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# Avery Brundage and American Nationalism at the Olympic Games

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In 1894, the United States was the dominant political power on the North American continent. It was unique among the nations of the world as it was composed of a diverse religious and racial population. Founded as a democratic experiment by, and for, Europeans, it nevertheless included substantial numbers of African and Asian immigrants. Despite its international composition and republican form of government, it was intensely nationalistic. Most of its immigrants dropped their native citizenship and language as soon as possible after their arrival. The concept of a Zion for the "chosen people", or an independent "church directly administered by God" has flourished in America since 1620. The national holiday on the Fourth of July celebrated independence from European control. From 1820 to 1900, the young nation lent its military and diplomatic support to "liberation" movements on the American continents. The national government was strengthened by a civil war of unification in 1860-65. Since 1877, improved global communications and marketing systems, missionaries, world wars, new immigrant groups, and advances in scientific knowledge have stimulated interest in internationalism. Since 1946, the United States has provided a home for the United Nations Organization in New York City. At the same time, powerful political and economic forces have supported a chauvinistic and militaristic nationalism that sought to assert and protect its global hegemony over the "Free World."

Nationalism is devotion to, or advocacy of, national interests, such as unity and independence. Zealous adherence to nationalism is similar to patriotism. It has often been evidenced by speeches, signs, symbols, and songs, e.g. "give me liberty or give me death", "love it or leave it," "every heart beats true 'neath the red, white and blue" and "the home of the brave and the free." Only a few quotations strike the note of Samuel Johnson's remark that "patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." In relation to the Olympics, nationalism often appears as politicization, or bringing international sports within the sphere of politics.

The United State of America has participated in twenty-three of the twenty-four modern Olympiads. Its athletes have won thousands of medals - gold, silver, and bronze. It has hosted the summer Olympic games on four occasions, the winter games on four also. Nine of the first fourteen Olympiads were held in European capitals. Seven of the eleven Olympiads not held in the capital cities were held in North American and Australia. More than twenty Americans have served on the International Olympic Committee since 1894. In the I.O.C.'s first eighty years, only two of its seventy-five meetings were held in the United States. Avery Brundage was the only American who served as I.O.C. president. Pierre de Coubertin, Brundage, and Juan Antonio Samaranch presided over the I.O.C. for sixty-eight of its first 104 years and were primary influences in the development of the Olympic movement.

For de Coubertin, internationalism was based on "the great need for peace and brotherhood." The international composition of the I.O.C. would balance the national interests of the national Olympic committees. The structure of the Olympic games was based on the "nation-state." Politicians perceived the Olympics as "a means of reinforcing national identity" and spectators experienced a "vicarious identification" with the triumph of a national team. Olympic leaders have also cited the amount of national participation as an indication of their success. Forty-nine nations participated in the Berlin games of 1936. The number of "nations" rose to 127 in 1972 and, in 1992, there were 169 national Olympic committees.<sup>1</sup>

State celebrations of Olympic victories are rooted in Greek history. National flag raisings began with the first modern Olympics in 1896. A symbol of American nationalism, the U.S.S. San Francisco, was moored in harbor at Piraeus during the games. The 1904 St. Louis Olympics were bathed in nationalism. In 1908, the Irish-American nationalism of James Sullivan collided with Lord Desborough's British nationalism in London. In 1912, American spectators in Stockholm waved flags and fired firearms to celebrate Olympic victories and the Fourth of July.<sup>2</sup>

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Most American Olympic leaders had some athletic experience in their youth and then proceeded to careers that did not involve competitive sports, e.g. Professor William M. Sloane, industrialist Robert Thompson, publisher James Sullivan, lawyer Gus Kirby, soldier Douglas MacArthur, diplomat Charles Sherrill, and contractor Avery Brundage. Several early Olympic leaders had ties to New York's Irish community during a period in which Ireland struggled for independence. In 1932, American Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage proudly reported "a steady succession of United States victories," i.e. forty-one of the 125 gold medals. At the opening ceremonies, a 250-piece band played the national anthem of each of the thirty-seven nations. Americans were absent in I.O.C. leadership positions in the late twentieth century. Military men had the longest tenures with the United States Olympic Committee. Shorter terms were served by a missappropriator of funds and a forger.<sup>3</sup>

