Protest at the Pyramid: The 1968 Mexico City Olympics and the Politicization of the Olympic Games

Kevin B. Witherspoon
The members of the Committee approve the dissertation of Kevin B. Witherspoon defended on Oct. 6, 2003.

_________________________
James P. Jones
Professor Directing Dissertation

_________________________
Patrick O’Sullivan
Outside Committee Member

_________________________
Joe M. Richardson
Committee Member

_________________________
Valerie J. Conner
Committee Member

_________________________
Robinson Herrera
Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
This project could not have been completed without the help of many individuals. Thanks, first, to Jim Jones, who oversaw this project, and whose interest and enthusiasm kept me to task. Also to the other members of the dissertation committee, V.J. Conner, Robinson Herrera, Patrick O’Sullivan, and Joe Richardson, for their time and patience, constructive criticism and suggestions for revision. Thanks as well to Bill Baker, a mentor and friend at the University of Maine, whose example as a sports historian I can only hope to imitate.

Thanks to those who offered interviews, without which this project would have been a miserable failure: Juan Martinez, Manuel Billa, Pedro Aguilar Cabrera, Carlos Hernandez Schafler, Florenzio and Magda Acosta, Anatoly Isaenko, Ray Hegstrom, and Dr. Eduardo Hay. Thanks also to Architect Pedro Ramirez Vazquez, who kindly offered access to a sampling of his private papers.

Thanks to those who made the trip to Mexico City possible, especially Ana Mary Ugalde, whose guidance and knowledge was indispensable. Thanks as well to Ellis Leagans, Carroll and Mitzi Golden, and Lorna Daniell.

Thanks to the staffs of the various libraries and archives I mined in researching this project: the staff at the National Archives and Records Administration; at the Mexican Olympic Committee, especially Samantha Rangel B., secretary; and the microfilm staff at Strozier Library, Florida State University. Thanks also to F.S.U. for a University Fellowship, and to the F.S.U. History Department for a Dissertation Grant, in support of this project.

Thanks to the “breakfast club,” whose assistance in translation of various documents was invaluable: Monica, Paul, Tam, Sara, and Vinnie.

Thanks to all my family and friends, whose support never wavered, and whose nagging questions about the dissertation served as motivation to finish it!

And there are not words enough to thank my wife, Jacky, who had the foresight to cancel our cable subscription while I completed the manuscript. When others doubted, she believed. I am forever in her debt.
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the importance of the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. It explores briefly the history of the Olympic movement in Mexico, and the origins of the Mexican bid to host the Olympics. In winning the bid, the Mexican Olympic Committee not only staged a thorough and well-prepared presentation, but also shrewdly negotiated the waters between the Cold War superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Even before the Opening Ceremonies, these Olympics were fraught with controversy, including the altitude issue, the debate over amateurism, and the question of whether to admit South Africa, which proved so divisive it inspired an international boycott movement. Each of these controversies detracted from the purely athletic interest in the Games, lending them a political feel from the beginning. These controversies were soon superceded by the “Revolt of the Black Athlete” in the United States, as black athletes threatened to boycott the Games, and a burgeoning student movement in Mexico. The latter ended in a brutal massacre initiated by Mexican police and authorities. The movement among black athletes peaked as Tommie Smith and John Carlos delivered the black power salute while on the medal stand, again drawing attention away from the athletic contests. The dissertation concludes with an analysis of the broader significance of the Olympics, from its economic impact to the meanings of the social movements attached to it. By the end of the fortnight, several hundred Mexican students lay dead, racial discord in the United States was again a topic of international discussion, and all aspirations hoping to separate sport and politics lay in ruins.
Jean-Claude Killy stood in the starting box at the top of the slalom run, eyeing the crusty and rutted course through a lightly falling veil of snow. “Le Supreman,” the 24-year-old, three-time defending world champion and heavy favorite to win three gold medals, had drawn the fourteenth starting position. The course was well worn, and if he intended to win he would have to run the fastest time under the worst conditions. He pushed out of the box and launched his run. He skied in signature Killy style, on the ragged edge of disaster, sliding across the hardened snow at every turn, seemingly out of control, but always able to pull himself through the turns. Snow clicking off his goggles, he could barely see the next flag. Ruts in the snow grabbed at his skis, threatening to pull him sideways. He fought through the conditions to cross the finish line in 1:59:85, winning by eight-one hundredths of a second.1

A French champion in a French Olympics, Killy became the signature athlete of the 1968 Winter Olympics, held that February in Grenoble. He was bold, and cocky, and a fantastic skier, worshiped as a hero by his countrymen. His performance in Grenoble was one of the greatest in Olympic history, as he swept three gold medals in the alpine skiing events, a feat yet to be duplicated. But Killy was not immune from criticism, and he celebrated his victories in a storm of controversy. The poor conditions had made the run difficult for even the greatest skiers in the world, and several had made costly errors during their runs. Karl Schranz of Austria suffered the most famous failure, as a “mysterious man in black” ran across his path.2 Schranz missed two gates but still finished, and with a faster time than Killy. After reviewing the tape dozens of times, officials ruled that Schranz missed the gates before the man crossed his path, and thus his run was disqualified. Haaken Mjoen of Austria also beat Killy’s time, only to be disqualified for missing a gate. Cries of home-town favoritism sounded from various countries, but Killy’s gold medal stood.3

Even more threatening to his reputation was the controversy over commercialism that swirled around Killy and the other alpine skiers. Skiers, as most amateur athletes, found it virtually impossible to survive under a system that forbade them to accept payment, at the same time dedicating themselves to their sport as if it were a full-time job. Many skiers took to accepting payment from ski companies to use their equipment, and especially to display their brands during competitions and interviews. Olympic officials, led by the president of the International Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, chose the Grenoble Games as the time to crack down on such breaches of the amateur code. Brundage demanded that all company trademarks be removed from skiers’

3 www.kiat.net/olympics/history/winter/wlogrenoble.html
equipment. After the athletes balked, Brundage relented, merely demanding that the athletes not hold their skis for cameras to see during interviews. Killy, the most visible of all the athletes, “inadvertently” kept his skis within view during one of his interviews, again sparking protest.\textsuperscript{4} Lesser athletes had been expelled from Olympics, even had their amateur status removed, for ignoring Brundage’s demands. But Killy escaped with only a warning, becoming the central figure in a fortnight of controversy.\textsuperscript{5}

The Winter Olympics in many ways were a portent of things to come. The French might have expected problems after the Olympic torch was inadvertently extinguished on the way to Grenoble.\textsuperscript{6} There was the fracas over Killy, and the uproar over amateurism and payments to athletes. The affair only grew more heated when a team of Soviet “professionals” dominated the hockey tournament, beating the best teams in the world by scores of 10-0, 9-0, and a 10-2 victory over the United States. Such lopsided games inspired calls to revise the rules of amateurism, somehow leveling the Olympic playing field. There was much debate over the expense poured into the Games by the French, transforming the industrial town of Grenoble into a state-of-the-art winter wonderland. Many of the sports installations used at those Olympics still draw the top athletes in the world to winter sports tournaments each year.\textsuperscript{7} For the first time, Olympic athletes underwent drug and gender testing, and the inevitable scandals followed. Erika Schinegger, the 19-year-old former World Champion in the downhill, withdrew from the Olympics because she could not prove she was a woman. By October, she had undergone four operations to officially render herself a man.\textsuperscript{8} Racial issues surfaced in Grenoble as well. It was during the Winter Olympics that the International Olympic Committee met to discuss whether to ban South Africa over the policy of apartheid, a decision that would erupt into chaos by mid-summer. While the Olympics carried on in Grenoble, black athletes in the United States boycotted the annual track meet at the New York Athletic Club, one of a series of protests that ultimately threatened their participation at the summer Olympics in Mexico City.

It should have come as no surprise that there were problems in Grenoble. Though it was only February, 1968 was already shaping up as one of the most tumultuous years the world could remember. Nothing, it seemed, was certain in the United States anymore. The racial unrest of recent years was only growing worse, as the Civil Rights Movement outgrew its nonviolent origins in favor of urban protests that increasingly ended in violence. The political maneuvering associated with presidential elections was especially heated in 1968, as the looming November election revealed no clear front-runner to unseat the battered Lyndon Johnson. And most glaring of all, the Vietnam War deepened and the death toll mounted, and anti-war protests grew more heated. Even before the Grenoble Olympics, the Tet Offensive sparked massive protests; heavyweight boxing champion Muhammed Ali was stripped of his title after refusing induction into the military; Bobby Kennedy launched a verbal attack against LBJ for his wartime policies; three black students were killed and over fifty wounded during a demonstration in Orangeburg, South Carolina; and controversy raged over the selection of Chicago, a

\textsuperscript{5} Washingtonpost.com:1968,Grenoble,France.
racially divided city, as the site of the upcoming Democratic National Convention. The year sizzled with an energy not explainable by simply cataloging events. The voice of the nation’s youth was louder than ever, heightened by an obsession with psychedelic drugs, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, sex, rebellion and fear at the prospect of being drafted. The “Greatest Generation,” whose wholesome values and determination had guided the United States through World War II, shuddered as their children approached adulthood and rebelled against all their parents held dear. It was a nation rent apart on many levels: young and old, black and white, pro-war and anti-war, conservative and liberal.

It was not only the United States that endured an explosive year -- the phenomenon gripped the entire globe. Unrest surged through Czechoslovakia, Cuba, Japan, West Germany, France, Poland, Brazil, Yugoslavia, Ireland, Pakistan, China, Italy, and Mexico, and few nations wholly escaped the chaos. The Olympics were part of a series of global disturbances, and the Winter Games at Grenoble were merely a prologue for the main event coming in October, the Summer Olympics in Mexico City. They would be a trouble-filled Games in the midst of a trouble-filled year. Those in Olympic circles, at least, hoped that nations awash in geo-political tension might meet in the arenas of sport to air their differences without violence.

Organizers in Mexico, who had spent years meticulously preparing for the Olympics, observed the global tumult with concern. The Olympics, they hoped, would represent the final victory of the Mexican Revolution, signaling Mexico’s entry into the ranks of the world’s advanced nations. Failure, though, could ruin Mexico’s reputation and confirm the doubts of skeptics, who argued that Mexicans were too lazy, disinterested, and disorganized to organize such a monumental event. In truth, no one knew whether Mexico was capable of staging an Olympics. Even those within Mexico were perplexed by its paradoxes. On the one hand, Mexico presented itself to the world as a “miracle,” a third-world nation with first-world stability and economic growth. A paragon of stability when compared with most other Latin-American nations, Mexico passed the torch of leadership from one president to the next peacefully for the better part of the 20th century. And yet, the vast majority of Mexicans simmered in discontent. Only a thin sliver of the population reaped the benefits of the economic miracle, as the rest saw their condition decline even from meager beginnings. And the stability of the political succession came at the price of democracy. While the six-year “elections” gave the appearance of democracy, in fact they scarcely obscured a ruling party accepting only the barest contributions from the masses. As the century approached its final quarter, the dissatisfactions of the Mexican people, both in material terms and in frustration at lack of participation in the government, threatened to boil over.

Only adding to the paradox was the decision of the government to endorse a bid to host the Summer Olympics. According to historian Roger D. Hansen, even as it confronted malaise and student rioting, “paradoxically, the Mexican government had enthusiastically agreed to host the Olympic Games.”

Faced with a populace growing ever more dissatisfied, it decided to undertake an expensive process of construction and beautification, absorbing great financial costs while most Mexicans clamored for assistance. It was a strange decision, and one that historians have still not reconciled.

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11 Carlos Hernandez Schafler, interview with the author, 14 Nov. 2001, Mexico City.
clearly. The Mexican presidents who oversaw the project, Adolfo Lopez Mateos and Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, were both obsessed with their own reputations and that of their nation, and they were convinced that staging the greatest Olympics to date would solidify both. At the same time, both were focused so much on their legacies that they turned a deaf ear to the complaints of their citizens, and by the summer of 1968 many of those citizens simply refused to be ignored. Hopes for a peaceful Olympics were shaken by a swelling student movement, strengthened as the year wore on by similar movements around the world.

The students in Mexico were well aware of developments in France, Cuba, the United States and elsewhere. It was a time for rebellion and a time for change, and the Mexican students did not want to be left behind. The Mexican student movement began over a simple street fight and police brutality in suppressing it, but it quickly evolved into a challenge to authoritarian government and lack of democracy. Students called for the release of political prisoners, expansion of the democratic process, and academic reform. These were heady demands for college, and even high school, students to make, but they were in line with the demands of other students around the world. Their methods, too, borrowed from other student movements, as they engaged in ever-growing peaceful marches, handed out fliers and held constant meetings, and fought back against the authorities with rocks, sticks, and Molotov cocktails, “touched by the same fever that…gripped students everywhere.”

By October and the brink of the Opening Ceremonies, no one knew for certain whether the student movement would interfere with the Olympics.

Like the students in Mexico, black athletes in the United States came to embrace causes much larger than they initially planned. They started their movement to protest an athletic system that was particularly difficult for black athletes, but they quickly embraced the broader methods and aims of the Black Power movement. The movement of black athletes was about much more than black coaches and the restoration of Muhammad Ali’s title; it was about equality, democracy, and independence for all black Americans. The athletes represented a small portion of the Civil Rights movement as a whole, a continuation of the efforts of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and all those who had come before. By 1968, as the movement turned away from nonviolence and pacifism, so too did the black athletes.

Other global events influenced the Games as well. The Cold War could not be ignored in Mexico City. The United States and the Soviet Union kept a watchful eye on one another, and both sides went to incredible lengths to try to prevail athletically, culturally, and diplomatically. If a military clash meant Mutually Assured Destruction, then one of the few arenas in which the two sides could battle for supremacy was in sport. Both sides took such competition seriously, and both pointed to Mexico City as an opportunity to demonstrate their superiority. The Americans traditionally fared well in team sports, track and field, and swimming, while the Soviets dominated individual sports such as wrestling, weight lifting, and gymnastics. The atmosphere surrounding these competitions only grew more tense as the real-world Cold War battles in Vietnam, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia heated up. With national pride on the line, the potential for conflict at the Olympics was very real. Mexican organizers, wary of such

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conflict, housed the Russians in a different building from representatives of the satellite nations, and assigned them to different dining halls.

So these Olympics were not simply a contest among athletes. As historian Richard Espy has noted, “The Olympic Games system is both actor and stage…a stage upon which world political forces are displayed in competition.”\(^{14}\) The Olympics were a forum for protest among students demanding change in Mexico. They were the scene of demonstrations of black athletes demanding respect and change in the United States. They were an opportunity for the superpowers to challenge one another without the destruction of the world at stake. They united politics, and culture, and diplomacy, and athletics as no Olympics before or since.

And yet, with so much at stake, the Mexicans staged a grand athletic festival. In the hyperbolic words of one Olympic chronicler, “They pulled off a coup of enormous magnitude and produced so magnificent a show that even their severest critics were forced to admit the stunning success of their unexpectedly superb fiesta.”\(^{15}\) In the thin air, records fell as at no other Olympics, and several records set in Mexico City survived for decades. While there were epic clashes between athletic teams, none of them carried over into clashes off the field, as competitors from all parts of the globe seemed genuinely interested in meeting peacefully with their opponents.\(^{16}\) For all its controversy and all its protest, the Mexico City Olympics largely succeeded in its mission of bringing the world together in peace. Still, the controversy lingered. After all the athletes and all the media had departed, Mexico City had to reconcile what it had done. The Olympics forced Mexicans to take a more international perspective than ever before, welcoming representatives from around the world.\(^{17}\) At the same time, it forced many Mexicans to look more honestly at Mexico itself. The Olympics had inspired a terrible slaughter of hundreds of peaceful students by the military and the police, and the populace would never forget it. They had inspired massive and expensive building projects that succeeded in impressing visitors from around the world, but also taxed the national budget while bringing no real benefit to the masses. The government, too, would have to answer for such decisions. While they may not have known it at the time, as the last of the athletes left for home, a chapter of Mexican history closed. The “miracle” was over, and with it a period in which the ruling party dominated governance virtually unquestioned. A new chapter had begun, one in which the Mexican economy was forced to pay for the decisions of the past, and one in which the Mexican people demanded a voice in government. The process is not complete, but the events of October, 1968 stand as monument and inspiration to the voices of change still at work in Mexico today.

The political, social, and diplomatic tensions surrounding the 1968 Olympics elevated it far above a simple sporting contest. The following dissertation addresses the many controversies that swirled around these Games, and their international importance. In Chapter I, I raise the question, “Why did Mexico host the Olympics and how did it come about?” Significant change had to occur along three broad fronts in order for


\(^{17}\) Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 3 Nov. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2337A, folder POL 2 Mex 11/1/68.
Mexico to consider staging such a massive event: development of the Mexican sporting infrastructure; achievement of political and economic growth and stability in Mexico; and expansion of the Olympic vision to include nations outside of the traditional European/American sphere. Such changes, far from anyone’s imagination when Mexico began its initial forays into international sporting contests in the 1920s, had been achieved by the early 1960s, when Mexico made its bid to host the 1968 Olympics.

Even after such changes made a Mexican bid for the Olympics possible, the Mexican victory was still unlikely. The competition to host the 1968 Olympics, waged at the German resort town of Baden-Baden in 1963, is the subject of Chapter II. The Mexicans faced stiff competition from the French city of Lyon, and especially the American nominee, Detroit. How did a relatively small, relatively undeveloped, Spanish-speaking, Latin-American nation overcome the traditional Olympic powers, the United States and France? Only after an intense and inventive publicity campaign, and a skillfully crafted final presentation, did the Mexicans prevail. They benefited, too, from a bitter campaign between the organizing committee from Detroit and the one from Los Angeles, which challenged Detroit for the American bid only a few months before the final vote in Baden-Baden. Finally, the Mexicans deftly negotiated the murky waters between the two Cold-War superpowers, assembling a coalition of Latin-American, African, and Soviet-bloc nations to overcome its rivals.

After winning the bid for the 1968 Olympics, but long before the Games began, the Mexican organizers faced a host of controversies and issues, discussed in Chapter III. Most pressing was the question of elevation. No one knew how the thin air would affect athletes of the highest caliber, and several incidents from the 1955 Pan-American Games, also held in Mexico City, led many experts to believe that athletes risked suffering great harm by competing at such altitudes. Even as the Mexicans faced those questions, the Olympic community in general wrestled with issues of amateurism. Many accused the Soviet team of breaking the amateur code, while at the same time amateur athletes from western nations routinely accepted under the table payments and many other benefits. Some wondered in 1968 if the whole order of amateur athletics was crumbling. The most threatening issue of all was the admission of South African athletes, who would be allowed to attend the 1968 Olympics according to the decision of the International Olympic Committee at its February meeting in Grenoble. That decision immediately inspired a massive boycott movement, including all other African nations, many other nations from around the world, the Soviet bloc, and black American athletes. While the 1968 Olympics were thrown in doubt by each of these controversies, ultimately all were settled before the Opening Ceremonies in October.

Even after the South Africa controversy was settled, the black athletes in the United States continued their agitation for a boycott. The “Revolt of the Black Athletes” is the subject of Chapter IV. What were the ties between the Black Power movement and the athletes? Why did the boycott movement ultimately fail? Building on the efforts of several black athletes from the early- to mid-1960s, in the fall of 1967 a group of athletes from San Jose State, led by their imposing coach, Harry Edwards, launched a movement for greater equality and better treatment. Borrowing ideology and methodology from the broader Black Power movement, the athletes made their greatest statement in threatening to boycott the 1968 Olympics. Ultimately, the lure of individual success, and the feeling that they would merely be replaced on the team by other competitors, led many black athletes to part with the boycott supporters. In the months before the Olympics, the boycott movement crumbled, but ended with the understanding that individual athletes...
could protest however they wished in Mexico City, an understanding that sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos took to heart.

Even as the black athletes waged their campaign to boycott the Olympics, within Mexico a burgeoning student movement gained momentum, discussed in Chapter V. Unlike many previous historians, I argue that the student movement was closely linked to the Olympics, though it began as a wholly independent protest against police brutality. As the summer wore on, students came to see the Olympics as representative of all that was wrong with the Mexican government, and the Olympics came to be a common target of their chants and slogans. Ultimately, though they pledged not to interfere with the Games, the students were crushed by a brutal attack from the Mexican military and police only a few days before the Opening Ceremonies. This attack had a profound impact on the Mexican psyche, and October 2nd remains to this day a date of somber remembrance on the Mexican calendar. One Mexican laments, before the slaughter, “Was Mexico a sad country? I see it as a happy one; a marvelously happy one.”¹¹⁸ One would be hard-pressed to find such an optimistic assessment in Mexico today.

Having weathered the protest movements of both the black athletes and the Mexican students, the Olympic Games carried on in October. The athletic competition is the subject of Chapter VI. What was the significance of an international athletic contest at the height of the Cold War? Who prevailed between the United States and the Soviet Union? The athletic contest, even after all the controversies preceding it, was memorable. Bob Beamon, Dick Fosbury, Al Oerter and many other individual performers set records and engaged in exciting events. The most enduring image of the Games, though, was the raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who gave the “Black Power” salute while standing on the medal stand after the 200-meter sprint. Their protest interrupted an otherwise spectacular performance by the American team, and brought the issue of racism in the United States to a global stage. Also entering the athletic arena were issues of doping and drug use, questions about gender, and the Cold War. Particularly stirring was a volleyball match between the Soviet team and the Czechoslovakian team early in the week. In spite of such controversies, the athletic contests were roundly declared a great success, and the Olympics concluded to Mexican jubilation.

What did the 1968 Olympics mean for Mexico? For the black American athletes? For the student movement? For Mexican-American affairs? For the Olympics in general? Such questions, and the aftermath of the Games, are the topic of Chapter VII. Experts still debate the economic impact of the Olympics. Construction and beautification efforts clearly taxed the Mexican economy, while tourism and general enthusiasm helped to boost it. More important, the Games represent a trend in Mexican government towards the superficial, and away from the necessary. The black American athletes returned from the Games to a nation still not entirely sympathetic to their cause. Many struggled to find employment commensurate with their skills, and still complain about the consequences of their protest. Still, racial barriers in sport continue to tumble, and the broader goals of the black protest have largely been achieved. What of Mexican-American relations? Not long after the Olympics, on October 27, Mexico’s president, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz crowed to a Joint Session of the United States Congress, “Geography made us neighbors, economy has turned us into the best of clients, and the decided will of our peoples, overcoming at times the relentless course of history, has made us cordial and respectful friends. Our

deals must always have these characteristics: of neighbors, good neighbors; of clients, magnificent clients; of friends, loyal friends.” Still, Mexican-American affairs, in part due to the student movement and the perception of Communist influence, deteriorated after the Olympics. Finally, the 1968 Olympics exemplify a movement towards politicization in sport that continues today. The close ties between national pride and sport reached an unfortunate climax four years later at the 1972 Munich Games, when a group of Palestinian terrorists cut down the team of Israeli athletes during their proudest, and most visible moment.

The 1968 Olympics, then, demonstrate the perils of placing too much importance on sport. The Mexican government hoped to use the Games to promote their national image, to prove the validity of their economic and organizational system. The U.S. government hoped to use the Games to show themselves superior to their great rival, the Soviet Union, and if at all possible to win favor with other nations. Both governments failed, largely due to uprisings among their own people. As historian Luis J. Garrido has noted, it was the last president before the Olympics were held, Adolfo Lopez Mateos, who “…was the last Mexican chief executive to be able to attend public functions without eliciting jeers.” Since 1968, on many other occasions nations have used the Olympics to political ends, and usually with harmful effects, either to athletes, teams, or citizens of one nation or another. One might question whether the Olympics were ever completely free of political influence, but certainly in the post-World War II era they have become little more than a pawn in a much larger game for geo-political dominance. Pierre de Coubertin, who revived the ancient Olympic Games in 1896, had an admirable vision, that men might meet on the fields of sport and put aside their political differences. That vision, as demonstrated by the 1968 Olympics, has been lost.

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CHAPTER I: THE QUEST FOR MODERNITY

It was three a.m., a dark and drizzly morning at the Mexico City train depot. The trumpet players and mariachis had left hours before, and scant evidence remained of the welcoming party that had long since drifted into the night. A few streamers clung to the sidewalk and bits of paper blew in the breeze. At last a train pulled into the station. It chugged to a halt, and through the blasts of steam a handful of bleary-eyed passengers stepped to the loading dock. Not a soul remained to greet them, and they exchanged pensive glances as they gathered their bags. This was their welcome to Mexico?

The Cuban athletic group had traveled to international sporting events before, and rightfully expected more from their hosts. But for Mexico City, the 1926 Central American Games were a first attempt at staging such an event, and the inexperience showed. In the weeks leading up to the tournament, the anticipated number of participating nations had dropped from around ten, to a half-dozen, and finally to three, the minimum allowable to hold an official contest. The Cuban group rolled into the train station almost twelve hours late, after a long boat trip and a slight derailment of their train. Still, their corps of 111 athletes was eager to launch the new festival. Guatemala, the other visiting team, also nearly missed the event. The Guatemalan President, Jose Maria Orellana, died the month before, and it seemed unlikely that the games would go on. At length, the new president decided to honor his predecessor’s vision and send a squad of fifteen athletes, enough to compete in scarcely more than half the planned events. They arrived a few hours after the Cubans, after a harrowing train ride of their own.

Some must have wondered if it was worth the trip. The Mexican team of over 200 athletes dwarfed those of both visiting nations, and many events did not go smoothly. The Guatemalans struggled to field athletes in some events, and in one of the shooting contests a visiting delegate competed even with no training or prior notice. Not only did he fail to win, he initiated one of the games’ many scandals when he failed to draw his gun against a Cuban opponent, conceding valuable points that helped give Cuba a victory. It was but the first of many problems. A mob of angry Mexican fans stormed the field in the eighth inning of a baseball game in which Mexico trailed Cuba 12-0, so disgusted were they at their team’s play. The Cuban athletes struggled mightily with the high elevation and thin air, as several of their top players managed to play only a few minutes of the basketball game, and their long-distance runners gasped and wheezed in poor finishes. Even with these wrinkles, though, both the Cubans and Guatemalans enjoyed the hospitality of their hosts, attending parties and dinners when they were not
competing. While only two nations made the trip, Mexico’s era of hosting international sporting events had begun.\(^{22}\)

Less than forty years after this humble beginning, Mexico secured the bid to host the largest sporting festival in the world, the Olympic Games. That any nation might achieve such an evolution is remarkable, and that it might be done so quickly is even more so. How did Mexico achieve such a startling transformation? How did it go from being scarcely able to stage a small festival with three participants, to hosting a massive event with hundreds of participants? From the beginnings of the modern Olympic movement, in the 1890s, through Mexico’s successful Olympic bid in early 1963, enormous change and development had to occur along three broad fronts: 1) Mexico’s political and economic stability; 2) Mexico’s sporting interests and infrastructure; 3) the attitudes of the international sporting community toward Mexico. In each of these areas, only after sweeping changes could Mexico hope to host the Olympic Games.

At the time of those first Central American Games, Mexico was less than a decade removed from a tumultuous and violent revolution, and the effects of that revolution still lingered. The Mexican Revolution of 1910-19 stands as a monumental interruption in a remarkable stretch of peace and stability that has endured from the 1870s through the present. This peace and stability was a major selling point for Mexico in making a bid for the 1968 Games, and it has made Mexico an exception to the rule in Latin America, where chaos, violence, and revolution often accompany changes in leadership. In the 1920s, though, the peace was still fragile, and the next forty years witnessed a transformation in Mexican politics, from a nation wracked by upheaval, to one ruled by the most entrenched political party in all of Latin America.

In 1920, few would have predicted that Mexico could achieve such stability. When the 35-year reign of Porfirio Diaz ended in 1911, the country descended into revolution and anarchy. So ubiquitous was the violence of this period that the population fell, from about 15.2 million in 1910 to 14.5 million in 1921.\(^{23}\) The national infrastructure suffered as well, as railroad tracks and trains were destroyed, bridges and buildings burned, towns and cities plundered. Political leaders faced constant challenges from regional revolutionaries, and power passed from one caudillo\(^{24}\) to another - a series of great figures in Mexican lore: Francisco Madero, Emiliano Zapata, Venustiano Carranza, Francisco “Pancho” Villa, Alvaro Obregon - and none left power alive. The seemingly endless string of assassinations ended with the murder of Alvaro Obregon, by his successor, Plutarco Elias Calles. It was Calles who installed much of the machinery still in place in Mexican politics, including its two most prominent features: a constitutional amendment forbidding the reelection of the president, and the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), which would evolve into the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the ruling party in Mexico from its founding until the year 2000. The PRI might resemble a political party as we know them in the United States, but for the fact that virtually no opposition parties were allowed. While several other parties cropped up between the 1920s and 1990s, they were powerless against the PRI. Anyone with political ambitions


\(^{24}\) A caudillo is a political or military chief. These figures assumed both roles during their careers, although during the Revolution they spent the bulk of their time as what might best be described as regional warlords.
knew that only through association with the PRI might they be successful, and those at the head of the party carefully groomed those beneath them. In this way, the presidency stayed within the “family” of the PRI, as each president selected his own successor every six years. This chosen candidate was confirmed by an “election” of the people, though it was only in the late 20th century that any opposition candidates were allowed to seriously contend. And so it was that power passed from one president to the next at six-year intervals, a total of twelve times between 1934 and 2000. No other Latin American nation – nor Mexico in its own history, for that matter – could match that stretch of stability.  

It should not be assumed, however, that stability translated into prosperity and happiness for all Mexicans. In truth, as historian Jorge Castañeda has pointed out, the system was plagued by contradictions that resulted, in part, in a gross disparity of wealth. For example, the Mexican electoral system cannot be considered a democracy, and yet the proper term for it is elusive. The people do come to the polls, and even before the recent defeat of the PRI there were candidates advanced by other parties, but corruption of the electoral system was so complete that challenging the ruling party was impossible. The chosen successor “campaigned” before the people, but his election was secure. Deepening this corruption of the system was the ability of the presidential party to control virtually every group of any import in Mexico. Opposition was either co-opted into the PRI political machine, destroyed by propaganda campaigns, or allowed to exist at some permissible level of agitation (the Communist Party, during its 80-plus years of existence, has endured all three types of treatment). The Congress, the judicial system, the church, labor unions, the media, and others were either directly chosen and controlled by the president, or were forced to cooperate by pressures either subtle or overt. Finally, Mexican stability was not achieved entirely without violence or repression, though it remained far more peaceful than other Latin American nations. Sporadically over the more than sixty years of PRI rule, the government squashed strikes or movements, often with startling brutality. But such instances are limited in number, and Mexico has always allowed at least some presence of opposition, including internationally renowned intellectuals such as Octavio Paz and Carlos Fuentes. If democracy is not the right word to describe the Mexican system, neither is autocracy or dictatorship.

Whatever the exact nature of the political system, it did secure tremendous economic and population growth throughout the middle of the 20th century, a period hailed as the Mexican “miracle.” Mexican leaders only achieved such growth through a series of complex and difficult choices, and it came at a price. Each president was forced to weigh the importance of political reform, economic reform, and social reform – no president yet has successfully balanced all three. A brief history of the presidents since the Revolution and their policies will demonstrate that the Mexican “miracle” was only possible at the expense of much-needed social reform. The economic growth that made the Olympic bid possible also created conditions for popular unrest, which festered for

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decades before bursting under the spotlight of Olympic publicity. As the Mexican economy flourished, and appeared prosperous to the casual observer, this veil of prosperity shrouded a people racked with poverty and social problems. While the nation advanced into modernity, its populace toiled in the past.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Range</th>
<th>President</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1916-1920</td>
<td>Venustiano Carranza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920-1924</td>
<td>Alvaro Obregon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924-1928</td>
<td>Plutarco Elias Calles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928-1930*</td>
<td>Emilio Portes Gil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930-1932*</td>
<td>Pascual Ortiz Rubio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932-1934*</td>
<td>Abelardo L. Rodriguez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934-1940</td>
<td>Lazaro Cardenas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940-1946</td>
<td>Manuel Avila Camacho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946-1952</td>
<td>Miguel Aleman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952-1958</td>
<td>Adolfo Ruiz Cortines</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958-1964</td>
<td>Adolfo Lopez Mateos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-1970</td>
<td>Gustavo Diaz Ordaz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-1976</td>
<td>Luis Echeverria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1982</td>
<td>Jose Lopez Portillo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-1988</td>
<td>Miguel de la Madrid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988-1994</td>
<td>Carlos Salinas de Gortari</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Interim presidents, policies dictated by Calles

Fig. 1: The Mexican Presidents, 1916-1994

The prosperity of the 1950s and ‘60s that allowed for the successful Olympic bid was born from a presidential preference for economic, rather than social, reform. Francisco Madero, who overthrew Porfirio Diaz in 1911, never promised the social reforms, most notably land reform, that his legions desired. When such reforms were not forthcoming, a number of revolutionaries, including Francisco Madero, Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, took up the standard of agrarian reform, and years of political chaos ensued. Again, the balance between political and social reform proved impossible to find, and without a predictable and stable process of political succession, none of the leaders who managed to take power could enact progressive policies. To compound matters, what money entered the Mexican national coffers was redirected into military campaigns. Much of what remained was siphoned off, either to maintain clientele relationships among the national leadership, or in any manner of corrupt schemes organized by once-poor men now surrounded by opportunities for easy money. Without political reform of this chaotic system, there could be no social reform.29

The Constitution of 1917 was an anomaly of this period. It remains the Mexican Constitution. When it was passed, it was one of the most progressive constitutions in Latin America, if not the world. It guaranteed the rights of the electorate, free public education, the rights of labor to unionize, and called for land reform. Yet much of it went unenforced. The political structures in Mexico were not yet stable enough to uphold even its most fundamental aspects, let alone the extensive social reforms it outlined. The

government was still contested by regional caciques, and the central government could not enforce constitutional measures without encountering regional resistance, especially from the church, large landholders, and international interests.\textsuperscript{30}

The political chaos was finally settled during the presidency of Plutarcho Elias Calles, who ruled as president from 1924-28, and continued to rule behind a series of puppet presidents from 1929-34. Calles laid the foundations of Mexico’s modern political system with the creation of the PRM (Party of the Mexican Revolution) and the precedent of a six-year presidential term with no re-election. This system did have its benefits. Beginning with the succession of the last of Calles’ puppet presidents, Abelardo L. Rodriguez, to Lazaro Cardenas in 1934, every president since has come to power peacefully. Cardenas, who ruled from 1934 thru 1940, is still remembered as a hero in Mexico. Among presidents during this period, he was far and away the most deeply committed to social reform. He redistributed more land to the rural masses than all of his predecessors combined, and launched an extensive program of rural education. His greatest triumph, however, was the expropriation of the oil industry in 1938. American interests controlled the industry, and many of those owners refused to abide by a 1937 tax law and subsequent rulings requiring the companies to pay. Frustrated by this insolence and ready to make a positive statement of Mexican autonomy, Cardenas nationalized the entire industry, repossessing American property. The maneuver caused a great uproar in the United States, of course, and only after calls for an American invasion subsided, and payment of $130,000,000 to the American oil companies, was Mexico able to resume oil production. Still, the expropriation was a forceful act, one which galvanized Cardenas’ reputation as a Mexican hero. He had challenged the Americans and won.\textsuperscript{31}

By the end of Cardenas’ term, Mexico showed signs of the growth and progress that would help it win the bid for the Olympics. His commitment to land reform drove the distribution of some fifty million acres of land to the peasants, bringing the total since 1910 to seventy-five million. Paved roads began to replace dusty and rutted dirt roads, tractors replaced oxen, motorized vehicles replaced horses and mules, more peasants were able to buy shoes and adequate clothing, and electricity began to creep into the countryside. Rural schools, too, multiplied in this era, challenging the church for control of the practical, and cultural, education of the peasantry. Illiteracy declined. Improvements in medical facilities led to a decrease in infant mortality and increase in life expectancy. Life was by no means easy by the end of the Cardenas era, but Mexico was on the road to modernization. Impressive as these gains were, it was not the developments in the countryside that would sway Olympic voters, but rather the facilities of the cities, and specifically Mexico City. Here, too, the nation improved during Cardenas’ years. As labor organized and campaigned for changes, salaries increased and working conditions improved, if only in tiny steps. Technology increased, and the mechanization creeping into the countryside was even more evident in the cities. Perhaps the most important development of this time was a change in the national psyche. Mexicans saw the improvements around them and took pride in them. They took pride in their own abilities to read and work better. And not least important, they rejoiced in a president who won the oil industry from the Americans. The patriotism of this era surged


during the era of the “Mexican miracle,” and played no small role in the successful bid for the Olympics.32

But even the extensive accomplishments of the Cardenas era have been viewed as fleeting by a growing number of historians. Alan Knight has called the regime more “Jalopy” than “Juggernaut,” arguing that Cardenas was never able in practice to live up to his radical goals. Knight conceded that the agrarian reform, labor initiatives, education programs, and even foreign policy initiated by Cardenas were radical. These policies grew from a combination of popular agitation and Cardenas’ personal goals. But even as he addressed the desires of the populace more closely than other presidents, Cardenas advanced the development of a strong centralized government. More important, political realities forced him to clip the wings of many of his programs before they took flight. Conservative protest from the church, businesses, the universities, foreign interests and others ultimately led Cardenas to pull back his reform movements between 1938 and 1940. The conservatism of the presidency was completed when Cardenas named Manuel Avila Camacho as his successor.33 Some historians claim that the Revolution itself ended with this succession.34

The trend towards conservatism increased throughout the 1940s and ‘50s. The pendulum swung once again towards economic reform and away from social reform, leaving the majority of the Mexican population to suffer. It is during this period that Mexico achieved the economic and industrial growth that came to be known as the “Mexican miracle.” Under the presidencies of Avila Camacho and Miguel Alemán, the social measures of Cardenas were discontinued in favor of government investment in industries such as the railroads and other transportation, construction, communications and energy. Driving the miracle, too, were the riches that lay beneath the harsh and scraggily Mexican landscape: oil and minerals. Beginning with the expropriation of the oil industry in 1938, the Mexican economy came to depend more and more on oil as its chief export. The transportation boom sparked by World War II, and the explosion of the American automotive industry in the 1950s and ‘60s, were fueled in part by Mexican oil, and the economy flourished as a result. The nation achieved remarkable growth, as the Gross National Product increased at an annual rate of over 6% from 1940 through 1970, among the highest rates in the world over that period.35 Mexico achieved this growth by a complex recipe of government policy, private efforts, and, some would say, luck.36

The process of industrialization initiated by Cardenas after 1937 gained momentum during World War II. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Mexico quickly sided with the United States, and throughout the war the two nations were closely linked. Mexicans joined the war effort both as soldiers on the battlefields, and as workers on the home front. Mexican war-time production increased, and businesses from the United States, particularly auto and munitions makers, flooded south to take advantage of cheap labor. These trends continued after the war, and Alemán demonstrated that he was clearly more interested in keeping up with the latest technologies than in improving the condition of the peasantry. During the 1940s, the priorities of the government swung from

35 Hansen, Mexican Economic Development, 41.
36 Ibid, vii-viii.
agricultural interests to transportation and industry. The government either owned outright or controlled portions of many major industries, including “the petroleum and electric power industries, the railways, major steel and fertilizer plants, railway equipment factories, a number of banks, … petrochemicals, aviation, motion pictures, newsprint, and mineral exploitation.”

Aleman made no effort at land reform, and his attention to the countryside was limited to a few large-scale irrigation projects that tripled the acreage of government-financed irrigated land during his presidency. In general, Aleman shifted the focus of the economy to urban, high-technology production, which left a large body of workers either out of employment or forced to the fringes of the industrial process, working as janitors, street-sweepers, prostitutes or criminals. Many others lived in abject poverty.

The problems did not end there. Increased production with little attention to environmental concerns, especially in Mexico City, led to severe pollution problems. One has only to drive to the pyramids at Teotihuacan, some forty miles north of the city, to see the extent of this pollution today, as Mexico City is visible from vast distances as an ominous black cloud on the horizon. The noxious air is almost intolerable for visitors who are unaccustomed to it, and has had dubious effects on the health of residents of the city. Another problem, exacerbated by the new industrial society, was corruption. The sheer volume of construction contracts offered ample opportunity for corruption at all levels of government, and many politicians took full advantage of those opportunities. Inflating costs of various projects, skimming from the enormous construction budgets, kickbacks and bribery enabled several Mexicans to amass huge fortunes. Others benefited from legal, if unethical, practices such as capitalizing on knowledge of future building projects or partnering with well-positioned companies. Such practices did allow for the creation of a small class of the spectacularly wealthy, but also encouraged dissatisfaction among the millions of underemployed, whose slums often rested in the shadows of the palacial estates of these new rich.

Even at the height of the “miracle,” as Mexico was hailed as a model of economic growth for other Latin American nations, the majority of the population suffered. The poorest half of the population in 1950 only earned 19 percent of the national economy, a number that continued to decline throughout the 1960s. By contrast, the wealthiest 20 percent held 60 percent of the national income in 1950, which climbed to 64 percent by 1969.

International observers, though, saw little of the downside of this new economic focus. Mexico was a bustling nation, and Mexico City a bustling city. Construction was ubiquitous – during the Aleman presidency, the government sponsored innumerable projects to improve roads, the water system, and the university. U.S. State Department commentary preferred to accentuate these positives, while playing down the troubles of the lower classes. Memoranda within the Department praised the high growth rates of the Mexican GNP. Its economy was “growing rapidly,” with the future showing nothing but “sustained economic growth.” Most important for United States’ business interests, this growth meant “favorable prospects for U.S. traders to build on the billion-dollar market which Mexico has become for them and for U.S. interests to make further productive

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37 Ibid, 44.
38 Maclachlan and Beezley, El Gran Pueblo, 385-387; Hansen, Mexican Economic Development, 45.
On the eve of the 1968 Olympics the State Department made its most expansive commentary on the Mexican economy, in response to an article published in a Latin American issue of The Economist that criticized the economy and pointed out a host of problems and concerns for the future. In retrospect, these concerns were legitimate, in some cases even prophetic. The article criticized the lack of diversity in the economy, dependence on foreign investment, high inflation, huge disparity in wealth, and reliance on oil, all of which contributed to the collapse of the Mexican economy in the 1970s. Experts in the State Department found the article to be “overly sombre [sic],” its predictions “not justified by recent performance and present policies.”

By the late 1960s, Mexico had become the envy of all Latin American nations for its growth and stability. It was, in the words of another State Department memo, “in the vanguard of progressive Latin American nations.” Now far removed from the chaos of the Revolution, Mexico was ready to take on the challenge, and the burden, of hosting the Olympics. But political and fiscal stability were not all that was required for such an undertaking.

Mexican sporting interests and infrastructure, too, underwent a considerable evolution before the nation secured the bid for the Olympics. Even before those first hesitant steps in hosting the 1926 Central American Games, sport in Mexico had begun to change. The beginnings of modern sport began to percolate in the Porfiriato, from 1880-1911. As William Beezley has ably described, the peace and stability of the Porfiriito allowed a populace, previously too consumed with revolution and mayhem to care much about sport, to take an interest in it. The substantial economic growth during the period was reflected in sport as well. The rising upper class adopted the sports of elites from other successful nations, especially the United States. Bicycles, imported from France and the United States, were a major fad in the 1890s. Cycling clubs flourished, and for a time the cycling lobby wielded enough clout among civic leaders to arrange for the paving of many roads and improvements in safety on the streets. Cycling, though, was not for everyone -- while the wealthy rode, the lower classes jeered and threw rocks.

Horse racing, too, came to be a favorite pastime among the wealthy, whose men owned and raced the horses, and whose women dressed up and properly supported their men. The middling classes also enjoyed the horse races, where their ceaseless gambling further allowed them to mimic Americans and other successful westerners. Diaz influenced the bullfights, too, which were banned for a time as too gruesome and bloody.

