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Sochi 2014: The Conundrum of Politics & Sports

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 16, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

This week, gay rights activists have been making the rounds of the cable news shows, urging that the Winter Olympics scheduled for Sochi, Russia next year be changed to a different venue or that the West launch a boycott of the Games. The activists are upset about anti-gay laws recently enacted by President Vladimir Putin and his rubber stamp Duma.

Changing venues at this late stage is never going to happen. And, a boycott would be ineffectual: The U.S. is not the powerhouse in winter sports that it is in the summer Games, and countries like Norway, which are powerhouses, are unlikely to anger their powerful neighbor. But, these two remedies miss the larger point: Russia never should have been awarded the Olympic Games in the first place.

The Olympics have long been intertwined with politics: If you have people involved, you are going to have politics involved. The first major instance of the Games being put to ugly political purposes were the 1936 Olympics: The Winters Games were held in Garmisch-Partinkirchen and the Summer Games in Berlin. Hitler used the event as a backdrop for displaying his ?new Germany,? complete with trains running on time, foreigners treated nicely, and monstrously brutish architecture. Hitler also introduced the Olympic torch relay, which gave his propagandists more great film clips, evoking the pagan traditions that so moved Herr Hitler?s heart.

President Obama probably had the 1936 Games in mind - and specifically the stellar performance of Jesse Owens, a black American who won a fistful of Gold Medals and thus gave pause to Hitler?s theories about the Master Race ? when he voiced the hope that gay athletes would compete and win at Sochi. Setting aside the fact that there are probably not a lot of gay bobsledders, Americans, who like a good story, overstate the impact of Owens on the 1936 Games. Hitler achieved his ambition as foreigners went home extolling the virtues of Nazi Germany and Owens? performances got greater play in the U.S. press than in the German press.

In 1968, politics again found its way into the Olympics when Tommie Smith and John Carlos bowed their heads and raised their clenched fists in the Black Power salute while standing on the podium to receive their medals and listen to the National Anthem. This moment has become an American cultural icon, even making its way into popular movies like ?Remember the Titans.? But, the real political event at the 1968 Mexico City Games came ten days before they opened, when student protesters were gunned down by the government in the massacre at Tlateloco. The Games went on as the Mexican government controlled the propaganda levers, diminishing the extent of the violence ? dozens were killed ? and blaming the event on the students.

In 1972, the International Olympic Committee displayed just how morally obtuse it could be. The Munich Games were shattered by the murder of 11 Israeli athletes. At a memorial service in the Olympic Stadium the next day, Avery Brundage, President of the IOC, compared the murders to the refusal to allow a team from Rhodesia to participate after several African countries threatened a boycott. Brundage may have been an egomaniac, to be sure, but the IOC has long viewed itself as somehow above the normal moral calculations of

the rest of the human race.

In 1980, the U.S. boycotted the Moscow Olympics to protest the Soviet Union?s invasion of Afghanistan and, in 1984, the Russians returned the favor, boycotting the Los Angeles Games. In the 1990s, the ghost of Sarajevo haunted the Olympic movement. The city had held the 1984 Winter Games but then became the target of a siege in the 90?s when Serb fascists surrounded the city. One of the happiest moments in my own life came when I helped find jobs for the Bosnian bobsled team that left Sarajevo to participate in the 1994 Lillehammer Olympics and, understandably, did not return home but came to Washington in search of a better life. In 2002, no one boycotted the Salt Lake City Olympics even though the U.S. had just invaded Afghanistan. Then, of course, there was the 2008 Beijing Games, which were a propaganda coup for the butchers of Tiananmen Square, complete with one of the creepiest opening ceremonies in history.

So, in short, trying to keep politics out of the Olympics is a fool?s errand. This does not excuse the somewhat bizarre outrage displayed by activists like Richard Socarides this week. Socarides is a long-time gay activist who served in a variety of high-level posts in Democratic campaigns and in the Clinton administration. He pronounced himself appalled that the world would not join him in his calls to move the Games or boycott them in the face of Russia?s legislative assault on the human dignity of gays and lesbians. To be clear, how a society treats its gay and lesbians citizens is rightly considered a marker of its civility, but it is not the only measure. I do not recall Socarides calling for the Games to be moved when Putin was imprisoning members of the press corps he did not like, or arresting opposition leaders. When Sochi was bidding for the Games, I do not recall seeing this man of moral outrage saying that a country that had brutally invaded Chechnya twice should not be rewarded with an Olympic bid. And, here is the strange part: This past week, during the half dozen media appearances I watched, I did not hear Socarides point out that Russia has become a serial human rights abuser on any issue except the recent anti-gay laws. I understand the natural human sympathy that leads us to worry most about threats to our own, but anyone who pretends to the job of moral scold needs a wider perspective.

In the event, there is a solution to this politicization of the Olympics, or at least a partial solution. For the foreseeable future, the Summer Games should be held always in Athens. Greece could use the revenue, and it is ridiculous that city after city build sports facilities that will be woefully underused once the Games conclude. Atlanta turned its Olympic Stadium into a ballpark. Much of the London stadium was temporary and the smaller, permanent structure will serve as a soccer stadium. But, what do you do with a velodrome? And how many swim meets need seating for 14,000? Returning the Olympics to Greece on a permanent basis makes sense for everybody. As for the Winter Games, give them to Innsbruck. After Denver?s bid for the 1976 Winter Games was chosen by the IOC, it was rejected by Colorado voters. Needing an alternate location on the fly, the city of Innsbruck, which had held the Games in 1964, stepped up, dusted off its facilities, and hosted the 1976 Games. If global warming continues to melt the glaciers in the Alps, perhaps Lillehammer or Oslo could take the Winter Games on a permanent basis.

As long as people play sports, politics will be a consideration in sporting events. I love watching the Olympics on TV as much as the next person, and the ten days I spent at the 1976 Montreal Games with my dad were great, as were the four days with friends at the 1980 Lake Placid Games. But, our moral antennae do not turn off when we click on the television. It is horrifying to think that Mr. Putin will enjoy basking in the refracted glory of the athletic accomplishments of those who ski down the hills or circle the ice track or shoot the hockey pucks in Sochi, but enjoy it he will. The many victims of his authoritarian regime will be mocked and they deserve better. The IOC needs to find a way to stop helping tyrants and start helping the country that gave birth to the Olympics.

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