In 1928, Major General Douglas MacArthur articulated the bond between nationalism and Olympic sports. "'Athletic America' is a telling phrase. It is talismanic. It suggests health and happiness. It arouses national pride and kindles anew the national spirit." "Nothing is more synonymous of our national success than is our national success in athletics. If I were required to indicate today that element of American life which is most characteristic of our nationality, my finger would unerringly point to our athletics escutcheon."<sup>4</sup>

Conceived as an educational force to promote physical fitness and international understanding, the Olympic movement has become the promoter of a major electronic entertainment event. The spectacular pageantry provided for an entry march of the nations, an appearance by a political leader of the host nation, tabulated medal standings for national teams, special television coverage for national markets, and the national anthem and flag raising at the medals ceremonies. Olympic victors have added their own nationalistic celebrations by circling the track or crossing the ring while waving American flags.

On October 14, 1952, in his first address to the I.O.C., Brundage gave five proposals to strengthen the Olympic Movement. The fifth was to "keep a happy balance between justifiable national pride and the use of sport for national aggrandizement." While he did not define "justifiable pride," "national aggrandizement," and "happy balance" for his I.O.C. audience, he reported to the U.S. Olympic Association that the United States "must keep a happy balance between justifiable national pride and the use of sport for aggrandizement" and that "if the Olympic Games as a result of unbridled chauvinism degenerate into contests between the hired gladiators of the large nations in an attempt to build national prestige or to prove that one system of government is better than another, the Games will lose all their purpose." He recalled that the I.O.C. had suspected that German Nazis would "attempt to use the (1936) Games for national aggrandizement" and had halted political manipulation in games where "four Negro youths...won six world championships in a land where racial intolerance was being widely preached."<sup>5</sup>

The erstwhile American isolationist complimented his Swiss hosts for keeping their independence by minding their "own business and not meddling in other people's affairs." At the February 13, 1960 I.O.C. meeting, he again mentioned the legitimacy of "national pride" and problems with "political infringements." He asked for a study of "the desirability of eliminating the use of national flags and hymns" and said that "it might be better to use a fanfare of trumpets instead of national hymns in the victory ceremonies." His view contrasted with the more popular position of Philip Noel-Baker that "the Victory Ceremonies in the Olympic Games are a supreme example of this marriage of national and international patriotism and pride." Brundage also suggested that when the Olympic flag was raised at the opening of the games, "perhaps all national flags should be lowered. Contestants in the Olympic Games should come simply as sportsmen and not as representatives of a country." Such a procedure would have dampened the enthusiasm of the hosts at the Berlin Games in 1936 and the American Olympic Committee's fund raisers. In 1961, Brundage noted that "political interference" was "difficult, if not impossible, to combat at a local level" and that, only by working together, could the I.O.C., the International Federations, and the national Olympic committees enforce Olympic regulations. This position was stated on March 26, 1962 in Circular Letter 194. In 1962, when he commended de Coubertin's vision of national programs of "physical training and competitive sport," he did not note the irony that governments used such programs for purposes of nationalistic propaganda, as much as for the benefits of public health and welfare.<sup>6</sup>

Brundage also condemned subsidized national programs for the production of elite sports competitors. He objected to scoring tables that showed contests between nations, rather than individuals. He noted that large countries which won most of the medals were much lower in the rankings on a per capita basis. In 1964, he observed that the I.O.C. and the federations had to devote more time to combatting the intrusion of politics into sport. In 1950, the United States congress incorporated the United States Olympic Association and gave it exclusive rights to Olympic symbols.<sup>7</sup>