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41 Department of State Airgram, From Amembassy MEXICO to Department of State, 24 Feb 1967, NARA RG 59, Box 642, folder E 2-2 Mex 1/1/67.
42 Department of State Airgram, From Amembassy MEXICO to Department of State, 29 Aug. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 642, folder E 2, Mex 6/1/68.
43 U.S. State Department Research Memorandum, 12 June 1968, NARA RG 59, Box 643, folder E 12 Mex 1/1/67.
44 William H. Beezley, Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirián Mexico (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 33.
45 This adoption of sports imported from European nations was typical of the growth of sport throughout Latin America. Joseph Arbena, among others, has wondered whether this borrowing from the Anglo-American tradition has advanced, or hindered, the development of nationalism in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. See Joseph L. Arbena, “Nationalism and Sport in Latin America, 1850-1990: The Paradox of Promoting and Performing ‘European’ Sports,” The International Journal of the History of Sport, 12:2 (Aug. 1995), 220-238.
46 Beezley, 41-52.
for a “sophisticated” nation. As Mexico’s stock improved, though, Diaz not only brought back the bullfights, but he brought them back with all the pomp and circumstance of a national holiday. Bullfights were not to be a source of national shame, but rather a source of national pride. Baseball, too, found its way to Mexico during this period. Carried south by American railroad workers in the 1880s, the sport quickly replaced cricket, just as Americans replaced Britons as the westerners to be most admired. The railroad workers promoted the game as they traveled through Mexico, and especially Mexico City. It grew in popularity throughout the 1890s, becoming a staple at athletic clubs in the city and the countryside. By the early 1900s the first Mexican leagues were established, and in 1906 Charlie Comiskey brought the world champion Chicago White Sox south for a week of exhibition games. Although the games were one-sided in favor of the champs, and the high price of tickets made for small crowds, the visit legitimized baseball in Mexico, and it has remained the nation’s second most popular sport ever since.47

Despite these developments, prior to the 1920s the Mexican government and other institutions had shown little interest in organized sport. Activities were largely spontaneous and disorganized, and were the domain of a small upper class, as with basketball, soccer, baseball or tennis, or for an even more elite group polo, fencing, horsemanship or gymnastics. The masses, when not embroiled in Revolutionary activities, might practice ranching sports such as riding, bull-fighting, or shooting, or entertain each other with cock-fights. Traditional Mexican sports intermingled with another popular leisure activity, drinking, and thus many Mexican politicians discouraged sport as being associated with laziness and immorality. Some “healthy” activities trickled across the northern border and became popular in Mexico, including bicycling and baseball. The government took little interest in these activities, though, and in general organized sports in pre-Revolutionary Mexico were rare.48 There was no political pressure on Mexicans to choose one sport over another, and in fact there was little political or financial support for any sports at all.49 If, in fact, the “support of governments” was necessary for the Olympic movement to succeed, as the founding Congress of Sorbonne determined in 1894, then Mexico had a long way to go before it might be suitable for Olympic consideration.50

During the Revolution, competing factions were too consumed with destroying each other to pay any attention to organizing sport, and even as the fiercest violence receded few politicians saw the value in sport. The first school for training physical education instructors was founded in 1908, but it closed in 1914 in the midst of the Revolution. Early in the 1920s, Jose Vasconcelos, an administrator of the Mexican National University and later Minister of Education, brought a new perspective on sport to Mexican leadership. His assertions mirror those of socialist sporting groups that were particularly popular in Europe during this period. He argued that physical activity and organized sports would encourage not only fitness of the mind and body, but also cooperation and satisfaction within Mexican society. At his urging, Mexico constructed a

49 Beezley, 52.
50 Leiper, 108.
new National Stadium, completed in May, 1924.\textsuperscript{51} Still, his ideas had only a minimal impact on the national scene, as few new programs in Mexican sport surfaced during the period.\textsuperscript{52}

The inspiration to join the international sporting community came not from anyone within Mexico, but rather from a representative of the International Olympic Committee, Count Henri de Baillet-Latour. The IOC was interested in reaching new regions of the globe, and Baillet-Latour launched a tour in the early 1920s to encourage developing nations to participate in the Olympic movement. His tour brought him to Mexico in 1923, where he met with Carlos Rincon-Gallardo y Romero de Terreros, a leading Mexican sportsman. Rincon-Gallardo arranged a meeting with General Alvaro Obregon, making an important link between the sporting community and political leadership.\textsuperscript{53} After a series of meetings, Baillet-Latour concluded his visit with an encouraging speech, in which he advised: “(1) the formation of Mexican federations for each sport and their affiliation with international federations; (2) the formation of a National Olympic Committee; (3) participation of Mexican athletes, which would be for the first time, in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris; and (4) the hosting by Mexico of a regional sport festival, to be called the Central American Games, in 1926.”\textsuperscript{54}

The Mexicans sent their first contingent to the 1924 Olympics in Paris. Alfredo B. Cuellar, a track and field coach, drove the early Mexican Olympic movement, lobbying the government for funds to support a national team. He met with little success from politicians, but by 1924 he raised enough money from private donations to send a team of 19 athletes to Paris. The largest contributions came from the two largest newspapers in Mexico City, \textit{El Universal} and \textit{Excelsior}. Editors of both papers may have believed their contributions allowed them to fabricate results, as both claimed second place finishes for several Mexican athletes. All such reports were false, although one Mexican shooter recorded the second best score, behind three others who tied for first. While their performance had not been world-class, the very presence of Mexican athletes at the Olympics made an important statement to global observers, that the nation sought to leave behind the violence and chaos of its recent past. If politicians had not yet grasped the value of such public relations, Mexican newspapers had. They, along with a few determined individuals, remained the strongest supporters of the international sport movement in Mexico throughout the 1920s.\textsuperscript{55}

Even more important than Olympic participation was the decision to host the Central American Games in 1926. Mexican athletes had traveled to meets within Latin America on a limited basis beginning in 1923, when a Mexican team participated in a series of soccer, basketball, and tennis matches in Guatemala City. It was on their next major expedition, to the Paris Olympics, that plans for the 1926 Central American Games began to take shape. In meeting with international officials in Paris, and in several other meetings before 1926, Mexican sporting leaders began to lay the foundation of the modern sport movement in Mexico. To fill various committees, they selected prominent coaches, athletes, and even political figures, including President Plutarco Elias Calles. They established a National Sport Confederation and several regional organizations, and,

of course, planned for the Central American Games. Those Games were, as mentioned above, something of a disappointment when measured against early expectations. At the peak of enthusiasm for the Games, during the 1924 Olympics, organizers expressed hopes for a festival that would rival the Olympics in scope and importance. As Mexican newspapers noted, the event failed to meet even more reasonable expectations for a significant athletic festival among Latin American nations. But even with only three nations participating, the Central American Games were an important landmark in Mexican sport history. Mexico had successfully hosted an international festival, however modest.

Still, the Central American Games were a far cry from hosting the Olympics, and demonstrated the weakness of Mexican sport federations. They had drawn little interest, even from Mexico’s neighbors, and in fact had attracted little attention within Mexico itself. A small group of men, at great personal expense and effort, arranged the event, with no support from the government. The masses, too, had not supported the event, as sports were still virtually the exclusive domain of the upper classes. The bulk of the sports contested at the Games, including basketball, fencing, shooting, swimming, and tennis were unavailable to the average Mexican. The other sports, baseball and track and field, were played by the lower classes only in primitive and disorganized forms. Before the Olympic Games would come to Mexico, both the government and the populace needed to support this still budding national sport movement.

Mexican participation in international sporting events continued to increase after the Central American Games, and interest in sports within Mexico also grew. It was a slow process, yet one which fueled itself. As more Mexican athletes traveled abroad, representing the nation in international contests, more Mexican sporting officials and politicians began to encourage sports programs within Mexico. After all, their athletes could scarcely hope to be competitive without adequate training facilities at home. Mexico also followed the sporting trends of Europe, where the workers’ sport movement was at its height. Sport improved physical fitness, encouraged cooperation, and allowed workers an avenue for recreation and enjoyment. Sport kept workers healthy and happy, and thus was to be encouraged. While national pride and recognition certainly motivated the growing interest in sport, it was this latter reason that the PRI emphasized when it announced the formation of the Mexican Sport Confederation in 1932. One of the stated goals of the new organization was to form “an integrated nation [composed] of healthy, virile, and dynamic men.”

Educational programs began to include more athletics during the 1930s as well, reflecting a similar interest in raising healthy and productive children. Sport not only developed the physical abilities and senses, but also encouraged social skills and

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56 El Universal, 8 Oct. 1926.
58 Ibid, 326.
cooperation among the students. As an added benefit, it offered a productive alternative to such habits as drinking, loafing, and fighting. National organizations continued to develop, especially through participation in the Olympics of 1932 and 1936. At the 1932 Los Angeles Games, Mexico won its first medals. More important, at those Games Mexico joined other Latin American nations in planning what would grow into one of the world’s most important competitions, the Pan-American Games. Participation in the Pan-Am Games continued Mexico’s rise in international sport, and its hosting of those Games in 1955 strengthened its bid for the Olympics.

Throughout the Cardenas years, the recognition and sponsorship of sport in Mexico increased. In 1935, the government founded a Department of Physical Education, whose leader, General Tirso Hernandez Garcia, helped to establish a school of Physical Education. These organizations generally promoted sports among all social classes, lobbied for additional facilities and supplies, published a monthly magazine, and educated the public in classes and lectures. Rationale for these efforts continued to echo the workers’ sport movement, as sport strengthened workers and promoted order and discipline. Cardenas also emphasized patriotic weekend fiestas, which typically included athletic competitions between villages or communities, including basketball, baseball, and footraces. These events were designed not only to promote health and positive habits, but also local and national pride. Even if Mexican athletes still rarely triumphed in international competitions, government sponsorship of athletic programs was a significant step, and sport in the 1930s grew quickly. By one account, during the Cardenas era “the number of physical education teachers increased from 58 to 300.” Still, things had not improved so much that Mexican athletes did not occasionally complain of a lack of government support, and one study of the athletes concluded that they were not competitive internationally due to insufficient training.

As in most nations, Mexican sport during World War II focused on meeting wartime needs, and sporting facilities were co-opted by the military. In the post-war era, though, sport achieved heights of popularity unapproached before the war. In 1945, the first magazine devoted to sports hit Mexican news stands, appealing to the public’s demand for updates, gossip, and merchandise. Mexicans seemed to be as interested in American sports as their own, and as interested in the latest fashions and equipment as in the news. Rather than building a unique sporting tradition, Mexico attempted to mimic the great western nations, especially the United States. This theme was best exemplified by Mexican efforts to found a professional baseball league, led by Jorge Pascuel Casanueva. The occasional exhibitions and barnstorming tours from one side of the Rio Grande to the other had continued throughout the first half of the century, and American ballplayers were familiar with the Mexicans. Pascuel Casanueva hoped to lure some star players across the border to solidify his upstart league. Major League Baseball understandably balked at such a prospect, and used its considerable influence to ensure that the Mexican League failed. Still, the attempt attracted the attention of international journalists and may have improved the self-esteem of some Mexican sportsmen. It may

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63 Arbena, 357.
64 Ibid; Machlachlan and Beezley, *El Gran Pueblo*, 335.
also have left a sour taste in the mouths of many international observers, who saw the gambit as an underhanded attempt to defeat the Americans. In some ways, those observers were correct, but nonetheless the maneuver indicated that Mexico was prepared to challenge even the mighty United States on the fields of sport.\textsuperscript{65}

The 1950s only enhanced the growing reputation of Mexican sports. Mexico was host to a number of meetings of international sporting commissions, most notably the 1953 Congress of the International Olympic Committee.\textsuperscript{66} Without question, though, the crowning event of the decade, and one that was revived repeatedly during Mexico’s bid for the 1968 Olympics, was the 1955 Pan-American Games, held in Mexico City. In March, 1955, 2,583 athletes from 22 countries came to Mexico City, demonstrating that the 1926 Central American Games were a distant memory. In preparation for the Pan-Am Games, the Mexicans built a number of sporting facilities as well as an athletic village. Over one and a half million tickets were distributed free to the Mexican public, and virtually every venue was packed with enthusiastic fans. A Pan-American Sport Congress was held in conjunction with the Games, in which IOC members and Latin American sport leaders discussed the present and future of Olympic sports in the region. Avery Brundage, President of the International Olympic Committee, attended the Congress, and announced that he looked forward to further expansion of the Olympic movement in Latin America. While it might be a stretch to assume that he envisioned the Olympics themselves coming to Latin America, it is clear in several of his speeches that hosting the Pan-Am Games did advance the Mexican cause. As early as 1950, in fact, Brundage noted after a trip to Mexico City that, “the [second] Pan-American Games will be held in Mexico City in 1955 and new facilities of Olympic caliber are already under construction.”\textsuperscript{67} The Pan-Am Games went off without a hitch, and athletes, spectators, media and organizers praised the facilities and organization of the events. The 1955 Pan-Am Games were not only a preview of things to come in 1968, but in all likelihood Mexico’s bid for the Olympics would have failed without them.\textsuperscript{68}

By the late 1950s, Mexico’s sporting interest was sufficient to support a serious bid for the Olympic Games. Coming off the great success of the Pan-American Games, huge numbers of fans were eager to attend a great sporting event. Even more important, a well-developed sporting hierarchy had the ear of high-ranking government officials. By the time of their successful bid in 1963 (Mexico City made a half-hearted bid for the 1964 Games, which failed), their strongest supporter was the president of Mexico, Adolfo Lopez Mateos. Indeed, this combination of popular interest and government support was vital to a successful bid. As one historian has noted, “the nations of the world have interpreted participation in the Games as an opportunity to express national


identification.” 69 It was not until the late 1950s that Mexico went along with this interpretation – just in time to make a bid for the 1968 Games.

Even with its own impressive development, for Mexico to be considered as a host for the Olympics, the will of the International Olympic Committee needed to evolve as well. In spite of its message of global unity through sport and universal participation, and its idealistic five-ringed logo, 70 it was not until after World War II that the Olympic Games became a truly global event. All of the Olympics from its revival in 1896 to the 1952 Games in Helsinki were held in either Europe or the United States. Indeed, only one city from outside these regions even made a bid, when the Egyptian city of Alexandria applied for the 1916 Games. The bid was not seriously considered against the competition of Budapest, Cleveland, and Berlin, which ultimately won the contest – the Games were cancelled due to the First World War, making the point moot. 71 Mexico would not host the Games until the Olympics themselves had overcome their western bias.

The limited scope of the Olympics might be traced to the beginnings of their revival in the late 19th century, and to the man whose vision drove that revival, the French educator Pierre Fredy, Baron de Coubertin. While Coubertin deserves the praise he has garnered for his efforts in reviving the Olympics and promoting world peace, his vision of the Games was quite different from what they have become. He promoted sport principally to improve the health and vigor of the youth of his own country, France. In doing so, he looked to two models: ancient Greece, and modern England. In ancient Greece, Coubertin found the type of man that he aspired to be himself, and hoped the same for his countrymen. The Greeks flourished physically and intellectually, and were masters of the arts as well as sport. If the Greeks were the ideal scholar/athletes of the ancient world, the English came closest to that ideal in the modern world. Coubertin felt that the French youth fell far short of those in English school athletic programs, such as the Rugby School that originated the sport of the same name. Coubertin considered such athletic programs the source of England’s great national strength. Based on the Greek and English examples, Coubertin developed his own vision of a complete education, which would incorporate training in academics, morals and ethics, and athletics. From this vision grew the Olympic ideal. 72

While his vision was certainly admirable, it was understandably rooted in upper-class, western ways that were reflected in the Olympic Games of the early 20th century. Coubertin himself was wealthy, as were the other men who met in Sorbon, France in 1894 to establish the new Olympics. They looked to upper-class English prep students as their model of athletic achievement, and took much from their own athletic experiences in sports such as tennis, rowing, cycling, cricket, and yachting, almost exclusively the preserve of the well-off. In the fall of 1893, Coubertin made a tour of the United States to pitch his Olympic idea, stopping at such upper-crust institutions as Stanford, Princeton, and

70 The five colored rings represent the five regions of the globe: North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Africa still has not hosted the Olympics, leading to questions about the “missing black ring” in the logo. Cape Town and Johannesburg have made bids for the 2004 and 2008 Games, but lingering questions about apartheid have damaged their chances.
Clearly missing in the early manifestations of Olympism was any sign of color, and any sign of the inclusion of the common sporting man. Those things would come later, after changes in five important areas: the growth of the Olympic Games themselves; advances in technology; the devastation of World War II, and the political changes wrought by it; the end of colonialism and development of new nations; and the selection of Avery Brundage as IOC president in 1952.

Prior to World War I, the Olympics were essentially a sandbox for the western nations, and the rest of the world was not invited to play. The Games were small, infinitesimal by modern standards, and the range of participating nations limited. Only thirteen nations and only twelve reporters attended the first Olympics, held in Athens in 1896. Virtually everyone in attendance, and all the participants, were either from Europe or the United States. The best athletes in the world either did not attend or disappointed in their performance, as no world records were broken. Hoping to encourage even greater attendance in the future, Coubertin sought to spark the growth of the festival by having a different host every four years. In an era before radio and television, this method of relocating the Games did bring sport to new audiences. It also nearly killed the nascent Olympics, as Paris in 1900 and St. Louis in 1904 failed to draw sizable crowds.

The Paris Games were poorly scheduled, poorly publicized, and poorly run. They coincided with Bastille Day, the French national holiday, so few spectators attended. They didn’t miss much, as the French threw together what amounted to little more than an international track and field meet, with none of the pageantry and ceremony of the modern games. The St. Louis Games of 1904 were even worse, as few nations even bothered to send a team to the little city that lay deep in the middle of a distant continent. Of those who attended, many athletes did not take the contest seriously, including the “victorious” marathon runner who rode in a car for more than half of the race. It seemed that the Olympic revival had played itself out, and many international sportsmen felt it would be just as well to discontinue it.

The disappointments of these early Games led Coubertin to experiment with an idea that has surfaced periodically throughout Olympic history, a permanent site. In 1906, the Olympics returned to Athens for what would be the first, and last, in an anticipated series of Olympics held at their original site. It marked the beginnings of a transition to the

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73 Espy, 25.
74 The elitism of the IOC is an issue that lingers to this day, as many historians have pointed out. As William Johnson has noted, “The favorite sports of the IOC members are yachting, fencing, and equestrian – the high society sports...IOC members usually fit one or more of three qualifications – they are men of extreme wealth, of high governmental or social position or of royal birth.” If the IOC has come to recognize “common” athletes from largely impoverished nations, its leadership, with rare exception, has not. See William O. Johnson, All that Glitters is not Gold, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1972), 95-96.
76 Johnson, All that Glitters, 107.
77 Collins, 50-55; Johnson, 116-119; Henry, 40-49.
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*Cancelled due to war

Fig. 2: Summer Olympic Cities and Bids, 1896-2000

modern Games, as more nations attended than ever before (20), and those who did submitted their athletes to a more rigorous entrance process than in earlier Games; a few athletes in St. Louis had simply wandered onto the fields and competed. This transition continued in London in 1908, where numerous controversies inspired the installation of international, “neutral” teams of officials, since the home-town British judges made many questionable rulings in favor of British athletes. Intentionally or not, the British also failed to raise the flags of several nations, including the United States. One might interpret this omission as either an early manifestation of politics in the Olympics, or, more likely, an illustration of their still-limited exposure. By 1912, the Games were well established as a major sporting event, and had begun to take on the modern implications of nationalism. Everyone – athletes, organizers, and spectators – was

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79 Johnson, 127-128; Henry, 70-83.
beginning to take the Olympics more seriously. It was appropriate that the final Olympics before the interruption of World War I were held for the first time in a Nordic city, Stockholm. Not only did the Swedes far outdo any of their predecessors in preparation, construction, and attendance at the Games, but they, along with Finland and Norway, won a disproportionate number of medals. With such innovations as electric clocks, photo-finish equipment, and brand new athletic and housing facilities, Stockholm launched the Olympics on their way to becoming the mega-event that they are today.\(^80\)

The Olympics enjoyed their period of greatest growth and innovation during the inter-war years, as the host cities fell into a pattern of one-upsmanship that made each festival more grandiose than the last. After a hiatus during World War I, the IOC, determined to resume the tradition in spite of the devastation of the war, hurried to hold the Olympics at Antwerp, Belgium, in 1920. A poorer choice could hardly be imagined, as Belgium was perhaps the most ravaged of all European nations, and the destitute populace could not support something so frivolous as the Olympics. Even a meager gate fee of about 10 cents was too much for the average Belgian to bear, and the stands were more empty than full for these gloomy, rain-filled Olympics.\(^81\)

The Antwerp Games were the last that might be considered marginal, and the expansion of the Games between the wars kicked into full gear four years later when the Olympics returned to Paris. They were a celebration of excess, a not-so-subtle symbol to the world that the war was over, and all was well. The splendor and decoration, the pomp and circumstance of the modern Games began to appear, as national flags and national anthems were ubiquitous. The Americans sent an enormous team of over 300 athletes, who were welcomed by the French fans with cheers. The excitement surrounding the Paris Games was almost matched by the Amsterdam Games of 1928. Returning to a smaller country lent an international flair to the ’28 Games, as more nations won medals than ever before, and the traditionally dominant teams from the United States, Britain, and France all saw their medal totals drop. Forty-six nations sent teams, and athletes from faraway places such as Algeria and Japan claimed victories. The Anglo-American proclivity of the Games was weakening, as was the gender barrier. In 1928, women competed in track and field for the first time (they had competed in gymnastics before), though the fact that several of them passed out during the 800-meter run led the slate of women’s events to be limited in future Olympics.\(^82\)

The inter-war blossoming of the Games is best exemplified by the 1932 Los Angeles and 1936 Berlin Games. Each nation expanded the importance of the Olympics far beyond what had been attempted before. In 1932, not only did the Olympics make a celebrated return to the United States, they also provided an opportunity to show the world that the Depression was not so bad, that Americans could put on a great show in spite of the hard times. It was the biggest, brassiest Olympics to date, as Angelinos outdid all previous hosts in construction of new facilities and excitement. The Americans awed the world with a brand-new, massive 105,000 capacity stadium, as well as many other smaller venues, such as an indoor auditorium, swimming pool, and arenas for cycling and shooting. Most spectacular was the massive Olympic Village, so huge it required its own zip code.\(^83\)

\(^{80}\) Collins, 62-91; Johnson, 134-138; Henry, 84-97.
\(^{81}\) Collins, 92-101; Johnson, 140-146; Henry, 98-113.
\(^{82}\) Collins, 102-121; Johnson, 147-161; Henry, 114-153.
\(^{83}\) Collins, 123; Johnson 161-172; Henry, 154-173.
Four years later, the Germans took every innovation from the Los Angeles Games and made it even bigger, more elaborate. The 1936 Games are probably the most famous, as Adolf Hitler and the Nazis publicized their regime and its organizational abilities by staging the largest Olympics to date. The entire city of Berlin underwent a facelift, as Nazi regalia adorned seemingly every building, and the streets were pristine. The Opening Ceremonies in Berlin dwarfed even those of Los Angeles, as the Olympic torch paraded before thousands of rod-stiff German soldiers and a row of massive German flags before lighting the flame. The sheer size of the Games was nearly matched by its political import, as not only the draconian measures of the Nazi regime but also because its stringent racial policies led to many protests. The Berlin Games, the last held before 1948, set a standard for spectacle, as well as for politicization, that would remain unmatched, perhaps until 1968.\(^{84}\)

Even as the Games had increased in size and importance, it was not until after World War II that circumstances would allow for a nation such as Mexico to host. The Olympics still had not been to a city outside of Europe or the United States, and membership in the IOC was still restricted compared to the current enrollment. As described later in this chapter, the massive political changes wrought by World War II led the Olympics to new lands, including Melbourne in 1956 and Tokyo in 1964. The post-war period is best characterized by its continued expansion, not only in sheer numbers of participants, but more importantly its extension to all corners of the globe.

After an understandably tepid resumption of the Olympics in war-torn London in 1948, the Games resumed their prosperity in Helsinki in 1952. More nations and more athletes participated than ever before, a trend speeded by the entry of the Soviet Union for the first time. The Cold War was palpable in Helsinki, as every match-up pitting a prominent American against a prominent Soviet was highlighted.

The Melbourne Games in 1956 were the last held before Mexico City began making a serious push to bring the Olympics to Mexico, and they highlighted many of the problems of the ever-expanding Olympics. One disturbing trend on the mind of IOC members was the possibility that the Olympics were expanding to the point that it was not feasible for most nations to stage them. An effort to bring the Games to new locales, in this case Australia, almost ruined them, as the Australians struggled to raise money for improvements that were barely completed by the Opening Ceremonies. Then, too, there was the overwhelming weight of outside diplomatic events lingering over the Games. Clashes between the Soviet Union and Hungary, and Israel and Egypt, led to boycotts and protests, as did a number of other events. Politics and the Olympics, contrary to the hopes of IOC founders and visionaries such as new president Avery Brundage, were inextricably tied. All of these concerns would play a role in Mexico City’s bid for the Games, in addition to their ability to successfully host them. By the mid-1950s, the Olympic Games approached the size and scope of those in 1968, and they had expanded enough to make a Mexican bid credible. Still, other changes in the Olympic movement encouraged the Mexicans even more.\(^{85}\)

One such development was the advance of technology. It is said that technology has made the world smaller, and indeed new technologies did bring more nations into the Olympic fold. One of the problems plaguing the early Games was the prohibitive expense of

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travel. The St. Louis Games of 1904 almost killed the Olympic revival, as only eleven nations could afford the time or money of sending a team; many of the best athletes even from within the United States failed to make the trip. With improvements in automobiles, ships, and airplanes, more teams could realistically travel to the Olympics. One reason for the monopoly of western cities on the early Olympics was their centrality; other locations were simply too remote. By the World War II era, this hurdle, while not entirely removed, was more easily cleared by many nations.

Technology also encouraged the publicity of the Games, and hence encouraged interest even in faraway lands. The explosion in print media of the late 19th and early 20th centuries allowed many individuals to read of the exploits of their favorite athletes. While in America this led to the creation of athletic “heroes” such as Red Grange and Babe Ruth, other nations as well took pride in the achievements of their athletes. And nations not involved in the Olympics could at least learn about them, and aspire to them. Athletes in underdeveloped countries were not likely to even have heard of the Olympics early in the 20th century, let alone thought about participating. But as word trickled down through newspapers and other media, interest in the farthest reaches of the world increased.

The development of radio and, later, television only hastened such growth. Sport was a central component of much early programming for both of these technologies, and in many ways the Olympics grew up with them as brother and sister. Radio, which blossomed in the 1920s and ‘30s, allowed listeners to hear the action at their favorite sporting events live, getting some sense of the thrill of actually being there. While baseball games and boxing matches were standard radio events, the Olympics offered different fare for the sports aficionado, one that had attracted only limited interest by the early 1930s. With the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, that began to change. For the first time, the Olympics were on the radio, and many Americans tuning in to support their home-grown Games became lifelong fans of the Games. By the mid-1930s, radio was universal enough to strengthen the Nazi movement, and Hitler capitalized on it to publicize the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Those Games were the first broadcast internationally, and individuals in distant nations learned of Hitler and of the Olympics at the same time. They grew even more famous through the production of Leni Reifenstahl’s massive documentary film, “Olympia,” as film, too, contributed to the growth of the Games. Finally, newsreels shown before feature films brought Olympic highlights to millions of viewers throughout the middle of the twentieth century.

Television provided still another forum for publicity in the post-World War II era. Viewers were able to watch the athletes in real time, to study their techniques and improve their own. They could finally “see” their heroes, and this attachment launched the popularity of sports in general to new heights. Television also offered new financial opportunities – opportunities that irrevocably changed the way sports operated. While the Games were first “televised” in 1936, the first meaningful television exposure for the Olympics came after World War II. With television came not only increased exposure, but also money. Squabbling over television rights for the 1956 Melbourne Olympics led international broadcasters to refuse to pay any rights, and thus there was a virtual blackout. Avery Brundage recognized the damage such lack of exposure could mean to the Olympic movement, but at the same time he dreaded the prospect that escalating

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rights fees might turn the leaders of the Olympic movement into a bunch of greedy money-grubbers instead of ambassadors for amateur sport – a prospect that recent history has shown he was correct to dread. As Brundage said in 1965, “One should be suspicious of any amateur organization that has money. The minute this occurs its complexion changes and not for the better.”87 In spite of the ominous rumblings inspired by increased revenue, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw the Olympics and television grow up together. Television brought the Olympics to nations too remote for actual travel and too small to host a large sporting festival, and the Olympics brought a guaranteed huge viewing audience every four years. Beginning in Rome in 1960, the Olympics became one of the most sought-after athletic events for viewers and advertisers alike. The cost for rights to televise them ran well into the millions, and it continues growing today. The advent of satellite transmissions in 1962 sparked even more growth, as now audiences could watch the Games live around the world, regardless of where they were being held. With increased money and exposure came more interest from aspiring athletes around the world. The Olympics as we know them now are a creation of television and the dollars it brings, for now billions of people around the world watch, and millions hope to participate themselves. It has become a truly global spectacle, having shed the regional clothes of its youth.88

Certainly the growth of the Games and increased exposure through improved technologies helped to create an environment in which Mexico City might be considered as a host city, but there were other factors at work as well. It is impossible to envision Mexico City winning the bid for the Games in a world that was not deep in the throes of the Cold War, having recently recovered from World War II. The war itself hastened the global expansion of the Games. Upon the end of the war in 1945, the IOC was determined to resume the regular staging of the Games at four-year intervals. However, Europe was decimated by the war, and few countries could even conceive of hosting the Olympics, let alone the huge costs in time, money, and labor that such an undertaking would entail. There was only one city on the traditional Olympic circuit with the facilities to hold the Games on relatively short notice: London. It had suffered through years of bombing and the terrors of war, and in 1945 was more a wasteland than one of the greatest cities in the world. Still, its facilities were the best available, and could be restored in time for the 1948 Games. The Games did go on that year, but were cause for great controversy and calls for change from IOC members. The world in general could mount but little enthusiasm to attend the Games as it recovered from the war, and witnessing the shell-shocked buildings and streets of London, even after three years of recovery, revived tragic memories more than it buried them. The IOC recognized that a change of scenery, away from the war-torn nations, might help, and at the same time would spread to new regions the “amity and understanding the Games would promote.”89 With that in mind, the selection of host cities in the years after World War II abandoned

89 Espy, 24.
the pattern of the pre-war years. New European cities were chosen, Helsinki in 1952 and Rome in 1960. But the IOC also sent the Games far afield during this period, to Melbourne in 1956, Tokyo in 1964, and Mexico City in 1968.

The war changed the world in more profound ways than the ruins of bombing and the scars of battle. Politically and ideologically, the post-war era delivered radical changes that took the Olympic movement in new directions. Seizing on the weakened state of virtually every colonial power, colonial territories launched revolutions around the world in the late 1940s. As Germany, France, Britain, and Japan lost control of their former territories, the 1940s and ‘50s saw the creation of a spate of new nations, most important of which for the IOC were those in Africa. Not only did these nations create their own governments, but many also created their own National Olympic Committees. No longer willing to be held down, they demanded a fundamental restructuring of the IOC. Previously, the IOC was an entirely independent body, designed to rise above the shifting plates of the geopolitical world. The Committee, its original members chosen by Pierre de Coubertin himself, chose its own members, based on criteria related only to one’s sporting experience and expertise. National or political allegiance was theoretically of no significance. In the post-World War II world, however, this system proved unmanageable, for a committee that chose its own members was under no obligation to select representatives from the newly created countries. Under literally a world of pressure, the IOC changed its format to allow each National Olympic Committee to choose representatives to the IOC. With this change came a dramatic shift in the direction of Olympic policy, away from its early roots in America and Europe, and towards other regions. This new direction was a key component in the selection of Mexico City for the 1968 Olympics, as its support derived mainly from nations in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, rather than the United States and Europe.\footnote{Leiper, 108-111; Edwards 233-234.}

The political restructuring of the post-war world also led quickly to the Cold War, in which the great powers of the United States and Russia divided the globe into their two spheres of influence. This rivalry played out in the fields of sport as clearly as in other arenas, and reached the Olympics after much controversy in the early 1950s. The Soviets, dispelling the western belief in the separation of sport and politics, drew direct connections between success in athletics and political strength. As such, they sought to defeat other nations, most importantly the United States, in sport, to symbolize the superiority of their political system as well. While there was considerable resistance to this effort, by 1948 the IOC, true to its apolitical doctrine, allowed the Soviets to send a team of observers to the London Games, in preparation for full participation in 1952. The entry of the Soviet Union into the Olympic fold had a profound impact on many aspects of international sport, among them Mexico’s bid for the Olympic Games. Without the support of the Soviets and the bloc of nations that came with them, Mexico had no chance.

Related to the admission of the Soviet Union to the IOC, the Cold War created another condition that was vital to the selection of Mexico City, simple and yet of critical importance. As did most things during the Cold War, the National Olympic Committees, and thus the International Olympic Committee, slid naturally into voting blocs that closely followed the ideological basis of government in each nation. In broadest terms, these blocs were capitalist versus socialist. But within these broad categories were various factions that might drift with the tides, including an “African bloc,” a “Spanish
bloc,” and several others. These blocs, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter, were vital to Mexico City’s selection to host the Games.91

A final factor that helped ripen conditions for Mexico City’s selection was the ascent of Avery Brundage to presidency of the International Olympic Committee. Brundage, an American, spent his entire life involved in the Olympic movement. He had participated in the 1912 Stockholm Olympics, bested by Jim Thorpe while finishing sixth in the pentathalon. He was a lifelong supporter of the Olympic movement, who held in highest order the mandate to separate sport from politics. He summed up his views on sport and politics with a quote from John Galsworthy, which he often cited:

Sport, which still keeps the flag of idealism flying, is perhaps the most saving grace in the world at the moment, with its spirit of rules kept, and regard for the adversary, whether the fight is going for or against. When, if ever, the spirit of sport, which is the spirit of fair play, reigns over international affairs, the cat force, which rules there now, will slink away, and human life emerge for the first time from the jungle.92

Historians might quibble about his own political leanings, but in his role as president of the IOC Brundage did attempt to elevate its workings above the inevitable political differences among nations. As later chapters will demonstrate, it was impossible to keep the two completely separated, and the 1968 Olympics themselves were embroiled in political controversies. Still, Brundage’s neutrality in decision-making trickled down throughout the IOC, and encouraged many members to consider the candidacy of a city like Mexico City, which would have been unthinkable before. Indeed, it was with Brundage’s blessing and support that Mexico City ultimately won the bid for the 1968 Games.93

In 1926, the world was no more ready for Mexico to host the Olympics than Mexico itself was ready to assume such a monumental task. Only after nearly a half-century of political and economic development was the nation capable of bearing the organizational and structural demands of staging the Games. Only after many years of improving sporting facilities and groups were Mexicans even interested in hosting them. And only with monumental changes within the organization of the International Olympic Committee and its guiding vision was the international sporting community ready to consider a site like Mexico City. Still, even as this remarkable evolution along so many fronts did take place, Mexico City was by no means the favorite to win the bid. Facing stiff competition from cities representing the traditional Olympic powers of the United States and France, it took a dramatic show-down in the German resort town of Baden-Baden to swing the IOC vote in Mexico’s favor.

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91 Leiper, 109.
93 Ibid, 110-131; Espy, 39.
CHAPTER II: BADEN-BADEN

Dr. Eduardo Hay tapped his foot nervously. Nearly two years of work was about to come to fruition – or be rendered meaningless. It was seven p.m., October 18, 1963, and the International Olympic Committee was about to announce whether Hay and his colleagues had convinced the Committee to select Mexico City for the 1968 Olympic Games.

Hay looked around the table, exchanging glances with the men who had worked so hard for this moment. There was Pedro Ramirez Vazquez. An architect by trade, Ramirez Vazquez was renowned for his design of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, the 100,000 seat Aztec football stadium, and dozens of other buildings. He had been drawn into the world of international events by his work on the Mexican pavilions at several World’s Fairs, and found himself at the forefront of Mexico’s efforts to win the Olympics. Stern, formal, focused, his face betrayed no emotion at this moment.

Next to Ramirez Vazquez sat the patriarch of the Mexican Olympic movement, Marte Rodolfo Gomez. A former Secretary of Agriculture in Mexico, his efforts in solving nutrition and health problems had led him naturally to the study of sport. Now 67 years old, Gomez had been an IOC member since 1934, and bringing the Olympics to Mexico had become his obsession. Next to him sat the other senior member of the group, General Jose de Jesus Clark Flores, whose life had been dedicated to two passions: the military and sport. Not only was he the highest ranking military official in Mexico, he could claim legitimate title as the highest ranking sporting official as well. Skilled in fencing and basketball, Clark presided over the Mexican Basketball Association, the Mexican Sports Confederation, and had been on the organizing committees of both the 1954 Central American and Caribbean Games and the 1955 Pan-American Games. As the Vice-President of the IOC, Clark had reached the highest post ever achieved by a representative from a Latin-American country.

And there was Hay’s best friend, Dr. Josue Saenz, who had been involved in the Mexican sporting movement as long as any of the others. While his background was economics, Saenz had a passion for organizing major sporting events, most recently Mexico’s Pan-American Games of 1955. Their eyes met for a moment, and Saenz gave a nod. He knew that Hay had played a key role in the proceedings. It had fallen upon him to defend the Mexican bid from the many critics who believed the city’s elevation was an insurmountable obstacle. An experienced athlete and former Central-American champion in fencing, Hay knew well the dangers of the thin air, both real and perceived. He had been the final speaker on the Mexican docket, and his remarks were met with enthusiastic applause. Still, he knew the vote would be close, and as the Belgian Yvar Vind, the
supervisor of the vote, approached the podium, Hay struggled to suppress the doubt that threatened to overwhelm him.\textsuperscript{94}

It had been a long week. The Mexican group had been the first to arrive, reaching the German resort town of Baden-Baden on October 12th after an exhausting two-day journey from Mexico City. Baden-Baden, an oasis on the edge of the Black Forest, a dream-like collection of gardens, spas, and palatial casinos framed in Greek colonnades, under normal circumstances is a vacationer’s paradise. For the Mexican delegation, though, it was the scene of constant effort, and the stress only heightened as the day of the vote neared. The Mexicans stayed up virtually all night on October 17th, the night before the presentations, making final preparations, memorizing speeches, and fine-tuning their display. The International Committee assembled to hear the presentations at 10 a.m. on October 18th. Buenos Aires, the Argentinian nominee, opened the proceedings at 10 a.m. Detroit, of the United States, followed at 10:45. After a break, the French city of Lyon resumed the hearings at 3 p.m. The Mexican presentation wasn’t scheduled until 4:15, so the group spent the better part of the day listening to the other talks, searching for chinks in the armor of their rivals, and fiddling nervously in anticipation of their own speeches. Even after the formal presentation, there were questions and answers, then a break before the final vote. At last, Vind approached the podium to announce the results. “Mexico obtained thirty votes….” he began, and the rest was lost in bedlam. The magic number for a majority, and victory, had been twenty-nine. With the announcement, Hay and the rest of the Mexican delegation, and many others in the room, erupted in applause and shouts of joy. They had come to Baden-Baden as a long-shot candidate. Most observers expected them to finish third, behind Detroit and Lyon. As Gomez and General Clark stepped up to the microphone to accept the nomination and offer thanks to the assembly, Hay patted Saenz on the back and smiled. Later, the reality of their accomplishment, and the enormity of the task they had undertaken, would sink in. For now, there was time only for celebration.\textsuperscript{95}

That Mexico won the “Battle at Baden-Baden” came as a shock to most observers at that time, but in hindsight the victory is hardly surprising. Not only was the international community ready to bring the Olympics to new regions, as described in Chapter I, but also the Mexicans simply out-maneuvered their opponents. Their bid featured a combination of eloquent speeches and skilled answering of difficult questions, as well as deft management of the political tensions of the time. Without the polarized diplomatic communities of the Cold War, it is unlikely that Mexico would have achieved success. But conditions such as they were, it is clear that the Mexican delegation manipulated Cold War tensions to their benefit more skillfully than any other group. This marriage of diplomacy and sport, combined with a masterful campaign and presentation, allowed the Mexicans to defeat rivals that had once appeared unbeatable.

Making an Olympic bid is a massive undertaking, requiring meticulous planning and, just as important, inspired leadership. In Mexico in the early 1960s, that leadership came from President Adolfo Lopez Mateos. An exquisite orator, a poet and a romantic,


Lopez Mateos ruled Mexico through a combination of skillful delegation of authority to capable men, and passionate zeal for reviving the “glory days” of the Mexican Revolution. His admiration for Lazero Cardenas, the most beloved of Mexican presidents, led him to emulate the great reformer, matching or exceeding his achievements whenever possible. He strived to make historic changes, which led him to expropriate the electric power companies, as Cardenas had done with oil; to launch an “eleven-year plan” of educational reforms, including free text-books; to open a series of museums, most notably the world-renowned Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City; and to launch the most extensive agrarian and health reforms since the Cardenas era. In keeping with this trend of history-making acts, Lopez Mateos enthusiastically embraced the idea of winning the Olympic bid as an important achievement in advancing Mexico’s respectability. He supported the effort both financially and rhetorically. Mexico already had most of the required facilities and infrastructure to host the Games, and with an extensive building plan, it had the potential to truly dazzle foreign visitors. Lopez Mateos made it his mission to win such attention for Mexico.  

With the full backing of the President, the Mexican Olympic Committee in 1962 launched an aggressive campaign to win the bid for the 1968 Summer Olympics. Mexico City, along with all other interested cities, was required by the IOC to answer a detailed questionnaire and assemble many supporting documents. A disorganized effort would have failed miserably. The Mexican Olympic Committee responded to these petitions with vigor. They assembled a 180-page book that not only answered those questions posed by the IOC, but volunteered additional information about Mexican culture and history, sporting traditions and facilities, and the omnipresent elevation issue. Like a politician seeking office, the Mexicans seemingly promised everything. Not only would they stage all the expected athletic competitions, but also a “Cultural Olympics,” to include exhibitions of fine arts such as “painting, engraving, architecture, photography, pre-Columbian art and popular handicrafts,” and an extensive program of events such as “concerts of symphonic and chamber music, modern dance recitals, native dances by Indian groups, theater, …rodeos, and fireworks displays.” They would build stadiums, and pools, and ball-courts, a new canal for rowing events, and extensive housing facilities for athletes and spectators alike.  

Problems of financing such facilities could be dealt with later; for the time being, the important thing was to make the right promises to win the vote. Another key element of these early documents was an extensive list of sporting events that had been held in Mexico, and of existing sporting facilities, that ultimately would be a major factor in the successful bid. While other prospective cities could provide virtually no resume of major events, Mexico had established a tradition of bringing international festivals to the country, including the “Central American and Caribbean Games of 1926 and 1954; the Pan American Games of 1955; the Modern Pentathlon World Championship of 1962, and the National Children and Junior Sports Games of 1961 and 1962.” Mexico City’s sports facilities were so extensive that, in reply to a question asking for a list of them, the MOC simply wrote, “Mexico City enjoys sufficient installations for competitions and practice.” In other documents, they would provide a more detailed list of such installations, including over 7,500 civic ball courts.

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97 Mexico XIX Olympic Games, Mexican Olympic Committee (1968): 16, located in the Mexican Olympic Committee archives, Mexico D.F., call # 796.48 J44.
fields, and arenas that could be used in hosting the Games. Few, if any, cities in the world could match those numbers.\textsuperscript{98}

This initial application served as a blueprint for the detailed presentations the Mexican group would give the following year before the official vote. It anticipated much of their argument, including explaining the plans to construct the Olympic village to house athletes, financial plans, demographic information, hotel accommodations, and legal and public programs in place to secure the safety of visitors. It also included an appeal to the diverse nature of IOC members, in one section rambling proudly about Mexico’s promotion of “harmony” between human beings, encouragement of “independence and justice” and “the ideals of brotherhood and equal rights for all men.” The Committee might be forgiven for hyperbole at times – after all, it is not easy to win the bid for the Olympic Games.\textsuperscript{99}

Based on similar submissions from several nations, in December of 1962 the International Olympic Committee narrowed down the competition to four cities: Mexico City, Detroit, Lyon, and Buenos Aires. Even after providing a wealth of information, all four committees were required to answer more questions, most of which revolved around the elevation issue for Mexico City. To meet such demands, Mexican President Lopez Mateos established the Organizing Committee for the Games of the XIX Olympiad, made up of members of the Mexico City government, the federal ministries, and the Mexican Olympic Committee. The creation of this body not only facilitated the bidding process, but also provided the foundation upon which the organization of the Games themselves would rest. The central figure in the preliminary stages of the application was General Clark, who headed an Executive Commission that supervised the completion of various tests and reports, most of which refuted altitude as a problem or a danger to the athletes. In one of these reports, the Mexican representatives “offered to defray the costs incurred in making physical adaptation,” by hosting practice “Olympics,” and allowing athletes to acclimate to the thin air for a sufficient amount of time.\textsuperscript{100} The IOC ultimately shelved its questions until the final meeting, but the international press never quieted on the issue, and most writers seemed to give Mexico only a slim chance of winning the bid, proclaiming that the altitude was an insurmountable problem. As decision-time approached in late 1963, a Mexican victory seemed unlikely.

Perhaps Mexico City’s victory should not have come as such a surprise. Their stiffest competition, Detroit, in some minds was not even the first choice in the United States. Los Angeles, which had hosted the Games as recently as 1932, contested Detroit’s bid only six months prior to the vote in Baden-Baden. The Los Angeles group noted weaknesses in Detroit’s bid, such as lack of hotel space, lack of experience in hosting major sporting events, and lack of funding. Just as important, since October 1962, when it was awarded the USOC nomination, the city of Detroit had shown only modest interest in making a serious bid for the Games. Civic rallies and promotional efforts had failed to stir much excitement. The Detroit committee flooded the city with billboards and television commercials, editorials and print advertisements; but while several thousand Detroiter had sent letters to local papers in support of the bid, more important groups such as hotel owners and tourist agencies were slow to come around. One hotel owner

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid, 13; Mexico ’68, published by the Mexican Olympic Committee, Mexican Olympic Committee Archives, Mexico City. Call # C796.48 M49, vol. 2.
summed up his feelings to Detroit Olympic Committee member Frank Hedge, saying simply, “Detroit really isn’t a good place to hold the Olympics.”\(^{101}\)

If advertisements and billboards couldn’t get up Detroit’s dander, a slap in the face from the powerful Los Angeles committee did. Between February and March of 1963, Los Angeles re-launched a bid for the Games that had been considered dead after the October USOC meeting. While the bid received a tepid welcome from business interests in Detroit, the city of Los Angeles was firmly behind efforts to regain the Games. Not only had Los Angeles hosted the Olympics before, but it also had facilities ready to do so again: a 102,000 seat coliseum, a 17,000 seat indoor arena, and dozens of Olympic-sized swimming pools. While Detroit struggled to win support for a bill to rush production of a $20-million stadium – a stadium that would be shared with the Detroit Lions football team – Los Angeles was ready and waiting to usurp the bid.\(^{102}\)

On February 12, 1963, the USOC finally yielded to growing pressure from the Los Angeles team and agreed to reconsider their selection at their next meeting, March 18-19 in New York. The most damning grievance they presented was that only a handful (later shown to be seven) out of the 34 voting members of the USOC had witnessed the presentation of the Los Angeles group, and many of them did not see any of the presentations. Equally troubling was the fact that only four of those voting were official members; the others were assistants to members, who technically were not allowed to cast a vote. The loud grumblings of the Los Angeles contingent parlayed these oversights into renewed consideration of the candidates.\(^{103}\)

Over the next month, Detroit and Los Angeles waged intense campaigns for the Games, in which politicians, media members, celebrities and former athletes flung barbs at each other and their cities. Detroit Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh complained that the action was “shocking,” and “totally inconsistent with the tradition of the Olympic Games,” and Michigan Governor George Romney griped that Los Angeles was trying to “rob” Detroit.\(^{104}\) Sent reeling for the moment, the Detroit team struggled to right itself over the next few weeks, which it spent dodging the slings and arrows of a ferocious publicity campaign out of Los Angeles. The arguments from Los Angeles were more than just empty thunder; they raised serious questions about the legitimacy of Detroit’s bid. Detroit lacked sufficient housing to support the athletes and coaches who came with the Olympics, let alone the huge crowds of spectators. It had little experience in staging large sports festivals. It had no Olympic stadium, an issue that the Los Angeles Times mentioned almost daily between February 12 and March 18, and one that would be raised again in Baden-Baden. Just as important, what plans Detroit did have for a stadium hinged on a massive bond issue, an increased tax on pari-mutuel horse track betting, and federal assistance, which combined might still fall short of footing the estimated $100 million bill to pay for the Games.\(^{105}\) Finally, Detroit had received the nomination of the USOC for the last four Olympiads, failing to win the international vote each time.\(^{106}\)

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\(^{101}\) "Two Cities Battle to Host the Olympics,” \textit{Business Week} (23 Feb. 1963): 36.

\(^{102}\) Ibid.


\(^{104}\) Paul Zimmerman, “L.A. Gets New Chance.”


