



THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

Why an Olympics Boycott Won't Work

Doug Bandow

April 10, 2021

Instead, look to the future and use the winter games against China.

The Biden administration was, or was not, depending on whom you talk to, discussing a 2022 Olympics boycott with allies and friends. That's all to the good. If the administration can't make up its mind about whether it was even considering the idea, it certainly shouldn't lead a campaign against the international competition.

A few days ago, State Department Press Spokesman Ned Price said a boycott was an option and "something that we certainly wish to discuss" with other nations. Indeed, "discussions are underway" about policy toward Beijing, he added. But then White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki announced, "Our position on the 2022 Olympics has not changed. We have not discussed and are not discussing any joint boycott with allies and partners."

After nearly three months in office, the Biden team apparently doesn't know its policy toward the People's Republic of China. Ironically, in this case administration blundering might be helpful. A boycott would not likely succeed. A botched boycott would be a terrible embarrassment.

The PRC is horrible on human rights. Just about everything is bad. The early post-revolution years were horrendous: tens of millions of people died during Maoist rule. The situation improved after Mao's death, but Xi Jinping, both Chinese Communist Party general secretary and China's president, appears to be trying to become the new Mao.

Unsurprisingly, then, human rights have deteriorated across the board. A once somewhat relaxed attitude toward religious faith and practice has been replaced by vicious persecution. Hong Kong has lost its unique status and in terms of political freedom is just any other Chinese city. Civil liberties are likely to disappear next.

And there is the mass incarceration of Muslim Uyghurs in reeducation camps. The Trump administration declared this to be genocide — not in the common understanding, of mass murder, but in the more rarified but still terrible sense of destroying a culture. Most boycott advocates focus on the Uyghurs. For instance, Rep. Tom Malinowski contended that "If you're going to accuse a government of genocide, you can't then have an Olympics in that country as if it's a normal place."

Should such a nation be allowed to host an Olympic competition?

In fact, the PRC already has: the summer games back in 2008. Even then China's human rights record was bad, though not nearly down to today's levels. Xi did not take over leadership of the CCP until four years later. Even so, journalist Nithin Coca blamed worsening repression on the world's failure to act in 2008: "The Beijing games turned out to be a watershed moment for Tibetans and Uighurs, but in the wrong way. They sent a clear signal — China had a free pass to oppress its minorities."

Actually, that free pass was evident throughout the PRC's history. There was never a moment when human rights were not being violated, the West was prepared to take extreme action in response, and the regime would have changed course even under greater pressure. Repression always was the essence of CCP rule. And especially now, after Beijing watched the Soviet Union's Communist Party introduce humanity into its rule, ensuring that it would no longer rule.

But what about 2022?

As a practical matter, it's too late to shift the games, requiring someone to arrange financing and construct facilities in so short a time. Could a former host be asked to step in? South Korea handled the games in 2018. But it has refused to even criticize China on Hong Kong and suffered substantial Chinese commercial retaliation after joining the THAAD missile defense system. Seoul certainly won't steal away the PRC's Olympics show, putting itself on Beijing's forever enemies' list. Four years before was Russia — another human rights abuser, so that wouldn't do! Before that was Canada, but the facilities would be a dozen years old and the dislocations would be enormous. Anyway, while most Canadians might like payback given the PRC's recent behavior, that doesn't seem to be Justin Trudeau's way.

If the games can't be moved, then how about a boycott? Advocates should recognize that the PRC will not change its policies even if America and some number of other nations stay home. Regime preservation is Beijing's most important objective, and the worsening repression is intended to buttress the system. China will pay a very high price to maintain control.

Moreover, the regime cannot afford to back down in full view of the world. To the contrary, the Xi government would do its best to face down any criticism. Public surrender would trigger popular antagonism and private CCP criticism that could cost Xi his job. Perceived weakness also would encourage new and fiercer foreign criticism and punishment.

Some in the West, desperate to believe in an eventual liberal, democratic China, imagine that young Chinese would join with America. Not likely. While college students I have met don't like censorship and controls, they are nationalists proud of their country and not interested in being lectured by Washington.

The U.S. also might find itself leading a parade of one. Most proposals for boycotts, including against Nazi Germany in 1936, came to little. Only two instances had much effect. In 1980, Washington led 65 other nations out of the games scheduled for Moscow to protest the invasion of Afghanistan. Four years later, the Soviet Union retaliated with a boycott against the Los Angeles games joined by 13 of its satellites and allies. Neither episode achieved anything practical.

An effort against China would not be nearly as successful. The Cold War united the West. The PRC is far different from the Soviet Union. Beijing has lost friends with its "Wolf Warrior"

diplomacy and offensive conduct, but few countries are willing to become enemies of a still-rising economic power that offers so much more than force.

Not Italy or Germany. Maybe the United Kingdom. But not France or Spain. Not Southeast Asia. No way South Korea. Not likely Japan. And on it would go. America's word no longer is law. When the Trump administration attempted to convince the Security Council to let it pretend that it never left the Iran nuclear accord and thus could trigger sanctions snapback against Tehran, it received the vote only of the Dominican Republic, a small country in America's backyard.

