, hesitant to publicly support Carter, was questioned on April 15, the day after Parliament was recalled following the election period, on whether he would endorse the boycott. In Parliament, Trudeau stated that a large coalition of nations was required for the initiative to be successful. He argued that it was important "to ensure that this united front of nations against that invasion be maintained in as large a proportion as possible, and that is what we are working at."<sup>315</sup> For Trudeau, the purpose of the boycott would be "to show the Soviet Union and the Soviet people that there is, indeed, widespread condemnation of their invasion of Afghanistan."<sup>316</sup> Unlike Carter, however, Trudeau admitted to the futility of the boycott as a tool to force the Soviets to withdraw their troops. The Prime Minister stated that the boycott "would not have much effect . . . on the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan."<sup>317</sup> Clark responded to

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<sup>311</sup> Macintosh, 96.

<sup>312</sup> Ivan L. Head and Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *The Canadian Way: Shaping Canada's Foreign Policy, 1968-1984* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart INC., 1995), 9.

<sup>313</sup> Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *Memoirs* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1993), 268-69.

<sup>314</sup> Manifestos of Canada's major political parties are available from <https://www.poltext.org/en/part-1-electronic-political-texts/electronic-manifestos-canada>.

<sup>315</sup> Parliament of Canada, "House of Commons Debates, 32<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Vol. 1, 1980," 21.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Trudeau, urging the Prime Minister to announce a decision on boycotting the Games. Clark stated that Canada should support the US, “not because of the accident of geography, but because of the act of sharing basic goals and basic ideals.”<sup>318</sup>

On April 22, Mark MacGuigan announced Canada’s decision to support the US and boycott the Olympics. He met with Canadian IOC member James Worrall and Pound on April 2, explaining that Canada would likely support the US initiative. Pound declared that he and the COA would accept the boycott if the government determined it was necessary, a reversal of his previous commitment to attend the Games regardless of the position of the government.<sup>319</sup> MacGuigan played a large role in the decision to boycott, noting that the “Prime Minister was reluctantly on board.”<sup>320</sup> Trudeau was further displeased that Canada was unable to bargain with the US for a *quid pro quo* for joining the boycott. April 22 was chosen as the day the boycott was announced, largely because Vance was scheduled to visit Trudeau in Ottawa on April 23 to discuss the Iranian Hostage Crisis. MacGuigan did not want Canadians to think that Vance influenced the decision or pressured Trudeau to support Carter.<sup>321</sup> The boycott was justified on the basis that Trudeau had conversed with several heads of state among Canadian allies in Western Europe and developing nations around the world. The Prime Minister determined that there was enough support for a boycott worldwide that Canada would participate.<sup>322</sup> MacGuigan believed that Canada decided to join the boycott independently, without pressure from Carter. He recalled in his memoirs that the “Americans were not in the habit of directly asking us to take any particular action on multilateral issues, and still less of pressuring us to do so.”<sup>323</sup> Ivan Head,

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>319</sup> Kereliuk, “The Canadian Boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games,” 1986, 157.

<sup>320</sup> MacGuigan, 36.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>322</sup> “House of Commons Debates, Vol. 1,” 298.

<sup>323</sup> MacGuigan, 36.

a foreign policy advisor, reflected in a memoir co-authored with Trudeau that they believed the US was generally considerate of Canadian interests on issues of bilateral foreign policy.<sup>324</sup> Lord Killanin also defended Trudeau, arguing that the Prime Minister “would not have sustained the boycott if Canada had not been split politically.”<sup>325</sup>