\(^{106}\) In 1948, Detroit received only 2 votes against eventual winner Helsinki and a host of other candidates for the 1952 Games. In 1949, for the 1956 Games, Detroit received 4 votes to Melbourne’s 21 and Buenos Aires 20. In 1954, for the 1960 Games, Detroit received 11 votes to 26 for Rome and 21 for Lausanne. In
Los Angeles countered each of these weaknesses with a strength. It boasted some 30,000 hotel rooms, to less than 10,000 in Detroit. It had hosted many athletic festivals, including the Olympics in 1932. It had a stadium at the ready, which with minor improvement would be “the best of its kind in America.”

Los Angeles’ supporters also advanced other arguments, some of which might open questions about the integrity of the Olympic bidding process. One such argument, mentioned repeatedly in the press, was that the Los Angeles Olympics would profit between $2 and $5 million, which would be “divided among the United States Olympic Committee, the International Olympic Committee and various sports federations.”

Paul Zimmerman, Sports Editor of the Los Angeles Times and the most vocal supporter of the Los Angeles bid, also noted that Southern California had contributed more money to the United States’ Olympic effort than any other region, over $1 million from 1948-1960. Over the same period, Detroit had raised only a few hundred thousand dollars. He asks, “Would you, as a director of the United States Olympic Committee…kiss off that kind of money? Or forsake your friends who have raised a million dollars compared to peanuts from another city?” He concluded the column by wondering whether the USOC would be motivated more by “politics and bias” or by “a genuine interest in the betterment of the national Olympic effort.”

Or, one might add, were they motivated by financial gain? The exchange of votes for financial support amounts to little more than bribery, and in light of more recent scandals associated with the Olympic bidding prospects, it is unlikely that the media would approach these issues so lightly today. If such references to profit for USOC members appeared openly in the press, what kinds of deals may have been made under the table?

In fact, the Los Angeles team was not above making deals publicly, as they attempted to do with the organizers of San Francisco’s bid attempt. When the USOC reopened consideration for the bid in February, San Francisco rejoined the contest with vigor. Still, it was lightly regarded, a “dark horse” at best, who might sneak in if Detroit and Los Angeles somehow cancelled each other out. In early March, county supervisors in Los Angeles approached those in San Francisco with a “trade” offer: if San Francisco dropped out of the race for the 1968 Olympic bid, Los Angeles would support San Francisco for the 1964 Democratic National Conventions. San Francisco county supervisors accepted the offer, and attempted to send the city’s Olympic bid to a committee, where it would die. USOC member Tom Hamilton, a supporter of the San Francisco bid, got wind of the plan and attended the committee meeting. His impassioned pleas kept alive San Francisco’s efforts, and the plot was foiled. Still, the episode demonstrates the seriousness, some would say deviousness, of Los Angeles’ efforts to win the Olympics.

In March 1963, the USOC reconvened to hear the presentations of each of the cities again. If star-power alone had determined the winner, Los Angeles would have won.
in a landslide. During its presentation before the USOC on March 18, the committee rolled out celebrities such as Jackie Robinson, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Peggy Lee, Zsa Zsa Gabor, John Carradine and Rudy Vallee to support its bid. The group was further backed by a power-packed “Committee of 100,” including other celebrities, radio and media personalities, businessmen, politicians, and sports officials. Several members of this group appeared on a local television program to publicize their case. In addition, the president of the USOC, Kenneth L. Wilson, was flooded with letters from Angelinos, the result of a letter-writing campaign engineered by Mayor Sam Yorty. Detroit countered with a powerful lobby of its own, including Governor Romney and Mayor Cavanagh. It also hired a “high powered public relations firm” that, a week before the final vote, issued false press releases that Wilson and Avery Brundage had conceded the race to Detroit.

Two late revelations made the final vote even more compelling. The Detroit team was boosted by last-minute news that the Michigan legislature had approved a plan to finance the Olympic stadium, thus clearing a major hurdle for their bid. The Los Angeles group, after lobbying fiercely for the re-vote, was stung by the announcement that the neighboring city of Long Beach was planning to host the World’s Fair in 1967 and ‘68. While this coincidence did not officially break the IOC rule against awarding the Olympics to a city holding the World’s Fair at the same time, Long Beach was near enough that it made a Los Angeles victory unlikely. Even a hasty letter from Nelson McCook, the president of the Long Beach World’s Fair board, promising to reschedule the event should Los Angeles win the Olympic bid, could not shake the pall from the Los Angeles team.

After a month of bitter politicking, Detroit was re-elected in resounding fashion, receiving 36 of the 44 votes, to Los Angeles’ four, San Francisco’s two, and one each for Portland and Philadelphia. Governor Romney found it hard to be excited at the outcome, choosing instead to throw a few final barbs at California Governor Pat Brown, who had challenged Detroit’s financial stability and worthiness to host such an enormous festival. Romney said, “I told the committee...if you are interested in a stadium and you want a 1932 model, you can go to Los Angeles. But if you want a 1963 model, you come to Detroit.” These jabs aside, the Los Angeles “Committee of 100” and others took their defeat graciously and promised to support Detroit’s bid for the Olympics.

In truth, though, the attacks from Los Angeles and the other challengers did weaken Detroit’s bid for the Olympics, and offered a clue as to what was to come in Baden-Baden. Many of Detroit’s flaws had been aired in the press for several months, and the Detroit organizing committee had been forced to waffle, to waiver, to whine, and

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to change its stadium plans several times.¹²¹ None of these actions were becoming of a committee theoretically slated to put together the largest athletic festival in the world.

Still, when the contending delegations went to Germany that fall, Detroit was considered the heavy favorite to win the bid. Between March and October, numerous reports surfaced, supporting the impression that the United States’ nominee would win the international vote as well. The press emphasized this point repeatedly, quoting members of the USOC such as Doug Roby, saying, “It looks more and more as if the United States is going to get the Games,”¹²² and IOC President Avery Brundage, who later denied saying, “none of the other countries bidding for the Games is as serious as the United States.”¹²³ Neither the Mexicans nor the French were willing to concede without a struggle, and in fact all three nations had reason to believe that the vote that October would swing their way.¹²⁴

After struggling to hold off the challenge from Los Angeles, Detroit found its support strengthened within the city and throughout the nation. Its backers included many high-profile Americans. Governor Romney lobbied fiercely for the Games, and flew to Germany as part of Detroit’s delegation. He brought a 37-minute movie that included a greeting from President Kennedy. Former President Dwight D. Eisenhower had mailed personal letters to each of the 60 members of the IOC, bearing a special July 4 postmark from the Gettysburg post office. Such extravagances were a small part of the massive $250,000 publicity campaign launched by Detroit once it had secured the American nomination. Another was the celebrated running of the Olympic flame from Los Angeles to Detroit, which was intended to symbolize the passing of the torch from the 1932 Olympic hosts to the anticipated 1968 hosts. To much fanfare, the torch left Los Angeles – not from the Coliseum where the flame had been extinguished 31 years before, but from City Hall – and was trotted across the country to Detroit. Skeptics noted that such antics were appropriate for the Detroit bid. All flash and no substance.¹²⁵

But Detroit’s bid was not to be taken lightly. If such things as the running of the torch provided flash, the substance of the bid came from a more profound source. For Detroit was the chosen nominee of the United States, the most powerful nation in the world. What the United States wanted, it usually got, and where the United States led, many others followed. So while the Detroit delegation did not dazzle with the cultural significance of the Olympics or the rich history of its city, it did carry the full backing of the United States. The United States had not hosted the Olympics since 1932, the longest such drought in U.S. Olympic history. More important, a bid that brought with it the full support of some of the most important and visible men in the world, including Presidents

¹²¹ The Detroit group lowered the estimated cost of its stadium project from $35 million, to $25 million, to $20 million, also altering its maximum seating capacity as cost became the major obstacle to their bid.
¹²² Zimmerman, “L.A. Gets New Chance.”
¹²⁴ The only city mounting a truly futile bid was Buenos Aires. The insignificance of the threat posed by Buenos Aires is evident in the official minutes of this meeting. In the section detailing each city’s presentation, the other cities responded to serious questions about their bid and clarified key points (Mexico City, for example, “refuted the arguments concerning the difficulty of athletes adapting themselves to a high altitude.”) The Buenos Aires delegation, by contrast, seems only to have “proposed the dates of April/May or September/October” in its closing statement. This hardly seems like the powerful presentation expected for a winning bid. “Minutes of the 60th Session,” 69.
Eisenhower and Kennedy, a huge publicity campaign and all the muscle associated with being a super-power, was difficult to deny.

The French were confident, too, and not just from stereotypical French arrogance (although French representative Tony Bertrand raised a few eyebrows the day before the final vote, when he laughed and said, “We’re going to win, hands down. There is no question of that. We have all that Detroit lists – and much more besides”). He did have reason to be confident. France had traditionally been awarded every third Olympics. With Tokyo hosting in 1964 and Rome in 1960, France had every reason to expect the victory. Lyon also had the advantage of being centrally located, in a region that nations from Africa and the Middle East could easily reach. The Lyon delegation had promised to enlarge the local airport to satisfy the needs of such a large gathering, to expand the stadium from a capacity of 60,000 to 95,000, and had assurances from the French government that money would be provided to improve roads and cheapen hotel rates. Finally, Lyon offered a small-town charm that could not be matched by the other candidates, and would be welcomed after the gala affairs in Rome and Tokyo. Could any of the other cities match the appeal of walking from the Olympic stadium to many of the greatest restaurants in the world, enjoying a glass of fine local wine, and concluding the evening with a stroll along the Rhone River? Indeed, the French would be tough to beat.

The Mexicans hoped to capitalize on whatever advantages might be derived from being the “underdog”, not the least of which was a humility that brought with it a sense of purpose. The Mexicans knew that a win was unlikely, so they paid attention to every detail, and they politicked with anyone and everyone. It only became clear after the final tally that the Mexicans simply tried harder. They were the first group to arrive in Baden-Baden, and they made the most of their time. Two days before the presentations, before the other groups even arrived, the Mexicans ventured to the casino where the meetings would be held. Hotel staff showed them the meeting hall, and one of the Mexican architects, on hand to help assemble their display, asked what space they could have. The reply was exactly what they hope to hear, “Take whatever space you want. Just divide it into three and pick your space.” The hallway leading into the room led up a ramp and into the left side of the room. The Mexicans astutely chose the far left portion for their display, so that all who entered the room would see the Mexican display first.

They made good use of this advantage. Their presentation focused on the Mexican people, on their history and heritage. They imported hundreds of items from the Mexico City Archaeological Museum. One of these was a huge statue of the Aztec God Quetzalcoatl, which they propped in prime position at the end of the ramp leading into the room. As the foreign delegates arrived, the statue was there to welcome them, with one arm up pointing the way into the convention hall. They followed the way straight to the Mexican display. From the very beginning, the Mexican presence was the most obvious at the meeting. When the other groups arrived, they were incensed that the Mexicans had gained such an advantage. Their German hosts were embarrassed, but what could they do? The Mexicans had been first, but had committed no wrongdoing by partitioning the

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128 Hay interview.
room. They were allowed to stay, and throughout the convention the delegates were greeted by the Mexican display on their way into the meeting hall.\(^{129}\)

While the Mexicans did everything they could to gain some advantage prior to the final presentations, they still faced formidable competition from the other delegations, each of whom had forty-five minutes on October 18 to state their case one last time. The Americans were the first of the serious contenders to make their presentation, and it was a dazzling show. At their allotted time, the American group stepped to the fore. As with all groups, they were introduced by titles they had provided beforehand, and the list was filled with high-ranking political officials, presidents of huge corporations and the like. After a few brief speeches, the Americans turned to the centerpiece of their presentation, a film touting Detroit and all its merits. The first face on the screen was John F. Kennedy, who offered the assembly his “warmest and most cordial welcome.” He praised the city of Detroit as one of America’s finest, and a great sporting city. He concluded by saying, “I appreciate this opportunity to appear before you, and may all of you have the wisdom ascribed to the Olympian gods in arriving at your very difficult decision.”\(^{130}\) It was an eloquent and appropriate introduction, and the crowd was dutifully attentive for the rest of the film.

As the film rolled, the Mexicans squirmed a bit in their seats. Hay and Ramirez Vasquez shared a nervous shrug, for they knew something that the rest of the audience would never discover – the Mexicans had hoped to match the glitz and showmanship of the American contingent with a film of their own. Their film, though, never made it to the screen before the Committee. The delegation had left Mexico City before the film was finished, and they trusted that the completed version would be useful. The day before the presentations, it still had not arrived, and members of the Mexican committee were growing restless. At last, late that evening, a messenger burst into the Mexican suite – he had the film. The Mexicans, finding that they had no projector, borrowed one from the United States committee. Excited, the group sat down to watch the movie. Out of the initial pops and scribbles of the reel-to-reel picture came the dust-blown images, in black and white, common to spaghetti westerns, as well as many Mexican films. There were horses, and cactuses, and gunshots, and re-enactments of the Mexican Revolution. “My god, what is this?” Dr. Hay asked. Before the film ended, the group agreed that it could not be used. In his words, it was a “very nice, very typical Mexican movie.” But it was not the stuff with which to impress the IOC. After several panicked minutes, the committee decided to claim that the projector and the film were incompatible. The projector wouldn’t take it. So there would be no film.\(^{131}\)

Instead, the Mexicans relied on a series of speakers, which stood in stark contrast with the theatrical efforts of the American group. It was an effective gambit, even if it was forced upon them by necessity. Each of the speakers was an accomplished orator, and the subject matter appealed to the audience. The committee broke down their speaking corps so that each spoke about a particular area of expertise. The panel of five addressed such matters as the financing of the games, the staging of sporting events, the facilities available, the history and culture of Mexico, and the make-or-break issue of the altitude. Mexican Senator Carillo offered one of the most well-received speeches, about the Mexican people. He had been educated at the University of Texas, and won many

\(^{129}\) Ibid.


\(^{131}\) Hay interview.
awards in speech contests there. His polished style showed during his presentation, as many in the crowd appeared genuinely moved by his discussion of simple, humble, hard-working and honest people. These were not selfish folks out to make a buck from the Games. They were a determined people who had transformed their nation after the Mexican Revolution, and the Olympics would symbolize the success of that transformation. The audience applauded him loudly.

The most important of the speeches was that of Dr. Hay, whose specialty was the altitude issue. Many delegates assumed that the Mexican bid was doomed to fail, as rumors swirled that the thin air could kill an athlete pushing himself to his physical limits. Dr. Hay, in eloquent fashion, not only defused these rumors, but even made the altitude a positive point. He argued that the climate in Mexico City is the best in the world, as the high air makes the weather pleasant and cool year-round. Just as important, Hay delivered the speech in French, rather than English, as all other speakers had done. By speaking French, Hay reached another segment of the delegation without alienating anyone; it was a sly maneuver. The speech included an impressive list of events and festivals that Mexico City had hosted previously, never with any serious altitude-related incidents. He concluded the speech with a powerful message, again countering that of the Americans, saying, “[We seek the Games] not for us, not for our business, but for our youth. That is why we are asking for this. Not to have another title. You can be sure that the Mexican public will be with you with the best of them.”

When the speeches, and the politicking, and back-room dealing was finished, all the contending nations had to wait for the final vote. The Mexicans had done a masterful job in all phases of the competition, but Detroit and Lyon had both made good presentations as well, and no one was assured of victory. On the morning of the vote, the Mexican delegation awoke to find a shock on the front page of the newspaper: the United States Senate had approved a $4.2 billion aid fund. The package promised to continue sending aid to developing Latin American nations, but more important hoped to extend aid to Communist countries such as Poland and Yugoslavia, part of the Soviet bloc that the Mexicans had wooed so zealously. This announcement threatened to kill all the dealing the Mexicans had done. Aztec artifacts are nice, but they were no substitute for $4.2 billion! The team went into one last damage-control campaign, seeking out the Russian delegates. Did the aid package change anything? Could they still count on the Soviet vote? The Russians assured them that nothing had changed; their votes would still go to Mexico. Breathing easier, though still not certain of victory, on the afternoon of October 18 the Mexicans joined the rest of the IOC for the vote.

The Mexicans tallied 30 of the 58 votes cast, just over the 50% required to secure the nomination on the first ballot. Detroit received 14, Lyon 12, and non-challenger Buenos Aires 2. Had Mexico City not won over 50% of the votes on the first ballot, the top two would have had a run-off. In that event, Detroit would likely have won, as few countries would have added to the Mexican total, while virtually all would have switched to Detroit. It was a close finish.

Of course, the outcome was cause for tremendous celebration from the Mexican contingent. The hall was filled with whoops and cheers from that section, and while other delegates could only kick the floor in frustration, the Mexicans danced a conga line.

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134 Ibid.
around the room. It was a well-earned victory, and a landmark in Olympic history.

Following the vote, the Americans and French prepared to leave Baden-Baden, while the Mexicans prepared for a great party. Prior to the convention, Mexican delegates had inquired about the possibility of a victory celebration in the unlikely event that they secured the nomination. There was no room, they were told – the Americans and French had both already booked the ballrooms for their own victory celebrations. Food and spirits had already been ordered and paid for. However, the hotelier told them, if by some miracle you do win, you will enjoy a lavish celebration on the house. The Mexicans made good on that offer, enjoying a five-star spread of food and wine, paid for by the defeated teams. It was a final touch of irony to a weekend that saw the Mexicans out-wit their competitors on many fronts.

As they packed their bags and boarded their respective flights home, both the victors and the losers had to wonder how this had happened. How did the lowly Mexican squad manage to upset the much slicker and better-financed teams from the United States and France? The answer to this question is a complex mix of timing, Cold-War politics, and solid fundamental qualities offered by the Mexicans.

The Mexican victory was based on much more than fancy and well-positioned displays. In truth, the political climate of the Cold War had created factions in the IOC, and with these factions voting blocs that determined the outcome of every major decision. Few nations were able to capitalize on these factions so well as Mexico, which, while it might not have had so many natural supporters as the United States, also had fewer opponents. The Mexicans, as a Latin-American nation, recognized far better than the Americans or the French that the Olympic movement encompasses dozens of nations that do not identify immediately with European ideals, or capitalist notions. Many, in fact, are repelled when such ideas are pushed upon them. The Mexican group knew that the Americans, in particular, might alienate other delegations without even realizing it. They were ready to win over any nations so repulsed. Through tireless effort and promotion, the Mexican delegation constructed a coalition of Latin-American and African nations, coupled with the Soviet bloc, which proved just powerful enough to overcome the United States and its allies. The Mexican campaign succeeded not only by attractive displays, then, but also by manipulation of Cold War tensions.

The Mexicans observed the presentations of the other groups with careful scrutiny, noting opportunities to gain approval for themselves. They noticed several weaknesses in the behavior and strategy of the American team; however small, they provided chinks in what had once seemed invincible armor. The American delegation routinely arrived at convention sites in stretch limousines with all the trappings, laughing and chatting amongst themselves with little attention to other delegates. They generally carried themselves with a haughty air, and put little effort into winning over the voting nations. They also spoke English, a weakness they perhaps could not help, but nonetheless connected them with a small group of nations, while alienating many others.135

Each of these flaws was on full display on the night of October 17, the night before the final presentations and the vote. It had been a busy day for all the groups, and many were eager for a fine dinner. Baden-Baden, a small town, had few restaurants to offer, but word got around that a world-class restaurant was not too far away, hidden in the Black Forest. The Mexicans headed out, crammed into two simple cars. They spent

the drive as they had spent virtually every waking moment for months, discussing the other groups and plotting strategies. In mid-drive, the Mexicans were startled as a massive limousine zoomed past, followed by several more. Dr. Hay turned to his wife and muttered, “My goodness, there won’t be any room for us.” Indeed, when they trickled in to the restaurant a few minutes later, the American and French teams had already ensconced themselves at most of the tables, while others waited near the door. There was no space. The Mexicans glanced around the restaurant, but seeing no open tables they resigned themselves to return to Baden-Baden. In the parking lot, they were stopped by one of the restaurant staff, obviously unhappy with the crowd of Americans. “Are you the Mexicans?” he asked. “Wait a moment. We have a space for you.” He led the delegation through a side door, where they were given a private room to enjoy a marvelous dinner. As he sipped a glass of fine wine, Hay turned to General Jose de Jesus Clark, another of the key members of the Mexican committee. They sensed what others did not – the Americans were driving people away from them.136

The Mexicans observed the same kind of arrogance and thoughtlessness in the American film, which on first glance appeared to be a masterful creation in the finest Hollywood tradition. Some in the audience, though, saw beyond the showmanship American arrogance and even propaganda. The simple plot of the film had a group of three teenagers driving around Detroit, playing on the obvious connection between Detroit and the auto industry. The plot itself was easy to swallow, but some details were cause for concern. The three youths included a white male, a white female, and a black male. It was an attempt to demonstrate the diversity, and yet the harmony, of the city of Detroit, but it struck many in the crowd as cheap pandering. The racial unrest in the United States was well known, and few in the audience were convinced that all was well by a simple film clip. And if the intent was to show the diversity of the city, what about including an Asian? A Latin American? The racial mix in the car was a small point – after all, someone had to be in it – but another small point that detracted from the presentation. Perhaps more grating than the three passengers in the car were the stops they made along the way. They pulled into the local burger shop, with its sign looming in the background. They stopped at the Texaco station, again making note of the company logo. They drank Coca-cola, waving the bottles within obvious range of the cameras. These shots were intended to demonstrate the vibrancy of the American economy and the variety of elements in Detroit’s corporate culture. But many in the room found the peddling of American goods unsettling, and near the end of the film one anonymous observer shouted, “What nice propaganda!”137

Beyond capitalizing on the perceived arrogance of the American presentation, the Mexican delegation earned their victory with hard work and skillful negotiation. They were shrewd politicians, and spent much more effort than the other groups in wooing delegates to vote for them. Josue Saenz, head of the Mexican Olympic Committee, began lobbying for votes as early as 1960. Even before the convention began, the Mexican committee assigned individuals to specific regions and worked to win support in each region. One member took Latin America, another Europe, and so on. Saenz went to see the Shah of Iran in an attempt to secure the Iranian vote. They studied the IOC representatives in each region, learned their eccentricities, their hobbies, their favorite

136 Hay interview.
137 Hay interview.
foods. They focused on the Russians and the entire Soviet bloc, which held a total of eight crucial votes.

Simply rubbing shoulders with representatives from swing-vote nations may not have been enough. To ensure that their efforts would be successful, the Mexican contingent engaged in a time-honored Olympic committee activity: bribery. While committee members are still reluctant to speak openly of the process, it is clear that some “greasing of the wheels” took place. In getting to know members of other committees, they took special note of artistic interests. If a rare Aztec artifact or finely polished glass sculpture made its way into the hands of a collector of such pieces, perhaps the beneficiary would remember where it came from on the day of the vote. The extent of this bribery is unclear, and the outcome may not have hinged on it. It is also entirely possible that the Americans and French dealt under the table as well. In any case, it is one more way that the Mexicans assured their selection.

The Mexicans prepared their presentation with the same attention to detail. Some delegates were put off by American arrogance, so the Mexicans tried to appear as humble as possible. As they were about to be introduced, Dr. Hay grabbed the card with their titles printed on it. After a few quick changes, the voice came over the speakers, “Architect Pedro Ramirez Vasquez, President of the Mexican Olympic Committee; Mr. Martin Gomez, member of the Mexican Olympic Committee; Dr. Eduardo Hay, member of the Mexican Olympic Committee…” and so on. In lieu of fancy titles, the Mexicans took an “everyman” approach to the introductions, and it endeared them further with voters from more marginal nations.

Foremost among these was the support of the Soviet bloc, which the Mexicans secured by positioning themselves well as an alternative to the American nominee. The Mexicans shrewdly accentuated their more socialist attitudes, while downplaying associations with American ways of life. Their speeches emphasized the people, the youth, who would benefit from the promotion of sport that the Olympics offered. Such ideals correlate directly with Russian sporting traditions, in which sport was most often used to strengthen the working masses, to encourage them to work smoothly and efficiently as one. The Mexicans also openly opposed the capitalist nature of the Olympics, the obvious economic boon that it offered, instead promoting its social and cultural values. In distancing themselves from the United States, the Mexican committee probably did not lose any votes – supporters of the United States would vote for Detroit anyway. But this distance helped to make Mexico City not only an alternative for the Soviet bloc, but an attractive alternative.

Even with Soviet support, the Mexican bid would have failed had not the bulk of the Olympic body decided that the time had arrived for a Latin American nation to host the Olympics. In the words of IOC president Avery Brundage, “What helped Mexico was that it is one of the smaller-scale countries, and some members felt they could do more for the Olympic movement on the whole by giving encouragement to such a country. Such encouragement, in this case, amounted to the Olympic Games.” Mexico, too, carried the torch for all Latin American and Spanish-speaking nations, none of whom had hosted the Olympics before. It was an easy decision for delegates from similar nations.

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139 Hay interview.
140 “US Delegation Hurt and Shaken.”
whether to grant the Games to the United States or France – again – or to one of their own. Mexico was the obvious choice.

Another key factor in the Mexican victory was the ability to explain and defuse the altitude question. The Mexicans had invested in dozens of studies of the effects of altitude on athletes, and presented ample evidence that the altitude was a non-factor. In some events, yes, the altitude would serve to weaken an athlete’s performance; but these effects would be shared by all athletes equally. Athletes traveling from afar, if given time to acclimate themselves to the altitude, would not be at a disadvantage. By the end of the convention, this point had been so effectively made that even non-Mexicans spoke out on the issue. At the end of the Mexican presentation, when one last question about the altitude was directed at the Mexican team, General Vladimir Stoitchev of the Russian delegation jumped up and said, “Horses never have trouble getting acclimatized down there. And if horses can stand it, so can the humans.” Case closed.

The Mexicans also brought an impressive array of facilities and programs to the table. Their bid was a strong one, even without considering the factors mentioned above. Mexico City had hosted major sporting festivals before, including the 1955 Pan-American Games, and it was capable of housing the athletes and spectators that would accompany the Olympics. The city was dotted with sporting facilities, including aquatic centers, soccer fields, indoor courts and arenas, and even bullfighting rings. The University Stadium could seat 80,000, and the Mexicans promised to build an even larger stadium, with a capacity of 150,000, should they win the bid. The city had thousands of hotels for visitors, and would build a massive complex of apartments for the athletic village. It was a city of some eight million residents, growing rapidly, which could absorb hundreds of thousands of tourists with ease. Mexico City also boasted another factor that helped to overcome Detroit’s bid: cheap housing. The Mexican team offered to house the Olympic athletes at a rate of $2.80 per day, which bested Detroit’s rate of “$3.00 or less” per day. Detroit and Lyon simply could not match these offerings. Detroit depended on a stadium that had not yet begun construction, and Lyon relied on the appeal of its small-town charm. Neither was convincing enough to overturn the Mexican effort.

As they left Baden-Baden, the Mexicans rightfully congratulated one another on their surprising victory. In the era of superpowers, they had negotiated the murky waters between the United States and the Soviet Union and emerged bearing a great prize: the right to host the Olympic Games. In the weeks and months after, though, the realities of their accomplishment would set in. There was much work to be done – buildings to be constructed, events to be planned, finances to be sorted out. But as 1968 grew nearer, even more pressing issues threatened the very existence of the Games. Fears concerning the elevation of Mexico City became more pronounced. The Olympic organization was wracked by internal issues, such as doping and the debate over amateurism. And in Africa and around the world, the sleeping giant of racism roused from its slumber, and thousands of black athletes saw October 1968 as their chance to slay the giant.

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141 Ibid.
142 “US Delegation Hurt and Shaken.”
CHAPTER III: THIN AIR AND OTHER CONTROVERSIES

In 1965, the top two middle-distance runners in the world were Billy Mills and Ron Clarke. The Australian, Clarke, was the best in the world at the 5,000 meters, having beaten his own world record several times. Mills, the American, was better in the 10,000 meters, having won the gold medal in the Tokyo Games at that distance. He hoped to beat Clarke in both races at the 1968 Games. On October 21, 1965, the two met in a much-anticipated 5,000-meter race. At the gun, all the runners were off, and the race proceeded as might be expected, with Mills and Clarke pacing each other and hanging with the main pack of racers. Midway through the race, Mills appeared to tire and fell off the pace, dropping farther and farther behind with each lap. Clarke took advantage, and led the field as it approached the finish. The best in the world, though, was beaten that day by unheralded Mahomed Gammoudi of Tunisia, who made an inspired charge at the finish. The pace was tortoise-like by world-class standards, a minute and fifteen seconds slower than Clarke’s world-record number. Mills was even worse, stumbling home thirty seconds behind the leader, and nearly dropping from exhaustion at the end. It turned out that Mills was suffering from a stomach virus and was racing sick, which explained in part his miserable performance. But what of Clarke and the others?

The race that day was of no importance as far as their prestige in the international racing community. It was an exhibition, and everyone involved agreed that who won was not important. But Mills’ falling out, and Clarke’s poor time, raised eyebrows among sportsmen around the world. For the race was held as part of an event that came to be known as the “Little Olympics,” a series of contests that the Mexican Organizing Committee arranged to demonstrate to the world that the Olympics could be held in Mexico City, with no ill effects on athletes’ performance. But poor times and severe exhaustion for many athletes belied that claim. Anyone who looked at Mills at the finish of that 5,000 meter race had to be concerned that the Mexicans were not telling the whole story.

As October, 1968 drew nearer, controversies surrounding the Games drew more heated and intense. The altitude was the most persistent question, but probably the least important. Even more divisive, was the increasingly difficult problem of amateurism, complicated by the participation of Soviet “state-athletes.” A final issue, and one the importance of which no one could question, was the admittance of South Africa. It was a problem that began long before the 1968 Olympics, but reared its head in most ugly fashion in the months preceding them. The problem was shown to have very deep roots, of critical importance to all other African nations, and to people of African descent all over the world. As late as April of 1968, many wondered whether the Olympics would take place at all.

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Long before Mexico City was ever awarded the Olympic Games, there were questions as to the suitability of the environment. Mexico City is located on a dried lake bed, surrounded by a rim of mountains, all of which rests on a plateau over 7,000 feet high. How this altitude might affect the most highly trained athletes in the world was a mystery, and the source of the earliest major controversies of the 1968 Games. Some nations would be at a disadvantage, some complained. Scores and times would be lower, unimpressive, others noted. Athletes will die, the bleakest skeptics thought. In hindsight, the altitude proved to be a minor issue during the actual contests. But before the Games went off, these kinds of questions were a major hurdle for Mexico to cross, both in making a successful bid for the Olympics, and in convincing the world it would be a show worth watching.

The altitude question surfaced long before Mexico City was even awarded the Olympics, and had, in fact, been the trump card of the cities challenging Mexico City for the Games. The 1955 Pan-American Games, so important in Mexico’s successful bid to host the Games, became an Achilles heel as the Games approached, as detractors could point to many examples of the altitude sapping competitors’ energy, even endangering them. Several athletes had collapsed during those Pan-Am Games, and not only those who finished poorly. In one celebrated incident, the American Lou Jones fell to the track after the 400-meter race, unconscious, learning only later that he had just broken the world record. Jones was hardly alone in suffering the ill-effects of the altitude, and the Pan-Am Games were held up as evidence by skeptics that an Olympics in Mexico City would be unsafe.

Complaints ranged from justified concern to outright panic. Most were genuinely concerned about the athletes’ safety, as there was little understanding about the real dangers of intense exercise at altitude. The darkest predictions were indeed dire: “There will be those that will die,” announced Finnish trainer Onnie Niskanen. While his views were hardly the consensus, many wondered just how far the human body could go under such conditions. Equally legitimate were fears that the altitude might favor certain nations over others. Not everyone had access to training facilities at high altitudes, and those athletes without such access would surely be at a disadvantage. In truth, here was an insolvable problem. While the IOC and various national Olympic Committees made an attempt to allow such athletes to train in other nations that did have high-altitude sites, this compromise was limited by the financial resources of the low-lying nations. One prominent figure in the controversy was Roger Bannister, perhaps the most famous runner in the world and the man who had first broken the four-minute barrier in the mile in 1954, now in the 1960’s an esteemed doctor of sports medicine. He represented England, a nation without such facilities, and was an outspoken proponent of literally leveling the field. He noted, “Opportunities to acclimatize will be left to the differing wealth of the countries and to the ingenuity, even ruthlessness, of their coaches.” Another unanswerable question was whether the thin air gave an advantage to certain individuals. The battery of studies conducted prior to the Games did find that the altitude affected each individual differently, but was inconclusive as to exactly how those effects were determined. Each nation had to decide how it would select its representatives, and

146 “Olympics Without Oxygen?,” 63.
hope for the best. But in retrospect, it seems clear that the thin air did favor some individuals, while damaging others.

Complaining about the Olympic site was one thing; proposing a reasonable alternative was quite another. One factor that made the issue so sticky was that no one seemed to have any better ideas. Bannister proposed that some events be held at lower altitudes, such as Acapulco, where the yachting events were to be held. This solution, though, would create a host of new problems. It would mean dividing the Games between several distant sites, and it would throw the plans and preparations assembled by the Mexican Olympic Committee to that date into disarray. It would also bring massive problems to towns such as Acapulco, which were unprepared to handle the traffic and crowds an Olympics would bring. Bannister’s idea would never work. Another proposal came from an American physiologist, who proposed that the Americans establish a “base camp” on the coast, and fly athletes to Mexico City hours or even minutes before their events, before the effects of the altitude set in. The problems with this idea are obvious, and there is no evidence that it was seriously considered by the USOC.

In an attempt to quiet the growing clamor over the altitude, the Mexicans arranged the “Little Olympics” in 1965, almost exactly three years before the real Olympics were scheduled to begin. The exhibition was actually designed to give some unity and direction to the host of teams of scientists who were flocking to Mexico to test the effects of the environment. Rather than keeping track of dozens of separate teams, why not invite all nations to one athletic meet, where athletes and scientists could do their tests during a contest that would simulate Olympic conditions? Sixteen nations responded to the invitation, and they amused the Mexican spectators with their insistent and never-ending testing, even in the midst of the competition. Athletes ran in special suits and special masks, gave blood before and after races, and answered never-ending questions. Over fifty doctors from the various nations trotted along after the athletes, chasing them down for testing immediately as contests ended.

What they discovered was not always pleasing. Almost without exception, the visiting athletes expressed concern about the thin air. “It was like walking uphill,” American Ron Laird groaned after the 20-kilometer walk. Billy Mills, who had faded in the 5,000 meter race, explained the toll of the altitude more precisely:

There is this awful sensation of breathing deeply and not being able to pull enough air into your lungs. When you run, you feel like you’ve never run before. I’m cruising along on the practice track and I get ready to give it the final kick and I turn on that last big burst – and that last big burst isn’t there. I don’t know where it went, but it isn’t there.

Athletes around the world were concerned that their abilities, too, might vanish into the thin air at Mexico City, so the battery of tests and studies would continue until a suitable solution was reached.

Clearly, with athletes dropping out of long races and even winners passing out as they crossed the finish line, the altitude did have an effect on the world-class athlete. So what, exactly, did all of these scientists discover, and what did they hope to do about it?

149 “In the High, Thin Air,” 70.
151 Ottum, 31.
Perhaps the most poetic explanation was provided by the sportswriter Bob Ottum, who wrote, “The altitude will have an effect, but it won’t make any significant difference.” He explained that the altitude might sap the performance of some athletes, and might lower the overall times in the longer events, but that on the whole the best athletes would still win, with an allowance for the occasional upset. The results, in short, would be just like those in any previous Olympics. Ottum’s explanation, while poetic, did not satisfy the athletes, coaches, and scientists from the many nations sending athletes, since they all wanted to make sure they were not the “exception,” who would be adversely effected by the altitude. So groups from around the world continued to produce studies and publish their findings. All in all, while the language was a bit more formal and the scientific basis a bit more grounded, the findings of these groups differed little from Ottum’s theory.

According to the French delegation, for instance, the key to maintaining performance at altitude was acclimatization. French athletes would need to train at high altitude “for at least three weeks prior to their departure.” If possible, too, they should make short trips from high to low altitude, since it was shown that such intervals would both allow the athlete’s body to grow accustomed to training in thin air, and would increase overall performance. The French study also announced that performance in events lasting less than a minute would not be damaged, but performance in longer events would suffer. It also noted a phenomenon called the “climatic crisis,” during which one’s performance decreased slightly between the 6th and 10th day at altitude. Finally, the study outlined other concerns for these Olympics, which were problematic but never particularly controversial, including the dryness of the air, the pollution, the time difference and “jet lag,” and the unpredictable impact of the food, including the dreaded “Montezuma’s revenge.” In sum, according to this report, claims that athletes would die in these conditions were exaggerated, but considerable time and effort needed to be put into the athletes’ acclimatization process to ensure optimum performance.

The Belgians carried out their own tests, and reached similar conclusions. Finally, the Americans conducted seemingly endless studies, the results of which were released in March, 1966, at a symposium held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, entitled “The Effects of Altitude on Physical Performance.” The symposium, sponsored in part by the U.S. Olympic Committee, made several suggestions to both the USOC and the IOC as how to best handle the altitude issue. Most were accepted, if not in full, then to some degree. While a few of their findings were obvious, such as “Athletes should be in top condition,” others were more noteworthy. The panelists reached the important conclusion that “The Olympic trials should be held at [high] altitude,” since individuals respond differently to the rare air. An athlete who excels at sea level may suffer at altitude, and thus would make a poor choice to represent his team in Mexico City. The symposium recommended even more careful scrutiny of athletes, such as examining family history and certain physiological traits, such as sickle cell or cardiopulmonary disease. While they could make no definitive statement about how these traits might increase or decrease an athlete’s chance of success at high altitude, their studies did note slight differences in performance among athletes with such characteristics. Depending on the length of the race or contest, these traits might slow the athlete down by a few hundredths of a second, enough to render a world-class athlete merely average in the intense competition of the

152 Ottum, 30.
Olympics. Finally, the symposium agreed with other suggestions to lengthen the prescribed period allowed for training at high altitude, a point that the IOC conceded with its October 1967 change of policy, discussed shortly. Overall, the USOC symposium decided that, while there was little physical danger for the competitors, there was much potential for selecting the wrong athlete to represent the nation in the Olympics.154

Ultimately, Mexico and the international sporting community had little choice but to deal with the altitude issue. It was on the table when Mexico City won the bid, so there would be no change of venue. Still, even acknowledging that they would have to accept the thin air, they came up with a number of compromises that did ease the tension over the issue. In one instance, seen by many as ironic, the Mexican Organizing Committee decided to remove the equestrian competition from Mexico City to Oaxtepec, nearly 3,000 feet lower. As one representative of the International Equestrian Federation explained, “Horses are inclined to go on well beyond the prudent limit of effort.” Another added, “They do not have the common sense that humans do.”155 While many observers noted that this change was a wise one, they also viewed it with some skepticism. If running in the thin air is unsafe for horses, how dangerous might it be for humans?

In fact, the IOC was very much concerned with the safety of its human competitors, and even altered its rules to account for the unique conditions. According to the Olympic Eligibility Code, an athlete is only allowed four weeks a year for “special” training at a camp (training at a special camp at high altitude would presumably fall under this category). To account for the altitude in Mexico City, and to provide some additional time for acclimatization, the IOC announced in October of 1967 that it would allow an extra two weeks of “special” training in the year 1968, a total of six weeks, with the caveat that only four of the six weeks could fall within the three months leading up to the Mexico City Games.156 How intently most nations took this rule to heart is up for debate, as virtually every nation that could afford special training facilities at high altitude constructed them. The Russians had expansive training sites at Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan and Yerevan in Armenia, both over 10,000 ft. The Japanese trained at Mount Norikura, the French in the peaks of the Pyrenees, and the Americans in the Rocky Mountains. Those that could not afford their own facilities made arrangements to visit a nation that had such facilities, as the West Germans did in joining the French in the Pyrenees, and many nations did in coming to the United States in the weeks before the Games.157

The changes in IOC rules offered the United States a unique opportunity for advancing foreign relations. While the United States had hammered Mexico on the altitude issue while making a competitive bid for the Games, it was quick to capitalize on the issue once Mexico won the bid. In a transparent campaign to curry favor from the international community, the United States State Department issued a memorandum to all diplomatic posts on July 3, 1968, encouraging other nations to come to the United States for training at high-altitude locations.Volunteering training facilities in the mountain states, such as Arizona, Utah, and Wyoming offered a number of benefits for the United States, two of which were stated in the memo. First, the State Department hoped, “substantial favorable publicity and prestige [would] accrue.” Second, the teams of visiting athletes would “undoubtedly enjoy traditional American western hospitality and a

beneficial exposure to the United States,” no doubt preferring American ways to their own. Unspoken in the memo, but also important, were the opportunity for the United States to keep a watchful eye on the competition, as well as to demonstrate American superiority. After all, lesser nations were not offering their facilities for other nations to use.\textsuperscript{158}

The circular met with a wide range of receptions, from gracious bemusement to cold indifference. The most humorous reply came from the Ecuadorians, who politely declined the invitation to train in the United States. Much of Ecuador lies well above the altitudes of Mexico City, and Ecuadorian athletes routinely train at altitudes in excess of 9,500 feet. In their reply, the Ecuadorian officers explained that they “were amused at the Department’s reference to the ‘extremely high altitude of Mexico City (7,430 feet)’...[they] should come up and see us some time!”\textsuperscript{159} While Ecuador and others declined the invitation, many other nations accepted eagerly. Indeed, before sending their teams to Mexico City, West Germany, Norway, India, Sweden, Austria and others sent them to the American West to train.\textsuperscript{160} Even as it hosted other nations for training, neither the United States nor any other nation could be completely certain how their athletes would fare in Mexico City. The pressures of performing under the duress of the Olympics could not be simulated in any training, so it was not without some trepidation that teams headed off to Mexico City in October, 1968.

Even as athletes around the world contemplated the sinister effects the altitude might have on their bodies, a second controversy was brewing. The debate over amateurism had been present at the creation of the Olympic Games, and remains a problem even today, but in the late 1960s it was the single most divisive issue between sporting groups of communist and capitalist nations. The altitude might have presented a problem, but it was one that all athletes would have to contend with equally. Allowing some nations to send “professional” athletes to the Olympics, while others were compelled to meet an elusive “amateur ideal”, was not so benign an issue.

The debate over amateurism had evolved over time but had never been completely settled. Amateurism was the core element in what had become almost a religion for some, the religion of Olympism. Originated by Pierre de Coubertin and developed and defended in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century by Avery Brundage, the amateur ideal ostensibly held Olympic athletes to a higher standard. It evolved from the class-based sporting traditions of the Victorian era, when sporting federations and competitions were largely the reserve of the upper class, wealthy enough that much of their time could be spent at play rather than at work. “Play without pay was a mark of status,” as one historian put it.\textsuperscript{161} Such athletes could have spent their time elsewhere, but dedicated themselves to athletics out of pure love of competition, unspoiled by the corruptive force of reward. It is from this tradition of amateurism that the Olympics re-emerged in 1896, and it was under such an amateur ideal that the Olympics were governed.

The early rules of eligibility in the Olympics reflected this ideal. In order to maintain amateur status and thus compete in the Olympics, an athlete could not be paid for his/her involvement in athletics – \textit{any} involvement. An athlete could not be paid for

\textsuperscript{158} NARA, RG 59, Box 325, folder 15-1 CUL MEX 4/1/68, memo 3 July 1968, Department of State to All Diplomatic Posts.
\textsuperscript{159} NARA, RG 59, Box 325, folder 15-1 CUL MEX 4/1/68, memo 17 July 1968, Amembassy Quito to Department of State.
\textsuperscript{160} See series of memos from various embassies to the Department of State, ibid.
\textsuperscript{161} Strenk, 59.
competition in any sport (even a sport other than the one he contested in the Olympics), nor could he accept payment for coaching or sponsoring athletic competitions. One who accepted pay for his athletic pursuits was no longer an “amateur,” but was instead a mere “employee” or “entertainer.” Such titles were not worthy of the Olympics.162

The IOC enforced these rules with draconian strictness, and a long line of suspensions and expulsions from the Olympic movement indicated the vagaries of defining amateurism, which grew even more difficult over time. One of the earliest and most celebrated expulsions was that of Jim Thorpe, winner of two gold medals at Stockholm in 1912. Thorpe was stripped of his medals and his amateur status when it was revealed that he had played professional baseball in 1909 and 1910. He had been paid for playing a sport – never mind that it was a different sport than that which he medalled in – and thus was unworthy of the “amateur” label. The list of athletes who could not measure up to amateur standards, or who could not tolerate going hungry, was much longer, and even the greatest of Olympians were not immune. Paavo Nurmi, six-time gold medal winner between 1920 and 1928, was barred from the 1932 Olympics after accepting expense money “in excess of his costs.” Babe Didrikson, one of the great female athletes of all time and the star of the 1932 Olympics, allowed her likeness to appear in an advertisement, and was summarily stripped of her amateur status. And Jesse Owens, the American sprinter who dominated the 1936 Berlin Olympics, found the stresses of life as an amateur too demanding. After appearing in several exhibitions for which he was paid, he was suspended from the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), surrendering his amateur standing.163

The list of “non-amateurs” grew longer with each passing year, but the IOC refused to budge on the issue. Part of their stubbornness was derived from respect for the Olympic tradition, but even more might be attributed to Avery Brundage, himself the son of a steelworker, who insisted that if he could make it to the top of the athletic world, anyone could. The possibility that he should be the exception rather than the rule never seemed to cross his mind, and his tunnel-vision regarding amateurism became almost laughable. “In fifty years,” he claimed in 1968, “I have never known one boy too poor to participate in the Olympic Games; in fact, it can be established that 90% of all Olympic medals have been won by poor boys.”164 This claim was unfounded, of course, but the unfortunate truth for dozens, even hundreds, of athletes was that Brundage headed up the most important amateur sporting body, and the rules would be difficult to change unless he yielded.

