Tibet and the Olympic Games

by Lionel_Van_Deerlin

The Olympic Games, we should be pleased to realize, take place no more often than every four years. Too frequently, they are hosted by nations we might otherwise shun for some real or perceived threat to humankind.

Five months from now, the cream of world athletes will be gathering in Beijing for the 26th Olympics since resumption of the modern Games in 1896. And once again many are questioning the propriety of recent conduct by their prospective host. It would have been difficult to anticipate the problem, since Olympic sites are selected eight years in advance. Who'd have guessed that the inscrutable Chinese would now be in open conflict with a people whose commitment to peace seems unique in all the world - the autonomous region of Tibet?

Despite similar past crises, the opinion of most participants has been that the Olympics are, and ought to be, a celebration of sports alone. It seems grossly unfair that the many months countless athletes have devoted to training for worldwide competition should go for naught because of unanticipated political confrontations that often engulf a host nation.

I believe this judgment no less valid today than in the past. But there must be ways other than an outright boycott by which the United States and other participants could make clear their disapproval of China's violence against Tibet.

One step that comes quickly to mind would be for President George W. Bush to stay home. Our Olympic team would suffer no diminution of speed and strength if this nation's top leader were to decline the well-guarded grandstand seat reserved for him within smiling distance of China's new warlords.

Simple research of earlier Olympics would tell Bush that no tradition requires his presence at the Games. We need not suffer the embarrassment of his presence at an "opening ceremony" in which the world's most populous nation surely intends to herald its rising importance. Indeed, President Herbert Hoover attended no part of the 1932 Games in Los Angeles, even though they were on U.S. soil the first time ever.

It is much too late, of course, to consider a change of venue for the 2008 Games. The Olympic Charter allows for changing sites only in the event of worldwide war. The lone exception occurred in 1908, when devastation from the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius two years earlier caused the Games to be switched from Rome to London. (Rome waited 40 years for a second chance.)

Only twice have these historic events been boycotted by a major participant for diplomatic reasons. President

Carter withdrew America's participation at Moscow in 1980, on grounds that the Soviet Union was waging an unwarranted aggression against Afghanistan. The Soviets returned the compliment, refusing to let its athletes come to Los Angeles in 1984. These mutual snubs served no higher purpose than to embitter the final phase of Cold War years.

The International Olympic Committee, a self-perpetuating body much like the Apostolic Succession, has long distinguished itself for failure to deal with the unexpected. Last week, this world body launched its longest ever torch-toting relay as if all were right with the world. The unpleasantness that the IOC must know awaits its torch bearers at several points along the way causes it no concern.

These people have a long-established record for ineptitude. Following the 1912 Games, they took back all the medals won by an American Indian, Jim Thorpe, after learning he had once accepted paltry expense money for playing sandlot baseball. Seventy years passed before Thorpe's medals were restored to his heirs. The 1924 Paris Games proceeded without the most celebrated distance runner of his century. Paavo Nurmi, the Flying Finn, also ran afoul of expense inducements that today's "amateur" athletes would reject as insultingly meager.

Officiating often has been a fright. In 1932 at Los Angeles, a small army of the blue-jacketed brigade was insufficient to keep the 3,000-meter steeplechase from going an extra lap. And when a Frenchman heaved the discus far enough for a gold medal, it didn't count because officials who should have marked and measured his throw were instead watching the pole vault.

Without question, though, the Olympics' darkest hour remains 1936, when 80,000 Berliners, arms extended in the Nazi salute, greeted Adolf Hitler's arrival each day - while the Fuehrer's concentration camps already were accepting their initial occupants.

Few could have realized it at the time. But in retrospect, if ever one of these quadrennial events should have been boycotted, that was the year.

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