The decision whether Canada should join the US in the Olympic boycott was discussed in the House of Commons and Senate, although in much less detail compared to the debates in the US legislature. The Liberals and Conservatives were united in support of the boycott. Indeed, the Conservative government supported the boycott in January and Trudeau’s Liberals did not withdraw from any of the sanctions imposed by Clark.<sup>326</sup> The timeframe of the decision was the main point of contention between the Liberals and Conservatives. The Conservatives supported the boycott and urged Trudeau to expedite the decision, whereas the Prime Minister was committed to discussing the boycott with other nations before deciding.<sup>327</sup> Aside from disagreements surrounding the timeframe of the decision, the boycott was supported by both major parties. Nathan Nurgitz, a Conservative Senator, applauded Trudeau’s decision, supporting the boycott based on the importance Moscow ascribed to hosting the Olympics and the necessity to deny them a propaganda victory.<sup>328</sup> Liberal Senator Stanley Haidasz supported Trudeau on the basis that the Soviet Union should be punished for its human rights abuses. Haidasz referenced the arrest of Sakharov as a justification for applying more pressure on the Soviet Union by employing the boycott, concluding that “we should be proud of our country’s record and resolve in promoting peace and defending human rights.”<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Head, 173.

<sup>325</sup> Killanin, 199.

<sup>326</sup> “House of Commons Debates, Vol. 1,” 157.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>328</sup> Parliament of Canada, “Senate Debates, 32<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Vol. 1, 1980,” 109.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Although support for the boycott was widespread among Liberal and Conservative MPs and Senators, the NDP endorsed Canadian participation in the Olympics. Pauline Jewett, an NDP MP, argued that the Party was convinced “that a boycott of the Moscow Games would not fulfill the objective of forcing the Soviets out of Afghanistan.”<sup>330</sup> The NDP also rejected boycotting the Olympics based on the lack of support for the initiative in Western Europe, considering that Trudeau pledged to boycott only if a large coalition of nations could be constructed.<sup>331</sup>

Pound and Worrall were strongly in favour of Canadian participation in the Moscow Olympics. On March 30, Pound orchestrated a vote by the board of directors of the COA and the results favoured sending a team to Moscow.<sup>332</sup> A day after the vote, however, the Olympic Trust, an organization that worked with corporate sponsors to raise money for the COA, declared that it would withhold funds if athletes participated in the Summer Games. Clark had mandated that the Canadian government would not provide any monetary assistance to support the COA; thus, Trudeau needed to reverse Clark’s decision for the athletes to receive financial aid from the federal government.<sup>333</sup> Pound lamented the support of the boycott by Canadian business, arguing that “our corporate community was more American in opposition to going to Moscow than even the US business community.”<sup>334</sup> However, corporate partners were influenced by their US parent companies, which in turn were hostile to the Soviet Union’s state-socialist economic system.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> “House of Commons Debates, Vol. 1,” 300.

<sup>331</sup> Parliament of Canada, “House of Commons Debates, 32<sup>nd</sup> Parliament, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Vol 2., 1980,” 1429.

<sup>332</sup> Macintosh, 98.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>334</sup> Richard Pound, *Inside the Olympics: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Politics, the Scandals, and the Glory of the Games* (Etobicoke, ON: Wiley, 2004), 99.

<sup>335</sup> H. Cantelon, “The Canadian Absence from the XXII<sup>nd</sup> Olympiad – Some Explanations,” in Maaret Ilmarinen ed., *Sport and International Understanding* (Berlin: Springer, 1984), 149.

The Olympic Trust pressured the Canadian government to support the boycott to further ensure that the COA would reverse its position.<sup>336</sup>

On April 26, following the April 22 boycott announcement by the government, the COA held a second vote to determine whether it would support Trudeau and abstain from participating at the Moscow Olympics. Similar to the US tactic of sending Walter Mondale and Cyrus Vance to the USOC vote, Trudeau also dispatched a government delegation to endorse the boycott before the COA. Although some voters remained committed to supporting Pound, those in favour of the boycott carried the vote by a tally of 137 to 35, a far larger measure of support than the USOC vote.<sup>337</sup>