In time, though, even Brundage had to admit that clinging to the old rules of amateurism was not working. While it is impossible to indicate a date when amateurism died, it was not far along the Olympic time-line that an athlete could no longer be a pure amateur and hope to be competitive as well. The competitions grew fiercer, national allegiances more pronounced, publicity and fame greater, and the lures of contracts and appearance fees more tempting. Events became more specialized, coaching and training techniques more advanced, and training and tournament schedules too demanding. Athletes were forced to buy uniforms, insurance, equipment, and food, and yet could not be paid – for the Olympics were the preserve of the amateur athlete. The stresses on amateurism were not caused only by the physical demands, but also by broader changes

164 As cited in Strenk, 64-65.
in the very nature of sport. With the advance of technology, particularly television, sport was no longer simply a local issue, viewed by those in attendance. As viewership ballooned into the millions for many sporting events, money began funneling in from television networks and sponsors. Sports, especially mega-events like the Olympics, became big business, and with big business came heightened temptation for athletes to reap some rewards. Athletes were offered appearance fees to participate in certain events, athletic scholarships from colleges, cash handouts by supporters or agents, bonuses from shoe companies, apparel manufacturers and other sponsors – all of which were considered illegal by the IOC and could get an athlete suspended or banned for life. The renaissance ideal that worked well in the 1890s simply did not work in the 1960s. Under the strictest definitions of amateurism, almost no athletes could be eligible for the Olympics. Something had to change.

While such pressures strained the amateur ideal almost to its breaking point, they don’t take into consideration the deepening divide between communist and capitalistic nations, a divide which threatened to crush the Olympic movement altogether. With the restoration of Soviet Olympic participation at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, the amateur ideal was confronted with a new problem: the “state-athlete”. On the surface, athletics in socialist and communist nations represented the very epitome of the amateur ideal – sport was designed to advance social, educational, and public goals, rather than to achieve private gain. There were essentially no “professional” sports in the Soviet Union, rather, all sports were “amateur,” open to everyone, and conducted without profit as a motive.

Increasingly, though, western athletes and organizers didn’t see it that way. Perhaps communist athletes did not compete for profit, but they were given the full support of the government for training and competition. Did they not have their meals paid for? Housing? Transportation? Were there not incentive bonuses and rewards from the government for top performers? Did these athletes not train year round, effectively “employed” as athletes, rather than working some other job and training at other hours? Whereas defenders of communist sport might claim that it was the very essence of amateurism, opponents claimed that it was, in effect, professionalism.

But the issue ran even deeper, inspiring genuine animosity between spokesmen from both sides of the Iron Curtain. For amateurism, according to its classical definition, was a reflection of more than simply economic status and interests. It was a reflection of moral character, honesty, and sincerity of purpose. A professional athlete was a mercenary, literally selling out the pure enjoyment and pleasure of play and sport for the selfish end of making money. An amateur, on the other hand, was driven by the purest motives: love of the game, self-sacrifice, the thrill of victory, and physical health. As Avery Brundage explained, “Amateur sport is a delicate and fragile thing. Its values are intangible. They come from the delight of physical expression, the broadened outlook, the deepened experience, the self-satisfaction and joy of accomplishment to the participant. It is an enlargement of life but it must be pure and honest or it is nothing at all.”

Strenk, 58.


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and honest and decent, while the professional is greedy, dishonest, and hypocritical. If, then, the Soviets were professionals, they were cheaters as well.

It was this moral condemnation that especially bothered the Soviets, and in the mid-1960s the debate over amateurism became a heated dialogue between East and West. The accusations from both sides sounded remarkably similar. The Soviets alleged: “[Sport in the west] is a big business and athletes are exploited without regard to their health or whether it is good or bad for them;”168 “Sport is manipulated,” becoming a substitute for political awareness and even for religion;169 and in response to allegations of professionalism, “What about the college-football scholarships and the industry-sponsored athletic teams in [America]?”170 The Soviets defended their system and insisted that it met the guidelines for amateurism. On the opposite side, the Americans complained: “The Russians…are in effect well-paid state officials;”171 “They included political agents on their teams, and…used sport for political purposes, propaganda and national aggrandizement;”172 and the Soviet sports system was “harsh and severe…both Spartan and puritanical, [and] most of the spirit of fun [was] bled from it.”173

Part of the animosity was caused by the startling transformation in Soviet sport, and the fear that the Soviets might soon leave the rest of the world behind. The development and perfection of athletes had become an industry, one that received support and attention from the government far beyond that of other nations. The Soviet sport system had its origins in the revolution of 1917. The communists assumed power in a nation mired in a health crisis. The devastation of war combined with the typically harsh Russian climate had left the populace racked by disease and malnutrition, and the new leaders launched a health program initially to rehabilitate the flagging health of the nation. This program was from the first tied to politics, and the Soviets would never concur with the western pretense that sport and politics should not mix; on the contrary, sport was a political tool. The fitness programs quickly assumed a military bent, as indicated in one explanation of the purpose of the Soviet program, which read, “The aim is achievement of a high level of physical development and physical preparation of the population for highly-productive labor and for carrying out the sacred duty of defense of the Homeland.”174 Indeed, the physical fitness program was lauded by the government during World War II for generating a fit and well-trained fighting force.175 By World War II, the Soviets had established a massive national fitness program, infused the masses with an interest and passion for athletics, and constructed many sports complexes and arenas to promote physical activity.176

173 Ibid, 111.
Still, it was not until after World War II that the Soviets took an interest in the Olympics; in fact, they had avoided contact with what they perceived to be “bourgeois” sports of the west. But with the onset of the Cold War, athletics took on a wholly new character, becoming not only a “[vehicle] for Soviet cultural diplomacy,” building relations with neighboring countries, but also a powerful tool for waging the Cold War. Barring the outbreak of a true “hot war,” victory in the international sports arenas became the best way to “demonstrate the vitality of the Soviet system,” and besting bourgeois nations on the fields of sport became an obsession for national leaders. The massive Soviet sport program shifted its focus, from national health and fitness to a single-minded mission to churn out the finest athletes in the world. The Soviets pursued this goal with a zeal unmatched in the west, scouting opponents for weaknesses and scheduling only matches they knew they could win, obsessively training athletes in events that needed improvement, and seeking out budding athletes at ages as young as seven for intensive training. Within a few years, the Soviet system had blown past all reasonable interpretations of the amateur ideal, producing athletes that pushed even the most liberal definitions of “professional.”

This quest for dominance in international sport led the Soviets naturally toward the Olympics. They sent a group to the 1948 London Games to observe, or rather to scout their opponents. They would not join the Olympic movement if they couldn’t win, plain and simple. By 1951, the Soviets petitioned the IOC for admission, a break with their past policy of avoiding “bourgeois” events. As James Riordan, a scholar of Soviet sports, has noted, this change in policy occurred for a number of reasons: the waning influence of Stalin, who opposed participation in the Games; the decline of the global workers’ sport movement, which left the Soviets “no one to play with”; the added security of the Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb; and the recognition that they could win. The IOC heard the petition of the Soviets, not without debate. Brundage and others recognized the conflicts between the Soviet system and the amateur ideal, but in some ways Brundage had talked himself into a corner after twenty years in the Olympic movement. To avoid mingling sport with politics, as he had always contended, and also to prevent an uprising in communist nations, Brundage led the movement to admit the Soviets, which was done in May, 1951. Even as he did so, Brundage conceded that the IOC had little more than promises that the Soviets would follow the rules of amateurism, but that they had little idea what “took place behind the Iron Curtain.”

What did go on behind the Iron Curtain would be a source of controversy for the next forty years. The national fitness program, still designed to strengthen the masses for potential military service, now served also as a massive “talent search.” Not only promising athletes, but also dancers, musicians, chess players, and others, were selected at ages as young as seven for special training. Those chosen for such programs were sent to boarding schools, where they received free tuition and coaching, room and board, travel to various camps and competitions, and some education. For many, this meant being separated from their parents at a young age and dedicating their lives to a pursuit before they even realized the implications. Soviet leaders countered that none of the students were forced to go; but in a society with few mechanisms for elevation, virtually

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177 Riordan, “Sport Policy of the Soviet Union,” *Sport and International Politics*, 73.
179 Ibid; also Riordan, *Sport, Politics, and Communism*, 127-145.
181 Ibid, 69.
no one turned down such an opportunity.\textsuperscript{182} Education at such schools focused on the
development of the young body, with increasingly rigorous athletic training as the student
aged, but also unflagging indoctrination in the superiority of the Soviet system. The
budding athlete was constantly reminded of the mission at hand, to defeat the forces of
capitalism. By the time an athlete reached maturity, he was consumed – or so the
government hoped – with a passion for beating the west.\textsuperscript{183}

After training in such institutions for years, the top athletes were enrolled at
various military or club teams for international competition. To better their odds of
victory, the Soviets often padded “amateur” teams with All-Stars from the club leagues,
as in a 1949 soccer match against Hungary, when a so-called “typical team of amateurs”
from a local factory actually consisted of the top Soviet players, carefully chosen from
teams around the nation.\textsuperscript{184}

The Soviets made every effort to conceal the obvious implications of this system
for amateur eligibility. Top athletes were enrolled in military units or other professions,
often showing up for “work” only once a month to collect a paycheck. In some cases,
such associations drove them even further from the ranks of amateurism, as with those
“soldiers” who were elevated to officers ranking as high as captain or major, or “auto
workers” who received brand new cars as a bonus for their performance. Other perks
were less subtle, as athletes breaking world records, attaining a certain athletic title or
rank, or winning major events received cash bonuses.\textsuperscript{185} Top athletes were hailed as
national heroes, recognized throughout the nation and often honored on billboards and
posters.\textsuperscript{186}

If the Soviet system itself made a mockery of the amateur ideal, western coaches,
sponsors and athletes were not much better. Indeed, as historian S.W. Pope has
demonstrated, “nineteenth-century amateurism was an invented tradition.”\textsuperscript{187} Athletic
competition was rooted in some variation of professionalism, including prizes and
rewards, gambling money, cash payments, and more recently to sponsorship, college
scholarships, and stuffed envelopes. The “amateur ideal” was an invention of the upper
class to preserve a purity in sport that had never really existed. It was born in the elite
colleges of the eastern United States, advanced by such men as Walter Camp, the great
football coach at Yale, who said, “A gentleman does not make his living from his athletic
prowess. He does not earn anything from his victories except glory and satisfaction…A
gentleman never competes for money, directly or indirectly.”\textsuperscript{188} This ideal found a
welcome home within the budding Olympism being formulated across the Atlantic, and
an American “amateur tradition” was born. The fact that it masked a sporting tradition
mired in “professionalism” was lost on those who wrote the canon of early Olympism,
and that canon was recited by such followers as Avery Brundage until the realities of the
life of an athlete were lost. True amateurism may never have reigned in the Olympics
(“amateur” American athletes commonly participated in summer semi-professional
leagues, barnstorming tours, or exhibitions for pay), but certainly by the 1912 Olympics

\textsuperscript{182} Riordan, \textit{Sport, Politics, and Communism}, 83-99.
\textsuperscript{183} Anatoly Isaenko, interview with the author, Columbus, GA, 18 Oct. 2002.
\textsuperscript{185} Rastvorov, 97.
\textsuperscript{186} Avery Brundage, “I Must Admit – Russian Athletes are Great!” \textit{Saturday Evening Post}, 30 April 1955, 112.
\textsuperscript{187} S.W. Pope, \textit{Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926} (New York:
\textsuperscript{188} As cited in Pope, \textit{Patriotic Games}, 23.
the pitfalls of maintaining pure amateurism were clear. The expulsion of Jim Thorpe from the Olympic movement was only the most publicized example of athletes struggling to meet the amateur ideal. In reality, few if any top athletes could survive without additional income, a problem that was discussed openly in Olympic circles by the 1950s. The corruption that had always accompanied sport was again tainting the Olympics, making western nations guilty of “professionalism” as well.

The case of Wes Santee, the top American miler in the mid-1950s, exposed the ubiquity of cheating in American “amateur” sport. Expected to survive on meager meal allowances and reimbursements that barely paid for travel expenses, Santee was expelled from the Amateur Athletic Union, and thus the Olympic movement, for accepting too much expense money in 1956. Santee described a hectic and demanding lifestyle, constantly on the wing from one track meet to another. To hold down a full-time job would have been impossible, given the time he devoted to training as well as travel. How else to survive, other than to break the rules? Santee found that at virtually every track meet he attended, a brown envelope stuffed with cash awaited him. Meet organizers in need of marquee names, or sponsors in search of a marketable name, made sure that Santee ate fine meals, wore decent clothes, and had a car to drive – any one of which was enough to cost him amateur status. Santee was not a wealthy man, and certainly was no superstar by any modern measure of the word. He was simply an athlete trying to survive. Doing that, while meeting the demands of the “amateur ideal,” was simply impossible.189

By the early 1960s, these issues cried out for some kind of resolution. While both sides flung slings and arrows across the ideological divide, in truth no one near the debate could sincerely believe that athletes could subsist while trying to remain “amateurs”. As the debate heightened, calls came from many quarters to abolish the old “amateur ideal,” and recognize that athletics at its finest require a full-time commitment. “Why should we be so reluctant to admit that [the champion athlete] is a professional?” asked Rene Maheu, director-general of UNESCO. “We deny the obvious fact that the champion is obliged to live the life of a professional athlete.”190

As pressure for a change mounted, at its 1962 meeting in Moscow the International Olympic Committee revised Rule 26, on amateurism, to read:

…When a competitor can prove that his dependents are suffering hardship because of his (or her) loss of salary or wages while attending the Olympic Games, his national Olympic committee may make a contribution to these dependents, but under no circumstances may it exceed the sum which he (or she) would have earned during his (or her) actual period of absence, which in turn must not exceed 30 days.191

While the restrictions regarding the rule were still strict, a precedent had been established, and Brundage’s firm grasp on the international definition of amateurism was loosened. Still, as the Mexico City Games approached, athletes from both east and west viewed each other with suspicious eyes. Even if the rules were relaxed, the chasm between the Soviets and the Americans had not been bridged, and it remained as wide as ever in 1968, with the issue of amateurism at the heart of the gap.

191 As cited in Brundage, The Games Must Go On, 130.
No issue posed so real a threat to the Olympics as the controversy surrounding the participation of South Africa. What seemed a simple question – should the IOC exclude a nation whose government practiced apartheid – quickly became an issue confronted by every athlete, white and black, around the globe. After years of debate, by 1968 the IOC was left with only two choices: ban South Africa, thus conceding that sport and politics are intertwined; or allow South Africa to participate, and face what promised to be a firestorm of protest. Before the matter was settled, the IOC had tried the second option, and when the firestorm of protest proved to be more than they could bear, resorted to the first. In the interim, the decision to reinstate South Africa flung open the Pandora’s Box of racism, and drew unto the IOC the rage and frustration of black athletes everywhere.

According to the IOC’s *Fundamental Principles*, while individual nations may select their athletes as they choose, they must do so according to the “high ideals of the Olympic Movement.” In part, those ideals are expressly stated – “no discrimination is allowed against a country or person on grounds of race, religion, or political affiliation.” Beyond these brief statements, the policies and behaviors of the IOC regarding racial discrimination are arbitrary, and have been either enforced or ignored over the years for many reasons, and for none.

The South African policy of apartheid had been a source of international concern for years prior to the Olympic controversy, but reached a head in the early 1960s as African nations began to participate in the Olympics for the first time. One such nation, seeking to send a team to Tokyo in 1964, was South Africa. The IOC, while hoping to preserve the divide between politics and sport, invoked the spirit of this “Olympic code” to deny the South African petition. Their justifications were not merely political. For apartheid, in addition to installing a fiercely racist system of government and social policy, also upset many of the traditions of fair play in sport that were so cherished by the Olympics. The bodies governing sport unfailingly upheld apartheid policies, ensuring a sports system that was hopelessly unfair to blacks. There could be no question that South African teams were not selected fairly – the evidence was ample and plain. Within South Africa, blacks and whites could not run on the same fields, play in the same arenas, swim in the same pools, or box in the same ring. How, then, could they hold Olympic trials? Blacks and whites could not room together or eat at the same table. They could not travel together. In short, there was no semblance of an integrated South African team. While there was no law, per se, prohibiting South Africans from competing in multiracial events abroad, many athletes who applied to travel for such a purpose found their passports denied. Even the spectators in South Africa were segregated – first, they could watch the same events while sitting in separate sections; by the mid-1960s, though, the races were only admitted to sporting events of their own race. In an attempt at compromise, the South Africans had begun to field two entirely separate teams, black and white, which traveled independently of each other and even had different uniforms. But throwing such a thin veil over their racist system did not appease the IOC. In 1963, the IOC suspended South Africa, barring them from participation in the 1964 Olympics.
The problem appeared to be settled. While IOC members regretted having to ban a nation for seemingly political reasons, the clear link to racism within the athletic system made the decision easier, and not particularly controversial. But the South African government, and athletic establishment, hoped to gain admittance to the 1968 Olympics, and they began to institute changes to the system. They agreed to assemble one team, with black and white athletes, which would wear the same uniform and march under the same flag. The team would be housed in the same quarters and eat at the same table. Rules against black and whites playing on the same field would be waived, not only for the Olympics, but for all international sporting events. These developments were enough to warrant a second look from the IOC, which in September 1967 assembled an investigating committee to examine conditions in South Africa, whose three members were Lord Killanin of Ireland, Reginald Alexander, a white Kenyan, and Sir Ade Ademola of Nigeria.196

This committee traveled throughout the country, and was given full access to all sporting facilities and competitions. What they found was not all rosy. The South African government still refused to allow inter-racial competition within the country, thus complicating and tainting the trial process. There would still be separate trials for black and white athletes, with the top performers from each competition then eliminated or accepted by a selection committee of four black and four white members.197 In an event such as boxing, in which only one winner would make the team and inter-racial competition was unavoidable, those contests would be staged outside of the national borders. And there were the still more complex matters of the sporting infrastructure, in which virtually no national support was given to sporting facilities to be used by budding black athletes, while ample support went to those for white athletes. The mirage of separate-but-equal facilities was not supported by the facts. In one celebrated incident, world-class cricketer Basil D’Oliveira had been so disappointed with the sporting equipment and facilities offered to black players that he moved to England, where he became a star.198 Even if the Olympic trials themselves were fair (and there were still plenty of questions about that), how could the Olympics endorse a system in which every obstacle was placed in the way of black athletes, while every opportunity was offered to white athletes? These were complicated questions, and the 113-page report ultimately filed by the investigating committee reflected this complexity. Was it the responsibility of the IOC to ensure that a nation offered equal opportunity to every man, woman, and child to excel in their chosen sport, or merely to ensure that the selection process itself was fair? The committee hesitated to make an unqualified recommendation, at the same time leaving the door open for admitting South Africa to the 1968 Olympics, noting that the progress made in South Africa provided “an acceptable basis for a multi-racial team to the Mexico Olympic Games.”199

Meeting in Grenoble, France, in conjunction with the Winter Olympics of 1968, the IOC considered these issues in a heated debate. Complicating the issue was the not-so-secret fact that readmitting South Africa would likely inspire a massive boycott by

other African nations, possibly precipitating a boycott by the Soviet Union and others. After weighing all these issues, the Committee voted 41-30 in favor of allowing South Africa to compete in Mexico City later that year. While the IOC “deplored” the policy of apartheid, it was also encouraged by the changes in the South African system and efforts to select a racially balanced team. The Committee also voted to reconsider South Africa’s status again in 1970.\footnote{Ibid.}

Even before the doors had closed behind the delegates leaving this meeting, a wave of international protest began building. The next day, the Olympic Committees of Ethiopia and Algeria announced they would not attend the Mexico City Olympics if South Africa was reinstated, invoking a clause formulated by African nations at the 1967 IOC meeting in Teheran, Iran, that allowed for such a withdrawal. They were joined by Tanzania, Uganda, the Republic of Mali, Ghana and the United Arab Republic the following day. Abraham Ordio of the Nigerian Olympic Committee summed up the concerns of these nations: “What South Africa does in sports outside her borders is not as important as what she does inside her borders, which is a violation of the Olympic code.”\footnote{"5 More African Nations Join Boycott of Olympics,” \textit{New York Times} 18 Feb. 1968, L++: 1, 2.} Accompanying this early flood of withdrawals was speculation that the boycott might grow far larger, soon incorporating Nigeria, Kenya, and other African nations with larger Olympic teams. As the list of nations expanded, so did the likely impact on the final medal count. While the absence of Ghana’s athletes was not expected to influence the medal standings, losing Kenya’s Kip Keino, one of the world’s best milers, or Ethiopia’s Abebe Bikila, the defending Olympic marathon champion, would make an impact. Even more ominous were thoughts of a boycott by the Soviets and their supporters, and the hundreds of top athletes that came along with them. The Soviets traditionally supported the African nations, and they quickly issued statements suggesting that they would support them in this protest as well. One such statement called the IOC decision a “flagrant violation of the charter…that forbids discrimination of athletes for political, racial, or religious reasons.”\footnote{Ibid.} Still more worrisome was the speculation that Mexico itself might refuse to hold the Games, or that other Latin-American nations would boycott as well.\footnote{Ibid; “Boycott in Mexico,” \textit{Newsweek} 11 Mar. 1968: 84.}

Speculation became reality as more nations piled on the bandwagon, including Kenya, Syria, and Iraq in the following days. Soon after, the Supreme Council for Sports in Africa, which oversaw sport in thirty-two independent African nations, approved the boycott, meaning that virtually all African nations would not be in Mexico City, if South Africa was there. Other nations issued statements supporting the African boycott and condemning the IOC decision, including further rumblings from the Soviet Union, and statements from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.\footnote{“Kenya, Sudan, and Iraq Join Boycott of Summer Olympics,” \textit{New York Times} 21 Feb. 1968: 39.} Giulio Onesti, president of the Italian Olympic Committee, publicly called for an extraordinary meeting of the IOC to reconsider the issue, stating that the Italians “deplored the true and proper split” of the thirty-two African nations and hoped to patch the IOC together again.\footnote{“Special Meeting Called Unneeded,” \textit{New York Times} 27 Feb. 1968: 48.}

Unfortunately caught in the middle of this swirling controversy were black sportsmen in South Africa, who had rejoiced at the announcement that their Olympic dreams might come true. A few black athletes and officials stood on the doorstep of
going to the Olympics, but at what cost? What they perceived as a victory, the rest of Africa and much of the world saw as a concession to a racist nation. Fred Thabede, a black boxing official in South Africa, expressed the frustrations of other black athletes. “The African states,” he argued, “know as well as any that for the past seven years South Africa’s committee has been struggling to have an integrated team at the Olympics. And now what do these African states do? They slap us in the face in the most blatant showing of discrimination against our whites and nonwhites that I have ever seen.”

Others in South Africa found even deeper importance in the IOC decision. The *South African Post*, a non-white newspaper, wrote:

> The Olympic movement has succeeded where no one else ever succeeded before, namely, to cause a first crack in the monolithic block of apartheid policy. For the first time, the South African government has publicly admitted that nonwhites also are South African citizens.

Here was an opportunity for sport to make a real difference, to begin to strike down the walls of racism in South Africa. And yet it seemed the whole world wanted the IOC to change its mind.

The tension mounted in the first weeks of March, as Belgium, Bulgaria, and Switzerland voiced their disapproval of South Africa’s reinstatement, and opposition from the Soviet Union grew even more strenuous – a Soviet boycott appeared certain. Nations within the Soviet sphere of influence also objected to South African participation. The Polish Olympic Committee, perhaps recalling the tortures of Nazi occupation, issued a statement that it “loatched all nationalism and racial discrimination…[and protested] the readmission of a country that trample[d] the basic principles of coexistence of citizens of the same state.” East Germany, too, joined the Soviets in protest. Even Jamaica announced that its government would not pay for its Olympic team to go to Mexico City if South Africa remained. One commentator joked that the only ones left to attend the Olympics might be “Avery Brundage and South Africa.” The list of nations joining the boycott seemed to grow longer by the day, and the pressure on the IOC to reconsider its decision was building.

Still, there were many who spoke out against the boycott, headed by an unwavering Avery Brundage. Brundage, long considered a champion of amateurism in sport, as well as the separation of sport from politics, bristled at the prospect of a boycott. “No matter what countries withdraw, the Games in Mexico will go on,” Brundage announced at a press conference. “We are sorry if countries want to withdraw for political reasons…the Mexico Games will go on, and they will be a success, like all other Olympic Games.” His comments were consistent with a life-long vision, and were reminiscent of a statement he made in 1956, “In an imperfect world, if participation in sport is to be stopped every time the laws of humanity are violated, there will never be any international contests.”

210 Furlong, “Bad Week,” 19.
intractable, insisting that since the IOC had already voted, there was no need to reconsider. He refused to use his powers as chief executive of the body to call for a full meeting of the IOC, even as members of the executive board urged him to do so. He simply would not budge on the issue.\footnote{212}

Brundage, while the most vocal opponent of the boycott, was not alone. Even as nations lined up in support of the African nations, others gathered on the side of competing even if South Africa attended. Great Britain, Puerto Rico, Greece, Denmark, Turkey, Italy and Brazil, along with many others, all issued press releases stating they would attend the Olympics, regardless of South Africa’s status.

Squarely on the fence throughout the crisis, and remarkably silent on the matter, was Mexico. Mexican officials made only one official announcement in the weeks after South Africa’s reinstatement: they would not send the South Africans an invitation until the IOC had settled the matter for certain, presumably at a special meeting. The rumors swirling about actions the Mexicans might take must have terrified members of the various organizing committees. There were any number of possibilities: they would hold the Games, whichever teams showed up; they would boycott the Games along with the Africans, insisting that South Africa be banned; they would cancel the Games altogether. In truth, the Mexicans shrewdly refused to show significant concern, choosing instead to await the final decision of the IOC. In the interest of speeding that decision along, though, General Jose de Clark Flores, Vice-President of the IOC behind Brundage, sent a letter endorsed by four other members of the executive council urging Brundage to call a full meeting of the IOC to re-open the issue.\footnote{213}

Perhaps out of deference to Clark, a long-time friend and ally, and perhaps yielding to the pressure mounting from various quarters, Brundage agreed to call a special meeting of the executive board of the IOC, held on April 21 in Lausanne, Switzerland. While not a meeting of the full committee, the concession was an opening wedge that would ultimately lead to the revocation of South Africa’s invitation.\footnote{214} The board’s nine members issued a telegram to the rest of the IOC strongly urging them to withdraw the invitation. A subsequent vote by mail confirmed this action. While Brundage remained disappointed with the decision, he could no longer deny the overwhelming sentiment against South Africa, and other board members were satisfied with the ruling. Lord Killanin of Ireland, who had chaired the investigating committee that first opened the door for readmission, explained the decision to the press. In addition to the threat of a boycott or even of Mexico’s refusal to support the Games, Killanin cited the possibility of violence against South Africans and their supporters. His comments demonstrated that long-held racist notions were not easily dismissed. “You can’t guarantee against embarrassments,” he added. “The Mexicans are a proud people. There might have been trouble, you can’t guarantee against it.”\footnote{215} There were other reasons behind the ruling as well. In the United States, the South Africa controversy had revived a flagging boycott movement among black athletes. Dozens of black Americans, many ranked at the top of their sports, threatened to boycott Mexico City. Their unity with the African nations, the Soviets, and others only added more gravity to the threat of a boycott. Finally, one tragic event united all those concerned behind the greater interest of

\footnote{213}{Ibid.}
\footnote{214}{“Brundage Calls Executive Unit to April Session,” \textit{New York Times} 13 Mar. 1968: 57.}
humanity. On April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. The executive board and others considering the South African petition noted the event with sadness, and many said that King’s death played a role in their debate. Ought not the board, now more than ever, be sensitive to the union of race and sport, and strive for the same measures of fairness and equality that King died for? Only a few weeks after King’s death, and with his memory heavy on everyone’s mind, the IOC simply could not justify readmitting a nation built upon racism and repression. South Africa was out.

Constantin Adrianow, the Russian representative to the board, was especially pleased at the outcome. He left the meeting, smiling broadly, knowing that the ruling saved the Soviets from having to make a difficult decision. The Soviets had walked a delicate line without stumbling. They had supported the boycott movement from its inception, but had not made a firm commitment to boycott themselves. Had they committed too early, the Soviets would have damaged their reputation within the IOC, a reputation that had been improving steadily since joining the Olympic movement in 1952. Had they not supported the African cause, they would have given ground to China, with whom they competed for the favor of Third World nations. Balanced between these opposing possibilities, the Soviets dangled the prospect of a boycott without making any definitive statements. This prospect of a Soviet boycott, including many other nations, contributed to the pressure that forced the reversal, although Andrianov denied such an influence. When asked if the threat of a Soviet boycott had forced the decision, he seemed startled. “Threat?” he asked, “At no time have we made a threat of boycott. What we have said was that if South Africa were admitted, we would have a meeting and reconsider our attitude toward competing. We made no threat.”

In truth, the prospect of a Soviet boycott had been more imminent than even the press suspected. Leaders of the Soviet Olympic Committee, not long before the final vote of the executive board, exchanged memos with the Soviet government in Moscow – memos that nearly forced a Soviet boycott regardless of the South Africa ruling. As one government official asked, “If it is possible not to compete if South Africa does, why shouldn’t we stay away anyway, to save all that hard currency?”

“National prestige,” came the reply. The Soviets had grown accustomed to using sport as a mechanism for demonstrating the superiority of their people, their government, and their organizational capabilities, and the Olympics was the grandest stage for such a demonstration. But a poor showing in the Olympics would have just the opposite effect. The exchange continued:

“Can the Soviet athletes defeat the Americans at the Games?” One can almost feel the Soviet Olympic Committee gulp, recognizing where the exchange was heading. If the government was eager to save the money to be spent on the Olympic team, and was not convinced the athletes would make a good showing, the entire Soviet Olympic enterprise was in danger. The Olympic committee hastily drew up “scientific proof” that they could indeed defeat the Americans at the Games, lists of athletes, times, scores and measures demonstrating Soviet superiority. And, ultimately, the Soviets did not boycott the Olympics. This exchange is but one more example of how closely the Soviets and the Americans watched each other during this period, and the aspirations they held for sport as a mechanism in “winning” the Cold War.

218 “Airgram Memo,” 14 May 1968 from Amembassy Moscow to State Department, NARA RG 59, Box 325, folder 15-1, MEX CUL 4/1/68.
In any case, such a boycott would only have heightened Cold War tensions between the Soviets and the western nations, in addition to erasing the possibility of waging the Cold War on the fields of sport. With the executive board’s reversal, not only would they not have to boycott the Games, but they could appear to have won a stand-off with the west. If their support of the boycott had been a bluff, it was a successful one, and Adrianow’s smile was justified.\textsuperscript{219}

While there were many who supported the ruling, others were disappointed with it, even despondent. The decision to readmit South Africa had been based on a number of policy changes which, however superficial they might appear to outsiders, had cracked the severity of racism in sport. With South Africa now banned, what motivation would the government have for easing racist policies? Making compromises with the IOC was pointless, so why not restore apartheid measures in sport? The black athletes and officials who had rejoiced at the initial decision were crushed by the reversal. Their hopes of equality had been dashed, and the prospects for further change appeared grim.\textsuperscript{220} A suggestion from USOC member Asbury Coward, that such athletes (and white South African athletes as well) be allowed to compete in the Olympics as independents, marching under the Olympic flag, went unheeded.\textsuperscript{221} The South African Olympic Committee, too, was outraged at the decision. Perhaps having pent up roiling emotions in the months while the decision was under debate, after the reversal the South Africans no longer restrained their anger. Reg Honey, South African representative to the IOC, called for the resignation of the entire executive board, and declared the ruling “illegal and immoral.” Frank Braun, president of the South African Olympic Committee, added bitterly, “We will accept the illegal position as it stands now in a gentlemanly manner.”\textsuperscript{222} And John Vorster, the Prime Minister of South Africa, jabbed, “[we are] back in the jungle, [and we might as well have] tree climbing events as Olympic Games.”\textsuperscript{223} But while most in South Africa ranted about the decision, even there some hoped to gain something positive from it. In Cape Town, the press largely accepted the decision, hoping that the ruling “will cause a fresh wave of soul-searching in the national party.”\textsuperscript{224}

Perhaps most stricken by the decision was Avery Brundage. Steadfast throughout the controversy, after the ruling the 80-year old Olympic President began to show his age. Appearing weary, beaten, and at times teary-eyed, Brundage hinted that he might retire in the wake of the conflict. During the Mexico City Olympics, the IOC would hold elections for the presidency and other offices. As he addressed the press in Lausanne, Brundage said he wondered “whether [he] would accept the invitation to take another term if the invitation [was extended].” Indeed, the defender of the separation between sport and politics had suffered a grave blow.\textsuperscript{225}

Brundage anticipated that changing policies in sport based on political reasons would start the Olympics down a slippery slope, the bottom of which was a long way down. No nation is without its flaws (as many commentators like to point out, racism was

\textsuperscript{223}“Telegram,” 25 Apr. 1968 from Amembassy Cape Town to Secretary of State, \textit{NARA RG 59}, Box 325, folder 15-1 MEX CUL, 4/1/68.
\textsuperscript{224}“Telegram,” 23 Apr. 1968 from Amembassy Pretoria to State Department, \textit{NARA RG 59}, Box 323, folder 15-1, MEX CUL, 4/1/68.
a serious problem in the United States, too), so we must keep sport above such considerations, or every international competition will be plagued with protests and boycotts. As if hearing such complaints from Brundage, on April 23, the same day in which the vote banning South Africa became official, Jack McDonald, U.S. Representative from Michigan, called for the exclusion of the Soviet Union from the Olympics. Were not Jews in Russia persecuted as harshly as blacks in South Africa? “Is Russia’s long record of persecution of the Jewish religion less obnoxious than South Africa’s policy toward its black people?” he asked. Similar questions were raised again in September, as many pointed out the hypocrisy of banning South Africa while not banning the Soviet Union after its invasion of Czechoslovakia.226 Czechoslovakia’s top Olympic athlete, runner Emil Zapotek, appeared on Czech television shortly after the invasion, demanding that Russia and its allies be banned from the upcoming Olympics.227 The slope grew only slipperier with such pronouncements.228

While few took McDonald’s resolution seriously, the South Africa controversy did have an interesting footnote further proving the entanglements between sport and politics. South Africa’s neighbor, Rhodesia, was ultimately banned from the Olympics as well. Rhodesia, while its government was based on similarly racist policies, had made more compromises on the field of sport, and through a fairer system of trials would bring an integrated team to the Olympics. On June 12, however, the Mexican Olympic Committee announced that Rhodesia would not be allowed to participate. The Rhodesians, it seemed, were under a travel ban enforced by the United Nations, who would not issue passports to the team. They had hoped to make the trip by using Olympic documents, but the Mexicans refused to overlook the UN ban. Was the Rhodesian exclusion motivated by the same political and racial factors that drove that of South Africa? Or were the Mexicans simply obeying the UN travel ban? Whatever the reasons, Avery Brundage again bemoaned the ties between sport and politics. One Rhodesian newspaper described the slippery slope even more eloquently: “The Mexican politicians may win in the end, but first let Rhodesia try to shame Mexico into realizing the paradox of excluding a nonracial Rhodesian team so as to teach Rhodesians nonracialism.”229

While the ban on South Africa and Rhodesia may have placated many African observers, one group that had vocally supported the boycott movement would not be so easily silenced. Black athletes in the United States had joined the global movement enthusiastically, recognizing an opportunity to join their African brothers for the betterment of their race. But if the South African mission had been accomplished, there was still much left for black athletes to fight for within the United States. And while the boycott movement among black Americans ultimately fizzled, the spirit of protest still burned within some of the athletes, and provided the spark that produced the most enduring image of the Games: two black-gloved, raised fists.

229 State Department Telegram, 12 June 1968, from Amconsul Salisbury to State Department, NARA RG 59, Box 325, folder 15-1, MEX CUL 4/1/68.
September 18, 1968, should have been one of the best days of John Carlos’ life. He was at the end of a four-week stay at Echo Summit in Lake Tahoe, California, a top resort. The first wisps of fall sent cool breezes through the tall pines, and the weather invigorated him. He had spent the month training with the finest athletes in the country, jabbing and jockeying each other in friendly competition, a daily regimen that left Carlos in the best shape of his life. He was twenty-three years old, and he was about to qualify for the Olympic Games.

As his race, the 200 meters, approached, Carlos sucked in the crisp air with confidence. He jawed at the other competitors, explaining in detail how he would defeat them. This was his time. At his best, John Carlos had the fastest start of any sprinter in the world, and for this race, he was at his best. After only a few steps, he could no longer see the other competitors at either side. A few more steps, and he could not even hear them. It seemed he was alone on the track. As he streaked across the finish line, Carlos knew it had been a great race, a perfect race. The time reflected as much, 19.7 seconds, a world record. For about five seconds, Carlos drank in the most satisfying victory of his life.

It took only about five seconds for U.S. Olympic Committee officials to meet him on the track, and to begin souring this, his finest moment. For this race, Carlos had worn a new product sent by his shoe company, Puma, a sprinting shoe called the “brush” shoe. Rather than having six lengthy spikes, as did the standard sprinter’s shoe, the “brush” shoe had some 60 tiny spikes, or brushes. In theory, the new design impeded the runner’s step less than a standard shoe, and was the ultimate design for the popular faux-cinder “tartan” tracks, like the one at Echo Summit. Whether or not the shoe actually aided Carlos’ heroic run is unclear, but Olympic officials, who knew he was wearing the shoe before the race began, ran nearly as quickly as Carlos himself to inform him that the world record would not stand.

While disappointed, Carlos was not surprised. He felt it was but one in a string of injustices perpetrated against him, and against all black athletes in America. Had not white officials, that same week, informed all the black athletes that, should they qualify for the Olympics, they were required to perform “in honor of the United States,” or they would be sent home from Mexico? Had not those same officials, for reasons unexplained, ruled that Carlos, who had missed a key qualifying event with a torn hamstring, could attempt to qualify for the Olympics in the 200 meters, but not the 100, his best event? Had not those same officials allowed an unusually large pool of qualifiers to come to Lake Tahoe, hoping – or so many black athletes believed – to ensure that plenty of white competitors would be available in case the black athletes decided to boycott the Olympics? No, it was no surprise that white officials soiled his proudest moment. It merely ensured that, rather than leave Tahoe happy and proud to represent his nation,
Carlos left bitter, and more determined than ever to make some sort of statement during the Olympics.\(^\text{230}\)

John Carlos was among the angriest in a group of black athletes, frustrated not only by such overtly racist actions of white officials listed above, but also by an entire society and athletic establishment designed to “keep the black man down”. In 1967, these athletes, energized by the shift in the Civil Rights Movement towards the aggressive, confrontational tactics of Black Power, began to organize, creating a sort of union of black athletes. By the eve of the Mexico City Olympics, their threats and protests, coupled with the boycott controversy over South Africa’s participation, threatened to permanently scar an already wounded Olympiad. It was, in fact, the raised fists of two of these athletes that would be the most enduring image of the Games, an image that spoiled hopes within the American government that the 1968 Olympics would be a triumphant moment in the Cold War.

In the wake of the Second World War, the realm of sport was on the cutting edge of the Civil Rights Movement. Most famously, Jackie Robinson captured headlines not only on the Sports pages, but also on the front pages of newspapers across the nation when he was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946. His signing was seen as a monumental event, a harbinger of racial equality that would surely follow. One of many African-Americans who addressed the significance of the event was J. B. Martin, president of the Negro American League, who said, “I feel that I speak the sentiments of 15 million Negroes in America who are with [Jackie] one hundred per cent, and will always remember the day and date of this great event.”\(^\text{231}\) Others felt even more strongly. “He was our Messiah,” recalls Ed Charles, in 1968 the third baseman for the Kansas City Athletics, “He was Moses to our people. He gave us all pride. It wasn’t just baseball, it was everything. We had a dream and he made it come true. Now, we could dream about everything.”\(^\text{232}\)

Robinson’s success, first with the minor-league Montreal Royals, and then with the Brooklyn club, opened the door for black athletes to follow, still seven years prior to the 1954 landmark Civil Rights decision, \textit{Brown v. Topeka Board of Education}. Following Robinson to the Dodgers were John Wright, Don Newcombe, and Roy Campanella by 1950. Other teams followed soon after, and by the time of the \textit{Brown} decision only four major league baseball teams remained segregated; all would be desegregated by 1959.\(^\text{233}\) Similarly, professional football teams began to sign black players, beginning with Marion Motley, who signed with the Cleveland Browns in 1946. While it would take until 1962 for the final NFL team to sign a black player – Bobby Mitchell of the Washington Redskins – most had integrated prior to 1954. In fact, in that year the top three rushers in the NFL were African-American.\(^\text{234}\) Professional basketball teams, too, integrated in the post-war era, with William “Pop” Gates and William “Dolly” King opening the door in 1946, and six others signing in 1948.\(^\text{235}\) It seemed that sports


had indeed shown the way to racial equality, well before advances in other aspects of life.  

But sport, once at the forefront of the drive for African-American rights, soon lost its opening-wedge status, and by the late 1960s had become more a symbol of inequality than equality. The black athlete actually furthered stereotypes and hindered black advancement, encouraging black adolescents to pursue the myth of athletic excellence while eschewing much-needed academic development. While a few black athletes did achieve fame and fortune, the vast majority toiled in a system ruled by white owners, coaches, and sponsors. Many black athletes came to feel they were used and abused by a white-dominated sporting infrastructure. The black athlete was merely a performer on a stage, controlled by a white director, in a theater owned by whites, before a largely white audience and critiqued by a white media. He was a modern-day minstrel player, a song-and-dance man, shuffling to the beat of the white man. This argument has been made eloquently by the historian John Hoberman in *Darwin’s Athletes*, in which he writes, “[sport] has preserved traditional white hierarchies in an era of so-called black dominance.” While Jackie Robinson was lauded as a breaker of racial barriers, in fact he merely discovered another realm in which blacks could play a subservient role to whites. By the late 1960s, many black athletes were speaking up about the racist nature of sports in this country.

The claims of injustice advanced by the black athletes were hardly hollow. Quite the opposite – an examination of the black American athlete in the 1960s reveals a life of not only physical turmoil and constant training, but also one filled with challenges in gaining an education, financial stability, satisfying relationships, and respect. Black athletes at white colleges were ostracized from normal social events. Often one of only a few blacks at a university, the athlete was unwelcome in the fraternity system, found it difficult to find dating partners, and found solace only in the athletic arena. The black athlete often encountered discrimination in the housing market, denied access to apartments or rooms readily rented to whites. He was frequently placed into easy courses, unchallenged academically, and graduated -- or worse yet, failed to graduate -- with an empty diploma. “At the University of New Mexico I got a sweater,” noted one black athlete, in summarizing his college experience. “At Cameron State College in Oklahoma I got a blanket. At Southwestern State I got a jacket and a blanket.” Worst of all was the ubiquitous racism that surrounded the black athlete. Professors asked challenging questions of other students, but only engaged athletes about their scores or times on the field. White students constantly stared and whispered at black athletes, who could only

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wonder whether the whispers concerned their status as star performers, or the color of their skin. Tommie Smith expressed this frustration, saying, “Sit next to a girl with long blond hair and you feel her tense up and try to move over. Talk to a couple of white girls in the cafeteria and see what happens. People are reading papers, and first thing you see the papers drop and eyes peering over. For quite a while, Lee [Evans] and I were so naïve we thought, ‘Man, we’re just great athletes, that’s why they’re staring at us.’”

The plight of the professional athlete was not much better. He may have escaped the college system, but he was still the victim of racism. Black athletes suffered from the stereotype of being physically gifted yet mentally deficient. They were relegated to positions that accentuated their athletic prowess, yet required no thought. In the late 1960s, there were no black quarterbacks in the NFL, only a handful of black pitchers or catchers in baseball, and no black point guards in the NBA. Typically, black athletes were “stacked” at a single position. There might be three or four black wide receivers on a football team, but none at other positions, thus limiting the playing time and influence of black players overall. Further, the black athlete was paid far below the standards of white athletes with similar abilities (with the notable exception of superstars such as Willie Mays or Hank Aaron). Endorsement dollars, too, were limited for black players, since, as one advertising representative put it, “If a black man peddles it, regardless of who he is, whites won’t buy it.”

A similar disparity was apparent for athletes celebrating Olympic success; the media seemed drawn to white gymnasts, swimmers, and track stars, who often landed major endorsement deals, while successful black boxers, runners, and others received no offers. And there were the taunts and racial slurs from fans, athletes, and even coaches. Finally, these athletes performed at the command and whim of almost exclusively white managerial staffs. There were no black owners, only a single black head coach (Bill Russell, named player/coach for the Boston Celtics in 1966), and few black assistant coaches. What it all added up to, according to one black athlete, was that black “super-animals” were used by whites as if they were a “piece of equipment,” performing as long as they were able and then discarded like so much garbage.

The protest-rich decade of the 1960s was the perfect time for black athletes to demonstrate their anger at the conditions noted above. The idea of an Olympic boycott by African-Americans had been proposed before, though it had never attained broad support among the athletes. In 1960, rumors swirled about decathlon champion Rafer Johnson, who mentioned that a boycott of that year’s Rome Olympics had been discussed. In 1963, comedian and Civil Rights activist Dick Gregory suggested a boycott of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. 3-time gold medallist Mal Whitfield elaborated on Gregory’s comments, and he quickly became the most prominent black athlete to advocate a boycott, a precursor to Harry Edwards in 1967. Whitfield noted many of the same complaints as Edwards, especially regarding treatment of black athletes away from the sports arena. “The Negro champion and the white champion may stand equal on a dais as they each receive gold medals,” he said, “but when they leave the dais only the white champion’s accomplishments assure him a stable and successful future.” It was time for “the Negro

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to launch the dramatic offensive.”244 Black athletes did not boycott the Tokyo Games, as there was not much interest beyond the few comments of men such as Gregory and Whitfield, neither of whom were active competitors. It took three years of changing currents in the Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the advance of “Black Power,” and the continued struggle of black athletes for equality off the field, for the boycott movement to win the support of many top athletes.

By the mid-1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement made its way into the urban centers of the north, a growing number of blacks challenged the effectiveness of nonviolence and called for more militant forms of protest. In June of 1966, Stokely Carmichael, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), gave a voice to this militant movement at a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, when he announced, “We need Black Power!”245 In the ensuing months, Carmichael and his successor, H. Rap Brown, deepened the divide between themselves and Martin Luther King, Jr.. In June, 1967, Brown called for a complete break with King’s nonviolence, saying, “The white man is your enemy. You got to destroy your enemy…I say you better get a gun. Violence is necessary – it is as American as cherry pie.”246 By the end of 1967, the Civil Rights Movement was fractured, with several factions vying for the support of the black populace. Still the most important figure was King, though his influence over the black masses was waning quickly. A second group was the Nation of Islam, who followed Elijah Muhammed and preached separatism between the races. Finally, there were the Black Power advocates, increasingly influenced by the openly violent Black Panther Party. Each of the three factions found followers among the black athletes, and as divided as the Civil Rights Movement was, equally divided were the athletes.

