

the johns hopkins NEWS-LETTER

FAS Panel Sheds Light On Global Issue Of Sportswashing

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April 3, 2024

On Wednesday, March 27, panelists Dave Zirin, Rob Koehler and Doug Bandow discussed the global implications of sportswashing during the latest installment of the Spring 2024 Foreign Affair Symposium (FAS) series, Kaleidoscope: Embracing the Global Mosaic.

Sportswashing is described as the use of sports and sporting events by host countries to cover up human rights abuses, distract audiences from problematic politics and improve their global status and reputation.

Dave Zirin is a journalist who writes about the politics of sport for the *The Nation*. He has authored multiple books on the subject and hosts a Sirius XM weekly radio show, *Edge of Sports*.

Rob Koehler currently serves as the director general of Global Athlete, a movement aimed at empowering athletes. Koehler also acted as chief executive officer of the Drug Free Sport Consortium in 1999 and helped the World Anti-Doping Agency implement its first out-of-competition testing program.

The final panelist, Doug Bandow, is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and specializes in foreign policy and civil liberties. A paper that Bandow wrote on sportswashing was distributed to event attendees before the discussion began.

Senior Jamie Kim, an organizer of the event, described the importance of the conversation.

“Our hope is that people understand what sportswashing is, what goes beyond sportswashing and the different perspectives that come along with sportswashing,” she said. “The question is not whether sportswashing is good or bad. I think we can establish that it is bad. But what are the perspectives we can see it [through]?”

The three panelists approached the topic in different ways, using their varied backgrounds and careers as lenses through which to analyze the issue. Zirin focused on the atrocities that often accompany large sporting events, while Bandow concentrated on geopolitical relations. Koehler emphasized a need for the empowerment of athletes and for holding the International Olympic Committee (IOC) accountable.

Zirin described how large sporting events often involve host countries committing human rights abuses regardless of whether the country is democratic or authoritarian.

“You may hear today, or you may believe, that hosting these events makes these authoritarian countries more like democracies, more caring about migrant rights, more caring about LGBTQ people, less likely to kill dissidents,” he said. “The opposite is in fact the case. Rather than make these countries like China, Qatar or Saudi Arabia more like democracies, they actually serve to do the opposite and make democracies more authoritarian.”

The construction of event spaces in the democratic country of Japan, for example, displaced citizens from their homes. Zirin also discussed how, in many instances, hyper-militarization occurs to silence dissent and protest during the event.

Koehler took a different approach to the topic by highlighting the IOC’s exclusion of athletes when making decisions about sporting events.

“We can’t just look at sport now and say, ‘I don’t wanna worry, I just wanna watch the player.’ No, there are bigger forces at play,” he said. “We need to start standing up and demanding change from the International Olympic Committee to reform itself and have more athlete engagement and involvement.”

In an interview with *The News-Letter*, sophomore attendee Jason Shumsky voiced his agreement on the importance of watching sports with more than just entertainment in mind.

“There’s politics at play,” he said. “When you’re just trying to relax and have fun while watching sports, just having context as to what is happening is important.”

Koehler offered Lionel Messi’s tie-up with Saudi Arabia as an example of how athletes can be used by governments to promote their interests. He argued that until the IOC and other major sporting organizations make necessary changes and begin to listen to athlete voices, sportswashing will continue.

Though Bandow agreed with many of Zirin and Koehler’s points, he also pointed out the difficulty in changing the status quo. Bandow highlighted how many democratic countries that could potentially host the Olympics drop out of bids because of high costs. As a result, the bids of many rich authoritarian governments are the only ones standing, as they are willing to take on the burden of paying for such a costly global event.

Bandow also described the difficulty in deciding which countries are behaving democratically enough to host, offering Turkey as an example. He argued that though Turkey is technically a democracy, its government enforces laws that many view as antidemocratic and authoritarian.

“The problem is, even among democratic countries who can come, I would say Turkey shouldn’t come. I’m not convinced Pakistan should come. I can go down the list of nominally democratic countries which in fact are not authoritarian states which occasionally hold elections,” he said. “So how narrow are we going to do this?”

Bandow pointed out that even the U.S. engages in some activities that some may consider antidemocratic. He urged the audience to question who can and will make an objective measure to determine which countries are democratic enough.

In an interview with *The News-Letter*, freshman Nikhil Subhas talked about how a multi-perspective approach was valuable in considering sportswashing as an attendee.

“I think it was interesting how the panel reframed it not so much as [a debate on whether] democratic or authoritarian states should or should not be able to host sporting events, but more so describing how the practice of sports everywhere is universal in terms of countries trying to create a facade of their reputation,” he said.