Trudeau's decision to support the US boycott, together with the results of the COA vote, angered Pound and Worrall. Pound believed that the boycott was decided solely to increase Carter's re-election chances, arguing that the President had a poor foreign policy record and needed to reassure the voters that he could act decisively when US interests were threatened. Consequently, Pound did not believe that Carter was sincere in his conviction that the ultimatum for troop withdrawal would have an impact on Soviet foreign policy.<sup>338</sup> Worrall shared this analysis and accused Clark of similarly using the boycott to bolster his re-election chances.<sup>339</sup> Additionally, Worrall was concerned about the impact of the boycott on Canada's standing within the IOC, which was especially important considering that Calgary was on the brink of presenting a bid to host the 1988 Winter Olympics.<sup>340</sup> Pound and Worrall placed much of the blame for the boycott on the US and their vitriol was thus directed at Carter. Pound noted that he

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<sup>336</sup> Sandra Kereliuk, "The Canadian Boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games," MA Thesis, Department of Physical Education, University of Alberta, 1982, 88.

<sup>337</sup> Macintosh, 101.

<sup>338</sup> Pound, 96.

<sup>339</sup> Worrall, 182.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

“could understand that our government would not want to offend the United States on an issue that seemed to matter to it, even though this fell well short of a national security issue.”<sup>341</sup>

Indeed, although Clark, Trudeau and the Canadian government were censured by Pound and Worrall, Carter and the US were mainly held responsible.

Like American athletes, most Canadian Olympians opposed the boycott and desired to participate in the Moscow Games. Athletes were devastated that years of training for the Moscow Games were wasted by the boycott. Feelings of disbelief, anger, loss and alienation were common reactions among affected athletes.<sup>342</sup> A 1992 study interviewed Canadian athletes who were affected by the boycott. It found that their initial reactions to the boycott were overwhelmingly negative and that opposition increased once it was evident that the Soviets would not withdraw their troops and that few other sanctions were imposed on Moscow by Canada.<sup>343</sup> Of interest, the study found that the athletes interviewed were more hostile towards Carter than the Canadian government, blaming the US for the reason why they were barred from participating at the Olympics.<sup>344</sup> Canadian Olympic coaches were more likely to support the boycott compared to the athletes, although the majority favoured participation in the Games. The discrepancy between athletes and coaches was not unexpected because most Olympians only had one chance to compete whereas coaches had the opportunity to participate in future Olympic Games.<sup>345</sup> Compared to the US, however, Canadian athletes were more likely to accept the

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<sup>341</sup> Pound, 99.

<sup>342</sup> Jill S. Black, “*Testimonios of Shared Experience: Canadian Women Athletes and the 1980 Olympic Boycott*,” PhD Dissertation, Oregon State University, 2002, 93.

<sup>343</sup> Jane Crossman and Ron Lappage, “Canadian Athletes’ Perceptions of the 1980 Olympic Boycott,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 9 (1992), 364.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>345</sup> Jane Crossman and Ron Lappage, “Canadian Coaches’ Perceptions of the 1980 Olympic Boycott,” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 95 (2002), 69.

government's decision to boycott the Olympics. Unlike in the US, there were no lawsuits filed by athletes to challenge the legality of the decision.<sup>346</sup>

Trudeau's decision to support the US boycott may have been influenced by the close relationship he enjoyed with Carter. Trudeau visited Carter following his inauguration in 1977 and was impressed with the President's pursuit of a "moral" foreign policy. Additionally, Carter was a newcomer to Washington and demonstrated respect and deference for Trudeau, an experienced head of government.<sup>347</sup> Carter and Trudeau thought highly of one another, partly due to their mutual foreign policy outlooks regarding the importance of human rights, engagement with the developing world and the need for diplomacy. In his memoirs, Trudeau reminisced that Carter was "very cerebral, very well briefed and highly principled. He was well known for promoting human rights and – even rarer for an American President – he had a genuine interest in the Third World."<sup>348</sup> Trudeau applauded Carter for his role in the Camp David Accords and believed "his claim to greatness" was helping to construct peace between Israel and Egypt. Commenting on Trudeau, Carter stated in his memoirs that "Pierre and I have a very easy personal relationship. I like him very much."<sup>349</sup>