In 1978, Congress passed the American Amateur Sports Act, which extended governmental legislative and financial control over the United States Olympic Committee. The act was accompanied by a federal grant of thirty million dollars "to help underwrite the reorganization of amateur sports" and provide "national training centers." Two years later, the United States government boycotted the Moscow Olympics to protest a Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, and sent an additional ten million dollars to the U.S.O.C.. When international prestige and political demands were at stake, Congress acted promptly. A zealous concern for the protection of national political and economic interests still governs American foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> It has been noted that the United States is "the financial engine of the Olympic Movement." By 1908, commercial advertising was a factor in the Olympic Games. On the 1932 Coca Cola Olympic schedule wheel card, the red, white, and blue American shield obscures five small white rings,

three of which are identified as "citius", "altius," and "fortius." "Sam" the red, white, and blue Olympic eagle, the national bird, was the official mascot of the 1984 Disney games.<sup>9</sup>

Since the advent of large television markets in 1968, the United States has led in corporate sponsorship, or financial support, of the Olympic movement. Extensive media coverage brought increased revenues, but also attracted protestors and terrorists. After Mexico City in 1968 and Munich in 1972, massive increases in security forces were used to control political demonstrations. Nationalism and militarist repression were major causes of protests at the Olympics. The ceremonial productions at the Olympic games have limited the nationalistic demonstrations that have occurred at some World Cup contests.

Nationalistic feelings peaked in team sports. Team members chosen by a national committee to participate in Olympic tournaments were recognized as representatives of the nation. American nationalism reached a fever pitch in the wake of two Cold War contests with the U.S.S.R. involving a basketball defeat in 1972 and a hockey victory in 1980. The American "Dream Team" of professional basketball players evoked worldwide attention at Barcelona in 1992.<sup>10</sup>

The Los Angeles Olympics of 1984 represent a breakthrough for both American nationalism and commercialization. Ronald Reagan, Juan Samaranch, Cary Grant, and Steven Spielberg welcomed about 7,700 athletes from 142 countries. Producer of Ceremonies David Wolper designed a "dazzling and spectacular show" suitable for the "entertainment capital of the world." Following the opening fanfares and songs, President Ronald Reagan was welcomed with "Hail to the Chief" and a bald eagle entered during a choral rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner." A program of American popular music was followed by the entrance of the Olympic flag, the release of the pigeons, and the lighting of the Olympic flame. The national flags of participating nations were grouped at the rostrum for the administration of the Olympic oath. David Walker from the University of Southern California football band and the Disney Studios was the Director of Ceremonies. The Los Angeles games were the "first Olympics financed almost entirely through private enterprise." Corporate sponsors provided 100 million dollars. The 326-page *Official Souvenir Program* featured 176 pages of advertisements. Buick, the official automobile, donated \$100 for every car sold before the games. Atlantic Richfield built eight new tracks in the Los Angeles area. President Reagan welcomed the Olympic participants and hoped that the games would "promote a greater understanding of the world's cultures."<sup>11</sup>

In a broader context, American support for internationalism and the Olympics has been dwarfed by its investments in financial, marketing, and military aid based on national interests. Public opinion polls suggested that Americans would wage war to protect "their" foreign oil supplies. These polls showed that Americans were still "very patriotic" - 89% in 1986 - and that they believed that the Olympics improve international relations - 55% in 1998. Public service advertising and government appropriations promoted strident nationalism. Altruistic internationalism was left to religious bodies and voluntary programs, such as the Peace Corps.<sup>12</sup>

"Proud Sponsors" and "USA" chanters, the political usage of boycotts, sycophantic journalism beholden to sponsors and ratings, and bureaucracies dependent on legislative appropriations have all contributed to the popular glorification of nationalism in the Olympic games. These zealous adherents to nationalism stimulated a huge media market for advertising, controversy, superficiality, and violence. The Olympic Movement had indeed spread throughout the world, but "peace and brotherhood" won the bronze, and profits and patriotism won the gold.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

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