It is possible that no one would join America in an Olympics boycott. The president of the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, Jörg Wuttke, told the Washington Post: "I've spoken with European ambassadors and friends here, and the appetite to take on China with a boycott is zero." A feeble boycott would be more embarrassing than threatening.

This suggests the importance of devising a more practical strategy.

First, push for a debate today over requiring the International Olympic Committee to take human rights into account before approving hosts tomorrow. Contests are assigned through 2028. So look to the future. Then there would be no need to debate the feasibility of moving such a huge event on short notice. And athletes who trained for years would not be sacrificed at the last minute for no obvious benefit.

But keep the decision out of the U.S. government's control. The Olympic committee is private. Washington should make the case, but not coerce. The Carter administration threatened to enforce the 1980 boycott by denying passports to athletes, a Soviet-style tactic. There is superficial appeal to barring human rights offenders, but the issues raised would be serious. Should politics be part of the process? What would the standards be? (If you claim to be acting on principle, it is best to avoid inconsistent "I know it when I see it" claims.)

This process would highlight the cause of human rights and might give increased hope to the oppressed, laudable objectives. Moreover, a credible threat of refusing to allow oppressive, however defined, governments to hold the Olympics might have some impact at the margin on bad regimes' behavior. No government, however, and certainly not Beijing, would upend its political system for this reason. The main effect probably would be to encourage offending governments to be slightly more discreet and hire slightly more expensive PR firms.

And there would be downsides — further politicizing sports and perhaps driving a substantial number of countries out of the Olympic process altogether. One could even imagine development of a counter-game, though none could compare to the Olympics and no one other than China or Russia could easily afford to host them.

Even if initially successful, the effort to implement such a policy might end up being refought every time an Olympics was assigned. The Olympic Committee might approve a policy in theory but never apply it in practice. Such battles would be costly to America's relations with the PRC, whether or not successful in blocking future bids. And Washington should not begin such a fight without a strong likelihood of winning, since defeat would be a huge propaganda loss.

Second, as for the immediate concern about 2022, consider what to do about next year's games. There should be no heads of state, heads of government, or other top officials in the audience.

The message should be consistent: they stand by the Chinese people, while expecting Beijing to live up to its responsibilities to everyone in the PRC.

Celebrities — an eclectic category whose members trend woke-ish — should be encouraged not to go either. Westerners who profess to possess a social conscience should not add glitter to the proceedings. Again, it would help if their message were consistent, with attention not to themselves but to the oppressed.

This might not be as tough as some might think. Tibet long has been a cause célèbre on the left, promoted by Richard Gere, among others. Moreover, the Left, which trends strong in Hollywood, among the literati, in artists' studios, among academic superstars, and more, tends to express greater concern over attacks on Muslims, like the Uyghurs, than persecution of Christians.

Also targeted should be Olympics sponsors. An effort should be organized to encourage companies to drop out of the program, eschew ads with their sponsorship appended, and instead feature notes that they dropped their support because of the PRC's mistreatment of its own people. The best message, attuned to the nationalistic young, would be one of regret and sadness: China's escape from weakness and poverty, which characterized the nation just decades ago, should be cause for celebration. That is why the world is calling forth China's better angels — both as a country and a civilization.

Finally, athletes and attendees should be encouraged to find creative ways to draw attention to the plight of the oppressed. Obviously, care should be exercised since there is no guaranteed get-out-of-jail card for the PRC. But participants could mention the controversy in news interviews and cite human rights in blogs, on Instagram, through Twitter, and more. They all should be encouraged to use VPNs to break through the Great Firewall. And visitors should engage the Chinese as people, not a cause, forging relationships and expressing concerns.

In none of this should Washington take the lead. Official U.S. involvement would scare off some other governments, which do not want to be seen as taking sides in a growing U.S.–Sino battle. Last year other industrialized states wouldn't even sign on to the Trump administration's COVID-19 attacks on Beijing. And Washington's humanitarian claims are tainted by everything from destroying Iraq, resulting in the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, to ignoring grotesque human rights violations by friendly regimes, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. Better criticism of China come from the human rights community, religious organizations, nations targeted by Beijing, advocates of business social responsibility, and more.

Ultimately, three considerations should be paramount. The interests of those who would be hurt by a boycott, namely the athletes and others involved in the games, should be treated seriously. Ivory-tower enthusiasts too easily dismiss often heavy costs incurred by others. Doing so is particularly wrong-headed if the benefits are at best limited and speculative, as in this case.

The purpose of acting is to help oppressed Chinese, not feed Westerners' moral vanity. Good intentions are not enough. Attacks on the PRC that lead the regime to tighten internal security, which already costs more than military defense, would be counterproductive. Thus, tactics should be adjusted to reflect their impact on the people suffering under Xi's misrule.

It also is critical to play the long game. The best hope for change is generational, especially with those born in the 1990s who grew up in a radically different world with increased opportunities.

Many want change, but few respond well to attacks on their country. A message that includes respect for China and recognition of Washington's shortcomings is essential. The American people rather than their government should speak as friends.

The PRC poses today's greatest international challenge to the United States. There is no panacea, certainly nothing to do with the Olympics. Next year's games won't be moved. Few if any other governments would back a boycott. Instead, those concerned with human rights should consider how to use the 2022 competition to highlight their concerns while pushing reforms for the future.