Beyond the personal friendship between Trudeau and Carter, relations between Canada and the US were strong in 1980. In January, the Canadian government worked with the CIA to orchestrate a plot to evacuate six American diplomats from Iran that had not been captured and taken hostage during the Revolution. The initiative was successful, and the diplomats escaped Iran with the help of fake Canadian passports. The US was thankful for Canada's role in the mission. Representative Ike Skelton stated that "we witnessed an act of friendship by the

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<sup>346</sup> Cantelon, 149.

<sup>347</sup> Head, 202.

<sup>348</sup> Trudeau, 219.

<sup>349</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, 93.



Canadian government,” a remark that was repeated in the American press.<sup>350</sup> The House of Representatives passed resolution 6374 that authorized Carter “to present, on behalf of the Congress, to Ambassador Kenneth Taylor, a gold medal of appropriate design in recognition of his valiant effort to secure the safe return of six American embassy officials in Tehran.”<sup>351</sup> Taylor served as the Canadian Ambassador to Iran and was instrumental in assisting the escape of the American diplomats. The recognition of his efforts by the House demonstrated the close ties and friendship between Canada and the US in 1980. In his memoirs, Carter noted that “Taylor and the other courageous Canadians became instant heroes. They well deserved the outpouring of gratitude from millions of Americans.”<sup>352</sup> The goodwill towards Canada gained for its role in the escape mission in addition to the close relationship between Trudeau and Carter may have influenced Ottawa’s decision to support its ally with the Olympic boycott.<sup>353</sup>

The importance for Canada to maintain strong relations with the US, its most important ally and largest trading partner, may have also contributed to Trudeau’s decision to support the boycott. If Trudeau decided to disregard the boycott it would have negatively impacted Carter’s global efforts and influenced the direction of other nations. Undoubtedly, refusing to join the boycott would have harmed Canada-US relations.<sup>354</sup> Carter determined that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was an East-West conflict that necessitated a united response among members of the Western Alliance. Canada’s geopolitical position meant that whether it chose to boycott the

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<sup>350</sup> 96<sup>th</sup> US Congress, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 96<sup>th</sup> Congress Second Session*, Vol. 126-Part 2, January 31-February 12, 1980 (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1980), 2480.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 2586.

<sup>352</sup> Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 484.

<sup>353</sup> There are letters of correspondence between Trudeau and Carter that are held at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa and the Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, GA. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic I was unable to visit either library in person and could not obtain a hard or digital copy of these documents. The letters may have provided a clearer explanation as to why Trudeau agreed to support Carter and the boycott.

<sup>354</sup> Macintosh, 101.

Olympics was not a decision as to whether it wanted to punish the Soviet Union; rather, it was a decision to support the US.<sup>355</sup>

Mark MacGuigan, “with reservations,” argued that the boycott was “a success,” noting that he believed that attending the Games would have been a worse outcome because it would have delivered the Soviets a propaganda victory; although he concluded that he was “disappointed with the result” of his first major foreign policy task under Trudeau.<sup>356</sup> Head and Trudeau also defended the decision, arguing in their memoir that the Prime Minister “refused to join the boycott until the Canadian Olympic athletes met and endorsed the continuation of the Clark policy.”<sup>357</sup> Their analysis failed to mention the important role that the Olympic Trust played in the decision made by the COA. Indeed, like the US case, it was not until financial blackmail was applied that the COA reversed its position and voted to boycott. The lack of federal and corporate funding forced Pound and the COA to begrudgingly accept the government’s decision. Trudeau’s rationale for a united front of boycotting nations representing the Western and developing world was hardly met. Very few countries in Western Europe boycotted, and support among developing nations was scattered and inconsistent. However, unlike Carter, Trudeau was never keen to support the boycott and was reluctant to continue Clark’s policy, deferring the decision to MacGuigan and other foreign policy advisors in his Cabinet.