By early 1968, the march toward equality seemed permanently side-tracked, as the proponents of violence and separatism eclipsed King as the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. Released in February of 1968, the final report of the Kerner Commission, which explored the condition of blacks in the inner cities, verified this rift between the races. “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal,” the report read, statistically proving what many Americans knew intuitively.247 In April, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. To the end, he had insisted on nonviolence, and while his influence had been challenged, it still held sway with many black Americans. But even King, in his final days, wondered whether violence could be contained. Only days before his death, he said, “Maybe we just have to admit that the day of violence is here…maybe we have to just give up and let violence take its course.”248 With King dead, and the greatest symbol of nonviolence removed – and removed by violence, no less -- his doubts seemed confirmed. Blacks took to the streets in violent demonstrations around the nation. Stokely Carmichael advised his followers, “Go home and get a gun!”249 There were riots in major cities across the nation, with racially-motivated murders in Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, Detroit, and Memphis, among others. The sun had set on nonviolence; chaos reigned.

Drifting along on the changing tides of the Civil Rights Movement were the black athletes, many of whom were involved in the Movement, others of whom remained

244 Ibid, 100.
246 Ibid, 139.
247 Ibid, 141-142.
248 Ibid, 143-144.
249 Ibid, 145.
detached, obsessed with their athletic pursuits. The most prominent black athlete was Muhammad Ali, formerly Cassius Clay, an avowed follower of Elijah Muhammad. Ali, first introduced to the Nation of Islam in 1958, changed his name after winning the heavyweight title in 1963, and formally announced his devotion to Islam in 1964. The host of white reporters who questioned his sincerity were proven wrong in April of 1968, when Ali refused to respond to an Army induction officer who called for “Cassius Clay.” He was indicted for failure to submit to the draft, but he remained steadfast, saying, “I am not going ten thousand miles from here to help murder and kill and burn poor people simply to help continue the domination of white slave masters over the darker people.” For this action, the WBA stripped Ali of the heavyweight title, and he immediately became a martyr and hero among the other black athletes.

Ali had the potential to be a leader of the black athletes, and yet he became essentially a symbol. It seems appropriate that Ali, the greatest practitioner of the ultimate individual sport, remained aloof from the broader movement of black athletes. He led with his words, but was unconcerned whether anyone followed him. He did not incite his fellow black athletes to action, but rather pursued his own goals. “We who follow the honorable Elijah Muhammad believe in the separation of the races,” he intoned during one interview. “In no way black and white will get along.” Yet he never advocated violence, and disavowed any ties to the Black Panthers. “I’m only Muslim. I’m with nothing else,” he said. And so Ali achieved an interesting duality during 1968, serving as an inspiration to the black athletes, but not a leader within the movement.

The majority of black athletes, rather than following Muhammad Ali and the Nation of Islam, supported the Black Power movement. There were echoes of the Black Power movement in the words, tactics, and symbols employed by Harry Edwards and the athletes. As Charles Hamilton, a Black Power advocate, explained, “There comes a point beyond which people cannot be expected to endure prejudice, oppression, and deprivation, and they will explode.” The black athletes had reached such a limit, and were on the verge of exploding. Many of their comments echoed this conviction. Edwards was quoted as saying, “It’s time for black men to stand up and refuse to be utilized as performing animals for a little extra dog food.” Even more emphatically, Tommie Smith exclaimed, “As far as being spit on, being stepped on, being bitten by dogs, the first dog that bites me I’m going to bite back. We’re not going to wait for the white man to think of something else to do against us.” There were many other parallels as well. Malcolm X, in his final public address in 1965, had said, “…the revolt of the American Negro is part of the rebellion against the oppression and colonialism which has characterized this era.” Several years later, Edwards began an open letter to the San Francisco Express Times, a militant underground newspaper, with the phrase, “We the colonialized and oppressed Black people of racist America….”

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256 As quoted in Black Politics 1:2 (Feb. 1968): 35.
The goals of the Black Panther party were also reflected in those of the black athletes. The “Black Panther Manifesto,” a sort of mission-statement for the Black Panther Party, the most militant wing of the Black Power movement, declared that the Party was waging war against “the vicious cycle of bad housing, poor health, inadequate education, improper medical facilities, unemployment, welfare, police aggression, court complicity, prison, and racism.”258 Another document listing some of their goals added, “We want freedom…we want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.”259 The athletes fought for similar things: equal opportunities for housing, education, and payment; an end to the racism among white coaches and administrators, and some punishment of those perceived to be the most serious offenders; integration of racially segregated institutions; equal access to social clubs and functions, such as fraternities and sororities on college campuses; and, most important, “equality, justice, the regaining of black dignity lost during three hundred years of abject slavery, and the attainment of the basic human and civil rights guaranteed by the United States Constitution and the concept of American democracy.”260

The influence of Black Power was evident in other aspects of the so-called “revolt of the black athletes.” Edwards, who had participated in many Civil Rights protests, borrowed tactics from such protests, and employed them to great effect for the black athletes. Among such methods were boycotts, sit-down strikes, and walkouts. While the boycott movement against the Olympics was the most obvious example, black athletes participated in dozens of lesser boycotts at meets and colleges around the country. Several black athletes refused to play for their teams until conditions changed; while a few were cut from the roster by their coaches or colleges, many times some effort was made to address their concerns. The athletes, as did other Black Power advocates, practiced intimidation and threatened violence. An athletic squad could hardly be expected to enter a stadium wielding machine guns; however, they intimidated observers in other ways. Many of the athletes wore dark sunglasses, berets, and black jackets, in addition to perpetual scowls on their faces. A picket line of such athletes was a fearsome sight, not only to white observers, but also to other black athletes who might otherwise have avoided protest. The black athletes also insinuated that they would resort to violence by repeating the Black Power mantra, “by any means necessary,” a phrase found throughout newspapers, books and pamphlets of the period 261

Finally, the black athletes borrowed that favorite symbol of the Black Power movement, the so-called Black Power salute, a raised fist. The salute, in some ways another element of intimidation, might more properly be considered a symbol of independence. No social setting acknowledges such a gesture as appropriate, so black protestors delivering the salute told all who saw them “we are going to do things our way.” The fist was a common symbol printed on posters, and in pamphlets and literature promoting Black Power. Black students and protestors raised their fists at strikes and rallies. Black soldiers of the era were known to deliver a derogatory black power salute to their commanding officers, rather than a standard military one.262 Black athletes

260 Edwards, Revolt of the Black Athlete, 38.
witnessed such displays, read about them, and used them in the months prior to the Olympics. Some must have asked themselves, what better time to use such a salute then during that solemn moment on the medal stand at the Olympics, when most victors stood at strict attention? By 1968, the language, tactics and symbols of Black Power were everywhere, and especially prominent in the colleges and universities where most Olympic-caliber athletes lived and trained. That black athletes ultimately adopted such techniques and formed their own movement is hardly surprising.

Virtually all of the top black athletes aiming at a spot on the 1968 Olympic team had felt the sting of racism at one time or another. Bob Beamon, who would break the world’s record in the long jump at Mexico City, was thrown off his college track team for refusing to jump against the team from Brigham Young University, a Mormon university. When Beamon, and other black athletes, learned that the Book of Mormon “castigates the black race as inferior and descended from the devil,” they felt the boycott was justified – and sacrificed their scholarships for it.263 Ron Copeland, an Olympic hopeful in the hurdles, recalls that apartments that denied him a spot suddenly became vacant when he had a white friend call for him.264 Lew Alcindor, the basketball star, was virtually silent and reclusive by the time he reached college, so scarred was he by a series of incidents in his youth, including one in which his high school coach had berated him at half time of a game, saying, “And you! You go out there and you don’t hustle. You don’t move. You don’t do any of the things you’re supposed to do. You’re acting just like a nigger.”265 John Carlos himself had been expelled from East Texas State for telling the school paper about his former coaches, who consistently referred to black athletes as “nigger” or “nigra.”266

Having endured such incidents, many black athletes had contemplated some sort of protest action on their own. In late 1967, though, such individual sentiments began to coalesce into a broader movement, fueled by the charged atmosphere of the late 1960s and inspired by other protests staged by students and civil rights activists. The leader of the athletes came to be Harry Edwards, a sociology professor and track coach from San Jose State College. Edwards was the perfect leader for such a movement. He was an imposing figure, standing 6’8” and usually wearing a beret and black sunglasses. He was outspoken, at times outrageous, in his denunciation of the white race, referring to popular white leaders with nicknames such as “Lynchin’ Baines Johnson,” “The Dishonorable Hubert Humphrey,” and “Cracker Dick Nixon.”267 Most important, Edwards was a former athlete. He had set many meet records in the discus, exceeding 180 feet in competition and approaching 200 in practice268, was a star on the San Jose State basketball team, and reportedly received offers to play for the Minnesota Vikings and San Francisco 49ers of the National Football League without having played a down of college football. But he also lived the life of a black athlete off the field, and found that his athletic prowess was not enough to gain him entry into white fraternities, or most

268 The best in the world in 1968 could throw the discus just over 200 feet. Al Oerter won the gold medal at the Olympics with a throw of 212 feet (improving on his world record by over five feet), while both the silver and bronze medallists threw 206 feet. See Blundell and Mackay, The History of the Olympics, 211; “Pride and Precocity.” Time (25 Oct. 1968): 62.
restaurants, or much off-campus housing. He had suffered for his outspokenness. One
morning, he found to his horror that his two dogs had been chopped into pieces and
dumped on his front porch, accompanied by the letters “KKK” painted on his house.269 It
was experiences such as these that motivated Edwards.270

Through personal experience and years of cataloging the troubles of his students,
Edwards developed a lengthy list of complaints against the white establishment in sports,
and was determined to do something to change it. He read carefully Bill Russell’s
autobiography, Up For Glory, which depicted not only one of the greatest basketball
players of all time, but also a man and a life rent apart by racism and abuse from white
coaches, fans, and fellow players. He took note when, in 1965, black players in the
American Football League boycotted the All-Star Game in New Orleans, Louisiana,
where most of those same players were not allowed to eat or drink in many restaurants
and clubs. Edwards, as did virtually all Americans, black and white, also followed closely
the saga of heavyweight boxing champion Muhammed Ali, and was inspired by his
determination and courage.271

The protest grew much more immediate for Edwards in the fall of 1967 after two
events. First, Tommie Smith, a top black sprinter on Edwards’ San Jose State team,
sparked a storm of controversy when he answered a reporter’s question about a possible
boycott of the 1968 Olympics, “Yes, this is true. Some black athletes have been
discussing the possibility of boycotting the games to protest racial injustice in
America.”272 It was a simple enough answer, and Smith hardly expected that it would
reach the papers back home. But by the time he returned to the United States, the media
had grabbed the story, and he found himself at the center of a “boycott movement” that
he didn’t even realize existed. Still, Smith embraced the challenge of heading the nascent
movement, and along with Lee Evans, the great 400-meter runner, he continued to make
statements alluding to a potential boycott.273

Even as the national media tried to absorb the impact of Smith’s comments,
another protest, this one directed by Edwards himself on the San Jose State campus, led
to the organization of the very boycott suggested by Smith. As the fall semester was just
going underway, Edwards and one of his graduate students, Kenneth Noel, arranged a
protest for the first day of classes. It was a simple rally, beginning with some thirty-five
black students and one hundred whites, waving signs and chanting to protest racism on
the campus in housing, social organizations, and athletics. Within a few hours, over seven
hundred students, faculty, and administrators had assembled. They drew up lists of
demands and made plans for further protest. A movement was born almost instantly. Its
first victim was to be the opening game of the football season, and thus the student
movement at San Jose State was tied to athletics from the beginning.274

Ultimately, the boycott movement mounted by athletes and students alike led to
the cancellation of that first football game, and Edwards learned that such mobilization
could lead to change. He shifted his focus from the tiny theatre of campus life at SJSU to

May 1968): 42-44.
271 David K. Wiggins, “’The Year of Awakening’: Black Athletes, Racial Unrest and the Civil Rights
274 Edwards, Revolt, 41-46.
the behemoth of global racism, and decided the ideal stage for protest would be the 1968 Olympics. Along with a core group of athletes from SJSU, including Tommie Smith, Edwards formed the Olympic Project for Human Rights in October of 1967, and arranged for a meeting with athletes from around the nation at the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference that November. The meeting featured talks by many top athletes, among them Alcindor, Smith, Carlos, and Evans. A few speakers were opposed to the boycott, arguing that sports had provided many opportunities for black advancement in America, and boycotting such an event was counter-productive. Such voices were shouted down by the audience, which grew increasingly enthusiastic as the meeting went on. At its conclusion, the group voted to plan a boycott of the Olympics – no active athlete voted against it – and the boycott movement was officially underway.\textsuperscript{275}

In the months that followed, Edwards refined the athletes’ agenda, settling on six specific demands, which he announced at a press conference in December. First, they sought the restoration of the heavyweight title to Muhammed Ali. Second, they demanded that Avery Brundage be removed from the International Olympic Committee, for his alleged association with the Nazis, among other infractions. South Africa and Rhodesia must be banned from international competition, according to Edwards. The demands also included the addition of blacks to key administrative and coaching positions, including at least two coaches to the United States’ Olympic track team, and two representatives on the United States Olympic Committee. Finally, the athletes demanded that the New York Athletic Club, a prominent sponsor of many track meets, be desegregated.\textsuperscript{276}

Among the first significant actions of the Project was a boycott of the prestigious track meet at the New York Athletic Club, the same club they demanded be desegregated. The NYAC struck some as a curious target. While its membership was admittedly all-white, it had made many contributions to inner-city track clubs and youth organizations, in addition to hosting a fully integrated track meet each season. Especially given such doubts, the boycott was an important test of the group’s ability to organize a protest that would be both non-violent and successful. Early signs indicated that the movement was having some success, as several prominent athletes announced that they would stay away from the meet. As word of the protest spread, athletes – and entire teams – from the New York area and elsewhere elected to skip the event. Black athletes rallied to the boycott cause, and many white athletes, too, stayed away, either out of sympathy with the boycott or fear of being involved in a violent incident. Negro colleges around the nation supported the boycott and declined invitations to participate. Several other schools, including the track powerhouses of Villanova and Georgetown, joined them. The military academies decided it was too risky to send their boys into the fray, and thus added to the boycott. Even some international squads, most notably the Russians, withdrew. So widespread were the withdrawals that the NYAC launched a national campaign encouraging teams to attend the meet, all expenses paid. The call was answered by, among others, the “third-rate” mile relay team from the traditionally liberal University of California-Berkeley, which drew a chorus of criticism from the liberal press.\textsuperscript{277} Even after this publicity campaign, the NYAC meet appeared headed for disaster.

\textsuperscript{275} Ibid, 50-56; Kenny Moore, “A Courageous Stand,” 68.
By coincidence, on the day the meet was to be held, newspapers ran the headline that the IOC had readmitted the South African team, an announcement that energized the already mounting black movement. In response to the news, Edwards vented to the press, “Where are all the people who say the Olympics should be above racism? Who can say the Olympics shouldn’t be the target now? The committee has shown the black man just what it thinks of him. I think things will really begin to heat up.”278 Indeed, the news of the boycott by African nations lent a new sense of empowerment to the NYAC boycott, and the crowd of black athletes picketing the event stole the spotlight from the athletes inside. Several blacks who tried to cross the picket line were pressured into boycotting, while a few others crossed the line unimpeded. All told, only nine black athletes participated in the meet, most notably Bob Beamon, who won the long jump. The vast majority remained outside, waving such banners as “RUN, JUMP, OR SHUFFLE ARE ALL THE SAME, WHEN YOU DO IT FOR THE MAN!”279

The evening was not without tense moments. The crowd of demonstrators joining the athletes attempted to storm the arena at one point, only to be forced back by policemen wielding nightsticks. A bit later, a group of protestors attempted to block one of the entrances used by the athletes, forming a picket line and marching by the doors, in spite of police orders to move. Harry Edwards, attempting to prevent violence, grabbed a bull-horn and encouraged the crowd to move to another entrance, which it did, allowing most of the competitors to enter the building freely. One group of athletes, representing teams from Holy Cross and Providence Universities, pulled up just as the crowd was reforming, and had to sprint from their bus to the entrance, pursued by protestors chanting and screaming at them. The scene frightened black athletes crossing the line as well. Once inside, Bob Beamon turned to one of his teammates, Dave Morgan, and said, “I’m scared, man.” “You’re not as scared as me,” Morgan replied. “I never been so scared.”280 In spite of their fears, the meet carried on with no serious incidents, and the protest was achieved with only a few minor scrapes and bruises – the potential violence had been averted. The boycott itself was a success. Entire sections of Madison Square Garden, usually filled to capacity for this event, remained empty. The protest left many of the top athletes in the world either outside on the sidewalk, or far away from the arena, so there were few noteworthy events during the meet. The press declared the contest was essentially empty without black competitors, and black athletes left the event energized and ready for further action.281

Fueled by the success of the NYAC boycott, the Project quickly organized a succession of protests on college campuses. These protests ranged from sitting on a track to prevent a meet to the simple threat of boycotting, and their goals ranged from the removal of racist coaches to excusing players from competing against Brigham Young University. At the University of California at Berkeley, a notice from the Project announced that black students would picket and disrupt all athletic events at the University, and that black athletes would boycott all competition until their demands were met. The University met, even exceeded, their demands before any such threats were realized. Two coaches labeled by the movement as “racist” resigned; two black

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279 Ibid.
coaches were hired; a program was implemented to encourage black students to attend the school; and a new Black Studies program was created. Similar protests were carried to the University of Washington and the University of Texas at El Paso. The latter was the scene of one of the most bitter confrontations between black athletes and white administrators, in part because the protest fell soon after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and all black students involved sensed that their own protest was carried out in homage to King. It was bitter, too, because UTEP administrators were utterly intransigent in their policies. In this case, black track stars refused to participate in a meet against Brigham Young University, based on the racist elements of the Mormon ideology. For this protest, the black athletes, including Bob Beamon, the long jumper, were stripped of their scholarships. The protest did not end there, however, as many black students calmly walked down to the track and sat down, refusing to allow the meet to continue. The “sit-in” was eventually broken up by the local police, but not before the protest had demonstrated a clear connection between athletics and the student body in general, and not before the students had carried out a peaceful protest that would have made Dr. King proud.  

As protests continued throughout the summer, with impressive frequency universities yielded to the demands of the athletes. All told, the Project assisted student-athletes at over thirty universities.  

Participants in these protests drew the ire of white critics everywhere, and the lives of the athletes at the forefront of the movement bordered on unbearable at times. Public displeasure came in the form of everything from simple boos to hate mail and threats. At the Los Angeles Invitational Track Meet in January, Tommie Smith was greeted by boos from the crowd when he was introduced. As he fell behind in the 440-yard dash – a race he had never lost indoors – the crowd cheered raucously. The cheers grew to a roar when he finished in third place. Smith interpreted the boos as a sign that his message was finding its mark. “If they felt upset enough to boo me,” he said, “I guess I must have had a pretty strong effect on their consciences.”  

Hate mail poured in to athletes such as Smith and Lee Evans. “Smith: Thanks for pulling out,” one read, “…I quit being interested in watching a bunch of animals like Negroes go through their paces. Please see what you can do about withdrawing Negroes from…boxing, baseball, and football.” Other letters read:  

“Why in hell don’t you and all the jigaboo so-called athletes…try the Congo? Now, there is a leading country – cook pots and dung piles everywhere, but that is black culture….”  

“Dear Traitor:…I’d rather have our country finish last, without you, than first with you.”  

“You are a fine nigger specimen – just another agitating militant. Hope you and your followers get your bloody heads bashed in.”  

The hate mail piled up for Lew Alcindor, too, who had never stated directly that he intended to boycott, but who had said in one well-publicized interview, “Well, if you live in a racist society and you want to express yourself about racism, there’s a lot of  

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282 Edwards, Revolt, 80-86.  
283 Ibid, 88.  
287 Ibid.
things you can do, and a boycott is one of them.”288 After this interview, Alcindor received letters saying he was an “uppity nigger,” that he was a traitor to the United States, and that he should be thrown out of UCLA and barred from professional basketball.289

While it seemed there was no end to the list of critics of the boycott and of the athletes themselves, there were those who voiced their support. In one celebrated case, the Harvard crew team, after qualifying for the Olympics, issued a formal statement of their sympathy for the black athletes. “We…have been concerned with the place of the black man in American society and his struggle for equal rights…. Everything about the plight of the black man in this country is regrettable…. We feel strongly that the racial crisis is a total cultural crisis.” In response to this statement, Edwards stated, “It [is] beautiful to see some white cats willing to admit they’ve got a problem and looking to take some action to educate their own.”290

In addition to the slings and arrows of countless critics outside their ranks, the boycott movement endured considerable dissent from black athletes themselves, both active and former. Many athletes balked at the prospect of surrendering years of training in a protest that would mean little, especially if the U.S. team succeeded without them. One of them was Ralph Boston, world-record holder and defending Olympic champion in the long jump, who said, “What boycott? I’ve put too much time and effort into track and field to give it up. If I felt there was sufficient reason I would boycott, but I don’t even know what the reason is. At least Negroes have this much: we can compete in amateur sports and we can represent ourselves and then the country.”291 America’s top triple-jumper, Art Walker, also spoke out against the boycott. “I just don’t see that a boycott would do any good…. I don’t think it would solve anything. I think it would merely keep the guys from having the chance to compete in the Olympics.”292 Charlie Greene, a favorite in the 100-meters, refused to accept the unpatriotic rhetoric of the movement. “It comes down to a matter if you’re an American or if you’re not,” he said. “I’m an American, and I’m going to run.”293 Other athletes didn’t mind the idea of a boycott, so much as they minded a boycott specifically of the Olympics. Larry Livers, an amateur hurdles champion, fell into this category. “I would rather see boycotts against domestic indoor and outdoor meets,” said Livers, “That’s where the black man is really exploited.”294

Former athletes, as current ones, were divided on the boycott question. Jesse Owens, the great sprinter who had dominated the Berlin “Nazi Olympics” in 1936, opposed the boycott. “We shattered this so-called Aryan supremacy then by our own supremacy and by standing and saluting the American flag,” he recalled. “I feel that the deeds of an individual are far more potent than a boycott. There is no politics or racial prejudice in the Olympics. I believe you contribute more by entering than by staying out.”295 Joe Louis, too, frowned on the boycott. “Things are improving,” he said. “If they

289 Ibid.
292 “If They Run, They’ll Win,” *Ebony* 23:12 (Oct. 1968): 188.
were going backwards, it would be different.”296 A few straddled the fence, wary of sounding too “angry” or “militant,” yet also hesitant to appear unsupportive of the black athletes. Jackie Robinson, interviewed often during this period, fell into the latter category. Publicly, Robinson refused to bad-mouth the athletes or the boycott movement. “The tragedy is that the Negro athlete is more concerned with gold medals than the advancement of his people,” he said, indicating his support for the boycott. He continued, “I am proud of these fellows willing to sacrifice something dear to them… I support the athlete.”297 In the same breath, though, he added, “…but I don’t think there are enough athletes to make it worthwhile. I wouldn’t do it myself.”298 While Edwards and others dismissed such doubters as “Uncle Toms”, it grew increasingly difficult to hold the splintering group together as the summer wore on.

The realities of athletic life also contributed to the decline of the boycott movement. Virtually none of the athletes, even those heading the boycott movement, were willing to abandon their training altogether. They trained as hard as ever, participated in meets and contests, and flocked to the preliminary qualifying session in Los Angeles. If they were serious about a boycott, shouldn’t the athletes abandon these formalities as well? As the final Olympic Trials approached, observers were hard-pressed to notice any real difference in the activities of the athletes. While many athletes maintained the boycott rhetoric, it looked to the rest of the world as if the athletes were ready to go to Mexico City.299

The athletes, already divided, discussed the issue constantly throughout the summer, especially after the decision to include South Africa in the Olympics was repealed in late April. At the end of July, a rift tore through the movement, as Lee Evans and a group of the athletes voted to drop the boycott and attend the Olympics. Harry Edwards insisted that the boycott movement was still alive, accusing Evans of trying to disrupt the movement. “If Lee said that, then that’s what he said,” Edwards explained. “They can go ahead and depend on that if they want, but…I wouldn’t put too much stock in what anybody says.”300 While Edwards tried to keep up appearances, after another month of debate and division in the ranks, even he was ready to capitulate. On August 31, he announced, “The majority of athletes will participate in the Olympics.”301 And with that, the boycott died.

The boycott failed for a number of reasons. Chief among them was the lack of unanimity among the athletes. Explaining the final decision, Edwards said, “Of the 26 athletes who held an excellent chance of making the team, 12 and maybe 13 were not willing to boycott under some circumstances.”302 To boycott under such circumstances would likely have been an empty protest, a meaningless sacrifice for those that chose not to attend. Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), expressed such doubts, saying, “[The boycott] is not likely to hurt the United States’ chances of winning the track and field section, although it could well reduce the margin of victory. It could embarrass the

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298 “Olympic Boycott?” 59.
302 Ibid, 4.
United States, but not damage it seriously." If only a few black athletes boycotted, their positions could be easily filled by other Americans, whether black or white. If John Carlos skipped the Olympics, Charlie Green was just as likely to win a medal. If Tommie Smith boycotted, Jim Hines would probably win in his place. If the boycott were to be of any significance, it had to be unanimous.

The fragmentation of the boycott movement might also be attributed to another characteristic that it shared with the broader Black Power movement, its constituency. Like the Black Power movement, the Project was comprised almost entirely of black, young, males, which contributed to tension surrounding the boycott. First, the Project was entirely black. As the 1960s had progressed, many organizations within the Civil Rights Movement had grown frustrated with the presence of whites in their groups. White people always seemed to wind up in supervisory or important roles, which irked black activists. Many blacks began to question whether whites could truly understand black needs, and the Black Power movement rejected white participation. The Project, too, had no white members. The only white person now associated with the Project is Peter Norman, the Australian sprinter appearing on the medal stand in Mexico City in front of Tommie Smith. His appearance in pictures of that medal ceremony lends a white presence to public perception of the athletes’ movement. In truth, the Project was black through and through. While it is unlikely that the most militant black athletes would have accepted whites in their ranks, outside observers would likely have given more credibility to an integrated movement. White sympathizers within the movement may have served as valuable spokesmen to the largely white media, or to white coaches, owners, and organizers who controlled the sports structure that the black athletes were trying to change. Instead, the black athletes were forced to assume a defensive stance with the media, which no doubt contributed to their difficulty in finding supporters.

A second way in which the Project’s constituency resembled other Black Power organizations was in its youth. Edwards himself was only 25 years old. Most of the members were younger. As top athletes in peak condition, they ranged in ages from 18 to a year or two older than Edwards. Much as the Black Power advocates rejected the “elder statesman”, Martin Luther King, these younger athletes rejected former black heroes such as Jesse Owens. The media pressed such former athletes for their views on the boycott, and often found that they disagreed with the boycott movement. Had they been able to present a united front to the media and the world, the movement might have been more successful.

The revolt of the black athletes was also an overwhelmingly male undertaking. Women such as Elaine Brown have written of their frustrations within the Black Power movement. Women were often made to do traditional “women’s work” in the office, such as cooking or cleaning. Whether the women involved in the movement of the athletes felt such frustrations is unclear. It is clear that leadership roles were completely filled by men, and the vast majority of athletes involved were men. Women in the movement were simply invisible to the media; their opinions and interests were just not mentioned. As with the potential to build a broader coalition by including whites and elders, the opportunities available by including women were lost. What remained was a movement

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304 Fraser, “Negroes Call Off Boycott,” 4.
driven solely by young, black males, and even many of them did not support the boycott. Fractured along so many lines, the movement could not hold itself together.

Even as the possibility of a boycott disappeared, the black athletes dropped hints that they might carry out some protest during the Olympics. While a formal boycott had been abandoned, individuals continued planning protests on their own. Lew Alcindor, so fiercely attacked after merely mentioning the possibility of a boycott, never did attend the Olympics. He skipped the qualifying camp and spent his summer in New York, working with Operation Sports Rescue, a program dedicated to inner-city kids. Alcindor insisted that his time had been well spent; it was more important to him to try to “change ten would-be junkies into useful citizens” than to win an Olympic medal.\textsuperscript{306} He suspected that the Olympic basketball team would be just fine without him, a suspicion that was confirmed when the United States won the gold medal in Mexico City.\textsuperscript{307} Other athletes, too, intended to make some sort of protest. Among them was the triple-jumper Art Walker, who said, “I think we still ought to do something anyway to let black America know we identify.”\textsuperscript{308} Harry Edwards insisted that all athletes going to the Olympics would wear black arm bands, and might refuse to walk in formation, to acknowledge the American flag, or some other form of protest.\textsuperscript{309} As the athletes went their separate ways and headed to Mexico City, even they didn’t know what kind of protest might lay ahead.

One such athlete was John Carlos, who spent the days prior to his departure thinking about the boycott, about his teammates, about what he might do should he reach the medal stand. The night before he left for Mexico City, he considered these things as he watched news coverage of the upcoming Olympics. On the screen, he saw students chanting in the background, thousands of them, waving banners and shaking their fists. He had been to the city before and understood a little about the poverty, the disparity of wealth, the ever-present police force, and the possibility of discord. He hoped that the Olympics and the money it brought in might change things in Mexico City, alleviating some of these problems. Apparently the people were still not satisfied. “Good for them,” Carlos thought, “using the Olympics to publicize their issues.” He watched for a few moments, remembering his earlier visit to the city, and pondering again the protests of the black athletes. Then he clicked off the television and headed to bed, an early flight to Mexico awaiting him the next day.\textsuperscript{310}

\textsuperscript{306} Phil Pepe, \textit{Stand Tall}, 114.
\textsuperscript{308} “If They Run, They’ll Win,” 188.
\textsuperscript{309} Fraser, “Negroes Call Off Boycott,” 4.
\textsuperscript{310} C.D. Jackson, \textit{Why?}, 177-178.
CHAPTER V: TLATELOLCO

John Carlos, who arrived in Mexico on October 3, in all likelihood was watching footage of a protest held by Mexican students in the historic Plaza de las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco district of Mexico City. The Plaza is a site of singular significance to Mexicans, as it represents all three of the major eras in Mexican history. There are Aztec ruins, partially excavated and seemingly growing from the grass and slopes; nearby is a cathedral, built by Spanish missionaries; and surrounding the whole area is a cluster of apartment buildings, and a highway, vestiges of the modern era. According to legend, it was on that site that the Aztecs mounted their final, heroic resistance against the Conquistador Hernando Cortés, thwarting his advance temporarily. It was there, across the ruins and on the vast, slate square that filled the bulk of the Plaza, that Mexican students gathered on the afternoon of October 2.

The meeting capped several months of student activities, protesting the harsh treatment of students by Mexican authorities, and demanding the expansion of the democratic process in Mexico. The assemblage was entirely peaceful, and over the course of the evening enthusiastic cheers interrupted a pleasant, picnic-like atmosphere. The students, who made up the majority of the crowd, were joined by their families, parents and many children, who ran about in the ruins. Local police and the military hovered at the fringes of the crowd, but the students had grown accustomed to their presence after months of similar protests. The hum of helicopters, too, seemed little cause for concern.

Suddenly, at about 6:20, two helicopters swooped low over the Square. A few moments later, to the students’ horror and amazement, the helicopters opened fire. Thousands of army troops, who had quietly observed the protest for most of the afternoon, moved to seal off all exits from the Square, and joined in the shooting. A third military group, the Battalion Olympia, which had been raised and trained as a security force for the upcoming Olympics, contributed fire from a number of balconies that lined the Square.

The crowd was helpless. The unarmed students formed a panicked human wave, rushing from one end of the square to the other, seeking desperately for some escape. They trampled one another, a reckless stampede that left some students crushed in their wake. From every side the students met death, from bayonets, from gunfire, from the helicopters, even from tanks. The killing continued for over an hour, subsided for a few minutes, then resumed. Until eleven o’clock the firing was nearly constant, and stray shots were heard even into the next day. Students fled into the apartments that ringed the square, huddling on the floor with strangers who took them in. Soldiers and tanks saturated these buildings with bullets and grenades, blowing out virtually every window and wounding many people inside. The barrage burst many of the pipes in the building, soaking the terrified residents and contributing to their discomfort and confusion. The troops then stormed the apartments, arresting not only anyone who looked like a student,
but many of those who had tried to help them. Those arrested were sent through a gauntlet of soldiers and police, beaten and groped as they were pushed toward the trucks awaiting them. Appropriately, a steady rain began to fall soon after the shooting started, and the streets literally ran red with blood, the dead bodies bloating in the rain.\footnote{311}{Enrique Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997): 715-722; “Mexico Washes Away the Bloodstains,” *San Francisco Express Times* 1:42 (6 Nov. 1968): 3, 5.}

It is unlikely that we will ever know precisely how many students died in the Plaza. There were rumors of dead bodies, even some living victims, being cremated by police to prevent the true extent of the slaughter from being known.\footnote{312}{Juan Martinez, interview with the author, 11 Nov. 2001, Mexico City. (Martinez was a student in 1967 and resident of Mexico City.)} The government wholly denied these charges, challenging graveyard workers and hospital workers to come forward if they had witnessed such cremations.\footnote{313}{Dept. of State Airgram, 20 Oct. 1968, “Review of Mexico City Student Disturbances,” *NARA*, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex, 9/1/68, page 8.} The official figure was thirty-eight dead, including four soldiers. Observers swear that the total was much higher, some estimating as many as three thousand killed.\footnote{314}{Pedro Aguilar Cabrera, interview with the author, 14 Nov. 2001, Mexico City. (Aguilar Cabrera was a resident of Mexico City in 1968.)} Most agree that the true total is somewhere in between, probably about 300. Several thousand student leaders were taken into custody. Many were tortured, terrible tortures including beatings, electric shocks, mental torture, food deprivation, and simulated castration. It would be years before most of the students could consider public protest again, and many were too scarred emotionally to participate in any protests after that night.\footnote{315}{Krauze, *Biography of Power*, 715-722; Lynn V. Foster, *A Brief History of Mexico* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1997): 199-201; Elena Poinatowska, *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (Mexico: Biblioteca ERA, 1993). This book is translated into English as *Massacre in Mexico*. The U.S. State Department listed the following figures: “At least forty, and [perhaps] five times that many were killed, 400 to 500 were wounded and over one thousand five hundred were arrested.” See Dept. of State Airgram, 20 Mex. 1968, “Review of Mexico City Disturbances,” *NARA*, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68, page 15.}

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} of October, 1968, is a landmark date in Mexican history. No one who lived through the event would be the same, and neither would the nation. Mexico, which had been lauded internationally as the paragon of stability and progress, revealed grievous flaws, while the world’s media watched. The Olympic motto, “Ante los Ojos del Mundo” – “Before the Eyes of the World” – only reminded Mexicans that this tragedy unfolded before millions of viewers, shattering the myth of peace and stability. Its mask pulled aside, the government at last had to confront issues that had been swept under the carpet for decades. The Mexican government had hoped that the Olympics would signal to the world that Mexico was a modern nation, prosperous enough, motivated enough, and organized enough to stage the largest sporting festival in the world. Instead, the student massacre announced to the world that much of that image of prosperity was a façade, concealing a nation rife with social problems and dissatisfied citizens.\footnote{316}{Octavio Paz, *The Other Mexico*.} The massacre renewed interest in reform, reviving a liberal tradition that had lain dormant since the end of the Lázaro Cárdenas presidency in 1940. Since 1968, the presidents of Mexico have slowly allowed voices of discontent to be heard in public forums, have expanded the role of minority parties in the political process, and have looked more earnestly at the problems facing most of the population.
These changes owe much of their inspiration to the student massacre, not the Olympics themselves. Historians, and witnesses to the student uprising, have debated whether there was any connection between the students and the Olympics. Indeed, the student movement seemed ideologically groundless at first, originating as a protest against police brutality, and over time attacking various government officials and programs, including the Olympics. The Olympics, in the minds of many students, symbolized all that was wrong with Mexico, a nation that spent lavishly on construction and remodeling the city, at the same time ignoring the armies of impoverished that wandered its sidewalks. The students waved signs and chanted slogans against the Games, and the newspapers printed editorials and cartoons connecting the two. The students were watched by police units assembled for Olympic security, filmed and interviewed by media on hand to cover the Olympics, and called to justice by a president obsessed with putting on a positive show “before the eyes of the world.” By the night of October 2nd, the students and the Olympics were inextricably linked, as they remain to this day. So profound was this connection that it is fair to surmise that, had the Olympics not loomed in the near future, the student massacre would never have happened.

The Mexican government, even as it had achieved the “Mexican miracle” in the 1940s and ’50s, and even as it was lauded by the rest of the globe as a paragon of political stability, had always had its detractors. Various strikes and protest movements over the years had inspired specific mechanisms within the government for handling such problems, and by the time the students began their protest in 1968, the government was well-practiced in dealing with trouble-makers. Since the beginnings of the Mexican Revolution, opposition groups operated only so far as the government allowed, never seriously challenging the established system, and yet never entirely snuffed out. Leaders of groups that started to speak too loudly were usually co-opted into the PRI and thus silenced. Often such groups found their voices squelched by a publicity infrastructure that was entirely controlled by the government – paper and ink for printing pamphlets or newspapers, space on billboards, air-time on radio or television, and virtually any other means of reaching a wide audience were either government-owned, or sympathetic to the PRI. Any movement that managed to circumvent such obstacles confronted still greater problems in challenging the government. Propaganda campaigns, launched in those same government-owned newspapers or over the radio, were vicious and ruthless, humiliating and emasculating individuals at the head of such movements. The president and his aides, too, thwarted opposition groups by either ignoring them or refusing to meet with their representatives publicly, ensuring an “our word against theirs” debate that the government would surely win. Finally, and only if all of the above mechanisms had failed to quiet the protest, the government might resort to force. Swiftly and completely, the most vocal dissenters were made to disappear. Only rarely had this happened in the Revolutionary era, so rarely that the incidents barely dented the Mexican reputation for stability.317

These methods for controlling protest had been tested several times prior to 1968, and always things had ended badly for the protestors. In 1940, troops fired upon labor leaders who sought improved working conditions, leaving eleven dead. Similarly, troops attacked another group marching in support of a strike in 1942, and eleven more

protestors died. The worst massacre prior to 1968 came in 1952, when the Army attacked a group protesting the policies of President Ruiz Cortines, killing over 200 people. Not all protests were put down with violence. When railroad workers struck in 1959, the government arrested the leaders of the union, many of whom spent years in prison, and fired thousands of workers. And in 1964 and ’65, when young doctors protested for increased wages and benefits, the government employed a variety of tactics to defuse the movement. Empty promises and shady back-room deals that were never fulfilled, were favorite tactics of the president. Perhaps the most devastating ploy was a clever propaganda, and slander, campaign against the doctors. The government purchased dozens of full-page ads in local papers, pretending to be doctors who opposed the protestors, and described them as a splinter group with little support in the medical community. After months of these kinds of attacks, the doctors found they had virtually no popular support, that many doctors did not know what their leaders really wanted, and still had not had an honest meeting with the president. The movement crumbled, its proponents beaten and demoralized.318

Students in Mexico faced other obstacles in mounting a protest, some common to students everywhere, others peculiar to Mexico. Students in general provide an ideal source of protestors. They are generally not of the lowest financial class, so they have the means and wherewithal to support a movement. They are educated and literate, and more politically aware than other groups. They are young and energetic, and looking for outlets to vent their energy. Most are at an age when they seek to assert independence and their own identity, often by breaking with societal norms or family traditions. They have less to lose than other groups, rarely tied down by commitments to home, family, and career. Finally, and not insignificantly, students have more time to dedicate to such activities – most even relish the opportunity to skip class for something so exciting as a protest march. Yet even with so many advantages, student movements often fail to materialize. For while they may have the time and the means to stage a protest, students also suffer from apathy, laziness, and spottiness of commitment. For many, their political awareness and interest is only just developing, and they may not identify with the ideals of a broader movement. While the most focused and driven of student leaders provide leadership, the masses of students may not follow them, or may not remain interested over the duration of a prolonged protest. Drawn in by the excitement and charge of the movement, when the drudgery and work of day-to-day operations set in, many students quietly find their way back to the classroom.

The students in Mexico faced other challenges as well. The movement struggled to win followers outside of their own ranks, though they made many attempts to connect with workers, peasants, and others. The grim financial prospects of most Mexicans left them unconcerned, in many cases even hostile, to a group of privileged students who were marching in the streets when they should have been in class. Finally, and perhaps most important, political careers in Mexico were achieved within the PRI. Thus, any student with the drive and focus to lead a protest, if he had any interest in a career in politics, had to think twice before attacking the government. And so, without having to exert any overt pressure at all, the PRI co-opted many student leaders who realized that speaking out against the government might threaten their futures.319 Understanding such

319 Kaiser, 1968 in America, 150-165; Fraser, 1968: A Student Generation in Revolt, 1-14; Airgram 3 Nov. 1968, “Generalizations on Student Unrest,” NARA RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 MEX, 9/1/68; DeGroot, Student Protest, p. 5.
obstacles, the American ambassador to Mexico speculated in June of 1968, “...It is most unlikely that such conditions [between students and the government] will rapidly develop here to critical proportions, at least until after 1970 when president Diaz Ordaz’s term ends.”

It was into this atmosphere that the students launched their movement in 1968. The protests began in late July, when students from several schools marched through the streets, many in celebration of the 10th anniversary of Fidel Castro’s revolution in Cuba. A chance encounter between student groups from the Vocational School Number Two of the National Polytechnical Institute and the Preparatory School Isaac Ochoterena – traditional rivals – led to fisticuffs in the street. The scuffle would have been simply another chapter in a long line of street fights between the two rival schools, had not the granaderos, Mexico’s feared riot police, been sent to the scene. They dispersed the students with unnecessary violence, swinging their clubs and injuring many demonstrators. They pursued both groups back to their schools, where they continued to attack both students and teachers, in one instance blowing down the door of an 18th century building with a bazooka, injuring many students huddled behind it. In extending their brutality onto the school campuses, the granaderos breached the barrier of university autonomy that was a tradition in Mexico. Misbehavior by the students had always been the sacred preserve of university officials. Now, with the government clearly in violation of such a policy, the university students began to protest the brutality of the police, and university officials supported them for the assault on autonomy.

In the days following the initial attack, student groups began marching in the streets and assembling at the Zocalo, a square in the heart of the city surrounded by government buildings. Students from dozens of schools and universities began organizing into a broader movement, and within days students throughout the city went on strike; cynics noted that most students would rather roam the streets than attend classes anyway. The movement escalated rapidly, and on July 26th a massive student march was again met with violence. Granaderos and the city police assaulted the students with clubs and bayonets, injuring many and killing four.

This latest spate of violence only heightened the resolve of the students, who organized further and released a list of six demands. These included: the release of all political prisoners in Mexico; the repeal of Article 145 of the penal code, which allowed for the arrest and punishment of dissidents under the vague category of “social dissolution”; elimination of the granaderos; dismissal of Mexico City’s police chief, Luis Cueto, and his deputy; payment of an indemnity to victims of police aggression and their families; and admission of responsibility for the violence committed. There was much debate in the media, both in Mexico and the United States, about these demands, but in hindsight they seem simple enough. The last four were all directly related to the police aggression towards the students, the catalyst for their protest. The repeal of Article 145

320 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 14 June 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2341, folder POL 14 Mex 1/1/67.
322 Spitzer and Cohen, “In Mexico,” 40.
was a broader demand, but not one uncommon in protest movements in Mexico. The Article had been a stick wielded by the government many times in the past; it gave the police a ready excuse to arrest whomever they saw fit. It was only natural that a protest movement would demand the repeal of such a law. Only the first demand indicated any broad political intent of the students, and it, too, seems like a natural demand for a “protest” group. Journalists speculated that such a demand indicated that communists had infiltrated the student movement, for most political prisoners in Mexico (though Diaz Ordaz denied that there were any political prisoners) were connected with communism in some way. It is entirely possible that there were communists in the midst of the student movement – although the Communist Party in Mexico denied any involvement with the students – but demanding the release of political prisoners might just as easily have been an exhilarating thing for the students to do. It lent an importance to the movement that attacking police brutality did not, and it gave a revolutionary feel to the movement, uniting them with students in France, the United States, Ireland, Italy, and elsewhere, who spent much of that summer marching in the streets. In truth, while they waved pictures of Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung, the Mexican students were not calling for a revolution as some other students around the world were, and they did not call for a significant overhaul of the political system. It is worth noting, too, that they made no mention of the Olympics in their formal demands. At its genesis, what the student movement wanted most was an apology, and to be left alone by the authorities.

It is possible that Diaz Ordaz could have defused the movement at this early juncture, perhaps by issuing such an apology and making a few concessions to the students. Instead, he chose to escalate the cycle of repression, leading to more student protest, and the pattern continued throughout the summer. Government officials tried to quell the strike in the same manner that they had the railroad strike and the medical strike. They purchased full-page advertisements criticizing the student movement, leveling accusations of Communist agitation, and attempted to alienate the students from the rest of the population. The police arrested many student leaders, several of them foreigners older than typical students, contributing to rumors of Communist involvement. Among the thousand or so protestors arrested were two Spaniards, an Algerian, five Frenchmen, and Mika Satter Seeger, daughter of the American folk singer Pete Seeger. Such government efforts were counter-balanced by student publicity campaigns, as growing armies of students distributed fliers, conversed with people on the street, and emblazoned buses and walls with their slogans and demands. The protests continued to grow in number and intensity, and as the movement grew its ideology began to crystallize and broaden. Initiated as a reaction against police brutality, the movement quickly came to incorporate demands for expansion of the democracy, university reform, and efforts to ease poverty. They began to talk about political domination by the PRI and about

324 Martinez interview.
325 Stevens, Protest and Response, 185-240.
326 “Mexican Student Protests Spread to 2 Other Cities,” New York Times (1 Aug. 1968): 4; Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 29 July 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
overcrowding in the universities. They began “questioning the political system and demanding a greater role in the decision-making process.” They also began to attack the Olympic Games. On July 30, banners revealed one of many new slogans, “NO QUEREMOS OLIMPIADOS” – “We don’t want the Olympics.”

