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Beijing Olympics Boycott: A Wake-Up Call

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Given China's objectionable behavior in recent years—in human rights, trade, nuclear proliferation, aid to Iran's Revolutionary Guards, support for genocidal regimes in Sudan and vicious dictatorships in Burma and North Korea—it is no wonder that dozens of frustrated members of the U.S. House of Representatives are calling for an American boycott of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Realistically, a U.S. boycott of the Beijing Olympics is not feasible. However, the advent of a new Olympic year is certainly an appropriate time for the Administration and Congress to call attention to the increasingly repressive character of the Chinese regime.

Rising Frustration with China. In August 2001, a skeptical Heritage Foundation cautiously welcomed the award of the 2008 Olympic Games venue to Beijing as an opportunity to “compel Beijing to adopt true Olympic values.” In the intervening years, China has disappointed even modest hopes for change and reform. More disappointing still has been the Administration's and Congress's reaction to Beijing's disregard of human rights in China and abroad.

Earlier this month, eight prominent Republicans in Congress introduced House Resolution 610, calling for a boycott of the games. They elicited a great deal of sympathy from those in the policy community who are concerned about China's dismal record on human rights. Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA) introduced her own resolution that expressed similar concerns from the Democratic side of the aisle, specifically delineating

China's economic and military support for Sudan's genocidal regime.

The boycott resolutions make an important statement, but they do not address the real problem. Members of Congress might simply vote for one version or the other, dust off their hands, and move on to the next order of business. Not only are House resolutions non-binding, but also they are generally seen on Capitol Hill as adequate substitutions for action that require no follow-up.

Parallels with 1936. The tragedy of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin was not that the free world participated but that nobody used the limelight of the Games to make an issue of Germany's deepening persecutions of Jews, its remilitarization, its occupation of the Rhineland, or its threats against Austria as it resisted being labeled “part of the German nation.”

The free European countries, as well as the United States, not only failed to use the 1936 Games as a bully pulpit from which to shame Germany's Nazi leaders; they actually downplayed German violence, threats, and excesses. A broad international boycott certainly would have been preferable to the fawning over Germany that took place.

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Similarly, the free world may use the Beijing Olympics as another stage on which to fawn over China's new wealth and power. This is already happening, as U.S. businesses try to curry favor with the Beijing regime and even U.S. officials downplay China's emergence as a ruthless superpower.

America's "China Lobby." *The Washington Post* recently reported that President George W. Bush's ambassador in Beijing "threw a fit" when he heard of the President's plans to meet with Chinese Christian dissidents in May 2006.¹ He called the meeting "inappropriate" and warned it would damage relations with the Beijing regime. This year, columnist Robert Novak reported almost a month after the fact that President Bush met secretly in the White House with the Catholic bishop of Hong Kong, Joseph Cardinal Zen, a figure reviled by Beijing. According to Novak, the U.S. ambassador in Beijing "weighed in against a Bush-Zen meeting."²

The image of the President of the United States meeting in secret with Chinese religious dissidents and Catholic cardinals because the State Department fears offending the Chinese Communist regime gives the impression that these meetings had something to hide. In the same way, both President Bush and President Clinton felt obliged to keep their meetings with the Tibetan religious leader, the Dalai Lama—a Nobel peace prize laureate—low-key for fear of offending Beijing.

President Ronald Reagan's recently published diary revealed his deep suspicions about a "China lobby" in his State Department that cared more about smooth relations with the Chinese Communists than about the legitimacy of America's commitment to human rights. Some current State officials are uncomfortable with the easygoing attitude toward China. The following is from a speech given by Ambassador Jay Lefkowitz to a Heritage Foundation audience in April:

As the world's attention turns to China for the 2008 Olympics, does anyone seriously believe a massive, abused, and imperiled refugee population will go unnoticed? I certainly hope not, and this is an area where the international media can play a big role of exposing what's going on. Hopefully there will be human interest stories that will spotlight the oppression and repression of the North Korean people—both in North Korea and indeed, even those who are fortunate enough to escape, but then languish in hiding in northeastern China. This will be an enduring black mark not only for North Korea, but for China too—unless China takes action.³

Boycott Call Catches Beijing's Attention. The "Boycott Beijing" campaign caught fire when Hollywood actress-turned-activist Mia Farrow championed the theme in newspaper ads in the spring of 2007. The ads called on China to cease its weapons and financial support for Sudanese genocide. China reacted to mounting pressure by dispatching a "peace envoy" to the Darfur region, and then claimed to have "urged Khartoum to be flexible on a peace plan." In reality, China's "peace envoy" returned to Beijing to report that "everything is basically stable." China's state media then blamed "Sudanese secessionists and external hostile elements" (read: the United States) for "viciously 'promoting' and publicizing the issue." Instead, said the Chinese media, "the Darfur issue is a pure internal affair of the Sudan."

While China has not exerted any real pressure on Khartoum, Ms. Farrow has done more to get Beijing's attention than all the State Department's polite exhortations put together have done to get Beijing to pressure Khartoum to accept the "hybrid" force with "a predominantly African character" that is now being desultorily assembled by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity. The

1. Peter Baker, "As Democracy Push Falsters, Bush Feels Like a 'Dissident,'" *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2007, p. A01 at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/19/AR2007081901720.html.
2. Robert D. Novak, "A Chinese Cardinal Meets the Real Bush," *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2007, p. A23, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/06/20/AR2007062001869.html.
3. Jay Lefkowitz, "North Korean Human Rights After the Six-Party Talks," Heritage Foundation Lecture No. 1018, April 25, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/hl1018.cfm.

move is seriously inadequate, but it is more than the Chinese regime wanted to do.

This raises the question: If not a boycott, then what? If the Administration and Congress are serious about China's persistent violation of human rights, labor rights, and civil and political rights, along with its myriad other depredations, they should do something more meaningful than pass symbolic, generally ineffectual congressional resolutions.

Conclusion. Both the Administration and Congress must get into the habit of seeing the regime in Beijing for what it is—a Communist dictatorship that suppresses religious, political, and labor freedoms at home and bullies its neighbors. It supports brother dictatorships around the globe, whether they are major or minor perpetrators of genocide, nuclear blackmail, slave labor, and suppression of freedoms.

Boycotting the Olympics would not change any of this. The calls from Congress, however—like Ms. Farrow's effort—do have the welcome effect of focusing attention on the dreadful state of human rights in China and the regime's support for tyranny abroad. American policymakers must use the occasion to call China out on its myriad domestic abuses and irresponsibility abroad and fully enforce related sanctions already on the books.

To do any less than this would be a betrayal of the bargain America made with its own conscience, and would be a lost opportunity of 1936 proportions.

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