Carter’s international boycott campaign was not as successful as the US hoped. Although several nations agreed to boycott the Olympics, few supported the President’s rationales. Indeed, nations in the developing world boycotted for a variety of reasons. The decision to send

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<sup>355</sup> Kereliuk, “The Canadian Boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games,” 1982, 87.

<sup>356</sup> MacGuigan, 39.

<sup>357</sup> Head, 210.

Muhammad Ali as a diplomat was unsuccessful at convincing African nations to join the boycott and may have damaged America's reputation. Ali's presence was viewed as offensive by some African leaders and it was widely mocked by the press in both the West and developing world. Carter was the least successful among his closest allies, of which only Canada, West Germany, Japan and Israel were able to prevent their athletes from attending the Games. Lord Killanin commented that "the Olympic world had stood up magnificently to the power of the US and its fawning political friends."<sup>358</sup>

The international boycott campaign demonstrated the problems associated with employing an Olympic boycott as a foreign policy response. The governments of nations such as the UK, Italy and Australia were in favour of supporting the US, but their respective NOCs, operating independently, refused to support the boycott. Carter might have had a better chance of achieving support for the boycott in Western Europe if he stressed the threat of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on human rights. With Sakharov's arrest for protesting the invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter was provided with an opportunity to centre the boycott on human rights issues, a policy that he was passionate about and that had surfaced as a concern in the aftermath of the Soviets being awarded the 1980 Olympics. Carter's narrow focus on the threat of the invasion to American security and strategic interests in the Middle East was not a response that was palatable to US allies or nations in the developing world. Considering the boycott necessitated global cooperation, more emphasis was needed on how the Soviet invasion negatively affected nations around the world.

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<sup>358</sup> Killanin, 216.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

According to Lord Killanin, the “boycott of the Moscow Games was the most damaging event since the Games were revived in 1896.”<sup>359</sup> Despite the efforts of the Carter administration, the 1980 Summer Olympics were completed as scheduled. The US-led boycott and the various rationales employed by nations around the world for abstaining resulted in 65 nations not sending their athletes compared to 81 that attended. The number of athletes was reduced from 10,000 to 6,000 and tourists from 300,000 to 100,000.<sup>360</sup> Lord Killanin’s tenure as IOC president ended following the Moscow Olympics and he did not seek re-election. He was succeeded by Juan Antonio Samaranch who led the IOC from 1980 to 2001. Reflecting on the boycott and his dealings with Carter, Lord Killanin remarked that “the more I look back the more it is extraordinary that a vast country like the United States could not produce a greater leader or statesman.”<sup>361</sup> Although Lord Killanin was disappointed with Carter’s efforts to boycott the Games, he believed that they “did not succeed, but at the same time nobody won.”<sup>362</sup>

In 1984, in turn, the Soviet Union led a boycott of thirteen countries of the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. The US State Department claimed that the 1984 boycott was the result of the Soviets retaliating for the US-led boycott of 1980.<sup>363</sup> However, it was also suggested that the USSR boycotted due to internal politics and concerns regarding the safety of Soviet athletes participating in Los Angeles.<sup>364</sup> Regardless of the Soviets’ motive, the boycott temporarily vindicated the position of the USOC, IOC and individuals such as Senator Ted Stevens who were

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>360</sup> Ray Morrison, “Government Documents Relating to the 1980 Olympic Games Boycott, A Contents Analysis and Bibliography,” Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois, 1982, 43.

<sup>361</sup> Killanin, 215.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>363</sup> United States Department of State Archives, *The Olympic Boycott, 1980*.

