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Let the Games Begin! -- But Free of Myths, Ancient and Modern

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Preparations for the London Olympics, about to start in the first city to host three Games, have not been without controversy. Cost overruns -- more than 100 percent over budget -- will make these by far the most expensive Games. Landlords in working-class East London rewrote leases so apartments would be temporarily vacated in favor of cash-rich tourists. And the logo is an incomprehensible mishmash of jagged shapes.

The International Olympic Committee has also taken heat for declining to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Palestinian jihadists' murder of 11 Israeli athletes and coaches at the 1972 Munich Games. Across the pond, Washington saw a rare moment of bipartisanship in politicians' outrage that American Olympians' garb was made in China. "I think they should take all the uniforms, put them in a big pile, and burn them," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, apparently not yet taken with the Olympic spirit.

More broadly, the media again remind us of how commercialism and the threat of terrorism have spoiled the world's preeminent athletic event. Columnists lament the passing of a purer age, when doctors trained in their spare time -- *Chariots of Fire* is enjoying a rebirth -- and competition was about more than endorsement contracts. These Cassandras habitually predict the demise of the Olympics as modern society wreaks havoc on the sacrosanct traditions of the ancients.

But this idea that the Games should promote a kinder, gentler world reflects sentimentalized history. Since the end of the Cold War, the Olympics have thrown off the corrosive chains of ideology to revert to the values of the original Games, among which were the dominance of the personal over the national, the economic over the political, and the athletic over larger concerns of the state.

The standard view of the Greek Olympics as a halcyon festival bringing amateur sportsmen together in the name of peace and brotherhood is a remnant of 19th-century Romanticism that was institutionalized by aristocrats like modern Games founder Pierre de Coubertin. Adolf Hitler, who staged the 1936 Berlin Games as a testament to the German people, was taken in by a similar vision of nationalism via physical perfection.

The ancient reality could not have been further from these modern misconceptions, as Greek armies routinely violated the Olympic truce, sometimes battling in the Olympic sanctuary itself. Individual achievement was valued much more than participation, and wealth superceded ideology.

Pindar, the lyric poet whose odes tell us much of what we know about the early Olympians, wrote at the behest and patronage of wealthy athletes, who sought personal glory rather than the vindication of their city-state and its political system. The great champion Alcibiades used his prestige to gain fame and riches, often at the expense of "national interest."

The modern Games, in allowing politics to overshadow sports, broke with their predecessors. After the Munich tragedy, the 1976 Montreal event left a trail of debt that Quebec taxpayers only recently paid off -- and for which British taxpayers now brace themselves -- and saw the first of a series of boycotts. The Olympics had lost their ancient bearings.

Though nobody knew it at the time, the 1988 Seoul Olympics were a watershed. These Games were the first to be free from major political turmoil since Tokyo in 1964. More importantly, they represented the last Olympiad of the Cold War, with the Berlin Wall falling the next year, followed by the dissolution of the Evil Empire and German reunification.

The 20th Century took us through almost continual political upheaval, most of it defined by the bipolar Cold War mentality and the specter of nuclear Armageddon. With that edifice of pretension eroded, the Games were free to become athletic spectacles again.

Under today's conditions of globalization -- cultural homogenization, economic interdependence, decline of the nation-state even with respect to our enemies in war -- international athletic competition assumes an ever-more parallel course to that of the world at large. As with all sporting events, the Olympics of the past two decades have become exponentially more entertainment-oriented. Even the proliferation of crass commercialism is a positive step because it returns the Olympics to the role they fulfill best: providing a forum for the globe's finest athletes to show the rest of us a good time.

The Olympics now bring us the absolute best, without regard to color, creed, contract, or the Iron Curtain. The nature of the Olympic "movement," meanwhile, has returned to the entertainment, ritual, and indeed athletic value of the original Games. Gone is the sham of amateurism, as athletes are once more individuals, not tools of the state.

Tradition meet meritocracy; Coubertin meet Milton Friedman. Counter the conventional narrative, the symbiotic relationship between sports and society has reverted to its original, proper status under the ancient Greeks.

Returning to 2012, the various London "scandals" are mere sound and fury compared to the Cold War-era misuse of sports for political purposes -- or, more prosaically, the lack of snow at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games. Even the tiff over foreign-made blazers betrays a lack of understanding about international trade. After all, the very reason consumers don't have to be polo-playing scions to afford the iconic wares of Ralph Lauren -- which is outfitting the U.S. team at no cost to taxpayers -- is because the company seeks out low-cost manufacturing.

The grandees of both the I.O.C. and Congress peddle utopian myths when they should be recognizing that the Olympics are no more or less than the very best the sports world has to offer.