By the beginning of August, student marches routinely included 50,000 or more protestors, with thousands of observers gathering at the roadsides to watch. While the students were always peaceful and unarmed, such masses of humanity were more than just a cause for concern for government officials – they also began to exacerbate traffic problems in a city already known for its traffic jams. They began to reach out to other groups, such as workers, the urban poor, and Indian peasants. While they had scant hope of winning many supporters from these groups – not only were many of their leaders loyal followers of the PRI, but most of them viewed the university students as spoiled brats – such efforts did not go unnoticed by the government, which could ill-afford a broad-based attack with the Olympics so near. Even more noteworthy, the students began to take the protest directly to Diaz Ordaz, chanting and jeering outside the presidential offices in the Zocalo, and demanding a public meeting with him. They waved banners suggesting that the president was an “assassin,” and parodied his empty offer of an “extended hand” with cartoons of an extended claw. Other posters depicted Diaz Ordaz using the Mexican Constitution as toilet paper. Such attacks cost them potential support from other groups, as many felt their actions in poor taste. In a demonstration on August 27th in front of the Presidential Palace, the students grew increasingly rowdy, until by the end of the display they had desecrated many symbols central to national pride, had spray-painted the palace and pulled down the Mexican flag. They shouted insults at the President, and chanted, “Sal al balcon, chango hocicon!” These attacks struck Diaz Ordaz on a particularly tender nerve, his physical appearance. The object of jokes and derision throughout his life, he was always on guard against such attacks as president. Other students broke into the Cathedral on the Zocalo, rang the church bells, and set off fireworks in the cathedral. Their actions on that night had two deleterious effects. First, they cost the students many supporters, who were offended at the desecration of the palace. Second, they deeply offended Diaz Ordaz, who was insecure about his appearance, sensitive to any insult, and suspicious of any number of conspiracies against himself and the country. It was, in part, the virulent insults launched by the students that drove Diaz Ordaz to consider a violent solution to the problem.

333 Dept. of State Intelligence Note, from Thomas L. Hughes to The Secretary, 29 Aug. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
334 (“Come out on the balcony, monkey with a big snout!”) Krauze, Biography of Power, 702.
Such violence resurfaced at the end of August, after a month of peaceful and undisturbed student marches. On August 28, the students launched their largest protest yet, including some 200,000 students, teachers, and parents. While again the march stopped traffic and filled the Zocalo, the police were nowhere to be seen. That night, long after most of the protestors had gone home, a few thousand students returned to the square, apparently intent on spending the night and planting some sort of permanent pickets in front of the presidential residence. It was then that the police arrived, at first chasing off the protestors with only minor resistance. When the students returned, armed with bottles, rocks, sticks and any other makeshift weapons they could find, the confrontation descended into violence. Dozens of students were arrested, and four were killed in the melee.\(^{337}\)

Perhaps in an attempt to avoid having to resolve the issue violently, in his fourth annual presidential address, delivered on September 1\(^{st}\), Diaz Ordaz dedicated much of his speech to the student protest and the coming Olympics. In hindsight, the speech is a classic example of a tactic used many times before by the government in handling protest, empty promises. Diaz Ordaz specifically addressed two of the six student demands. Regarding the release of political prisoners, he maintained his position that there were no prisoners held solely for their political beliefs, and that all those incarcerated had committed other crimes (it is fair to assume that such “crimes” may well have fallen under the aegis of Article 145, “social dissolution”). He intimated, though, that he might be willing to release some prisoners if the protests ceased. Regarding Article 145, Diaz Ordaz explained that he had initiated a study of the Article, and suggested a public debate within the Congress. Such assurances appear even more transparent in hindsight than they did in 1968, and few students were assuaged even then. Regarding the use of violence, Diaz Ordaz was even more intransigent. Not only was no apology for prior acts forthcoming, but he insisted that the government was ready to use armed force to prevent further disturbances. The warning foreshadowed the events of a month later, though no one recognized it at the time. Student leaders were disappointed that Diaz Ordaz addressed only two of their demands, and even those inadequately, and they vowed to continue their protests.\(^{338}\)

The first weeks of September passed relatively quietly. The students respected the observance of several national holidays by refraining from protests. In addition, classes were starting up again, and some students talked of ending the strike. A minority, though, agitated as actively as ever for change. They formed “brigades,” meeting each day to distribute literature in the streets and encourage workers and peasants to join their movement. They preached of a corrupt government, ruled not by democracy but an entrenched oligarchy, of an economy grossly divided between the wealthy few and the impoverished many. These students took up a headquarters at the National University, where they used the university grounds for planning their next protests and organizing the brigades for their daily marches. It was this improper use of the university campus that


prompted the most significant government attack thus far, when army troops attacked the National University and seized control from the students on September 20th. At about 10 p.m., trucks and armored cars swarmed over the campus, breaking into the student offices and arresting hundreds of students, faculty, and administrators. The military repulsed several efforts by students to retake the campus, insisting that the students had been using the grounds illegally. U.S. officials wondered whether this explanation was simply an excuse for the government to occupy the university, where a number of important Olympic facilities were located. It was later reported that the attack was a preemptive strike to thwart a student march on the Olympic Village, though it is impossible to know whether such a march was actually in the works. While university staff balked at this ultimate breach of autonomy, those few who openly defended the students’ actions joined them in jail, and the total number arrested quickly topped one thousand. The university would be restored to its normal operation procedures, explained the Minister of the Interior, Luis Echeverria, but probably not until after the Olympics were completed. The Minister of Defense, General Marcelino Garcia Barragan, was less optimistic, saying that the university would be restored only when he was certain there would be no more student disorder. The students took refuge at the other main campus in the city, the National Polytechnic Institute, surrounded by the army but not seized immediately. In the ensuing days, the students engaged in numerous street battles with the army and the police, exchanging volleys of rocks and bottles with the tear gas launched by soldiers, and continued their agitation as best they could, leaving flyers in the streets and painting their slogans on city buses.

The battles between students and authorities ebbed and flowed, stirring up ceaseless debate in the Mexican papers and much uncertainty whether the problem could be solved before the Olympics. On September 22, even as flocks of doves were released in a rehearsal of the Opening Ceremonies, across the street students and soldiers engaged in a pitched battle on the University campus. Injuries were common in such battles, and the death toll mounted daily. In the battle on the 22nd, students overturned buses and set fire to them, threw rocks, bricks, boiling water and Molotov cocktails at authorities, who responded with tear-gas and occasionally gunfire. This kind of violence led to the police storming the students’ stronghold at the Polytechnic Institute, an action that led to the resignation of the rector of the National University, Javier Barros Sierra, a resignation that was rejected by the university’s governing board, which still hoped to convey an image of normality. Still another battle raged on the night of September 24th, in which students for the first time responded to the violence with gunfire of their own, contributing to as many as fifteen deaths that night. Students were heard to ask passing motorists for donations of gasoline, “for the people of Mexico,” to use in the making of their bombs. Such entreaties met with little success, though students still hoped their protests might win acceptance with a broader audience. “It is no longer a student fight.”

339 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 19 Sept. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/168.
one said, “but a fight by all the people.”

In spite of such aspirations, the students struggled on largely unaided by other groups, pitted against the authorities in nightly battles.

The U.S. government and media watched the proceedings in Mexico with more than simply passing interest. Cold-war tensions contributed to their concern, as early reports seemed to indicate that the student movement of Castro-friendly Mexico had been infiltrated by communist radicals. For years, the U.S. State Department had kept tabs on communism in Mexico and was leery of the left gaining influence. As the student movement grew, State Department documents reflected almost a paranoia that communists controlled the movement. In truth, such claims reflected more the Mexican government’s perspective than reality. As September wore on, diplomats seemed to recognize that the role of communists within the movement was limited, and their concern shifted. They were more concerned that the student movement might win a larger audience, eventually driving the government itself to the left. (This, in effect, became reality in the early ’70s under Echeverria, who did move significantly to the left) The second cause for concern was that the student movement, or more important government reaction to it, would threaten the Olympics, the athletes, or traveling spectators. U.S. diplomats were unimpressed with Diaz Ordaz’s handling of the affair, long before the massacre itself. On August 28, one such diplomat assessed his methods to that point, writing, “The evidence thus far is that Diaz Ordaz has not distinguished himself in handling the student crisis. He apparently has: 1) under-estimated the depth of student hostility toward the GOM; 2) overestimated the role played by alleged “Communist” agitators; and 3) failed to follow up on possible opportunities to settle the problem.”

Then, five days prior to Oct. 2, calm set in. Students and government alike began speaking of a rapprochement, and began making concessions, however mild. With the Olympics less than three weeks away, and both sides exhausted by ceaseless fighting, it seemed that a compromise was in the offing. Rector Barros Sierra, returned to his post after his resignation was denied, insisted that he would come back to work only if the army vacated the National University. Shortly thereafter, the army did indeed begin making preparations to end its occupation, painting over the many murals and slogans created by the students, and generally cleaning up the mess of the past few weeks. Diaz Ordaz replaced a member of the congressional committee on student affairs, whom the students had named as unsympathetic to their needs. For their part, the students reiterated their commitment to non-violence, and while they refused to cancel their strike, they vowed repeatedly not to disrupt the Olympic Games in any way. The only notable demonstration during this period was a low-key “Mothers March” on Sept. 30, consisting of some 3,000 women. Finally, the military rolled out of the National University, sweeping away in about ten minutes all signs of an occupation that lasted nearly two weeks. Not long after, the students pensively resumed their customary places on campus.

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345 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 2 Aug. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
346 Dept. of State Memorandum, from Covey T. Oliver to The Secretary, 28 Aug. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
It felt for all the world like things were heading back to normal, and everyone hoped the Olympics might arrive with no further incidents. Covey T. Oliver, the U.S. ambassador in Mexico City, wired home, “Tensions seem to be easing in Mexico City.”

It was October 1st.

The following day, leaders of the strike movement continued their trend of recent days, organizing smaller gatherings, treading carefully to avoid police violence. At about 5:30, some 10,000 people gathered at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas – students, parents, women, children and elderly among them – for their latest rally. The throng had planned to march to a nearby campus for a demonstration, but strike leaders announced to the crowd that those plans had been scrapped, for fear of inciting the troops who had surrounded the Plaza. Scholars disagree as to the exact nature of the attack in Tlatelolco, but it clearly involved some planning by the military, and was much more than a spontaneous outbreak of violence. Witnesses in the square recall seeing men wearing white gloves, now understood to be a sign that they were members of the Battalion Olympia, spaced strategically throughout the square. Moments prior to the attack, these men rounded up many of the student leaders and forced them to a second-floor room in one of the buildings fronting the square. From the balcony of that room, these soldiers were able to fire on the crowd from an ideal vantage point, and they did so indiscriminately. At the same time, two military helicopters circling the area began circling lower and lower over the square. Two flares, green and red, flashed from one of the helicopters moments before the attack began, later described as a signal to the ground troops to seal off all exits from the square. The helicopters, the tanks, and the spacing of the troops all suggest a pre-planned attack. One mysterious element of the slaughter points to an even deeper conspiracy – one of the earliest injuries was to General Hernandez Toledo, who suffered a wound from a .22 caliber weapon, one that soldiers would surely not be using. Toledo, who oversaw the troops in the immediate area of the square, insisted that his troops resorted to violence only when fired upon by snipers from the top of the apartment buildings, and held up his wound as proof of such sniping. But why would the students, after weeks of essentially unarmed and peaceful protest, suddenly choose to engage in the systematic sniping suggested by Hernandez Toledo, especially after the lull in violence of the past week? More likely is a theory advanced by historian Enrique Krauze, that the whole affair was premeditated, including the shot on Toledo (which was not fatal). Krauze speculates that a military sniper, armed with the smaller gun to add to the deception, fired the shot at Toledo – who himself was not aware of the plot – to make it seem that the students had fired the first shot. Whether the conspiracy was this well-planned or not, there can be no doubt that the planners of the massacre put a great deal of thought into their efforts. The complete results of a

347 Dept. of State Memorandum, from Covey T. Oliver to Acting Secretary, 1 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8, Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
349 Pointowska, Massacre in Mexico, 210.
350 Krauze, Biography of Power, 719-720; Poinatowska, Massacre in Mexico, 202-208. Krauze’s theory was based on the accounts of members of student leadership, who insisted that the first shots fired from the apartment building were not fired by students, but by members of the secret police or Olympia battalion. Dept. of State Telegram, 10 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
government investigation launched in 1997 to determine the nature of the attack are still forthcoming, but preliminary findings indicate that the military initiated the attack, and that high-ranking government officials either coordinated or at least knew the attack was coming. Long-secret files recently opened have revealed graphic pictures of soldiers abusing near-naked students, beating and bloodying them, and lining them up for arrest.\(^{351}\)

Student leaders did their best to prevent panic in the crowd, before finally succumbing themselves. They beseeched the crowd not to run, shouting that the flares were only designed to scare them, that the shots were only fired into the air. In fact, the shots were fired straight into the crowd, and as the troops closed in, in a pincer movement, the mass fled first one way and then the other, facing fire from both sides. While the government claimed that several soldiers were killed by shots from the students, it is likely that they were shot in cross-fire from the various military units, firing in all directions. In the days and weeks following the massacre, students insisted that none of them carried guns. Even if one or two did have a pistol that night, the suggestion that many students fired on the soldiers is not borne out by the evidence or by their own statements. Guns had never been the weapon of choice in the many skirmishes prior to Oct. 2, rather they had thrown sticks, bottles, rocks and Molotov cocktails. Especially after a week of peace, it is highly unlikely that the students would have chosen that evening to fire upon a mass of heavily armed soldiers that had them surrounded in an enclosed area.

Students were rounded up for arrest by the hundreds, lined up against the walls of the cathedral, the housing unit, the ruins. Those who had taken refuge in the apartment building, including many leaders of the strike, suffered the worst abuses. Huddled on the floor in hiding, many of the students did not realize until later that they were soaking wet from the ruptured pipes. The police who searched the building grabbed virtually anyone resembling a student, including several foreigners and laborers. They were treated as one, herded in groups of a dozen or two into several apartments designated as holding areas, where many were made to strip and subjected to searches – witnesses recall that many students were naked even as they were marched to transport vehicles. The police screamed at them, badgered them, and beat them. The march from the apartments to the trucks was even worse, a gauntlet of sorts with soldiers lining the whole walk. The abuses here were even harsher, as these soldiers targeted their blows at the prisoner’s unprotected faces and groins. Most were doubled over in pain by the time they reached the trucks. The students were then hauled away to prison, where many would suffer days and even weeks of extended beatings, deprivation, mental abuse and torture.

The mess created in Tlatelolco was difficult for authorities to clean up, both literally and figuratively. A school adjacent to the square served as a triage center to aid the wounded, and it remains to this day a walk-in clinic.\(^{352}\) The next day, the rain-soaked Plaza was littered with shoes, bits of clothing, purses and hats, and stained with blood. The bodies were gone, and since soldiers had confiscated every camera they saw, the media and witnesses could only guess at the body count. The Plaza was understandably deserted. Now and then a family shuffled out from one of the apartment buildings; many


\(^{352}\) Manuel Larenza, interview with the author, Mexico City, 12 Nov. 2000.
families left the buildings after a night of questioning by the authorities. Otherwise, nothing stirred in the square.

The students were all gone. Dozens had been killed, and even conservative estimates suggested that thousands had been arrested. While the square was silent, the prisons and hospitals of Mexico City resounded with the moans of the wounded and cries of those being tortured. Many of those held in captivity after the massacre were brutally tortured, by soldiers searching for clues as to the leadership, direction, and finances of the movement. Luis Tomas Cabeza described the tortures he endured that day:

…More punches then, this time right in the balls. The pain was so intense I doubled up and fell to the floor. They stopped punching me then and instead began kicking me from head to foot as I lay there…

More punches, plus electric shocks in my testicles, my rectum, my mouth.

Then they tied me up again and shot a pistol off just half an inch or so from my ear. Then after that they said, “Let’s not bother killing him…let’s just cut his balls off…” After they’d subjected me to what they called a “warm-up,” they injected my testicles with an anesthetic and pretended they were castrating me…

Tomas Cabeza was but one of several thousand students being detained, questioned, and in many cases tortured. The arrests continued for a few days after the massacre, as authorities hunted down student leaders. The students themselves were shocked and horrified at the brutal repression, and only the most foolish of them set foot in the streets during those days. What was left of the student leadership made several statements to the press, describing in detail the effects of the massacre. “With the massacre of Tlatelolco,” one read,

Not only did [the government] terribly frighten the popular-student movement, not only did [it] immobilize it terribly during the days when it was important to them to immobilize it totally, not only did [it] confuse public opinion, not only did [it] establish the basis for their political assault, but [it] also struck a strong blow against the general leadership of the movement and its central nucleus, the CNH.

Other such press releases assured the public that they would not hold any more meetings and would not disrupt the Olympics, though they pressed for an end to repression and freedom of the students in captivity. Olympic organizers and government officials declared that they were “discussing” the situation with leaders of the movement, and soon

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353 Official Mexican government statistics listed 37 killed. Other estimates have ranged much higher, even into the thousands. Most contemporary sources estimate the true figure is around 300. See, among others, “Mexico: Massacre in Tlatelolco Square,” http://english/pravda/ru/diplomatic/2002/10/04/37695.html.

354 From Elena Pointowska, Massacre in Mexico, excerpts from W. Kirk Raat and William H. Beezley, eds., Twentieth Century Mexico (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986): 261-262.

355 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 25 Dec. 1968, “Communists Reveal Demoralizing Effect of October 2 Incident,” NARA, RG59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/68.

after announced that the students had agreed to postpone any further activities until after
the Olympics. In truth, continued protest would not only have been difficult, with so
many of their members either dead or in jail, but it would have been extremely dangerous
as well. Diaz Ordaz and his administration had made the decision to end the protests, by
whatever means necessary. Renewed protest would surely have been met with similar
violence. The student movement was, for all practical purposes, dead.

The students thus joined doctors and railroad workers as groups whose movements
were crushed by the government. But this ending was unique, and changed the course of
Mexican history. The massacre was so brutal and senseless – hundreds of fully armed and
professionally trained soldiers leveling all their resources at a crowd of unarmed students –
that the rest of the population simply had to question the actions of their government.
The actions of the government did not go unnoticed, or uncriticized, by the international
press and intellectuals in Mexico. Observers in the U.S. government wondered what
effect the massacre might have on the Diaz Ordaz administration, and on the credibility
of the government as a whole Octavio Paz, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature,
became a vocal critic of the government. Only democratization and an opening of the
government to criticism could solve the deep-seeded problems in Mexico, he argued. Paz
was joined by the popular historian Daniel Cosio Villegas, who wrote many works
criticizing (then President) Luis Echeverria in the 1970s. The fact that these writers
were able to express such sentiments without being censored indicates that the
government was growing more permissive to voices of opposition. In addition to Paz’s
works, the massacre inspired an entire genre known as “Tlatelolco literature,” which
included critical essays, documentaries, novels, short stories and poetry, all of which
galvanized the night of October 2, 1968 as a crucial and tragic memory in the Mexican
conscience. Finally, the massacre helped to change the direction of Mexican
historiography, as many historians rejected the “official mythology” that had been
advanced by the revolutionary state. This official history, as might be expected, glorified
the Revolution and all of its accomplishments. Post-Tlatelolco history has tended to be
more skeptical of the achievements of the Revolution, with many historians even
questioning the contributions of Lazaro Cardenas.

The massacre had profound implications for Mexican self-image, as well as its
image within the international community. Mexico had been looked upon as that rarest of
creatures, a Latin American country which had achieved economic and governmental
stability nonviolently. In one afternoon, that image was shattered. According to one
student, Luis Gonzalez de Alba, “I’m not the same now; we’re all different. There was
one Mexico before the student movement, and a different one after 1968. Tlatelolco is the

357 Hay interview.
358 Dept. of State Telegram, 14 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
359 Roderic Ai Camp, “Political Modernization in Mexico,” in Jaime E. Rodriguez O., ed., The Evolution of
360 Dolly J. Young, “Mexican Literary Reactions to Tlatelolco 1968,” Latin American Research Review XX
(2) 1985: 71-85.
Studies 7(2) Summer, 1991: 331-345; Mary Kay Vaughn, “Cultural Approaches to Peasant Politics in the
Mexican Revolution,” Hispanic American Historical Review 79(2) 1999: 269-305. Jaime E. Rodriguez,
Latin American Center Publications, 1990): 1-11; Thomas Benjamin, “The Leviathan on the Zocalo:
Recent Historiography of the Postrevolutionary Mexican State,” Latin American Research Review XX (3)
dividing point between these two Mexicos.” A populace that had been raised on an idealized vision of the Mexican Revolution was forced to question the validity of its policies. The dream that Mexico might become a modern nation by allowing a privileged few to partake of the benefits of modernization was crushed. The argument advanced by intellectuals such as Paz, that only through democratization could a nation be truly modern, became more apparent even to those in power.

Criticism from outside the government was compounded by criticism from within. Even politicians who had been groomed under the PRI were shocked and appalled at the handling of the student protest, and many recognized that changes had to be made. Such critics might have noted hypocrisy in their president, who two years prior to the massacre had announced in his annual presidential address, “We shall not fall into the trap of the trouble makers. Faced with irresponsible violence, we shall not resort to arbitrary counterviolence.” Clearly, Diaz Ordaz had broken this promise, and his credibility was destroyed. The massacre signaled the beginning of a long, slow erosion of the party, still in progress today. The defection of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas from the party for the 1988 presidential election is an example of this crumbling of a party which, for half a century, appeared solid.

The massacre contributed to the political opening that followed in the 1970s and ’80s, culminating in the election of Vicente Fox in 2000. In the years immediately following the slaughter, under the Presidency of Luis Echeverria, politics in Mexico underwent the “opening of the left.” Echeverria allowed for the release of many political prisoners, and incorporated outspoken proponents of leftist policies into the system. In addition, the government conceded additional seats in the Chamber of Deputies and more truly democratic elections, although even today election fraud remains a problem. The number of opposition candidates winning seats in the Chamber, while always a minority to the majority PRI seats, steadily increased throughout the 1970s and ’80s. Beginning in the late 1980’s under President Carlos Salinas, the PRI settled for only “small majority” victories in elections, rather than grossly lopsided ones. This process finally reached fruition with the election of the PAN candidate in the most recent elections – time will tell how much permanence the changes will hold.

The events of 1968 also had effects within the military. Tensions between civilian leaders and career military officers may have triggered some of the atrocities in the square. The historian Roderic Camp describes an atmosphere of distrust and disdain between the civilian leaders of the country, and General Garcia Barragan, the military leader of the operation in Tlatelolco. He suggests that the incident only worsened already deteriorating relations between the two sides, and that considerable effort in the wake of the slaughter has been invested in reshaping military leadership to be more compatible

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362 Pointowska, 6.
364 Dept. of State Airgram, 9 Jan. 1968, “Mid-Point in the Diaz Ordaz Administration: A Political Assessment,” NARA, RG59, Box 2341, POL 15-1 Mex 1/1/68.
365 Carr, Mexican Communism, 4-5.
367 Pointowska, 6.
with civilian goals.\(^{369}\) The government has also invested in programs to improve training and equipment within the military, making it more efficient and responsive to potential problems, thereby removing the need for gross overreactions such as that in Tlatelolco.\(^{370}\)

Finally, younger officers were promoted, while older ones were phased out, in hopes that younger leadership might react less offensively to the demands of a younger populace.\(^{371}\)

The events of October 2, 1968, are remembered with horror and sadness in Mexico today. They have been a driving force behind the changes in policy discussed above. They are not the only causes of change – the oil crash of the early 1980s led many to economic ruin and mandated reform; the austerity policies employed in an effort to ease the depression only angered many citizens; and the earthquake of 1985 revealed that the government was not capable of handling an emergency, while the citizens helped themselves during the crisis.\(^{372}\) Each of these incidents, and others, deepened the desire for reform that had been articulated by the students in 1968. The students took to the streets to protest police brutality and the authoritarianism of a government once seen as stable and admirable. Their movement was crushed in the most brutal manner imaginable, with hundreds killed and thousands jailed and tortured. The martyred victims have been vindicated, though, by changes in the ensuing years, by the opening of the political system, which crossed an important divide in the year 2000 elections. Given the recent history of Mexico, it is difficult to imagine that any President will be able to satisfy the masses. The old problem of balancing economic and social reform with the latest positive political reforms still exists. But after 1968, Mexico has pulled away the mask that concealed profound problems. It has looked at itself, blemishes and cracks and all, and is working to make itself better.

Accounts of the Olympics almost always mention the students, and vice-versa, and without question the two together have attracted more scrutiny from historians than either would have independently. But were the two so connected at that time? Historians have debated whether the student movement was at all related to the impending Olympics. The day after the massacre, in fact, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico wrote that, “there [did] not seem to be any connection between [the] shootings and [the] Olympics.”\(^{373}\) To be sure, there could have been a student movement without the Olympics, but we must wonder whether it would have ended in such disastrous fashion. If the students initially showed no interest in any ties to the Olympics, by the time of the massacre, the two were so closely linked that, without the looming Opening Ceremonies, there may not have been a massacre at all. The timing of the Games, and the pressure they added to Diaz Ordaz’s decision-making process, is but one connection between the Olympics and the students. In fact, there were at least five significant ties between the two: 1) timing; 2) student rhetoric; 3) the security force that repressed the students was raised for the Olympics; 4) heightened media coverage; 5) the perception in international circles that the students were protesting the Olympics.


\(^{371}\) Camp, “Political Modernization,” 251.


\(^{373}\) Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to Sec State, 3 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
The first connection between the two movements is timing. In the early months of the student movement, while the Olympics were still seemingly in the distant future, neither the press nor the Mexican government, nor the students themselves, for that matter, made much mention of any connection between the two. The government initially had taken a non-violent approach, employing a combination of delay tactics, smear campaigns and false promises. Such techniques had little effect on the bourgeoning student movement. As the months wore on, the impending Olympics grew more prominent in everyone’s consciousness. Leaders of the student movements declared that “time was on their side because the Mexican government had to show [the] International Olympic Committee…that political stability could be maintained” leading up to the Olympics.\(^{374}\) The international media seemed to take the student movement more seriously as the Games drew nearer, less often writing off the students as an ill-guided Communist-infested rabble, and more often giving serious consideration to their grievances. The U.S. media, in particular, began to question the Diaz Ordaz regime, suggesting that the students had struck a chord with which many Mexicans agreed, and that the problem would have been quickly resolved if the students’ complaints were not valid. The Mexican government, too, and Diaz Ordaz in particular, grew more agitated as the Games drew closer. Order simply had to be restored before the hordes of media, athletes, and spectators descended upon Mexico City. By September, members of the US State Department wondered if the window of opportunity for a peaceful settlement had passed. The student movement had gained so much momentum that violence and repression seemed the only possible solution. As a State Department memo dated Sept. 26 explained, “All indications are that the Government of Mexico is completely determined to restore order by any means.”\(^{375}\) Diaz Ordaz himself said plainly, “We are not going to let the student protest interfere with the Olympics.”\(^{376}\) Indeed, with only a few weeks to the Opening Ceremonies, and with international media already arriving, Diaz Ordaz had run out of time. As one American diplomat put it, the “…significance of [the] Olympic deadline should not be underestimated. [The] government obviously felt that concessions under pressure would only strengthen [the] hand of radicals and encourage terrorist elements who might jeopardize [the] Olympics.”\(^{377}\) Swift and violent force, was the only way to subdue the students before they could threaten the Olympics.\(^{378}\)

Student rhetoric and other symbols are the second connection between the two movements. To be clear, from the beginning students vowed not to disturb the Olympic Games. They recognized that the Olympics were hugely important in building Mexican pride and nationalism, and that the vast majority of Mexicans supported the undertaking. To attack them directly would be self-defeating. Still, the Olympics exemplified much that was wrong with Mexico, and the students increasingly drew connections between their own grievances and this ultimate symbol of Mexican extravagance and waste. While the government spent billions of dollars in construction, beautification programs, training and organizing for the Games, the masses remained mired in poverty. One student summarized

\(^{374}\) Dept. of State Telegram, from Ambenbassy to SecState, 20 Aug. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2341, folder POL 14 Mex 1/1/67.
\(^{375}\) Dept. of State Memorandum, from Covey T. Oliver to The Secretary, 26 Sept. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
\(^{377}\) US Dept. of State Telegram, 5 Oct. 1968, NARA, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
\(^{378}\) U.S. Dept of State Intelligence Notes, from Thomas L. Hughes to The Secretary, 6 and 16 Aug. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
their views, “We weren’t against the Olympics as a sports event, but we were against what
the Games represented economically. We’re a very poor country, and the Olympics meant
an irreparable drain on Mexico’s economic resources…[the president] made this
commitment simply to make a big splash, to enhance our country’s outward image, which
had nothing at all to do with the country’s real situation.”379 By the end of July, the first
slogans and banners decrying the Olympics had appeared. On one sign, the Olympic rings
were replaced with five smoking bombs. Another read, “Mexico: Gold Medal for
Repression.”380 The popular Olympic jingle “1968: Year of the Olympics,” was replaced
with “1968: Year of the Repression.”381 By the end of August, the crowds of protesters
waved countless signs against the Games. At a march on August 27, nearly half a million
people joined the students in chanting, “We don’t want the Olympics, we want
revolution”.382 Similar slogans were spray-painted on buses and buildings, often directly
on top of the Olympic logo or Mexico’s logo for the Games, which read “Mexico ‘68”.

Fig. 3: Cartoons such as this one demonstrate ties between the student movement
and the Olympics. From Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins, 1968: Marching in the Streets

The third link between the two was the security force that helped put down the
rebellion. As with any large event, the Mexicans heightened their security presence in the
weeks prior to the Olympics. In fact, a special battalion was assembled to preserve public
order during the Games, the Olympia Battalion. This unit wore white gloves to denote
their special role. Witnesses at the Tlatelolco massacre recall seeing white-gloved soldiers
interspersed in the crowd, some in civilian clothes (while still wearing the tell-tale white
gloves). In a newspaper ad purchased by the students some two weeks after the massacre
(and largely unnoticed in the midst of the Olympics), student leaders blamed the Olympia
Battalion for the slaughter of innocents in Tlatelolco.383 One U.S. State Department report
explained that the “Students did not start [the] violence at Tlatelolco, but rather [a] well-
armed group identifying [them]selves by gloved left hand[s] started firing and provided
pretext for army firing.”384 Testimony at later hearings indicate that a total of some 65
soldiers from these battalions had been sent to the square and played a key role in

379 Poinatowska, Massacre in Mexico, 310.
382 Ibid.
383 The ad appeared in the Oct. 17 El Dia. Dept. of State Telegram, 17 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 2340,
folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
384 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 6 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343,
folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
blocking the panicked students as they tried to flee. They also stormed the apartment buildings surrounding the square, as witnesses recall hearing soldiers calling to one another, “Olympia Battalion! Olympia Battalion!” and such things as, “Don’t shoot! They’re wearing white gloves!” Surely the Mexican military could have squashed the student movement without the participation of these 65 soldiers, but their presence was a telling reminder that the protection of the Olympics was at stake.385

A fourth connection between the two was heightened media attention. Just as there was additional security for the Olympics, there was dramatically increased media in the country. With only a few weeks before the Opening Ceremonies, the number of reporters and film crews in Mexico City was growing by the day. Those reporters that did arrive received specific instructions from the Mexican government regarding their coverage of the student movement. Jack Zanger, a writer for the New York Times, resigned from the press corps in protest over being censored. “We should have known what was coming at the first meeting,” said Zanger, “when an official told us: ‘There are no riots. If anyone asks you about riots, say it’s not your department.’”386 Many papers, including the New York Times, carried daily updates of both the Olympics and the student movement. Many such reports were critical of Diaz Ordaz’s handling of the students and wondered what protests they had planned for the Olympics. Such speculation grew louder as more and more crews arrived. If the student movement was to be put down, it needed to happen before the full media crush that was to arrive in the following days. One incident, in particular, exemplifies this theme. After the attack of October 2nd, much furor was made in the Italian press over the wounding of Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. Fallaci, in Mexico City to cover the Olympics and investigate the student movement, was on the 3rd floor balcony of an apartment house during the attack. “She threw herself face down on balcony, was menaced with pistol and seized by hair by Mexican security officer, compelled to stand with hands on wall for two hours in exposed position and hit by three bullets or fragments at that time.”387 In response to this attack, the Italians threatened to withdraw their Olympic team, and requested compensation from the Mexican government. Nothing more came of the incident, and Fallaci made a full recovery, but her injury demonstrates that the government did have an interest in “solving” the student problem before the media presence grew even greater.388

Finally, the widely-held perception that the student movement aimed to damage the Olympics created a connection between the two. If, as the cliché holds, perception is reality, then the student movement was a threat to the Games. The international media began linking the two movements very early, and as the Games drew nearer scarcely an article could be written that did not speculate whether the protests would threaten the Olympics. An article running in the Sept. 2 issue of Newsweek quoted one student as saying, “The committee is considering different projects to use the Olympics to embarrass the Mexican Government. Violence is definitely being considered – but right now it would be a last resort.”389 A government propaganda campaign contributed to this misconception. Mexican papers promoted the idea – on the morning after the massacre, one, just under the

385 Poinatowska, Massacre in Mexico, 218, 221.
387 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 9 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
388 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Rome to SecState, 9 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
389 “Plot to Kill the Olympics,” Newsweek 2 Sept. 1968, 59.
headline, printed the phrase, “The Objective: Preventing the Nineteenth Olympic Games from Being Held.” These campaigns were largely effective, as most international readers or visitors to the country believed that the students were trying to ruin the Games. One French tourist commented, “The students’ acts of bravado and the turmoil they were causing were threatening to ruin the Olympic Games.” Another said, “What happened was that students wanted to steal the spotlight from the Olympics.” Coupled with such beliefs were legitimate concerns about the safety of visiting athletes and tourists. The U.S. State Department grew more alarmed in the weeks prior to the massacre, and remained so in its aftermath. It issued bulletins speculating that there might be more trouble during the Games, and certainly that there would be increased security. Indeed, on the day of the Opening Ceremonies, the front page of the *New York Times* ran a large picture of the Olympic Stadium, ringed with hundreds of riot police. But the movement had been thoroughly crushed, its leaders either dead or jailed, and the Games went on undisturbed. As one historian wrote, “By mid-week of the final week before the Opening there was much more threat of turmoil than actual turmoil. Mexico City was outwardly peaceful and serene.” Student promises not to disturb the Olympics were upheld, though we can only wonder if they would have staged some kind of protest had the massacre not occurred.

After the massacre of Oct. 2, and during the Olympic Games, it seemed for a time that one could not mention the massacre without mentioning the Olympics, and vice-versa. As *Sports Illustrated* aptly predicted, “When the big show moves into the stadium on Opening Day, there will be almost as large a crowd of soldiers outside the place – guarding it.” The soldiers were a constant reminder of the slaughter of a few weeks before, and both Mexican and American newspapers greeted the ceremonies with a joy mixed with sadness. One of the most telling images appeared in the Oct. 13 *New York Times*, in which the United States Committee for Justice to Latin American Political Prisoners took out a ¼ page ad, depicting the Olympic torch accompanied by the quote, “Mexico’s Students Uphold Freedom’s Torch.” The marriage of the two movements was complete. The student movement, hindsight shows us, had been thoroughly crushed, its leaders incarcerated and its rank-and-file demoralized. Diaz Ordaz and his officers, though, still wondered whether there might be some backlash during the Games. Pockets of student resistance carried on in rural areas, and might somehow revive the urban movement. Just in case, the Mexican Government arranged for the tightest security ever seen at an Olympic Games, and athletes approaching the stadium might have understandably thought they had walked into a war zone. An Olympics that was supposed to symbolize peace, prosperity, and good will, instead opened in an atmosphere of fear, tension, and distrust.

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391 Ibid., 307.
392 Ibid.
393 See, for example, Dept. of State Telegrams, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 6 Sept., 2 Oct., and 14 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
Fig. 4: “The Path of Death,” depicting some of the many issues on Diaz Ordaz’s mind on the eve of the Olympics, *Excelsior*, 13 Sept. 1968, 7-A.
Darkness fell over the pyramids at Teotihuacan, and for a few minutes their silhouettes hung eerily against the orange backdrop of sunset. Then, piercing lights shot from the ground into the night sky, dancing between the structures, around and over them. The biblical voice of Charleston Heston boomed from the dark, telling tales of ancient peoples building the pyramids. The voices of Vincent Price, Burt Lancaster, Charles Bronson and others picked up the narrative, speaking of the Mexica, a nomadic people who discovered their sacred symbol, an eagle perched on a cactus, a snake in its mouth, at the site where the pyramids stand. Music rose and fell behind the voices, much of it played on pre-Columbian instruments. For several hours, a small crowd of mostly American tourists watched the show, drinking in both the spectacular light show and the Mexican history and mythology. As the lasers fizzled to a stop and the music died down, dim flood lights lit the pyramids, and the visitors concluded the evening with a hurried walk back to their cars and buses in silence, surrounded by the chill of late October air and the ghosts of Mexico past.\(^{398}\)

With the Opening Ceremonies still nearly a year off, the celebration of the Olympic year had begun. The Sound and Light show at the pyramids was one of the first events of the year-long “Cultural Olympics,” a celebration of international customs and artistry that rivaled the athletic contests in scope and scale. The Mexicans took to heart their status as the first Latin American nation to host the Games, and they genuinely sought to make their Olympics the warmest, broadest, and most egalitarian sporting event ever held. A major part of their agenda in that regard was the Cultural Olympics, the first of its kind but now an accepted part of Olympic tradition. The cultural festival was the brainchild of Pedro Ramirez Vazquez, president of the Organizing Committee, an accomplished architect. Under his skillful guidance, the Cultural Olympics equaled, and in some ways surpassed, the athletic contests. More nations, and more individuals, participated in the cultural events; the artistic achievements were warmly received by spectators and critics, and played out before huge audiences; and in some cases the artwork produced for the Games still stands, while few of the athletic records lasted more than a few years. If the Olympics themselves became for many a symbol of the government’s shortsightedness and poor fiscal policy, the Cultural Olympics was an accomplishment without blemish, a testament to all that was right in Mexico.

The Cultural Olympics served several purposes, though organizers could scarcely have imagined they would be so successful. First, they served as a form of advertising for the Olympics. The cultural events began in the fall of 1967 and continued throughout the year, thereby constantly exposing Mexicans not only to the artists themselves, but also reminding them of the athletic festival coming in October. Newspapers were filled with

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mention of the Olympics, long before the athletes started to arrive. It seemed every play, every dance, every art festival or poetry reading was advertised under the Olympic logo. Mexican television ran programs describing the events, encouraging attendance at local theaters, musical performances, and the ballet. Local businesses got into the spirit, advertising not only Olympic dinners, Olympic parties, and Olympic weddings, but Olympic hairdos and Olympic watches, Olympic houses and Olympic brandy, Olympic banks and Olympic dresses. If there were Mexicans that were unaware the Olympics were coming, they were few in number; by October, they flocked to Mexico City in droves. Second, the Cultural Olympics advanced understanding and appreciation of other peoples and cultures. The spokesman of the program, Oscar Urrutia, summarized this aim of the Cultural Olympics by citing an ancient Mexican poem, “Yet even more do I love my brother Man.” Hearing poetry of the ancient Greeks and modern Africans, watching dances of Chinese girls and German boys, viewing modern art from the United States and classical art from Britain, reading the Dead Sea Scrolls and listening to the Duke Ellington Orchestra couldn’t help but broaden the thinking of Mexicans, many of whom rarely left their home villages or cities. Third, the Cultural Olympics would level the playing field, allowing smaller or poorer nations to compete in the same arena with the superpowers. In the words of President Diaz Ordaz, “In physical strength, size, sources of wealth, economic development, and in other areas, certain countries may be outstanding...[but] in loftiness of thought, no nation, no one group of people can consider

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399 “Television Programs Dedicated to the Events of the Cultural Olympiad,” El Nacional, 10 Sept. 1968, 8.
400 See, for instance, Excelsior 3 Nov. 1968, 38-A; El Universal, 5 Nov. 1968, 10; El Universal, 5 May 1968, B, 32; El Universal, 9 June 1968, D, 34; Excelsior, 12 Oct. 1968, 19; Excelsior, 10 Oct. 1968, 5.
itself superior to the rest." Finally, the Cultural Olympics would further the Mexican aim of producing the grandest, most innovative Olympics ever held. Not only would it draw more spectators, and participants, to the event, it would also set a precedent that future Olympic hosts would have to consider. Since 1968, it has become customary to include some sort of cultural festival alongside the athletic contests.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)


The triumvirate overseeing the cultural events included Ramirez Vasquez, Urrutia, an architect who had worked with him often in the past, and Mathias Goeritz, a German native who fled the holocaust before World War II, a restless artist who worked in many media, including painting, sculpture, and architecture. Urrutia served as the program coordinator and spokesman, and in a press conference on July 15 he explained many of the upcoming events and exhibits. Literally the biggest exhibit was the “Route of Friendship,” a collection of 18 modern sculptures lining a 10-mile stretch of highway approaching the city and ending at the Olympic Village. Organized by Goeritz, the Route featured original works from some of the top sculptors in the world, at least one from each continent and representing 16 countries. Each artist delivered a scale model of the sculpture to the organizing committee, and then local workers constructed each sculpture to full-scale in concrete along the roadside. The smallest of the sculptures was 20 feet high. The tallest, nearly 80 feet high, was the crown jewel of the collection. “Red Sun,”

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designed by renowned English sculptor Alexander Calder, still stands in front of the Aztec Stadium.403

Among the hundreds of other participants in the program were: Eugene Ionesco, the playwright; The Bolshoi Ballet from Moscow; The Martha Graham Dance Company from the United States; Van Cliburn, the pianist; paintings and artwork donated by the Avery Brundage Foundation in San Francisco, and noted art collector Richard Brown Baker of New York; works from English artists J.M.W. Turner and Francis Bacon; a display of classical Japanese art; a “Festival of Children’s Painting”; a show of architectural plans and models; a collection of postage stamps from around the world;404 a painting by Salvador Dali, “The Cosmic Athlete”; a huge mural by the great Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros; an international film festival; dozens of plays and orchestral performances; and a massive World Youth Camp at the Olympic Village, estimated at 20,000 Mexican children and an equal number from around the world. In the words of Ramirez Vazquez, “The art [was] every bit the equivalent of the track and field.”405

The Americans zealously supported the Cultural Olympics, and seemed intent on dominating the cultural festival as well as the athletic competition. Perhaps due to proximity, but also wealth and commitment, the United States contributed more than any other nation to the Cultural Olympics. President Lyndon Johnson explained U.S. involvement in the program, “If we have never learned it before, we humans would be wise to learn it now: we are brothers, we live in one world, and we will survive in peace on our planet only if we know and appreciate each other.”406 As such, the United States sent, among others, the Phoenix Singers, a New Orleans jazz band, and several dance troupes, as well as exhibits on nuclear energy, the space program, contemporary art, Navajo sandpainting and weaving, architectural design, and the history of the Olympic Games. The United States was particularly interested in the Olympic Nuclear Exhibits, demonstrating not only U.S. domination of this critical field, but also American generosity in sharing equipment and technology, on a limited basis, with Mexico.407 The exhibit was a popular and diplomatic success, and it was supported by a visit of Vice President Hubert Humphrey to Mexico City in April. Humphrey toured Mexican Olympic facilities, and in a series of meetings and luncheons discussed American and Mexican cooperation regarding nuclear energy, and the American exhibit. His tour concluded with a well-publicized visit to the Mexican Olympic Sports Center, which he said “probably reached the Mexican public more effectively than any other” part of the tour.408 In an era when cultural exchange was a

Knox, “Olympics Press Culture”.
407 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico City to Dept. of State, 7 Apr. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 325, folder 15-1 Mex CUL 4/1/68.
408 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 7 Apr. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 325, folder 15-1 Mex CUL 4/1/68.
significant spoke in the diplomatic wheel, the United States clearly saw the Olympics, and the exhibits accompanying them, as an opportunity to win supporters in Mexico City.

The Cultural Olympics met, even exceeded, the expectations of its organizers. But there were some who noted an unforeseen drawback to the festival: that the rich, mysterious, and fascinating culture of the Mexicans themselves was overshadowed by hundreds of imports from faraway lands. During the Olympics, spectators listened to the music of Beethoven and watched the plays of Arthur Miller and observed the sculptures along the highway built by artists from around the world. They witnessed a Mexico City striving to be modern, structured and organized, with the most up-to-date technologies and buildings. To some observers, such as Octavio Paz, the undertaking was a façade, masking the realities of Mexico from the millions of visitors. Paz wrote, “The Mexican seems to be a person who shuts himself away to protect himself. His face is a mask and so is his smile...He builds a wall of indifference and remoteness between reality and himself, a wall that is no less impenetrable for being invisible. The Mexican is always remote, from the world and from other people. And also from himself.”

The Cultural Olympics exemplified this remoteness. The Mexicans welcomed foreigners who came to see the Games, they put on a vast cultural festival, but observers came away knowing more about Europeans than Mexicans. Travelers noted that the Mexicans, especially Mexican youth, had a great admiration of American culture, and sought to emulate it whenever possible. The Mexicans, it seemed, were perpetuating the Latin American tradition, seeking legitimacy through the imitation and satisfaction of foreigners. Thus, the Cultural Olympics celebrated European and American culture, relegating Mexican culture to lesser stature.

The Cultural Olympics picked up its pace on September 12, one month before the Opening Ceremonies, as several events got underway, including “The History and Art of the Olympic Games,” a gallery of art devoted to the Olympics from their ancient origins to the present; “Space for Sports and Cultural Activities,” a show of the latest gymnasiums and stadiums, concert halls and the like; a “Festival of Children’s Painting”; and “Kineticism: System Sculpture in Environmental Situations,” a show of modern sculpture depicting sport and movement. Even as the Cultural Olympics steamed ahead, other happenings indicated that the start of the Games neared. Tourists, international media, and athletic teams began to arrive, and the bustle surrounding the Olympic Village and the sporting arenas increased. And the Olympic Torch made its way from Greece, its gradual approach building the excitement.