<sup>364</sup> Robert Simon Edelman, “The Russians are Not Coming! The Soviet Withdrawal from the Games of the XXIII Olympiad,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 32 (2015), 9.

concerned about the ramifications of the 1980 boycott on the long-term health of the Olympic Games. A minuscule number of nations boycotted the 1988 Summer Games in Seoul. However, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in 1991 helped to depoliticize the Olympics. The 1992 Barcelona Games was the first time since the 1972 Munich Olympics that no nation boycotted the Summer festival. The superpower rivalry that dominated Olympic competition since the 1950s was replaced by US medal hegemony beginning at the 1996 Atlanta Games. The Olympics were no longer a Cold War realm in which two ideological and geopolitical rivals competed for prestige and influence on the world stage.

Carter's decision to boycott the Olympics failed on several fronts. The one-month ultimatum for troop withdrawal was unsuccessful at changing the direction of Soviet foreign policy. The ultimatum was criticized in the US Senate, by the USOC, IOC, the Olympic athletes and by the governments and NOCs of several other nations, including Canada. The boycott, though it may have denied the Soviets the opportunity to achieve a propaganda victory, left the USSR with a large platform to promote the alleged benefits of its way of life to a global audience. The hope that Soviet citizens would notice American absence from the Games and challenge their government never occurred. The Soviet press easily constructed narratives to explain American absence, proceeding to host the Games as if the nonattendance of the US and other nations did not affect the importance of the Olympics. The Olympic boycott was necessarily a temporal sanction and did little to punish the Soviets beyond damaging their prestige. The logic of boycotting as part of a deterrent for future Soviet aggression was flawed. Indeed, the invasion of Afghanistan prompted differing views harboured by both sides, resulting in misunderstanding by both the US and the USSR. Carter viewed the invasion as a major divergence from Soviet foreign policy during the Cold War and was convinced that Brezhnev

had ambitions to further expand Soviet influence in the Middle East. Contrarily, Brezhnev believed that Afghanistan was within the Soviet sphere of influence and thus the USSR was justified in intervening to protect its domestic interests; he did not intervene as part of a plan to expand Soviet territory and was surprised that Carter reacted so strongly.

One of Carter's rationales for the boycott was that it was part of a greater plan to promote American long-term interests in the Middle East. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent Olympic boycott influenced American foreign policy beyond 1980. Following the Moscow Games, Carter remained steadfast in his efforts to improve America's strategic position in the Middle East. The President was committed to further advancing the Carter Doctrine, explaining in Presidential Directive NSC 63 on January 15, 1981, that the US would continue to increase its military presence in the Middle East to protect American access to oil.<sup>365</sup> The Carter Doctrine influenced the direction of US foreign policy towards the Middle East for the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Indeed, a frequent rationale for, and critique of the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the enduring US-Saudi Arabian alliance, highlighted the importance of American access to Middle Eastern oil. Although the Olympic boycott was a short-term policy option, the Carter Doctrine was crucial for the establishment of American long-term energy policy in the Middle East.

The end of *détente* and the combative approach Carter adopted in response to the Soviet invasion was a harbinger for the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. Reagan defeated Carter in the 1980 election, vowing to continue an antagonistic approach against the Soviet Union. Understanding the boycott as part of the end of *détente* is crucial to evaluating Reagan's foreign policy decisions and the more aggressive and combative approach he adopted towards the

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<sup>365</sup> Presidential Directives, Carter Administration, "Presidential Directive/NSC-63," January 15, 1981.

Soviets in his first term.<sup>366</sup> The roots of this policy change were not his doings alone; a return to the pre-1970s contentious and hostile Cold War rhetoric began with Carter's decision to boycott the Olympics. The Soviets remained in Afghanistan until 1989, which hindered progress regarding arms limitations. Although SALT II was never ratified by the US Senate, the two superpowers abided by its tenants until the treaty expired at the end of 1985.

