

Sarantakes, Nicholas Evan. *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xvi + 340 pp. \$28.99 (paper). ISBN 978-0-521-17666-8.

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes offers a scathing, at times sarcastic, account of President Jimmy Carter's decisions, in reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, to boycott the Moscow Olympics and to try to persuade international sports authorities to cancel or move the Games. Sarantakes's documentation of the confusion in the White House is truly impressive. For me this book brought back sharp memories. In the middle of January 1980, I traveled to Moscow to work in the Soviet Academy of Sciences as a part of the American-Soviet cultural exchange. The United States was bubbling with anti-Soviet feelings, and we then sat in Moscow under the threat of being called home at any time.

Readers of this journal presumably would be especially interested in the author's description of Soviet policy. My own thoughts here differ from Sarantakes. Although he extensively quotes Soviet commentary on the White House's confusion, he pays little attention to details of Soviet foreign policy. Up to 1980, Soviet sports commentators had insisted that anyone who wanted to deny that politics were an important part of international sports was either confused or lying. Now in 1980, those same commentators argued for "sport vne politiki" a position that Sarantakes apparently approves of (see his comment on "keeping the Olympics out of politics," p. 84). In my view, there is no separating politics from the Games: The Olympics are *real* "reality TV," the Games are Big Business and Show Biz, and they involve great sums of money—people care, and where people care about money there is politics, rampant politics.

As I recall the month of January 1980, I would put more emphasis on the Carter administration's frustration and anger at its own inability to deal with the Iranian government's holding of American diplomats hostage in Teheran. In February, while Sarantakes stresses the U.S. hockey victory in Lake Placid as a significant step in the erosion of Carter's boycott campaign, I would say more about the International Olympic Committee's complaints about conditions in Lake Placid, especially the snow. (Soviets kept asking me why the Americans were housing Soviet athletes "in a prison.") There are some odd shortcomings in the book. I was surprised at first looking at the index, not to find Thomas Watson, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, or Eric Heiden, the U.S. speedskating star in Lake Placid, although they are in the text (pp. 83, 135). They both had interesting roles in the drama. Watson worked on the front line of Soviet-American relations; in latter January he told a group of us in Moscow that he had come as "a friendship ambassador, but now ..." Heiden had publicly opposed the boycott—a Moscow newspaper declared he was considering asylum in Norway (a false report). The Soviets invited him to the Games in Moscow, but he did not go.

These comments, however, deal with the fringes of Sarantakes's account, which in its core constitutes a devastating and convincing criticism of disorganization and ignorance within the Carter administration. (At the same time, an account more sympathetic to the Carter administration's aims might put more stress on the vanity and egocentric vision of Olympic officials.) The boycott could not stop the Soviet move into Afghanistan, and the American government had to settle for clouding the Soviets' image by interfering with the Moscow Games. The administration displayed monumental ignorance of Olympic history, traditions, and politics.

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