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411 Glueck, “Not All Rowing”.
Even as the start of the Games inched closer, the international media, and Mexicans themselves, wondered if they could pull it off. A recurring theme in stories about the upcoming Olympics was the so-called “manana” attitude among Mexicans, a general laziness and tendency to procrastinate, that surely would doom an undertaking of such magnitude. But organizers knew that if the city was not ready, it would not be laziness that was the problem – getting ready for the Olympics was simply a huge undertaking. In making their successful bid for the Games, committee members had stressed the athletic facilities already available in the city. After several members visited the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan, they were shocked to see that the Japanese poured some 2.7 billion dollars into preparing for the Games, including construction of a high-speed train and massive urban improvements. The Mexicans were not prepared to spend that kind of money. The committee re-examined the facilities available and drew up new building plans, borrowing ideas from the Japanese. Their “shoe-string” budget of improvements came to $84 million in federal spending, coupled with some $75 million from private investors, simply for those projects directly related to the Olympics. It is difficult to gauge exactly how much the nation spent in preparing for the Games, since auditors did not include such projects as a new six-lane highway connecting the facilities,
considering them either regular expenses or permanent improvements.\footnote{Pan Dodd Eimon, “The City Tells Its Story,” \textit{The American City}, 83:8 (Aug. 1968): 133-134.} Among the improvements the committee deemed necessary were a massive series of building projects, including the Olympic Village, improvements to roads, water supply lines, and sewage facilities, and, most controversial, a subway system. While it was hoped that such projects would ease the horrible congestion and pollution in the city, during construction such problems only became worse. Visitors to Mexico City in the months prior to the Games were understandably skeptical that the projects could be completed in time.\footnote{Henry Giniger, “A Sports Capital-to-Be,” \textit{New York Times}, 13 January 1968, 28; “Better Act Now if You’re Going to Olympics,” \textit{U.S. News and World Report}, 24 June 1968, 56.}

In addition to these major projects, the committee undertook many lesser ones as well.\footnote{Boletin Oficial, \textit{XIX Olimpiada}, no. 2 (Oct. 1965): p. 2-3.} The Olympic stadium was marked with huge orange balloons, visible from miles away, and balloons and banners throughout the city marked the way to various venues. A white line was painted on the streets, leading to the Olympic stadium. “Street fixtures” incorporating street-lights, benches, mailboxes, street signs, telephone booths and the like would adorn the street sides. For visitors still not comfortable making their way around unchaperoned, 3,400 special taxis rode along the Olympic routes, and nearly 1000 “Olympic girls” were hired for the Games, pretty, multilingual young women in miniskirts, who walked amongst the Olympic venues offering directions, assistance, or simply conversation to visitors. Gardens and walkways throughout the city were improved, and over 10,000 trees planted along major thoroughfares. Hotel construction, expansion, and renovation, which was moving at a frenetic pace even before the Olympic bid, quickened all the more after it. So rapid was this construction that Mexico City was expected to outpace the 50,000 rooms it had promised in its initial bid for the Games, by 10,000 or more. The largest and most luxurious hotel, the Maria Isabel, added 400 rooms, and at least four other major luxury hotels would be completed by October. To handle the rush of tourists filling such hotels, new agencies were formed to take reservations for transportation, lodging, and tickets to the events, and a new fleet of taxis and buses was prepared especially for the Olympics.\footnote{Einon, “City Tells Its Story”; “If You Plan to See the Olympics,” \textit{Sunset}, 140:1 (Jan. 1968): 28; “Mexico’s Olympics…not Yet Sold Out,” \textit{Sunset}, 140:7 (July 1968): 26; “Letter from Mexico City,” \textit{Holiday}, Oct. 1967, 18; “The Scene a la Mexicana,” \textit{Time}, 18 Oct. 1968, 79.}

Such improvements did not even consider the vast building projects related to athletic contests, which in mid-summer were far from complete. An international contest among architects produced revolutionary designs for several buildings, most notably the Sports Palace, an $8-million, 25,000 seat arena for boxing, basketball, fencing and other indoor sports, topped by a spectacular copper geodesic dome. By mid-June, it was nearly complete, except for the floor and some seating. The University Stadium was ready, recently expanded from 57,000 to 80,000 seats, and with a new track. The even-larger Aztec Stadium, for soccer, had been completed in 1966, including an eight-foot-deep

moat ringing the stadium, a hazard to any potentially rowdy soccer fans attempting a charge onto the field.  

A velodrome for the cycling events, sporting the steepest incline in the world – 39 degrees, to prevent cyclists from flying off the track in the thin air – also neared completion. Other facilities were far from finished. The high-tech pool, including the first sensitive plates built into the sides for precise timing, was ready, but the new swimming and diving center around it awaited a roof and seats in the stands. A smaller gymnasium for volleyball still had no floor. The Olympic village itself, 29 buildings of six and ten stories, was a bee-hive of activity, as round-the-clock construction continued. Other buildings, including a media center, two commercial centers, an international club, and a medical clinic had scarcely begun construction. The pace of construction on such projects grew more frantic as the deadline approached.  

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The organizing committee set Aug. 31 as the deadline to have all projects complete, a few weeks before the rush of media and tourists was expected to arrive. That deadline came and went, with workers still working furiously to have everything ready. In the first week of September, there remained much to be done. The floors in the basketball and volleyball centers were still under construction. The lights in the volleyball center were taken out, as it was found they were too bright for the players to tolerate, and a new system was being installed. The swimming pool, already filled with water, required new tiles. The Olympic flame was not ready to go. Walls around the Olympic stadium were too high. The press booths had no furniture. Roadsides awaited landscaping. Perhaps no one of these details was catastrophic, but in general, with little over a month until the Opening Ceremonies, the city and the Olympic facilities had a rough, unfinished look and feel about them.\textsuperscript{418}

Even with work still underway, President Diaz Ordaz made his tour of the facilities on Sept. 12, with one month to go, and inaugurated many of the new buildings. In his estimation, Mexico City was ready for the Games to begin.\textsuperscript{419} There were still some glitches to be taken care of, and work would continue until the very eve of the Games. They may have cut it close, but with only a few exceptions the preparations were completed. The media center never quite made it – during a rain storm the roof leaked so badly that corps of Mexican boy scouts ran between the typewriters with garbage cans to catch the water streaming from the ceiling. Aside from a few such problems, though, the city was well prepared.\textsuperscript{420}

As the work carried on in Mexico City, the Olympic flame inched its way inexorably towards its new home. Ready or not, the torch would arrive at the stadium on October 12. As with most other aspects of the Games, the Mexicans had plotted the most elaborate course ever for the flame to follow, and it took nearly two months for its bearers to make the journey. In a dramatic ceremony, a torch was lit from the site of the original Olympic Games, at the sacred grove of Zeus in Olympia, Greece. Aristophanes would have been proud, as maidens bedecked in ancient Greek garb acted out a scene before carrying away the flame. From there, the torch made a circuit of Europe, in an effort to honor the history of Mexico and the Olympic Games. Much of the early part of the trip went by sea, around the Mediterranean Sea. To Genoa, Italy, the birthplace of Christopher Columbus. To Barcelona, Spain, one of the seats of the Spanish empire. To Palos, Spain, where Columbus' voyage began in 1492. From there, the torch made its way across the Atlantic, to San Salvador, where Columbus first landed in the Americas. Finally, it arrived at Vera Cruz, Mexico. There, adding to the drama, the torch shared its flame with four other torches, and the five followed different routes to reach Mexico City, in honor of the five Olympic rings.\textsuperscript{421} Along those five routes, the torches made their way to all reaches of Mexico, and at every stop they were greeted with enthusiastic, and curious, spectators. At last, on the eve of the Opening Ceremonies, the five were reunited at the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan, 31 miles north of the city. There, the

flames fanned out in many directions as part of the ancient Aztec ritual of the new fire, before reuniting again for the final trek to Mexico City.  

At last, all was ready. The evening of October 12 arrived, and the city opened its arms to some 135,000 tourists. 80,000 spectators packed into the Olympic Stadium for the Opening Ceremonies to launch the largest sporting event in Mexico’s history. Observers raved about the Opening Ceremonies, and they were brilliant indeed. It was the beginning of the largest Olympics ever, as 7,226 competitors from 119 nations filed into the stadium. The athletes gleamed in bright colors as the sun began to set: Nigerians in green gowns; Americans in red blazers, and Russians in blue; Australian girls in yellow dresses, Mexicans and Japanese in white. Everyone was smiling, especially Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who opened the proceedings and watched from his presidential box, thrilled at this triumphant moment for both his country and his presidency. The ceremony exemplified one of the slogans of the Olympics, “Everything is possible in peace.” As part of this message of peace, the Mexicans released thousands of doves into the air, and they circled over the stadium, swooping and swirling as a single unit before flying out of

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the stadium.\textsuperscript{423} If only for a few hours, nations put aside their differences in the real world, and communed in peace in the world of sport.\textsuperscript{424}

The lighting of the Olympic flame was another revolutionary moment. The honor had fallen upon Norma Enriqueta Basilio, a 20-year-old Mexican woman. She was the first woman to have the honor, and her selection was no accident. The daughter of a Mexican cotton farmer from Baja, California, she represented portions of the Mexican population not usually celebrated, and when it was announced in July that she would light the flame, Mexicans throughout the country applauded the choice. She represented “a new kind of Mexican,” tall, thin, and beautiful, contrasting the older generation that she called “short and fat.”\textsuperscript{425} As a specialist in the 400-meters, she also had the long stride and endurance necessary to complete the run around the stadium and up the steep steps to the stadium’s rim, no small accomplishment even for a fit athlete. She was the perfect choice, and as she approached the stadium behind a police escort, adoring fans threw flowers into the road before her. She entered the stadium to a huge roar, and as she circled the track and trotted easily up the steps to reach the huge saucer that would house the flame, the crowd’s applause and shouts of support grew. The roar was nearly deafening as she reached the final step, turned, and held the torch high for a moment. Then, she threw the torch into the saucer, and flames poured skyward. The Games had begun.\textsuperscript{426}

The athletic contests that followed were spectacular, though the issue of elevation was never entirely put to rest. The first medal event of the Games, the 10,000-meter run, could have been taken as a bad omen. Several athletes collapsed over the course of the race, and only a handful remained in contention in the final laps. All the medals went to athletes who lived and trained at high elevations. Naftati Temu of Kenya won the gold medal, Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia the silver, and Mohammed Gammoudi of Tunisia (who had won the “Little Olympic” race) the bronze. To the delight of the crowd, a diminutive 21-year old Mexican, Juan Martinez, finished fourth. Already, though, the media focused on the altitude issue, and whether athletes training at low altitude would suffer.\textsuperscript{427}

It did not take long, though, for athletes in the shorter events to perform, and records began falling quickly. The American sprinter Jim Hines, who had run fast times since arriving in Mexico, tied his own world record in the 100-meter sprint in both qualifying heats, before breaking it in the finals, on the second day of competition. On the same day, American Jay Silvester set an Olympic record by tossing the discus over 207 feet in the preliminary round. Rainy weather on the next day didn’t stop the avalanche of falling records. Silvester’s teammate, 32-year old Al Oerter, broke the record by five feet in the medal round, winning his fourth consecutive Olympic gold medal while throwing farther than he ever had before. After a long season of mediocre performances, Oerter explained that he had spent the whole year preparing to make a long throw in the rarefied air in Mexico. Not long after, Wyomia Tyus, a 23-year old sprinter from Griffin, Georgia, broke the world record while winning gold in the 100-meter dash. The same day, Dave Hemery of Britain broke the world record in the 400-meter hurdles, and Ralph Doubell of

\textsuperscript{423} Film: \textit{Olimpiada en Mexico}, Mexican Olympic Committee, Mexico City.
Australia tied another in the 800-meter run. Records seemed to be falling in every event, and it became clear that the thin air only aided competitors in non-endurance events. In addition, many competitors cited the synthetic Tartan track, smooth and level even in the poor weather, as contributing to the barrage of records. All told, over the course of the entire track and field program, world or Olympic records were matched or broken in every event save the 5,000 and 10,000-meter runs.428

Records continued to fall as the days went by. Tommie Smith won the 200-meters in world-record time, while Peter Norman and John Carlos, who finished second and third, both tied the old record. The American Bob Seagren tied with two Germans, Claus Schiprowski and Wolfgang Nordwig, in breaking the world record height in the pole-

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vault, as nine men vaulted over 17 feet. A Russian, Jan Lusis, broke the world record in the javelin throw. Italian Giuseppe Gentile finished first in the hop, step, and jump (now called the triple jump), ahead of four other competitors who bested the old world record. And that was just on the third day of competition.429

The signature feat of the Games, and one commonly attributed to the altitude, was Bob Beamon’s spectacular long jump. It was no surprise, really, that Beamon won the event. Blocking out the political turmoil, the racial conflict, and the possibility of a black boycott of the Olympics, he had spent most of 1968 in isolation, training intensely for the Games. He won both the long jump and triple jump at the NCAA championships, and came into the Olympics having won 22 of his last 23 competitions. It was no surprise, either, that the world record fell in Mexico. In October, 1967, at the “Little Olympics,” Russia’s Igor Ter-Ovanesyan had jumped 27’ 4 ¾”, tying the world record held by Ralph Boston.430 So it was no surprise that the record fell, or that it was Bob Beamon who broke it. But the manner in which he did it stunned everyone who saw it.

Beamon nearly failed to make the final round, fouling in two preliminary attempts. He survived, though, in the same way that Jesse Owens had done at the 1936 Olympics. Ralph Boston, his rival and friend, told Beamon to back up several inches and jump conservatively, securing a place in the finals. Beamon did, and advanced to the next round. The next day, October 18, was overcast and humid, but neither the weather nor the cheers of the crowd distracted Beamon. With his first jump, he soared farther than anyone had before. Even with an imperfect landing, on his butt instead of his feet, he nearly leapt through the sand pit. Beamon and the other competitors knew it was long, but had to wait several minutes to learn exactly how long – Olympic officials had installed new optical technology to measure the jumps, but it was only programmed to measure 28 feet. An official ran out of the stadium and returned with a tape measure, and confirmed that the jump was 8.90 meters, or 29 feet, 2 ½ inches, crushing the old world record of 27-4 ¾. Thin air or no, it was an astonishing accomplishment, a record that would stand until Mike Powell broke it by two inches at the 1991 World Championships.431 Less than ten minutes later, even as the cheers for Beamon’s jump still rang in the air, Lee Evans set another astonishing record. Evans had considered not racing, as a protest against the treatment of Smith and Carlos, but Carlos sought him out. Carlos told him, “You run, win, and then do your thing, man.”432 Still high from watching Beamon’s leap, Evans crushed the world record in the 400-meter run. His time of 43.8 seconds would not be matched until 1988, by Butch Reynolds. The records set by Beamon and Evans make October 18, 1968, one of the greatest days in track and field history.433

If the elevation inspired many exceptional performances, it did contribute to a few collapses by top athletes, most notably the American miler, Jim Ryun. Ryun entered the Olympics as one of the most celebrated American athletes, winner of 47 races in a row and the world record holder in the 1,500-meter run.434 But he had suffered from mononucleosis

434 The so-called “metric mile”.
in the month before the Games, and seemed to have some sort of mental block in adjusting to the thin air. His closing kick had not been in evidence during practices and preliminary heats, though he still won the heats. He met a pair of Kenyans in the final, Ben W. Jipcho and Kipchoge “Kip” Keino, whom he had defeated in his semi-final heat. The Kenyans, renowned for their grueling training runs and seemingly endless reserves of energy, were particularly feared at these Olympics for their experience in running at high altitudes. Of this very busy group, Keino was the busiest. By the day of his showdown with Ryun, he had already competed in the 10,000-meter run, two heats of the 5,000 meters, and three preliminary heats of the 1,500 meters, logging over sixteen miles of competition, and many wondered when he would tire. Unbeknownst to many at the time, Keino was also suffering from gallstones, which made him buckle over in pain even as he led the 10,000-meter race, causing him to finish well back in the pack. Over a week later, the pain from the gallstones was so severe that Keino resigned to forfeit the 1,500-meter final, and he stayed in his room at the Athletic Village that morning. But as the race approached, he changed his mind and hurried to reach the stadium. Stuck in a taxi in traffic, Keino jumped from the car and ran over a mile to the stadium only minutes before the race began. The other runners noticed that Keino was winded and sweating, and most expected him “to fall flat on his face at any moment.” Keino, though, pressed on, and it was Ryun who suffered in the 1,500-meter final. Jipcho led the early portions of the race. Keino surged to the front on the second lap and maintained a fast pace, while Ryun lagged behind, unable to mount a challenge. Ryun came back in the final lap to finish second, three seconds slower than Keino, but still among the best times in Olympic history. Of all the events in Mexico City, this was the one most often held up as an example of the altitude favoring one athlete over another. Ryun’s world record, set at sea-level, survived the Olympics, but his reputation as the top 1,500-meter runner was eclipsed by Keino, who became a hero in his country and around the world.

All told, the elevation effected performances much as experts had predicted prior to the Olympics. Athletes in longer events in running, swimming, and especially rowing failed to approach record times, while those in more explosive events, such as sprints and throwing events, frequently matched personal bests and world records. The leading U.S. doctor on hand to analyze the influence of the elevation, Dr. Daniel Hanley of Bowdoin College, supported such findings. “There is not a shred of evidence that the altitude had any harmful after-effects on the athletes from all the nations who…participated here,” he said, and aptly summarized the altitude issue, saying, “…all things considered, altitude was even less of a problem than anticipated.”

Not all events were influenced by the elevation, though one of the most memorable did involve height. Dick Fosbury provided one of the most entertaining moments of the Games, while revolutionizing his sport at the same time. Employing a backwards, head-first style, now known as the “Fosbury flop,” the 21-year old senior at Oregon State University dazzled the crowd in setting an Olympic record and barely missing in three attempts at the world record. The crowd shrieked and howled with his every jump, as the unorthodox style was simultaneously effective, and dangerous. In describing the technique, Fosbury said, “I take off on my right, or outside, foot, rather than my left foot. Then I turn

my back to the bar, arch my back over the bar and then kick my legs out to clear the bar." With every such leap, it appeared that he would crash onto his head, a prospect that mesmerized the crowd. Fosbury added to the tension with his nervous rituals, staring at the bar, rocking from one foot to the other, clenching and unclenching his fists, seemingly interminably. It was written that he once stared at the bar for four-and-a-half minutes before making his jump, and he often tested the two-minute time limit given to each jumper. As he went through this ritual before each jump, the crowd whipped into a frenzy, exploding in amazement every time he cleared the bar without killing himself.439

Fosbury was not the only showman at these Games, and stars were born in many other events. Leonid Zhabontinsky, the great Soviet weight-lifter, feigned an arm injury while marching as the flag-bearer of the Soviet team, then went on to crush the competition, and several world records, in the weight-lifting competition.440 Vera Caslavska, a Czech gymnast and favorite of the Mexican fans, won four gold medals in gymnastics to go along with three she had won in Tokyo. In winning the overall gymnastic competition, she bested two Soviet competitors, Zinaida Voronina and Natalia Kuchinskaya, a thrilling victory given the political tensions between those two countries. Already a fan favorite, she secured her place in Mexican hearts by performing her final routine to the “Mexican Hat Dance,” and confirmed it by getting married in Mexico City the day after winning her four medals. Her wedding was the event mentioned in Mexican society pages, and the couple could scarcely make their vows above the din of clicking cameras.441 Debbie Meyer, a 16-year old school girl from Sacramento, California, struggling with a sore throat and intestinal problems, battled to victory in the 200-, 400-, and 800-meter freestyle races.442 A 19-year-old boxer from Houston, Texas named George Foreman slugged his way to the gold medal. It mattered not that his feet were a bit slow and his style somewhat clumsy. He battered the opposition into submission with fearsome power, winning over the Mexican fans and foreshadowing his rise to the heavyweight championship of the world.443 The U.S. team cruised to a gold medal in basketball, continuing a winning streak that dated back to 1936, but the defining moment of the basketball tournament came when Yugoslavia defeated the Soviet Union 63-62 in the semifinals. The game was close from start to finish, physical and emotional, as the Yugoslavians struggled not only to win a basketball game, but also to overcome agents of the nation that threatened their independence. After the victory, which their coach described as “vital for the morale and pride of our players and people,” the players kissed, embraced, cried, and rolled on the floor in ecstasy.444 The fact that they lost the final game to the Americans, 65-50, was of little consequence, for they had won the game that mattered most.

As extraordinary as the athletic contests were – and they were extraordinary indeed – politics and scandal were never far from the surface throughout these Olympics. On the very first day of the competition, the Soviet Union faced Czechoslovakia in a women’s volleyball match. Only a few weeks before, the Soviet army had rolled into Czechoslovakia, conquering its peaceful neighbor after only minimal resistance. After the occupation, which began on August 21, the Czech organizing committee doubted whether they could even send a team to the Olympics. Communication within the country was disrupted, transportation in some cases cut off, and sports temporarily banned by the invading Soviets. By early September, though, some aspects of normality had been restored for the Czech athletes, and the Czech Olympic Committee decided to send a 100-person team to Mexico City, in spite of transportation and organizational hurdles. It was clear that the Olympics offered the Czechs an opportunity to thrive in spite of the occupation of their homeland, and events such as the volleyball match seemed an ideal opportunity for them to seek some retribution, if only in the form of a ball spiked into the face of an opposing player, or a charge across the net. The match drew thousands of enthusiastic fans, even more excited by the political overtones surrounding it. Many references were made in the press to the similarity of circumstances to a water polo match between the Hungarian and Soviet teams, played shortly after the Soviets rolled into Hungary in 1956. That match had deteriorated into a bloody slugfest, with the Hungarians exacting some revenge upon the Soviets both on the scoreboard and in the water. One American player speculated on the potential for violence, “If the Czechs have any class, there is going to be some blood tonight.” Under heightened security, the match carried on without incident. The Czechs played better than expected, winning a set from the Soviets for the first time in six years, but in the end the Soviets won convincingly. The biggest fanfare came at the press conference after the match, when an agitated press corps eager for headlines misunderstood a statement of the Soviet coach, who commented on the cool attitude of his players under pressure. The statement, after making its way from a Russian to a Spanish to an English interpreter, came out in the press as, “My team is not affected by what the crowd says or to whom. They are professionals.” Given the uproar over amateurism, this comment was met with much furor by the press corps, and only after several days of rewrites and the vehement denials of the Soviet coach was the whole affair straightened out. But literally from day one, politics blended with sport at these Olympics.

The amateurism debate surfaced several more times during the Games, most notably when three American track stars were accused of taking cash payments from equipment manufacturers. The rumors, which seemed to swirl perpetually around track and field athletes, intensified midway through the festival, when four American runners turned in $500 cash, apparently left in their shoes by representatives of a shoe company. The four received high marks for scruples, but also renewed discussion of such payments, and speculation about other athletes. An investigation by the USOC revealed only more rumors and sketchy details, of several athletes living in high style in Mexico, well beyond the means of an amateur. There was talk of two track athletes, “gold medal winners,” receiving $7500 each, and a third accepting 18,000 pesos (about $1440).

447 Ibid.
The rumors and subsequent investigations reopened the debate over amateurism that had never really quieted. The athletes generally found the rules of amateurism unlivable, and it was clear that most athletes accepted payouts at one time or another. Olympic officials, many of them wealthy and removed from the struggles of trying to survive as an unpaid athlete, were appalled at such breaches of the rules, and continued to pursue and punish as many transgressors as they could find. In these Olympics, it turned out that officials could not prove any wrongdoing, and rumors remained just that, as there were no formal charges brought against anyone. Everett “Eppy” Barnes, acting executive director of the USOC, conceded, “We have nothing to substantiate the rumors.”

But neither officials nor athletes would let the matter die as the Games wore on. Many officials agreed with Dan Ferris, secretary of the Amateur Athletic Union, who argued that equipment company logos should be eliminated, thus removing their incentive to pay athletes to prominently display their products. This solution hearkened back to the winter Olympics at Grenoble, where Avery Brundage had demanded that ski company logos be painted over. Most athletes agreed with Harold Connolly, a four-time Olympian, who advocated open competition between all athletes, professional or otherwise. “Why don’t they make the Olympics an open meet, just like the tennis people did?” he asked. “That would be one way of putting an end to this ‘shamateurism’ that the Olympic brass claims to deplore.”

Other athletes urged the IOC to broaden its membership to include former, if not active, athletes, who could better understand their plight. Even as the Games drew to a close, athletes fumed over the IOC decision to limit the number of athletes marching for each team at the Closing Ceremonies, and the clamor for a large-scale restructuring of amateur athletics was louder than ever.

There were other, lesser, problems during the Olympics as well. The specter of the student massacre never entirely disappeared, and both organizers and participants wondered if the students might protest during the Games. While the students in Mexico City appeared to be thoroughly silenced, those in outlying regions continued to demonstrate. Students at University of Sonora, University of Monterrey, and in Tijuana stopped classes in support of those killed or arrested in the massacre. Those in Tijuana organized several marches, including one of nearly 1000 people on the eve of the Olympics, and they reiterated the demands of the original student movement. Students in Chihuahua, too, continued to protest, engaging in several marches between the massacre at Tlatelolco and the beginning of the Games. Their protests centered around the disappearance of a student reporter named Sergio Saenz, who had gone to Mexico City to cover the student movement and had not been seen since the massacre. The unrest in Chihuahua grew so intense that the students were eventually sent on an “Olympic holiday” to prevent further problems during the Games. Such continued activity was not unnoticed by the U.S. government, which worried whether these limited incidents might

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453 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 2 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
454 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amconsul Tijuana to Dept. of State, 23 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
455 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amconsul Chihuahua to Amembassy Mexico City, 18 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
explode under the spotlight of the Olympics. One internal memo expressed such concerns, “The continuing violence raises two concerns for the U.S.: 1) the safety of U.S. athletes and visitors to the games and 2) U.S. participation in scientific and cultural activities associated with the Olympics.” Even minor developments, rumors and speculation heightened U.S. concern. The State Department took note of a leaflet issued by a radical wing of the student movement a week before the Opening Ceremonies, reading, “It will be necessary to mount a major military operation against the government during inaugural ceremonies of Olympic Games.” Given such activity, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico speculated that, “The Olympic Games will be held, although marred by sporadic violence. Students are not likely to attract significant support from other important sectors and will not threaten the stability of the Government in the short run.”

The State Department needn’t have worried much about the prospect of student unrest. Not only were the students in Mexico City terrified into submission, but also the Mexican police and Olympic security were constantly on the lookout for any trouble-makers, and kept the U.S. government abreast of any developments. Rumors of the possibility of sabotage of Olympic facilities, or even kidnapping of athletes, proved unfounded. The event was not without incident, though. A State Department memo cited one incident that threatened the peaceful atmosphere:

… [a student named] Ramon Hernandez Vallejo [was] commissioned by [a] band of Cubans in Chetumal, Quintana Roo to kill a U.S. athlete to create problems between Mexico and [the United States]. Hernandez came to Mexico City [on] Oct. 14 but decided not to carry out [the] Cuban instructions. While eating supper in [a] restaurant near [the] Basilica of Guadalupe, [he] encountered Cubans who pursued him on leaving restaurant. He fled to [the] dome of [the] Basilica and while climbing down a cable, Cubans arrived and shook [the] cable, causing Hernandez to fall and be seriously injured.

In another incident, a student attempted to incinerate an Olympic bus, but all athletes and passengers escaped without harm. In yet another, “A Mexican spectator shot himself at the start of a cycling team trial…in protest of the Mexican government’s treatment of students.” These incidents notwithstanding, aside from a few small student gatherings, all of which were understandably peaceful and relatively quiet, there were no serious protests during the Games. The city was consumed in the Olympic spirit, and those

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456 Dept. of State Memorandum, 3 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
457 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 6 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
458 Dept. of State Memorandum, from Covey T. Oliver to The Secretary, 20 Sept. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
459 Intelligence Note, Dept. of State, 10 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68 POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
460 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 16 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68, POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
461 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 16 Oct. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 13.2 Mex 9/1/68.
students who were not incarcerated either joined in the celebration of the Games or kept quiet, not wanting to revive the ire of the government.\footnote{Florenzio Acosta, interview with the author, 16 Nov. 2001, Mexico City. Also Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 10 Oct. 1968, NARA RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68 POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.}

Still other controversies flared up during the Games. The Olympics in Mexico City were the first to implement widespread drug testing, combating another issue that had plagued amateur athletics in the mid-1960s. The testing was also instituted to ensure the safety of athletes exerting themselves at high altitude.\footnote{The Games Must Go On, 123.} Athletes were subject to random drug tests, as each day the Olympic Medical Committee tested ten athletes from one sport, all chosen at random. For team sports, two members of every participating team were tested. As many still do today, athletes questioned the logic of the substances listed as banned, versus those that were permitted. One magazine noted, “The sprinter who fancies a double scotch to steel himself for the big occasion must not imbibe, though he can pep himself up with caffeine from a cup of strong black coffee.”\footnote{Howard A. Rusk, “Olympic Game Health,” New York Times, 13 Oct. 1968, 88.} In spite of repeated warnings and lengthy lists explaining the forbidden substances, there were several transgressions, some influencing medals awarded. In one case, middleweight boxer Chris Finnegan refused to take a blood test after his match, saying “standing at those long urinals…with all the other blokes” made him uneasy. Eventually he was cleared of any wrongdoing and awarded the gold medal, but his actions certainly aroused suspicion among other competitors, fans, and the media.\footnote{Collins, Olympic Dreams, 201.} While Finnegan kept his medal, the Swedish modern pentathlon team was forced to surrender its bronze medal after one of its members, Hans-Gunnar Liljenvall was found to have an illegally high alcohol content in his blood.\footnote{“Sweden Ordered to Return Medals,” New York Times, 25 Oct. 1968, 54.} Similarly, Greco-Roman wrestler Hristo Traikov was banned from the Olympics when it was discovered that his trainer had administered ammonia, an illegal substance, to him during a match with David Hazewinkel of the U.S.\footnote{“U.S. Wrestler Gets Reprieve After Foe Fails Drug Test,” New York Times, 26 Oct. 1968, 44.}

The 1968 Olympics also saw the first gender testing among female competitors. Female athletes, especially those whose musculature and performance approached that of men, had always fallen under special scrutiny. Stella Walsh, a top female athlete of the 1920s, and Babe Didrickson, among many others, were often called lesbians, and sometimes even accused of being male. Walsh ultimately was revealed to possess sexual organs of both genders after her death in 1980. Such suspicions were further aroused beginning in the early 1960s, when female athletes from the Eastern bloc nations suddenly began to break world records and crush the competition from other nations. As such, in 1966, the IOC announced it would perform gender tests at the 1968 Olympics. While no athletes failed the tests in Mexico City, several prominent athletes either withdrew from qualifying tournaments or retired at the announcement that they would be tested. It has since been revealed that female athletes from East Germany, Russia, and elsewhere were routinely forced to take steroids and male hormones, with tragic consequences for many such athletes later in life.\footnote{Entine, Taboo, 304-316; Hay interview.}
One controversy that never attracted the attention of the media involved the German flag. 1968 was the first Olympics in which East and West Germany might be represented separately, and Olympic organizers were torn as to how they should handle this obvious intrusion of politics into the world of sport. Brundage and the IOC decided that East and West Germany should march together under one flag at the Opening and Closing Ceremonies, and that the national anthem would be Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The East Germans lobbied vigorously for their own flag and anthem, and throughout the fortnight they engaged the Mexicans in an often-humorous cat-and-mouse game to secure their own symbols. The East Germans wanted their own anthem; the Mexicans explained that their band could not learn a new song on such short notice. The Germans found a different band, which said they could play the song; Ramirez Vazquez told them, “They are Mexicans. If you asked them to play Beethoven’s Eleventh Symphony, they would tell you they could do it.” The Germans hired another band and trained them to play their anthem; the Mexicans sent that band on a fool’s errand to Guadalajara on the day of the Closing Ceremonies, to avoid any embarrassing incidents. The two camps engaged in similar machinations over an individual flag for East Germany. The Mexicans explained that they had only one flag for Germany. The German contingent worked feverishly over several days to produce an East German flag. On the morning of the Closing Ceremonies, they handed the flag to Ramirez Vazquez, who unfolded it only to realize that it was bigger than both the Mexican and the Olympic flags. “If I put out a flag like that, the Mexican army will shoot me!” he told the Germans, expecting the affair to be settled. The Germans were more stubborn than anyone expected, though, and in the few hours before the Closing Ceremonies, the ambassadors and their wives put together still another flag, which they brought to the Mexicans only moments before the ceremony was to begin. Avery Brundage was there, and everyone present recognized not only that the group had put great effort into making the flag, but also that the new flag was much nicer than many of the other flags flying at the Olympic stadium. They relented. Willie Daume and the East German contingent celebrated, and so it was that East and West Germany flew separate flags at the Closing Ceremony of the 1968 Olympics for the first time.470

The best-remembered incident, though, was the Black Power salute of Tommie Smith and John Carlos. The boycott movement among black American athletes had failed, but they had agreed to carry out protests individually as they saw fit. Even after the Games had started, black athletes made statements hinting at some kind of protest. In the first few days of competition, though, there was little sign of discontent. Jim Hines, who won the 100-meter dash in world-record time, informed Olympic officials that he would not accept a medal from Avery Brundage – he was awarded his medal by someone else. But the real test of black militancy came on October 16, the fourth day of competition, when Smith and Carlos competed in the 200-meter sprint. The boycott movement had originated in statements made by Smith, and Carlos became one of its leaders as the summer wore on. The two were co-favorites in the 200-meters, so it was an ideal opportunity to plan some sort of protest, as two of the most militant black athletes were expected to be standing together on the medal stand.471

The two invested only minimal time in planning a precise demonstration. Carlos, bitter after his treatment at the Olympic Trials in Tahoe and deeply committed to the cause

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470 Hay interview.
of black equality, approached Smith before their semi-final heats, two hours before the final. The discussion was brief and revolved around securing a few articles of clothing to make some sort of statement on the medal stand. Smith had a pair of black gloves. Carlos had some black beads. Both agreed to do something on the stand, but they would work out the details later.

Carlos explained his need to protest:

I wanted to create a protest to tell the world that the black man and woman dominate the Olympic Games, and this particular Olympics is a black Olympics for blacks all over the world. This protest is a protest to mourn the deaths of all the black women, men, boys, and girls that died fighting against the European kidnappers on the shores of Africa. Then to those who died in the Middle Passage along the way. Then to those who were beaten unmercifully by the slave masters, being separated from family, religion, and language.

…Somebody had to say something about the mistreatment of black people around the world…My whole purpose was to use that world stage to represent blackness.472

Before making any kind of protest, though, both Smith and Carlos had to get to the medal stand. They were the class of the field in Mexico City, and both swept through their preliminary heats without being challenged. Smith, though, endured a thigh injury during his semi-final heat, and left the field on a stretcher. He estimated there was only an 80% chance he would run in the final. While lying on the stretcher between the races, though, Smith determined that he had come too far not to give it a try. He would run the final, even if he had to limp to the finish line. Once Smith had committed to run, Carlos began to contemplate how he wanted to run the race. He discussed it with his coach, Bud Winters. Having run in world-record time in Tahoe, and beaten the best in the world repeatedly in the 200-meters, he was convinced that he could not be beaten in the final. At the same time, he knew that winning a gold medal meant more to Smith than to him. He told Winters, “The race don’t mean shit to me…[and Tommy] would be elated if he won it.”473 Indeed, after winning the race, Smith told the press, “This meant everything to me.”474

Carlos decided to “let” Smith win the race, if the opportunity presented itself. He got a fantastic start in the race and led comfortably after 130 meters. He checked to his left to see how far back Smith ran, and eased up a bit to allow him to take the lead. He ran the last thirty meters or so on “autopilot,” and failed to consider the possibility that another runner might catch him as well. The oversight cost him a silver medal, as Peter Norman caught him at the line. The two finished in a dead heat, but examination of the “photo-finish” showed Norman ahead by inches. Disappointed in his overconfidence, Carlos later conceded, “…If a white man can run a 20 sec. flat in the 200-meter, he deserves to win the second place medal.”475 He had blown the silver medal, but would still be on the medal stand. And that had been the ultimate goal.

473 John Carlos, Why, 197.
475 Carlos, Why, 201.
In the ten-minute interlude between the end of the race and the medal ceremony, Smith and Carlos, amidst the bustling activity in the stadium corridors, hurried to finalize their plans. Smith’s wife brought the black gloves; Smith took the right-hand glove, Carlos the left. Smith threw on a black scarf, and Carlos donned a black shirt and his black love-beads. Both men removed their shoes and rolled up their pants legs, revealing long black socks. The pair approached Norman, who would stand beside them on the medal stand, and he agreed to wear a button from the Olympic Project for Human Rights — the button, incidentally, was borrowed from a white member of the Harvard crew team, who had supported the black athletes from the beginning. As the group made the walk to the medal platform, amidst the cheering of the fans, Carlos had one last brief conversation with Smith. He warned him that someone in the stadium might attempt violence during their demonstration. “The people will be shocked to silence and we should be able to hear the clicking of a gun,” he said, and warned Smith to be ready to hit the ground if he heard such a click. 476 With those thoughts in his mind, Tommie Smith took the top step of the medal platform to receive his gold medal. 477 Asked later what he was thinking at the time, Smith explained, “Praying...I was praying underneath the bleachers, I was praying on the walk up the victory stand, and the entire time I was up there.” 478

The moments before the playing of the national anthem were filled with a myriad of emotions and thoughts for both men. They both pulled on their black gloves just before kneeling to receive their medals. They also both carried their shoes, which they placed on the platform next to them, in honor of the Puma brand, since “Puma had been providing them with all of their running equipment.” 479 Smith was torn between the obvious tension of the moment, and the joy of achieving his life-long goal of winning Olympic gold. He took a moment to greet the crowd, both arms raised in victory, unwittingly revealing the glove on his hand, setting off nervous whispers between some Olympic officials who spotted it. Track coach Payton Jordan, who had given Smith and Carlos permission to wear black handkerchiefs and black socks beneath their sweatsuits, hoped that the protest would go no further. 480 As the other athletes were introduced, Smith composed himself and prepared for the protest. He later explained the symbolism of their attire:

I wore a black right-hand glove and Carlos wore the left-hand glove in the same pair. My raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos’ raised left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity. 481

With all three men on the stand, the stadium fell into silence as the announcer introduced the American National Anthem. The men turned, with Norman now standing in front of Smith and Carlos, and the music started. As the first notes sounded, they

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476 Carlos, Why, 205.
478 http://tommiesmith.com/about-main.html
479 Carlos, Why, 203.
481 Harry Edwards, Revolt of the Black Athlete, 104.
dropped their heads to their chests and shot their clenched fists skyward. Smith, on the
top step of the platform, stood rod-stiff, his right arm straight and tall, his eyes clenched
shut. Carlos, behind him, stared emptily into Smith’s back, his body less stiff, his saluting
arm bent a bit at the elbow. In his memoirs, Carlos seems surprised himself to realize that
he was actually calm during the protest, recalling earlier pivotal moments in his own life
and reflecting on the importance of what they were doing. Indeed, neither the look in his
eyes nor the lines of his posture seem panicking; he does appear calm.\footnote{Carlos, Why, 207.}

In the stands, Lee Evans, the star 400-meter runner, raised his right fist in unison
with the two on the medal stand, also wearing a black glove. His gesture went virtually
unnoticed, as the stadium full of fans began to realize what was happening.\footnote{John R. McDermott, “Amid Gold Medals, Raised Black Fists,” Life, 65:18 (1 Nov. 1968): 64C.} Within
moments, eyes that had been averted to look at the rising American flag were riveted on
the pair, and cameras flashing throughout the stadium recorded one of the most
memorable moments of the era. While there may have been a few gasps of surprise, there
was no clicking of guns to be heard from the stands. As Carlos said later, “One could
hear a frog piss on cotton it was so quiet in the stadium.”\footnote{Carlos, Why, 206.} Save, of course, for the
national anthem.

The next few minutes were a blur for the athletes. As they were hustled from the
field, both delivered the Black Power salute several more times. There were shouts from
all directions, mostly insults or angry words, but some cheers of support as well. In the
tunnel beneath the stadium, they were assailed by the media and countless questions,
which they answered hurriedly or not at all. Eventually, they made their way back to the
Olympic Village, where they found they had been banned. Carlos collected his bags from
the street outside of his villa, and after a time found lodging at the downtown Hotel
Diplomatica, paid for by Puma.

The storm of protest began in earnest the following day, and the significance of
their action set in. In an instant, Smith and Carlos had shattered the myth of the pacified
black American, renewing fears of a black uprising that hearkened back to ante-bellum
fears of a slave revolt. On the surface, this was merely two black athletes raising their
fists on the medal stand. More profoundly, though, it was two black men taking the
ultimate opportunity to reject custom, convention, and control. White America gasped, as
did the Olympic community. The International Olympic Committee called for some
action from Avery Brundage, who needed little prodding – he was already furious. The
next day, the U.S. Olympic Committee issued a formal apology to the International
Olympic Committee for the actions of the two athletes and warned against further
protests. It also announced that the pair had been banished from the Olympic Village and
would be sent home. The media generally condemned Olympic officials for blowing the
incident out of proportion, thus forcing the story onto the front pages of newspapers
around the world.\footnote{“The Olympics Extra Heat,” Newsweek, 28 Oct. 1968, 74.} Smith agreed, saying, “We couldn’t have done more to publicize our
cause than the committee did. We’re very grateful.”\footnote{Ibid, 79.} In truth, the action was swift and
appeared forceful, but it could have been worse. Both athletes had completed their events,
they remained members of the team, and they got to keep their medals. They also ignored
the USOC order that they leave Mexico within 48 hours. Carlos explained, “They said we
had to get out of Mexico City in 48 hours. They must certainly have realized they did not
have this power. Only the Mexican Government can kick us out of Mexico and they have said nothing about it."\textsuperscript{487} In fact, both remained in Mexico to watch the rest of the Olympics.\textsuperscript{488}

Over the next few days, athletes both present and former took sides, either supporting their protest or criticizing it. British runner John Welton applauded the protest, saying, “It’s bully that these blokes had nerve enough to express their feelings.”\textsuperscript{489} Other Americans, too, supported their compatriots. Hammer thrower Harold Connolly said, “Let a Russian try that and see what happens. I know a lot of Russians who don’t like what happened in Czechoslovakia, but they can’t say a word.”\textsuperscript{490} There was a wave of lesser protests and gestures over the next few days, supporting Smith and Carlos and their cause. The Mexican women’s 4 x 100 relay team, which took second place, sent their silver medals to Harry Edwards as a sign of their support for the Afro-American athletes. Wyomia Tyus and the rest of the American women’s 4 x 100 relay team dedicated their gold medals to Smith and Carlos.\textsuperscript{491} Lee Evans, Larry James, and Ron Freeman, who swept the top three spots in the 400-meter run, wore black berets and raised their fists during the medal presentation, but it was a half-hearted display, as their salute lasted only a few moments, and they laughed and shook hands with the other athletes on the stand and the men presenting the medals.\textsuperscript{492} Perhaps most surprising, Ralph Boston, the black American long jumper who had been staunchly opposed to the boycott, went shoeless on the medal stand out of deference to his fellow black athletes.\textsuperscript{493} Several other medal winners wore long black socks on the stand, or black berets, or even made some semblance of the black-power salute, but none had even remotely the effect or drama of Smith and Carlos. Often such gestures were complimented with a smile and a wave, or a crisp attentive stance during the playing of the anthem.

Contrasting such supportive acts was the performance of the beaming George Foreman, who paraded around the boxing ring after winning the gold medal, brandishing a tiny American flag and chanting, “United States Power!”\textsuperscript{494} Jesse Owens, too, called the pair to task, saying, “We don’t need this kind of stuff. We should just let the boys go out and compete.”\textsuperscript{495} Other black athletes branded both Foreman and Owens as “Uncle Toms” for such actions.\textsuperscript{496} Bob Seagren was one of several white athletes who challenged their behavior, wondering whether the Olympics was the appropriate time for such a protest.

Regardless of whether other athletes supported or condemned their actions, Smith and Carlos created a storm of controversy and strengthened the bond between politics and sport. For the first time, an athlete (in this case a pair of athletes) had used the medal platform to make an overtly political statement. Prior to their protest, politics entered the Olympics via several methods. Governments and organizing committees used the Games to improve their national image, as Nazi Germany and Mexico itself, or as a pawn in

\textsuperscript{488} Carlos, Why, 208-209.
\textsuperscript{490} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{493} Ibid.
diplomatic negotiations, as South Africa and the Soviet Union. Athletes deemed to have made political statements had always done so simply by their very presence at the Games, or by performing well, as Jesse Owens had done in overturning the myth of Nazi superiority in 1936. Both individual athletes and national teams had used the boycott, either threatened or real, to make political statements or encourage policy changes. But never had an athlete taken his protest to the medal stand, a sacred stage of ceremony and, theoretically, a sanctuary devoted to pure athleticism. If athletes were allowed to use the medal stand for such gestures, what would prevent similar displays by Czech athletes opposed to Soviet intervention? Or Vietnamese against the United States? Or Hungarians, or Koreans, or virtually anyone for that matter? Smith and Carlos, in the words of one newspaperman, “…shook this international sports carnival to its very core.”497 The International Olympic Committee reacted swiftly and authoritatively, for its members must have sensed that such overt political demonstrations had the potential to tear apart the Games. The Olympics were intended to allow athletes from warring nations to peacefully challenge each other on the fields of sport, not as an alternative venue for such wars to be continued. But the line between the two is very narrow indeed, a lesson the IOC would learn in 1968, and would continue to learn in the decades following.

