

Book Reviews

Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott and the Cold War, by Nicholas Sarantakes (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011). 340pp. Reviewed by Gordon MacDonald, The University of Western Ontario.

In 1974, when the members of the International Olympic Committee selected the city of Moscow over the city of Los Angeles to be host of the 1980 Olympic Games, they were keenly aware of the political risks involved in choosing one of the two opposing superpowers for this honour. However, in the intervening years, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union remained stable and, despite occasional American murmurs about not competing in Moscow, preparations for the Games continued apace as nations around the world made their plans to travel to the 1980 summer Olympic Games. Unfortunately, the worlds of superpower politics and international sport collided at the end of 1979 when the Soviet Union moved large numbers of its troops into Afghanistan. The American reaction was swift and intense with President Jimmy Carter deciding to use as many non-military options as possible to punish the Soviets. The most visible method quickly became a proposed boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games. Nicholas Sarantakes' *Dropping the Torch* is an engaging history of the struggles faced by President Jimmy Carter's White House to use the Games as a tool of foreign policy. This included attempts to convince the United States Olympic Committee, as well as the national Olympic committees of American allies, not to attend, the IOC to postpone or move the Games, and governments or international sport organizations to organize alternative competitions. Though a number of nations did eventually join the United States in boycotting the 1980 Games, Sarantakes argues that, overall, the efforts were a failure on the part of the White House administration and lays much of the blame with President Carter.

Before dealing with Carter and the boycott, Sarantakes provides several chapters of contextual material including a whirlwind tour through a number of the political issues that beset the Olympics in the 20th century. More importantly, he delves into the activities of the White House during Los Angeles' unsuccessful bids to host the 1976 and 1980 Olympic Games. Here he reveals that ignorance of the world of international sports was not solely a feature of the Carter administration, showing how, previously, the Richard Nixon White House fumbled its way through relations with sport organizations during the bidding processes that ultimately gave the Games of 1976 to Montreal and 1980 to Moscow. Sarantakes also takes the time to provide personal background information on the boycott principals, President Carter and IOC President Lord Killanin, though as the narrative unfolds it becomes apparent that the latter played a less important role in the drama than the former.

As additional background material, Sarantakes covers the Soviet Union's movement of troops into Afghanistan and looks into their accounts as to why they believed it to be justified. He also shows massive disconnect between the Soviet Union and the USA by recounting how the USA was totally surprised by the vehemence of the Soviet Union's reaction to the military activities. It would have been nice to have more detail on this disconnect and a little less about the actual military operations in Afghanistan. (For example, I don't think the description of the firefight for the Presidential palace in Kabul is critical to the narrative.)

With the preliminaries covered, Sarantakes turns to the details of the White House campaign to promote a boycott of the Games. Here his archival work provides great insights into the inner workings of the White House as the various parties struggled to understand why the sporting world did not respond quickly and positively to the President's pronouncement that the United States should not participate in Moscow unless the Soviet army departed Afghanistan. The paper trail left behind by White House staffers, high-ranking advisors, and the President himself reveal their ignorance of the organizations involved in the Olympic Games both within the United States and abroad. Despite the generally strong support of the American people and media, Sarantakes demonstrates ably the mis-steps that the administration made during the months that passed between the first talk of a boycott and the Games. Indeed, Sarantakes' sources reveal over and over again the lack of knowledge of the Olympic system of nearly everyone outside the world of international sport. Conversely, the conflict also reveals again the steadfast refusal of Olympic sports officials to acknowledge that the quadrennial gathering of elite athletes is constructed in large part by choosing the participants based upon their affiliation with a political unit. Rather, they continued to maintain the mantra that sport and politics should be kept separate.

As the battle to convince the United States Olympic Committee and other national Olympic committee—via primarily political rather than sporting channels—continued into the spring of 1980, it became apparent that it was not likely that as many countries would boycott as the Carter administration had initially hoped. Despite the support of the political leaders in allied nations (the UK and Australia in particular), several national Olympic committees decided to attend in any case. Sarantakes takes the time to relate the intense struggles between political and sport leaders in these and several other countries as to the correct course of action. In the end, a significant number of countries did not attend the Games, though a significant number also did participate. The boycott certainly failed to convince the Soviet leadership to abandon Afghanistan—though it is not likely that many boycott supporters thought for very long that it would. Equally, the

Games were certainly not destroyed. However, the Soviets were undoubtedly stung by the Americans' absence—in terms of Olympic competitors, in most sports each was the other's greatest adversary. Elite athletes always want to test themselves against their greatest opponents. Indeed, being the stage for competitions amongst the best athletes in the world is one of the Olympic brand's great attractions, both for the athletes and the consumers who follow them. An absence of the sort caused by the 1980 boycott cannot help but be noticed, just as it was in Los Angeles four years later.

Beyond the issue of the boycott, the volume provides an interesting exposition of the exercise of power in the White House under President Carter. Sarantakes falls within a camp of historians who have strong negative opinions on the workings of the Carter administration and of President Carter personally. His assessment of Carter's presidential style is that it was micro-management personified and that the differing opinions of two of his key advisors, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance, led to too much court politics. He argues that the competition between the two advisors led too often to the President being told what he wanted to hear rather than what he needed to hear.

In terms of its physical composition, the volume contains extensive endnotes and lists of references, archives, other sources, as well as a comprehensive index. However, emanating as it does from a distinguished university press, the volume contains an unusual number of spelling errors of peoples' names. In nearly every chapter are examples of persons' names being spelled in at least two different ways—and this is in addition to the expected variations in spellings found in the quotes from primary sources. For example, surely the President's name should not come out as 'Cater' on even the one occasion that it does. This problem is one of text editing that should have been caught, even in the final stages of production. Despite these editorial issues, this volume is very well-researched and makes great use of available archival materials. Those from the presidential archives are the most valuable because they provide an intimate portrait of how key individuals thought about the events as they were unfolding. In contrast, the IOC materials are primarily official minutes of meetings and memoirs of the key individuals, both of which tend to provide a more sanitized version of the events. Nonetheless, *Dropping the Torch* will certainly stand as a major contribution to our understanding of the development of the American boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games.

