

The Politics of the 1980 Olympic Boycott: A Canadian Perspective

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Two political imperatives, one international and the second, domestic, underlay both the Canadian and the United States' boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, set against the cold-war atmosphere and a decline in US hegemony, was the external force that drove the United States and her allies in search of strategies that would force a withdrawal of Soviet troops. But equally powerful was the low ebb in popularity that both President Carter and Prime Minister Clarke were experiencing at a time when they were respectively facing presidential primaries and a federal election. As a result, both leaders sought to bolster their political images by taking a strong stand against the Soviet invasion—threatening to boycott the Moscow Games was one of a number of sanctions that were proposed. But a perplexing aspect of the Canadian boycott was the fact that the final turn of the screw on the Canadian Olympic Committee (COA) was applied by the newly elected Trudeau government. When Trudeau had been Prime Minister of Canada in the 1970's, he had taken great pains to distance his government from the United States in matters of foreign policy. But pressured by the Trudeau government and threatened with a withdrawal of funds by the Olympic Trust, the fund-raising arm of the COA, the latter capitulated and voted overwhelmingly to boycott the Moscow Games.

In the war of international sport, the United States was the "big winner", even though her efforts to draw other nations into the boycott were only modestly successful. The absence of the United States from the Moscow Games made it impossible for the Soviet Union to demonstrate its superiority over the US on its home court. Conversely, when the Soviets retaliated by boycotting the 1984 Los Angeles Games, the United States scored a political coup when its overwhelming triumph in those truncated Games was televised around the world.

In retrospect, politicians and sport officials alike were almost unanimous in their view that the various sanctions and boycotts imposed by the US and her allies had little impact on Soviet policy in Afghanistan. Nor did the sanctions that were imposed cause much hardship, on either the Soviet Union or the relevant economic sectors in the US or Canada. The "big losers" were Canadian and US athletes and sport organizations.

Sport is ideally suited as a vehicle that can be used by governments to further their foreign-policy goals. It has great symbolic significance, attracts much media coverage, yet entails little risk. If government use of sport in foreign policy initiatives is to be minimized or avoided in the future, Canadian and US sport officials must learn from other interest groups to mount well orchestrated, concerted political lobby campaigns.