In his memoirs, Carter stated that one of his "most difficult decisions was supporting the boycott of the Summer Olympics."<sup>367</sup> In hindsight, Carter believed that boycotting the Olympics was the correct decision. Speaking to members of the US Olympic team on July 30, 1980, the President commended the USOC on its decision, arguing that the boycott was "a vital and indispensable reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It was the only correct course of action for our nation."<sup>368</sup> At a September 15 press conference, Carter argued that the boycott had "a great effect on the Soviet Union" and claimed that the US achieved a major propaganda victory over the USSR.<sup>369</sup>

Carter acknowledged that he "knew the decision was controversial," but had "no idea at the time how difficult it would be to implement it or to convince other nations to join us."<sup>370</sup> He noted that it was "a difficult task" to convince the USOC to support the government's agenda, acknowledging that the Committee "deeply resented any government involvement in their decisions."<sup>371</sup> But, in his memoirs, the President did not discuss the coercion used to force the USOC into submission, suggesting that the Committee was swayed by his understanding of the

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<sup>366</sup> For Ronald Reagan's approach to the Soviets on Olympic matters during his first term in office, see Brad Congelio, "Before the World was Quiet: Ronald Reagan, Cold War Politics and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Summer Games," PhD Thesis, Graduate Program in Kinesiology, Western University, 2014.

<sup>367</sup> Carter, *White House Diary*, 395.

<sup>368</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1980-81, Book II* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1981), 1441.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 1727.

<sup>370</sup> Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 482.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

point that “it would be a violation of Olympic principles of good sportsmanship and fair play to be guests of the Soviet Union under existing circumstances.”<sup>372</sup> Carter’s reflections on the boycott revealed that he did not appreciate the autonomy of the USOC or the challenge of recruiting other nations and their NOCs. Despite knowing that the decision to boycott would be challenging and controversial, there was little evidence that he worked to address or overcome the obstacles that confronted him.

Although Carter defended the boycott decision, his memoirs revealed that he did not consider the boycott to be a major foreign policy success. Why did the boycott fail and what could have been done differently to increase its chances at succeeding? Carter might have put more emphasis on postponing or relocating the games as opposed to boycotting. The one-month ultimatum for troop withdrawal handicapped this effort because it committed the US to boycott and Carter could not renege on his decision because it would reflect badly on the nation. Carter’s efforts might have been framed differently. For example, the President attempted to justify his decision by appealing to several different rationales which encompassed both short- and long-term goals. Focused messaging might have yielded less confusion and more unity regarding the purpose of the boycott, providing clarity to all necessary actors and pre-empt negative reactions and criticisms, such as the widespread belief that the boycott was motivated by domestic concerns relating to Carter’s re-election campaign.

Carter did not appreciate that the boycott could not be levied unilaterally like traditional foreign policy responses. It required the support of the USOC, IOC, the nations of the world and their respective NOCs to be successful. Carter seemed disinterested in working with these groups; he expected that they would share his assessment of the Soviets’ motives and the

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 526.



severity of the invasion and would thus support the boycott. He did not consult with these essential groups before announcing the decision, an act that caused confusion and resentment. Opinion polls conducted before the boycott was announced revealed that it would be accepted within the US. Thus, Carter did not need to convince the US public or Congress to support his decision.

Carter might have based the reasoning of the decision on what would have been palatable for the necessary actors that he needed to convince. For example, human rights abuses in the Soviet Union were a major issue for Carter's European allies. Arguably, focusing on human rights might have been more appealing compared to promoting an aggressive change from détente through the ultimatum. Indeed, Western Europe was content with détente and did not want to risk escalating tensions to support American interests in the Middle East. Thus, the boycott might have been branded as a response to the violation of human rights in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union as opposed to a threat to US interests and security. Human rights had a wider appeal globally and it might have been easier to gain worldwide support as opposed to a narrow focus on the self-interest of the US. Human rights also played to Carter's strengths and were consistent with his foreign policy outlook throughout his term. Recruiting other nations in January while the boycott was being deliberated might have helped to counter the IOC's stance that other NOCs opposed the boycott. Creating more pressure from NOCs beyond the USOC might have established a greater demand on Lord Killanin to seriously consider Carter's proposal.