After weeks of scandal and controversy, and stunningly successful athletic contests, the Olympics came to a close. The final events of the Games were held on Sunday afternoon, October 27, and afterwards all the athletes and supporting staff made their way to the Olympic stadium for the closing ceremonies. As they waited for the ceremonies to begin, the athletes did their best to entertain the fans, putting on impromptu gymnastics displays and waving to the crowd. At last, Avery Brundage got the ceremony underway by declaring the Games of the 19th Olympiad closed, and calling for the teams to reconvene four years later in Munich. The stadium descended into darkness, before the scoreboard reading “Mexico ’68” flickered for a moment, then switched to “Munich ’72.” A tremendous fireworks display followed, for ten minutes lighting up the night sky. As the fireworks crackled to a conclusion, some 800 mariachi bands entered the stadium and circled the track, playing several traditional Mexican tunes. They concluded with “Las Golondrinas,” a song about swallows migrating south for the winter, but always returning the following year. It was a fitting tribute to the athletes, who like the swallows were preparing to leave the spotlight for a time, returning four years later. It was a beautiful, and moving, ceremony.498

But even the Closing Ceremony was not entirely without controversy. The Closing Ceremonies had always been something of an enigma for Olympic organizers, clearly an anticlimax after the exhilarating Opening Ceremonies followed by weeks of heated competition. At the Tokyo Games in 1964, the IOC tried a little something different to maintain interest. Heeding a suggestion from a 12-year old Japanese boy, the IOC decided to allow the athletes at the Closing Ceremony to march in whatever groups they wanted, rather than the strict national groups as in the Opening Ceremony. It was hoped that such a change would lend an informal air to the Closing Ceremony, also encouraging good will and brotherhood between nationalities. The plan worked, perhaps too well. The athletes danced and paraded their way around the track as a joyous mob, topped by the New Zealand contingent, which bowed, waved, and blew kisses at the Japanese emperor. The emperor seemed to enjoy the gesture, however irreverent it may

498 Cady, “Amid Gun Salutes.”
have been, and he laughed and waved in response. IOC members, though, were appalled at the informality and feared that a similar display at future Games might set off a riot.499

Hoping to prevent such chaos in Mexico, the IOC ruled that only seven members of each national team would be allowed to march in the Closing Ceremonies, and that the remaining athletes would have to sit in the stands. The new rules seemed to have worked, as the athletes entered the stadium in well-ordered fashion. Not long into the ceremony, though, an American athlete from the stands hopped over the wall and onto the track, joining the other athletes. He was followed at first by a handful of athletes, then dozens and hundreds, and before it was over virtually all of the athletes, and many spectators, had filed from the stands onto the field. They danced around the track while the mariachi bands played, smiling and whooping it up. Athletes borrowed sombreros from Mexicans in the bands and on the field, and a Mexican gold-medal winner was carried around on the shoulders of his countrymen. The jubilance carried on for half an hour, as the Mexicans and athletes alike milked all they could from the experience.500

Even amidst such joy and spontaneity, though, reminders of the tension that had surrounded the Games’ beginning still surfaced. Military police wearing jackets and white helmets stood guard in the stands and around the field, and plain-clothes police mingled among the spectators. Diaz Ordaz kept a watchful, though not unhappy, eye on the proceedings from his presidential box, and an occasional helicopter swooped around the stadium. As the celebration drew to its close, and jubilant fans wandered out into the night chanting “May-hee-co,” the military and the plain clothes police followed closely behind.501

CHAPTER VII: AFTERMATH

The day after the Closing Ceremonies, Willie Daume walked through the Olympic Village with a particular glow about him – as the President of the German Olympic Committee, Daume would supervise the organizational efforts for the 1972 Olympics in Munich. It would be an enormous task, but he was excited and eager to try to match the show put on by the Mexicans. He found Pedro Ramirez Vazquez and Eduardo Hay chatting and reminiscing with Avery Brundage. “Willie,” Brundage called, beaming. “It’s a tough thing for you, eh? Have you seen these Games? It will be tough for you to do better than this.”

Daume shook his hand, and replied, “Look, I will do my best. But I can’t do a Mexican miracle.”

They all laughed, and Hay asked, “Willie, what do you mean by a Mexican miracle?”

“When I arrived in Mexico,” Daume said, “we saw the workers and the painters and construction men coming out of the city, and we were coming in at the same time! So it was finishing up just as we arrived. And this is the miracle. I will try to do my best, but we can’t do the miracle.”

The Mexicans may have cut it close in preparing for the Olympics, but there were few organizational glitches, and the casual observer would never guess that there had been a frenzied rush to finalize preparations in the weeks before the Games. Indeed, no one wanted to discuss any of the troubles or controversies surrounding the Games in the immediate aftermath. Praise came from all quarters. Over the following days, organizers and political officials gathered at parties and reunions, where congratulations abounded. Committee members congratulated each other. IOC members congratulated the Mexicans. Organizers congratulated athletes, and athletes congratulated organizers. Josue Saenz, President of the Mexican Olympic Committee, made several speeches thanking Diaz Ordaz, and legislators congratulated him for his unfailing support of the endeavor. Deputy Luis Farias read a letter of thanks to Diaz Ordaz in one such session, which read in part, “The eyes of the world were watching in anticipation from October twelfth through twenty-seventh. What those eyes witnessed was a grand athletic competition, extraordinary sporting facilities, and a feeling that our organization is not inferior to any other nation in the world.” Pope Paul VI praised the Games as “a forum of universal brotherhood.” French President Charles DeGaulle sent a letter praising the Mexican

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502 Hay interview.
503 “Agradecimiento del COM Para el Presidente D.O.,” Excelsior, 1 Nov. 1968, Sports, 3.
504 “Felicitan por la Olympiada los Legisladores, al Lic. Diaz Ordaz,” Excelsior, 1 Nov. 1968, 1.
government and Olympic committee for a well-prepared and organized Games. A Peruvian news program called the Mexico City Olympics “the most brilliant and astonishing in the history of the sports world.” U.S. President-elect Richard M. Nixon chimed in, proclaiming that the Olympics signaled that Mexico was ready to join the ranks of the most advanced nations, and that the Games had formed, “a bridge of international understanding and a contribution to the cause of peace.” Not all praise was delivered for public consumption, either. The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, wired Nixon, “The Olympics, as you know, were held with outstanding success. The Games were a source of great national pride for all Mexicans.”

The Mexico City Olympics set many precedents that future Olympics would struggle to match. The Cultural Olympics was a great success and would become a mainstay. More athletes representing more nations competed in Mexico City than ever before, including representatives from more than twenty African nations, and the Vatican. It was the first to be transmitted globally on color television, and the official film of the Olympics was nominated for an Oscar. Much of the technology associated with the Games was revolutionary, including the Tartan track and the timing pads in the swimming pool. For the first time, a woman lit the Olympic flame. And, for the first time, the Olympics carried out drug and gender testing. Adding to Mexican pride was the fact that Mexico won more medals than it ever had before, including three golds. If, as Joseph Arbenas has written, “The objective was to show Mexico at its best, both to enhance image and pride as an end in itself, but clearly also to open channels for more trade, investment, and tourism,” then in the short term at least, it seemed they had succeeded.

The initial flush of success lingered for several months, as Mexicans anticipated that the benefits of the Olympics would far outweigh the expenses of staging them. Alfredo Santos, president of the Mexico City Chamber of Commerce, described the Olympics as, “…a seed planted, that if well-fertilized would produce abundant fruits, such as having other events of world importance in the future, like the 1970 World Championship of Soccer.” He, along with many other analysts at the time, dismissed the notion that the expense had not been worthwhile. After all, the economy enjoyed a great boost from tourists visiting during the Olympics, many of whom enjoyed their experience and would return later, hopefully with friends. He estimated that the tourists spent about 300 million pesos beyond expectations, largely offsetting the cost of the Olympics themselves.

In truth, financial analysis of the Games is not quite so simple. The Olympics were one of the most glaring symbols of a government that spent lavishly on luxuries when it neglected obvious areas of need, a country engaged in a dangerous game of “keeping up with the Joneses” that left the majority of the populace impoverished.

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507 “Gran Elogio a los Juegos Olimpicos de Mexico en ‘El Comercio,’ de Lima,” Excelsior, 3 Nov. 1968, 3.
508 “Mensaje de RMN por los Juegos,” Excelsior, 7 Nov. 1968, 1.
509 Memorandum for the President, from Dean Rusk, 11 Dec. 1968, NARA RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 7 Mex 1/1/68.
510 “Aportaciones Relevantes de la Olimpiada en Mexico,” memo from private collection of Pedro Ramirez Vasquez, Mexico City, Mexico.
511 Joseph Arbenas, Sport in Latin America p. 359.
512 “En la Olimpiada, Mexico Demonstro lo que es Capaz de Hacer, D ce la CANACO,” Excelsior, 1 Nov. 1968, 25.
Mexico would never again approach the financial heights of the “Miracle” of the 1950s and early 1960s. One might argue that the Mexican economy was past its peak anyway, and would have suffered during the oil crisis of the 1980s regardless of policy, but in hindsight many Mexicans were right to question the prudence of staging a massive sports festival when there were so many other problems to be dealt with. In any case, the ledger looks like this: $153.2 million spent in total, of which $92.5 million was paid for by income from ticket sales, advertising, television rights and other sources. The Mexican people paid for the remaining $60.7 million.\footnote{“XIX Olympiad: Spirited Success,” \textit{America}, 119:15 (9 Nov. 1968): 423.}

But the balance sheet extends far beyond these numbers, for the total spending does not incorporate the construction of roads and subways, many improvements to hotels and the like. Such expenditures stretched the Mexican budget even further. At the same time, the Olympics brought residual benefits. Television sales boomed throughout 1968, as many Mexicans bought their first television to be able to watch the Olympics. The construction sector of the economy jumped by 11\% during 1968, with many projects devoted to Olympic preparations. The airline industry flourished, and tourism brought other benefits to the economy, as visitors stocked up on souvenirs and trinkets, and boosted the restaurant business as well.\footnote{Dept. of State telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, “Mexican Economy in 1968,” 2 Feb. 1969, \textit{NARA}, RG 59, Box 642, folder E 2 Mex 1/1/69.}

What can be made of such figures? First, it would be easy to exaggerate the impact of the Olympics on the economy. It is important to remember that virtually all of the economic impact of the Olympics, both positive and negative, concentrated on Mexico City. Very few of the improvements and expenditures, and also of the tourism and income, reached into the Mexican countryside. Many Mexicans were not affected by the Olympics at all. Second, the overall Mexican economy for 1968 was not substantially different from that of the years just prior or just following. The GNP grew by 7.1\%, which was precisely the average growth rate over the years 1963-1967. While there was much excitement generated over the Olympics, it seems that the expenses and income balanced each other out.\footnote{A sampling of projects undertaken in 1969 included: a plant for making alcoholic beverage from henequen, a cement factory, several shoe factories, two ice-making plants, a fruit-processing plant, and many others. Initial State Department assessment of these projects was, “Welcome as these projects are, none of the projects will employ any significant number of the greatly under-employed…peasants.” Dept. of State telegram, from American Consulate Merida to Dept. of State, 23 Jan. 1969, \textit{NARA}, RG 59, Box 642, folder E 5 Mex 1/1/67.}

Most important, though, the Olympics represent the vision of a government determined to emulate western economies, especially that of the United States, and determined to join the ranks of “modern” nations. Such policy involved a host of issues, all of which ultimately debilitated the economy, including: dependence on oil rather than a diverse economy; a growing trade deficit; inflation; high interest rates; low savings rates among Mexican citizens; tax benefits to foreign investors and companies; concentration on urban development while neglecting rural areas; and high superficial expenditures, including such luxuries as the Olympic Games.\footnote{Dept. of State airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, “Projected Mexican Economic Growth in 1968 – Revised Appraisal,” 2 Dec. 1968, \textit{NARA}, RG 59, Box 642, folder E 5 Mex 1/1/67.} Even in the late 1960s, as the Mexican economy chugged along, experts worried that these policies could not be sustained indefinitely, and that without wholesale changes in philosophy the Mexican economy would crumble. At least one article, published in \textit{The Economist} in August of 1968, suggested that one key to Mexican economic survival would be “austerity” in
Cutting back on unnecessary expenses and superficial projects could save the Mexican economy. While we can only speculate in hindsight, it seems clear that spending on projects such as the Olympics contributed to the economic woes of the 1970s and ‘80s.

Problems of the Olympic era foreshadowed far more crippling difficulties to come, many of which still afflict Mexico today. Following Diaz Ordaz as president was Luis Echeverría, who had been Secretary of the Interior under Diaz Ordaz and “the non-military official most closely associated in the public mind with the policy of repression of the students in 1968.” He was humorless, unimaginative, and tactless, and endured dozens of protests against his regime. Problems such as malnourishment, illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and poor health approached epidemic proportions, exacerbated by soaring population growth and a steady urban migration. Mexico City, which had put on its best face during the Olympics, became a filthy city, filled with slums and beggars, choked with smog and pollution, and slowed by endless construction and traffic jams. Echeverría poured money into public works projects and subsidized dozens of industries, many of which floundered or produced inferior products. His administration was also rife with corruption, and bribes and kickbacks siphoned off untold millions from the national budget. Increasingly dependent on loans from the United States and foreign investment to fund such projects, the Mexican economy suffered even more as the U.S. economy sagged in the mid-1970s. Coupled with staggering inflation and careless monetary policy, this debt caused a virtual collapse of the Mexican economy by 1976. The prosperity that had been so crucial in winning the Olympic bid was a distant memory, and Mexico still struggles to lift itself from economic depression. While it is folly to suggest that the Olympics caused this economic crisis, the Games are a fitting symbol of an economic policy that steered the nation into such crisis.

While economists would debate the financial significance of the Olympics for many years, other experts attempted to settle the score in the athletic competitions. Had the Olympics truly been an exhibition of friendly competition, victories and defeats would be of no import. Indeed, there is no official measure of team success in the Olympics. Unofficially, though, writers, observers, and participants alike have found it irresistible to tally up the final results by nation. The most common means of comparison are a total medal count for each team, and a total “score” weighing the quality as well as quantity of medals, in which 3 points are awarded for each gold medal, 2 for silver, and 1 for bronze. Experts were quick to point out that the United States had “won” the Mexico City Olympics on both counts, and fairly comfortably at that. By such measure, the United States finished with 107 total medals and 225 points; the Soviet Union was second with 91 total medals and 181 points. The two were far and away the top performers, as the next highest finisher, Hungary, tallied only 32 total medals. Both should have been pleased with their totals. In quite un-Olympic fashion, however, representatives from the United States trumpeted the superiority of their system in winning so many medals, and

518 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 29 Aug. 1968, “The Economist publishes critical article on Mexican economy,” NARA, RG 59, Box 642, folder E 2 Mex 6/1/68.
those from the Soviet Union were clearly disappointed, and more than a little surprised, that they had fared so “poorly.”

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<th></th>
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<th>Silver</th>
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<td>45</td>
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Fig. 11: 1968 Mexico City Olympics, Medal Count

In the weeks after the Olympics, there was considerable finger-pointing in the Soviet press, and a number of athletes were singled out for their failures. Valery Brumel, once the world-record holder in the high jump, wrote that, “some of our sportsmen, especially the younger ones, were unable to overcome a lack of confidence, a subconscious awe of the great names.” Other writers, too, pointed to “fear” or “nerves” as a cause of poor performances. There was no shortage of explanations for poor performances, from the altitude, to lack of experience running on tartan tracks, to stomach problems, to poor coaching. The Soviet Union, “smarting from a mediocre Olympic Games record,” reorganized its sports establishment in the wake of the Olympics. It announced the formation of the Union Republican Committee on Physical Culture of Sports, whose leader would be Sergei Pavlov. It was hoped that such a committee could address some of the failings that afflicted the team in Mexico City.

In general, though, the Soviets attempted to spin the Olympic venture as a success, either by downplaying their failures or by slighting American achievements. Press coverage concentrated on Soviet victories or medallists, while those athletes that failed to live up to expectations were relegated to the back pages. The papers avoided listing the total medal counts so common in American papers, instead focusing on events in which the Soviets bested the Americans head-to-head. In events where no Soviet athlete excelled, the papers often wrote about other socialist athletes rather than

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523 Ibid.
Americans. The exception to this rule was the African-American athletes, who received ample attention in the Soviet press. Not only did the black athletes carry the American team, they also openly criticized the United States, a point not unnoticed by the Soviet papers. The Soviet media leapt at the protest of Smith and Carlos, speculating about racism within the United States and racial tensions on the U.S. team. Television coverage, including two hour-long programs and several other fifteen-minute news clips each day, was more comprehensive, as the achievements on the screen were less easily manipulated. Understandably, special reports and praise concentrated on Soviet athletes.525

The United States played the same kinds of games, praising American accomplishments and downplaying their failures. While coverage in the major newspapers was reasonably even-handed throughout the competition, all the talk after the Games was of the poor Soviet showing. Arthur Daley, Olympic correspondent for the New York Times, wrote of the Soviet performance in track and field, “The most red-faced country, properly enough, was the Soviet Union, with only three gold medals in men’s and nary one in the women’s competition, a phase that the Russians once used to dominate.”526 If there were political motivations for such commentary, the fact remains that the 1968 Olympics were the only Summer Olympics from 1952 to 1996 that the Soviets did not “win” according to medal count.527 Still, both nations continued to try to promote the efficacy of their social systems by engaging in sports matches and exhibitions. In 1969, the United States Olympic Committee sent its boxers on a global tour, including matches in the Soviet Union, Poland, England, Mexico and other countries.528 Perhaps hoping to avenge the disappointments of 1968, Soviet track coach Gabriel Korobkov also cleared the way for a pair of home-and-home track and field meets between the United States and the Soviet Union.529

It is possible that such victories in the field of sport might have convinced some members of the international community that the American social system was superior to that of the Soviets. Whatever diplomatic gains might have been won, however, they were overwhelmed by the image of Tommie Smith and John Carlos on the medal stand. The protest had a profound impact on international observers, who remember it above all else from those Olympics. Here were two Americans, in what should have been their proudest moment, announcing to the world that they were dissatisfied with their own nation. While the United States may have prevailed according to the medal count, it was a hollow victory.

For the black athletes, the 1968 Olympics were a great success, on the field. The black Americans won gold medals in seven events in track and field, including two four-member relay teams, and they took sixteen total medals – and that was just the men. The women added gold medals in three events, most notably Wyomia Tyus’ repeat of her gold-medal performance in Tokyo in 1964. Black athletes added two gold medals in boxing, and they anchored the gold-medal winning basketball team. Bob Beamon’s leap

527 Riordan, 85. The 1984 boycott year excepted.
was unforgettable, and the parade of world and Olympic records broken by the group was unprecedented.\footnote{530}

In terms of their broader social protest, though, the ’68 Olympics can best be considered a cry in the wilderness, a distant precursor to changes that only came many years later. For Smith and Carlos, the protest would remain an albatross to bear to the present. The pair was swamped with letters and comments for months, many threatening, most negative, and a few supportive. According to Carlos, “We got letters saying ‘You set us back a hundred years,’ and others saying, ‘You freed us.’”\footnote{531} Response from the black community was generally supportive. Smith recalls returning to his home town and going to visit his father. “He looked right through me, stone silent as usual. Then, for the first time in my life, he reached for my hand. ‘I don’t really know what happened,’ he said, ‘but what you did was right.’”\footnote{532}

Not everyone was so quick to support the athletes. Tommie Smith set out to build a career after returning from the Games, and found obstacles put before him at every turn. The ROTC back at San Jose State wouldn’t have him. He also found NFL teams were not interested in signing him, a shocking development for a world-class sprinter, wooed by several teams before the Olympics. Finally, Bill Walsh, then an assistant coach for the Cincinnati Bengals, offered Smith $300 a week to play on the practice squad, a position he held for three years. After his short-lived NFL stint, Smith entered a stormy career as the track coach at Oberlin College. He represented a young, black, militant group that clashed with the older guard of the administration, and his position was never secure. Denied tenure in 1978, he hit the low point in his life. Turned down as “too good” for several coaching positions, he moved around the country, borrowed money from family and friends, and considered positions as insurance salesman, policeman, or garbage collector. He gained nearly fifty pounds over his racing weight of 190. Finally, he took a position coaching track at Santa Monica College, a program that he built into a powerhouse track team by the 1980s.\footnote{533}

Carlos took a slightly different path, but also found himself in the NFL within two years. After the Olympics, he continued to run on the track circuit, a star sprinter at his peak. He was the best in the world at the 100- and 200-meters, and dominated track meets around the world throughout 1969. He won the NCAA championships and the AAU meet, but his crowning moment came at the 1969 Fresno Relays. In the 100-yard dash at that meet, Carlos had his greatest race. Watches in the stands showed different times, from 8.7 to 9.0 seconds. After a wait of several minutes, the official timer flashed 9.1 seconds on the board, merely tying the world record. Carlos, convinced he had run 8.8 at worst, left the meet feeling cheated again. Still, he dominated every meet in which he competed, and after that season he felt he had no other worlds to conquer in track. He turned to football, but like Smith he could not translate his raw speed into success on the football field. He was out of the NFL by 1972, and attended the Munich Olympics not as a competitor, but as a representative with the Puma shoe company.\footnote{534} After making his appearance in Munich, Carlos found his career in a tailspin. Without a college degree, he worked odd jobs, took on speaking engagements when he could find them, and finally established a children’s foundation in Los Angeles in 1977. Unsure where her next meal

\footnote{532}{Ibid.}
\footnote{533}{Ibid.}
\footnote{534}{Ibid; John Carlos, \textit{Why?}, 214-258.}
would come from and shaken by years of uncertainty, Carlos’ wife committed suicide shortly thereafter. He turned to drugs and was arrested in December 1986 for possession of cocaine. Finally, in 1988 he was hired as an assistant on the Palm Desert High track team, and in 1990 as head track coach at Palm Springs High.

For both Smith and Carlos, the road to peace, success, and security was long and difficult, as they toiled to overcome the memory of their protest. Both men still show signs of bitterness over the consequences of their actions of more than thirty years ago. Smith, who once claimed that the Olympic gold medal “meant everything” to him, as recently as the year 2000 put the medal up for sale on his internet website. He eventually took it down after receiving no offers at his asking price of $500,000. Carlos finally explained his side of the story in his 2002 biography, entitled Why? He is as defiant as ever in these pages, still convinced he was cheated out of world records at the Lake Tahoe Olympic Trials and at the 1969 Fresno Relays. The demons of 1968 still haunt both men.

Other black athletes were dragged down by association with Smith and Carlos. Jim Hines, who won the gold medal in the 100-meter dash, found his once-promising endorsement prospects on shaky ground after returning from Mexico City. Adidas withdrew offers of a lifetime contract. Professional football teams, too, shied away from Hines, though he hung on for five years in the league. With only a little bitterness, Hines says, “The gesture cost me a total of $2 million.” Larry James, silver medallist in the 400-meters, also felt the weight of the protest. He returned to a place on the Villanova track team, but after receiving hundreds of letters and countless comments challenging his actions, he lost focus and withdrew from social activity. For two years, he questioned himself, before finally joining the Marines in 1972 and finding a sense of purpose again. James has gone on to a career in teaching and coaching, like many of the black athletes from the ’68 team, many of whom found solace teaching in Africa or the Caribbean.

Was it worth it? To the men who sacrificed countless dollars, stable careers, and adoration by millions, did the gains outweigh the cost? Early financial struggles subsided with the passing years, and all the key actors in the 1968 drama eventually found employment, even if not as professional athletes. The stigma associated with their protest is virtually gone, and the moment on the medal stand now signifies a defining event in the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1960’s. No longer villains, Smith and Carlos are revered by many, respected by all but the most ardent racists. They had the courage and will to use their brief time in the public eye, not for personal gain, but in an effort to make profound change in our society. In the words of Steve Holman, an Olympic miler in 1992, “At great personal cost, against negative public opinion and an antagonistic media, in spite of numerous death threats, they still had the courage to stand up for what they believed.”

If their reputations have been vindicated, then, can we say that their protest was an unmitigated success? The protest did attract a great deal of attention, both in the

538 Ibid.
United States and abroad. And while such attention was the immediate goal of their gesture, the changes they sought were not so easy to achieve. It would be many years before black athletes began to attain the equality and respect that Smith, Carlos and the others fought for. In his 1992 book, *Necessities*, Phillip Hoose explains that the situation for black athletes in the early 1990’s was scarcely better than it had been twenty years before. At that time, there was only one black head coach in all of professional sports. On college campuses, black athletes endured the same kinds of social limitations, though with more blacks on campuses there were more activities to be involved in. Athletes still complained of “stacking”, racism, and opportunity in only a few sports. More important, the road to athletic stardom was increasingly littered with the sad tales of thousands of black youths who dedicated their lives to sport, only to find their careers cut short after college or even sooner. A roundtable discussion of top black athletes in 1991 reached similar conclusions, although it noted the important improvement in the salaries of black athletes. No longer did they toil at menial wages; salaries of the best black athletes, such as Eric Dickerson and Bo Jackson in football, Magic Johnson and Michael Jordan in basketball, and Dwight Gooden in baseball, were equal to those of white athletes.

The ensuing decade has brought great change to the sports landscape. Black head coaches, while still a minority at the professional level, at least equal their percentage of the overall population. Black athletes now dominate all the major professional team sports save hockey, and they thrive at all positions, including quarterbacks in football and pitchers in baseball, positions once held exclusively by whites. They have achieved great successes in traditionally white-dominated sports such as tennis and golf, including one of the world’s most recognizable athletes, Tiger Woods, and the top two women’s tennis players, Serena and Venus Williams. Blacks have begun to crack into ownership in professional sports as well, often after successful playing careers, such as Michael Jordan and Isaiah Thomas, partial owners of NBA franchises. The changes sought by the black athletes of ’68 have largely been achieved, or at least continue to improve with each passing day. Historians and scholars have turned to issues beyond equality of opportunity, such as whether success in athletics has helped or hindered African-Americans as a whole, or whether it is genetics or the environment that lead to black dominance in most sports.

Like the black athletes, Mexican students had to wait many years before their efforts paid dividends. The slaughter in Tlatelolco had stunned the students into silence, and the Olympics further slowed the movement. All eyes were diverted to the athletic competition, including those of the students, and the heightened attention that the Games had brought to the student movement evaporated quickly as the athletic events got underway. There was also a genuine aura of goodwill surrounding the Olympics, and neither the students nor the government wanted to spoil it with further violence. Diaz Ordaz may have sidetracked student efforts by freeing many of the imprisoned students and continuing to negotiate for the release of all of them. He also withdrew all military forces from campuses throughout the city. For the duration of the Olympics, the students remained quiet, and the government did its best to keep them that way.

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542 See, for instance, *Darwin’s Athletes* and *Taboo*.
543 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 3 Nov. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2337A, folder POL 2 Mex 11/1/68.
After the Olympics, the tattered remnants of the student movement attempted to reorganize, but found only a few thousand courageous protesters remained. A well-publicized “unity meeting” on October 31 attracted only 3,000 students, which the government interpreted as a sign that support for the movement was waning. After Tlatelolco, the movement was divided and disorganized, and most of the frightened students returned to school. Others wanted to continue the strike, fearing abandonment of their cause and their imprisoned comrades. The government continued to undermine what remained of the movement. Diaz Ordaz secretly promised representatives of the Mexican Communist Party official recognition and four seats in the legislature if they would help to halt the student strike. On Nov. 27, he announced the seizure of more than 100 tons of subversive propaganda from Communist China, USSR, and Cuba, a sign that dissidents were still being watched and controlled. By the end of November, some 60% of the student body at the National University was back in classes. By early December, only a handful of student holdouts remained, and the strike was officially called off. The movement declined even further over the holidays, as most students focused on their exams and then took a break for Christmas. The holiday season ended on an ominous note from the president, as Diaz Ordaz announced that the Department of the Federal District had purchased twenty anti-riot tanks from France. After October 2nd, such an announcement could not be simply dismissed as an idle threat.

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The movement had been effectively silenced, though not without winning a few concessions. Within three years, all the student prisoners were freed. The hated law against “social dissolution” was repealed. The chief of police was fired, though not until June of 1971 after several more complaints of brutality were lodged against him. Still, the student movement had its most lasting impact in inspiring political change. The unrest of the Diaz Ordaz regime never entirely died out, and the protests of the students lived on in the efforts of teachers, intellectuals, Sonoran farmers, women, various minority parties, and many other groups who continued to agitate for broader representation in the years and decades after 1968. In overcoming his political enemies, Echeverria found it most

544 Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 28 Nov. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2341, folder 15-1 Mex 1/1/67.
545 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 2 Dec. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2337A, folder POL 2 Mex 11/1/68.
546 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 20 Jan. 1969, NARA, RG 59, Box 2337A, folder POL 2 Mex 11/1/68.
547 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 11 Feb. 1969, NARA, RG 59, Box 2337A, folder POL 2 Mex 11/1/68.
expedient to broaden representation within the PRI, and thus he appointed students, intellectuals, and some laborers to positions within his government. More concessions came in 1976, when Echeverría’s successor, Jose Lopez Portillo, ascended to the presidency with Mexico on the verge of social and economic collapse. He opened the political process slightly, allowing for several representatives of minority parties to win seats in the legislature. This gesture, while it served at first only to divide the other parties even further as they fought furiously for their few seats, was an initial wedge that ultimately pried open the door for truer democracy. This development was consummated in 2000 with the election of Vicente Fox, a non-PRI candidate, to the presidency. While the electoral process remains far from perfect, Fox’s election over thirty years after the slaughter at Tlatelolco would not have been possible if not for the efforts at reform instigated in part by the students in ’68.548

The United States took a keen interest in the student movement and the political changes following it, but U.S. interest was not purely beneficent. Deep in the throes of the Cold War, the U.S. government was on the lookout for communism, and it paid particularly close attention to the student movement in 1968. It was not the first time that the United States observed communism infiltrating the Mexican educational system. In 1962, the State Department heightened surveillance of Dr. Juan M. Capallera, rector of the Preparatory School of Veracruz, after he allegedly circulated communist materials while discussing Russian films in a seminar.549 In 1964, it watched closely as three Mexican students were expelled from the Seminar for Central American University Student Leaders, for distributing pro-Castro propaganda.550 The United States kept careful count of the number of registered communists in Mexico, and enlisted informants to keep them abreast of developments within the party.551 It kept a list of bookstores suspected of distributing communist propaganda, and detailed records of the owners and patrons of such stores.552 Recognizing the communist influence within student movements elsewhere in the world, the State Department expected communist infiltration of the Mexican student movement and feared a broader communist influence. “Communists have doubtless attempted to influence and manipulate [the] movement, and several points in [the] student demands have been communist slogans for years,” one memo claimed.553 The full extent of Communist involvement in the student movement is impossible to gauge, though it is clear that at the core of the movement was a dedicated

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549 Dept. of State Airgram, from American Consulate, Veracruz to Dept. of State, “New Cine Club at Veracruz Possible Vehicle for Communist Propaganda,” 20 Oct. 1962, NARA, RG 59, Box 2338, folder 812.46/4-1361.
550 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy San Jose to Dept. of State, “Seminar for Central American University Student Leaders,” 21 Aug. 1964, NARA, RG 59, Box 367, folder EDU 9-4 LA 1/1/64; also Dept. of State Airgram, from AmEmbassy Mexico City to Dept. of State, “Preparation of 20th World Strength Report of Communist Party Organizations,” 29 Nov. 1967, NARA, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/67; also Dept. of State Airgram, from Amconsul Mexicali to Dept. of State, “Communist Meeting in Mexicali,” 1 Sept. 1967, ibid.
551 See, for instance, Dept. of State Airgram, from AmEmbassy Mexico City to Dept. of State, “Preparation of 20th World Strength Report of Communist Party Organizations,” 29 Nov. 1967, NARA, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/67; also Dept. of State Airgram, from Amconsul Mexicali to Dept. of State, “Communist Meeting in Mexicali,” 1 Sept. 1967, ibid.
552 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amconsul Mexicali to Dept. of State, “Increased Communist Activity in Mexicali Consular District,” 14 Mar. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/68.
553 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico City to SecState, 6 Sept. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2340, folder POL 23.2 Mex 9/1/68.
group of students, perhaps a few hundred, who were largely communist. The rank and file, though, were mostly middle- to upper-class youth excited to be involved in a new sort of activity.

The U.S. government feared that the student movement in Mexico might explode into a broader-based revolution, as had the movement in France. There, massive student protests won the admiration and support of workers, who joined in the protests. The students in Mexico, though, never achieved such broad-based support. There was a class disparity between the students and the workers. Just as important, though, the most important labor unions and organizing bodies among the workers had been incorporated into the PRI. They already had a voice in government, and to join the student protest would have meant the possibility of sacrificing gains already won. The Mexican students simply had no chance to win great support from the workers, whatever grievances they may have had with the government.

U.S. concern over communist infiltration of the student movement was not entirely misplaced, as there were clearly some communists involved. But U.S. interest in Mexico went far beyond the student movement. U.S. diplomacy in Mexico throughout the years leading up to the Olympics concentrated on two themes: building neighborly relations, while at the same time combating communism. On the one hand, it promoted cultural exchange and assistance programs across the U.S.-Mexican border. In 1966, the two nations formed the United States-Mexico Commission for Border Development and Friendship, partly in connection with the Olympics. Among many programs created by this commission was an exchange of athletes and coaches to help both nations prepare for the Olympics, and a scrimmage between the Mexican basketball team and the Texas Western All-Stars, dubbed the “Olympic Friendship Basketball Game.” In addition, students from the Texas A&M School of Architecture visited Mexico City to study some of the architectural plans for the new Olympic facilities. The two nations engaged in many other friendly exchanges, not all so closely linked to the Olympics. Among dozens of such programs were a student exchange program; various ecological and biological studies of the border region; recovery of space fragments; and participation in numerous fairs and cultural activities across the border. The presidents of Mexico and the United States met three times in 1966 and 1967, and exchanges of letters between them were always friendly. So positive were relations between the two nations that Diaz Ordaz, entering the year of the Olympics, described them as, “exceedingly cordial and based on an absolute reciprocity of respect and show of friendship and truth.”

On the other hand, State Department documents during this period are filled with references to communism in Mexico, possible communist agitators, and the threat of Soviet influence. While some contacts between Mexico and the Soviet Union were denied, others were accepted, and were viewed with some suspicion by members of the

555 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, “Labor and the Students – Mexico 1968,” 1 Dec. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2343, folder 23-8 Mex 1/1/68 POL 23 Mex to POL-MEX-US.
556 NARA, RG 59, Box 643, folder E 1 Mex-US 1/1/68.
557 Letter from Paul Pate to Thomas C. Mann, 7 Apr. 1965, NARA, RG 59, Box 368, folder EDU 15 Mex 1/1/64.
558 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico City to Dept. of State, “Mid-Point in the Diaz Ordaz Administration: A Political Assessment,” 9 Jan. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2341, folder POL 15-1 Mex 1/1/68.
559 Ibid.
U.S. State Department. In June alone, former Mexican President Miguel Aleman traveled to Poland, the USSR, and Yugoslavia; the Mexicans received a commercial mission from Czechoslovakia; and Mexico and Yugoslavia signed a trade agreement. Might such cordial relations mean that Mexico was opening itself to infiltration by communism? The period of goodwill associated with the Olympics also inspired some Mexican-Soviet talks, though little of substance was accomplished. In May, the two nations announced a program of cultural and scientific exchange, associated with the Mexican Cultural Olympics. Some in the State Department feared that such cultural exchanges would ease the entry of Soviet students into Mexico, where they might stir up trouble on the campuses. During the same talks, though, the Soviets flatly refused to sign Mexico’s Treaty of Tlatelolco, the Latin-American Nuclear-Free Zone agreement. Olympic good will only went so far.

The U.S. took note of several developments that seemed to weaken the Mexican communist party, including the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the massacre at Tlatelolco. Communists in Mexico were torn by the invasion of Czechoslovakia, as even staunch supporters of the Soviet Union found it difficult to defend. The party was divided all the more as Fidel Castro announced his support of the Soviet action; many Mexican communists, who typically followed Castro’s lead, could not agree with him on this matter. Finally, Diaz Ordaz condemned the Soviet action, indicating tacit agreement with the United States. The movement was weakened even more by the massacre at Tlatelolco, in which several communist student leaders were either killed or arrested. Some student communists announced their break with the party, which some of them felt had provoked the attack in Tlatelolco. It must be noted that such announcements, prominently placed in the Mexican newspapers, may have been planted by the government to further weaken the Communist party. Such a tactic would be in line with Diaz Ordaz’s approach to leftist groups in the early portions of his presidency, which was not supportive. Unlike the friendly exchange with the U.S., cultural exchange with the Soviet Union was “polite but constrained,” according to one State Department memo. The Mexican Government declined a request by the Soviet Union to establish a tourist office in Mexico City, and it denied visas to the Russian Circus, which had been scheduled to tour Mexico in 1966. While such developments did not warrant an international scandal, they did indicate that Diaz Ordaz was not warm in his reception of leftist groups or ideas. In any case, the United States took some solace in the fact that communism in Mexico was on the wane, and the tone of most State Department memos

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560 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, 3 July 1968, NARA, Rg 59, Box 2337, folder POL 2 Mex 7/1/68.
561 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, “Mexican-Soviet Cultural and Scientific Convention,” 14 July 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 325, CUL 1/1/67 Mex-A.
562 Dept. of State Intelligence Note, 3 June 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 7 Mex 1/1/68.
563 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, “Czech Invasion: Consternation on the Left,” 24 Nov. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/68.
564 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 2 Sept. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2341, folder POL 15-1 Mex 1/1/68.
565 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico to Dept. of State, “Communists Reveal Demoralizing Effect of October 2 Incident,” 25 Dec. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/68.
566 Dept. of State Airgram, from Amembassy Mexico City to Dept. of State, “Mid-Point in the Diaz Ordaz Administration: A Political Assessment,” 9 Jan. 1968, NARA, RG 59, Box 2341, POL 15-1 Mex 1/1/68.
of this period indicate that they were satisfied that U.S. support in Mexico far outweighed that of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{567}

At the same time, though, the Mexican government showed some signs of inching to the left, a trend that accelerated after the student massacre. In May, 1968, Diaz Ordaz hosted a “broad meeting” with top leaders of the Mexican Communist Party, the PCM. State Department officials interpreted the meeting in two different ways. As one memo read, “This is [the] first time, at least in this administration, that [the] president has formally received PCM leaders and will probably be used by [the] latter to further [an] effort for recognition as [a] legitimate political party.” The meeting was also in keeping with a “general effort to build [a] spirit of harmony for [the] Olympics.”\textsuperscript{568} It is also likely that opening the door, however slightly, to the Communist Party was an initial maneuver to begin co-opting communist leaders into the PRI. Whatever the reasoning, such recognition was not as warmly received by observers within the State Department, always wary of communist infiltration. This move to the left contributed to a decline in U.S.-Mexican relations that marked the Echeverria tenure. Echeverria’s ineptitude in handling protest, poorly conceived economic policy, and lack of personal friendship with U.S. presidents contributed to this decline, but the prospect of communist infiltration was the chief concern. So the positive atmosphere surrounding the Olympics also marked a high point in U.S.-Mexican relations.

As for the Olympic Games themselves, 1968 was a watershed year. Any time nations gather in a competitive setting, with flag-waving and national anthems, and with national pride on the line, politics will come into play. Politics and sport had always been intertwined in the Olympics. But never before had politics mingled with sport on so many levels, and quite so overtly, as at the Mexico City Olympics. Several nations had threatened a boycott of the 1936 Olympics after Hitler took power in Germany, but that movement had fizzled out. Recognition of various nations for Olympic participation had been wielded as a carrot in the past, but never had it created quite such a stir as the South African question did in 1968. Most important, though, the raised fists of Smith and Carlos brought protest literally to a new level in Olympic history. The athletes themselves had always competed more or less as friendly rivals, never bringing the troubles of the outside world into the sacred preserve of the Olympic stadium. After Smith and Carlos, there was no more pretending that sport and politics were independent of one another. The medal stand, the Opening Ceremonies, the Olympic Village, and competition itself were now fair game for protests.

Perhaps most troubling of all, the deepening rift between East and West had begun to erode the Olympic spirit. Intended to bring together athletes from different ideological and political backgrounds, to provide them with a peaceful forum for competition, instead the Olympics began to reflect those very differences, to enhance the distance between nations. The Olympics were no longer a bastion of good will and friendly competition. Instead, they had become a fiercely competitive extension of the Cold War, in which contestants would lie and cheat in order to win, and in which both sides flung accusations and insults in hopes of bringing the other down. While most of the athletes looked upon one another as friendly rivals, organizers never knew when national differences would supercede good sportsmanship. Representatives of rival

\textsuperscript{567} Dept. of State Airgram, from AmEmbassy Mexico to Dept. of State, “Developments in the Mexican Left: Struggle with Cuba, PPS Split,” 27 Feb. 1968, \textit{NARA}, RG 59, Box 2339, folder POL 12 Mex 1/1/68.
\textsuperscript{568} Dept. of State Telegram, from Amembassy Mexico to SecState, 9 May 1968, \textit{NARA}, RG 59, Box 2341, POL 15-1 Mex 1/1/68.
nations were closely watched and separated from one another as often as possible. In Mexico City, for the first time, national teams were designated separate sections in the dining hall at the Olympic Village. The Soviets and the East Germans ate in one section; Austrians, Czechoslovakians, Hungarians, Poles, Rumanians, and Yugoslavians ate in another.\(^569\)

In the years after 1968, the Olympics became less and less a simple sports competition and more and more a political tool. This development was visible most starkly in the 1980s, when the United States and Russia engaged in “dueling boycotts”. Jimmy Carter, President of the United States withheld the U.S. Olympic team from competition at the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Similarly, the Soviet bloc refused to attend the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, afterwards held up as a great triumph for the U.S. team, which dominated in the absence of their most capable opponents.

But the infusion of politics into the Olympics reached its most terrifying extremes four years after Mexico City, at the Munich Olympics. There, just before dawn on September 15, eight Palestinian terrorists made their way into the building housing the Israeli Olympic team, and in a matter of fifteen minutes killed two Israelis and took nine more as hostages. Over the next nineteen hours, terrorists, national leaders, police and Olympic officials engaged in fruitless negotiation, ending with a two-hour firefight at a German airbase, in which all nine hostages, five of the terrorists, and one policeman were killed. In the midst of it all, while the Israeli athletes were shuttled to their deaths, athletes from other parts of the world continued to compete in volleyball, boxing, and canoeing. Eventually, the sporting events were suspended, though they resumed again only hours after the tragedy’s conclusion.\(^570\)

The friendly and open atmosphere of the Olympics was largely to blame for the tragedy. Hoping to avoid the militaristic images of Mexico City, there were few armed guards surrounding the Olympic Village in Munich, and the Israeli athletes received no special security in spite of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. The terrorists achieved their attack by simply donning sweat suits and hopping a fence, mimicking many of the athletes who had taken to sneaking out of the Olympic Village for late-night carousing. Were it not for the air of peace and harmony that surrounded the Olympics, the tragedy might have been avoided. As one Israeli student said after the attack, “We have learned to be on guard for this kind of thing almost all the time. But not here – not with all the nations gathered in peace, with all the talk about sportsmanship and freedom.”\(^571\)

Avery Brundage, in one of the final acts of his long tenure as president of the IOC, stood before a crowd of 80,000 somber fans at the “memorial” service for the slain Israelis, and cheered, “The Games must go on!” He callously rejected the possibility that the Games be discontinued out of respect for the dead and the chance of further violence, and begrudgingly called for only a twenty-four hour mourning period – beginning retroactively from the moment the Games had first been suspended. Sport must not become the bargaining chip for political fanatics, he argued. But had it not already been so transformed? “What Brundage failed to recognize,” according to historian Richard


Espy, “was that sport was in fact a terrific stick for achieving political objectives.” The weight of this realization had finally settled on Brundage, who was wearied after a lifetime of fending off political intrusion into the Olympics. His handling of the Munich crisis was shameful, the acts of a tired and beaten man. He had actually been voted out as president of the IOC in the week prior to the Olympics, and had the unfortunate privilege of overseeing one of the most difficult weeks in the history of sport as his final action as president. With the end of Brundage’s tenure, the great champion of amateurism and purity in sport was removed. Though he frustrated many in the Olympic community with his stubbornness and strict adherence to policy, Brundage was sincere in his mission to separate politics from sport. With Brundage gone, no one picked up the mantle of that mission. The influence of politics, so profound in ’68, came to dominate the Olympics in the post-Brundage era.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

KEVIN B. WITHERSPOON

EDUCATION
Ph.D. (Defended Oct. 6, 2003) Florida State University
M.A. 1996 University of Maine
B.A. 1993 Florida State University

DISSERTATION
“Protest at the Pyramid: the 1968 Mexico City Olympics and the Politicization of the Olympic Games”

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE
Professor James P. Jones (chair), Professors Valerie J. Conner, Joe Richardson, Robinson Herrera, and Patrick O’Sullivan

FIELDS OF CONCENTRATION
20th Century United States History
Secondary Field: Latin American History
Other areas of interest: American social and cultural history, especially the history of sport; African-American history; Oral History

TEACHING EXPERIENCE
Florida State University (Fall 1999 – present):

Instructor:
U.S. History post-1865
Latin American History
Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in U.S. History
Writing for History
American Civilization (U.S. survey)
The American Experience through Foreign Affairs

Grading Assistant:
Race and Ethnicity in United States History, Fall 1999

Tallahassee Community College (Spring 2001):

Teaching Assistant:
European Civilization to 1815
Sport in the Western World

University of Maine (Fall 1994 – Spring 1995):

Instructor:
European Civilization to 1815
Sport in the Western World
CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS


“Building for Legitimacy: Mexico, the Cold War, and the Bid for the 1968 Olympics,” 2003 World History Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA (June 28, 2003)

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**AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

Thomas Campbell Award for Excellence in Teaching, 2003
FSU J. Leitch Wright Award for Excellence in Research, 1999, 2000, 2003
FSU Teaching Assistant, 2002-2003
Florida State University Fellow, 1999-2002
FSU Graduate Dissertation Award, 2001
FSU History Department Dissertation Award, 2001-2002
FSU Grading Assistant, 1999
FSU Liberal Arts Fellow, 1998-1999
University of Maine, Teaching Assistant, 1994-1995
University of Maine, University Fellow, 1993-1994
FSU, Completed Honors Thesis, History, 1992
FSU, Phi Beta Kappa, 1991
FSU, Male Sophomore Student of the Year, 1991

**DEPARTMENT SERVICE**

FSU, Faculty Search Committee, Student Representative, 1999-2003
FSU, Faculty Committee, Graduate Student Representative, 1999-2001
FSU, Graduate Committee, Graduate Student Representative, 1999-2001
FSU, President, History Graduate Student Association, 1999-2001
FSU, History Department Grading Complaint Committee, 2001

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

Volunteer, Tallahassee Humane Society, 2001-2002
History Fair, Trinity Episcopal Middle School, Judge, Spring, 1999
History Fair, Tallahassee Middle School, Judge, Spring, 1999
University of Maine, Tutor, Onward Program, Fall, 1994

**PROFESSIONAL/RESEARCHER**

Research Assistant, Dr. Rodney Anderson supervisor, Fall 2001
Guadalajara Census Project, Florida State University
EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant, Dr. Elna Green supervisor, Spring 1999, Summer 2000, Florida State University Department of History

Interviewer, Dr. Robin Sellers supervisor, Summer 1999, Summer 2003, Florida State University Oral History Program

Archivist, Fall, 1994
University of Maine, Special Collections, Fogler Library

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Spanish, Passed Proficiency Exam, Summer 2000, Florida State University
Latin, Passed Proficiency Exam, Spring 1996, University Of Maine

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Florida State University, Program for Instructional Excellence, 2000-2003

Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) Fellow, 2000-present

“Surviving Life as a Teaching Assistant: Experienced TA’s Speak,” Preparing Future Faculty panel, Florida State University (Nov. 8, 2003)

“John Marx and the ‘Superfine 9’: Florida State University’s First Black Students,” presented for History Department Seminar Series, Florida State University (Feb. 27, 2001)

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ORGANIZATIONS

American Historical Association
South Eastern World History Association
Phi Alpha Theta