Although the Carter administration was primarily responsible for the Olympic boycott, the USOC and IOC were also guilty of several missteps. Considering the history of Olympic boycotts throughout the twentieth century, the superpower rivalry at the Games that had begun in

the 1950s and the rumblings of a boycott before the invasion of Afghanistan, the IOC and USOC might have been better prepared to address Carter's decision. Beyond voicing their displeasure, appealing to the tenants of the *Olympic Charter* and demonstrating that it was unpopular with the athletes, there was very little that Robert Kane and Lord Killanin did to push back against the boycott. Kane agreed with Carter that the invasion of Afghanistan was a matter of national security for the US and admitted that the USOC would be receptive to directives from the government and Congress. The USOC and IOC might have done more to anticipate and prepare for a boycott to repudiate Carter and maintain their autonomy. Additionally, Kane was unable to address criticism levied by Congress that the Soviets continuously used professional athletes masquerading as amateurs at the Games without punishment. It reflected badly on the IOC and bred mistrust and skepticism towards the values of the Olympic movement in the US. Indeed, if the Soviets were allowed to cheat by ignoring the rules of amateurism, why should the US participate in an event that would enhance Moscow's reputation as a powerful Olympic nation? The IOC expected the US to value the *Olympic Charter* and not inject politics into the Games, but it did little to ensure that the Soviets abided by the values of amateurism.

Even if Carter had approached the boycott differently its success was compromised. The boycott was a foreign policy decision that involved the cooperation of several non-state actors that were overtly hostile to the politicization of their movement. Carter might well have justified the boycott differently, consulted the necessary actors before the boycott was announced and shown respect and understanding for the position and autonomy of the Olympic movement. Although the President may have considered making the boycott more appealing to his allies and other nations of the world, it remained difficult to persuade the USOC, IOC and NOCs. The

campaign to boycott the 1980 Moscow Games provided important lessons for current and future leaders regarding the use of the Olympics to achieve a foreign policy or political goal.

The Olympics of the twenty-first century have been well attended. The number of nations participating in the Games increased since 1980; nearly all UN member states are now represented at the Summer Olympics. Additionally, there have been no boycotts of either the Summer or Winter Games since 1988. Although the current era of Olympic competition is larger and more stable than in 1980, it does not mean that boycotts cannot be employed in the future. Beijing, China is scheduled to host the 2022 Winter Olympics and calls for a boycott are growing. Concerns surrounding China's human rights abuses in Tibet, of its Uyghur Muslim population in Xinjiang, and its anti-democratic crackdown in Hong Kong have received worldwide attention and condemnation. Arguments familiar to the 1980 case have been employed, such as the idea that the 2022 Games would be a propaganda opportunity for China to cultivate goodwill among the nations of the world.<sup>373</sup> Threats of a boycott emerged in 2008 when China hosted the Summer Games, but they never materialized. The Winter Games, however, are attended by a smaller number of nations, many of which are developed democracies that oppose China's authoritarian regime. Global distrust of China is also higher than it was in 2008, as Beijing's human rights abuses have become a salient issue.<sup>374</sup>

The case of the 1980 Moscow Olympics revealed that employing a boycott as a tool of foreign policy embraced serious shortcomings and challenges. Even if several Western nations agreed to boycott China, such a policy would need to be endorsed by the NOCs and the Olympic athletes to have a chance of success. It is unlikely that the IOC could be persuaded to postpone,

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<sup>373</sup> Lily Kuo, "Winter Olympics: Threat of boycotts clouds China's 'joyful rendezvous' in the snow," *The Guardian*, October 19, 2020.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

relocate or cancel the Games over calls for a boycott similar to 1980. Consequently, it is doubtful that a boycott of Beijing would be universal; several nations would still attend the Games and it is unlikely that China would alter its policies towards Tibet, the Uygurs or Hong Kong as a result. Traditional sanctions might have a greater chance of tangible success compared to a symbolic victory that may be achieved through a boycott of the Olympic Games.

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