

The American Presidency Project

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• Jimmy Carter

Remarks to Representatives of U.S. Teams to the 1980 Summer Olympics

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First of all, it's a real honor for me to be here with all you famous people. I have a great admiration for you and a deep feeling for you in this time of challenge and disappointment.

This is a sad time for all those in our country who are involved in amateur athletics. This past week, as you know, a tragic airline accident occurred in Warsaw, Poland, and 22 members of the U.S. amateur boxing team were killed. It's a tragic occurrence, and our whole Nation was reminded of the value of a human life, and also was reminded of the sacrifice that goes into the training for championship sports.

This team went overseas to do its best. They were full of spirit and full of determination to exhibit their own prowess and achievement, and also to represent their country. And they represented us well. And I personally feel the loss, which I know you all share.

When we are confronted with stark tragedies such as these, we have to stop for a moment and put our own lives and our own principles, our own emotions, our own commitments, back into perspective; to reassess or to kind of inventory what are the most important things in a human life. This is one of those times. And that's why I've asked you to come to the White House—with some degree of trepidation—to listen to Dr. Brzezinski, to consult with Joe Onek,¹ and to meet with me as your President, to discuss a very serious and a very vital matter, one that does directly involve human life, thousands of human lives already lost in Afghanistan, and many more hundreds of thousands of lives that could be lost, unless our Nation is strong enough and is willing to sacrifice, if necessary, to preserve the peace of our country.

¹ Deputy Counsel to the President.

The highest commitment that I have in my official capacity as President is to preserve the security of the United States of America and to keep the peace. Every decision that I make, every action that I take, has to be compatible With that commitment. Ours is a nuclear age. We have a much more serious prospect now even than existed back in 1936 when the Olympics were held in Berlin. It was serious then. In retrospect it's obvious.

I met last week with the Minister President of Bavaria, in Western Germany, who's running for Prime Minister this year—or Chancellor. He said if only the Olympics had not been held in Berlin in 1936 the course of history could have been different. We face a similar prospect now. I'm determined to keep our national interest paramount, even if people that I love and admire, like you, are required to share in disappointment and in personal sacrifice. I don't say that lightly, because my admiration of you and my appreciation of you is very deep and very sincere.

But it is absolutely imperative that we and other nations who believe in freedom and who believe in human rights and who believe in peace let our voices be heard in an absolutely clear way, and not add the imprimatur of approval to the Soviet Union and its government while they have 105,000 heavily armed invading forces in the freedom-loving and innocent and deeply religious country of Afghanistan. Thousands of people's lives have already been lost. Entire villages have been wiped out deliberately by the Soviet invading forces. And as you well know, the people in the Soviet Union don't even know it. They do not even realize that 104 nations in the United Nations condemned the Soviet Union for their invasion and called for their immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan. The people of the Soviet Union don't even know it.

The Olympics are important to the Soviet Union. They have made massive investments in buildings, equipment, propaganda. As has probably already been pointed out to you, they have passed out hundreds of thousands of copies of an official Soviet document saying that the decision of the world community to hold the Olympics in Moscow is an acknowledgement of approval of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union, and proof to the world that the Soviets' policy results in international peace.

I can't say at this moment what other nations will not go to the Summer Olympics in Moscow. Ours will not go. I say that not with any equivocation; the decision has been made. The American people are convinced that we should not go to the Summer Olympics. The Congress has voted overwhelmingly, almost unanimously, which is a very rare thing, that we will not go. And I can tell you that many of our major allies, particularly those democratic countries who believe in freedom, will not go.

I understand how you feel, and I thought about it a lot as we approached this moment, when. I would have to stand here in front of fine young Americans and dedicated coaches, who have labored sometimes for more than 10 years, in every instance for years, to become among the finest athletes in the world, knowing what the Olympics mean to you, to know that you would be disappointed. It's not a pleasant time for me.

You occupy a special place in American life, not because of your talent or your dedication or your training or your commitment or your ability as an athlete, but because for American people, Olympic athletes represent something else. You represent the personification of the highest ideals of our country. You represent a special commitment to the value of a human life, and to the achievement of excellence within an environment of freedom, and a belief in truth and friendship and respect for others, and the elimination of discrimination, and the honoring of human rights, and peace.

Even though many of you may not warrant or deserve that kind of esteem, because you haven't thought so deeply about these subjects, perhaps, the American people think you do, because you are characterized accurately as clean and decent and honest and dedicated.

That's why it's particularly important that you join in with us, not in condemnation, even of the Soviet Union, not in a negative sense at all, but in a positive sense of what's best for our country and best for world peace. There must be a firm, clear voice of caution given to the Soviet Union, not just in admonition and criticism of what they have already done to despoil a small and relatively weak country but to make sure that they don't look upon this as an achievement without serious adverse consequences which can then be followed up with additional aggression along the same lines.

Since the Second World War the Soviets have invaded successfully and have subjugated and taken away the freedom of people in Poland, in Hungary, in Czechoslovakia, in other countries as well, as you know. But for more than 25 years they did not use their massive forces, after the Warsaw Pact was formed, to go into an adjacent country themselves. They used others to fight the battles for them, the Vietnamese and the Cubans, the North Koreans earlier. This was a radical departure from past Soviet policy, to go in themselves, and it cannot go unmet.

I'd like to also point out that you will not be the only ones making a sacrifice. Yours may be the deepest and the most personal to you. I acknowledge that. But the farmers of this country also suffer. Some of you come from farm families. You know how important it is to have stable international markets to sell your products after very doubtful seasons have to be faced and deep debts have to be acquired.

Shortly before the election in Iowa, I declared an embargo and cut off 17 million tons of grain that was going to the Soviet Union. And a lot of people said, "The farmers will condemn you, Mr. President. You'll never be successful in the election, in the farm communities." I won the election by more than a 3-to-1 margin, because the farmers felt that, "Although it's a sacrifice for me, I believe in my country, and in a peaceful way we must send the Soviets a clear message that aggression will not be condoned or excused."

And I'd like to remind you that everything we have done has been not only for the ultimate purpose of peace but has been done with peace. I've got powerful forces available to carry out my command, military forces, the most powerful on Earth, and I did not exercise any military option. We exercised political options by asking the other nations to join in with us at the U.N. to condemn the Soviet Union, and 103 others did it. And we exercised economic options, which I've just described and I need not repeat. And the other thing that we must do is to stand with our allies and friends and freedom-loving people around the world and say, "We will not go to Moscow and participate in the Olympic games in your capital. We call for the moving of the Olympics or the delay of the Olympics for at least a year, until Soviet troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan, or the cancellation of the games, or either we would not participate."

Mr. Onek has been describing to you my commitment to do the best I can to give you Olympic-quality international competition, probably toward the end of August, that will let you participate, representing yourselves, representing our Nation. I am not naive, and I know that there is nothing that I could help to create, even if all other nations on Earth joined with me, that would equal the status of an Olympic gold medal.

In my judgment what we are doing is preserving the principles and the quality of the Olympics, not destroying it. It would suit me fine if we had a permanent Olympic site near the original Olympic game in Olympus in Greece. We've advocated that. We've sent a delegation from the White House, along with Prime Minister Karamanlis of Greece to look at a potential site. That would please me completely. It's going to take a while to do it. But I want to be sure that the principles of the Olympics are preserved, not wasted or destroyed or minimized.

This is obviously a difficult decision for me to make. It's much more difficult on you. I'm not saying it's worse for me.

The last think I would like to say is this: We have many kinds of awards and types of recognition. I'm not an outstanding 10,000-meter runner. [Laughter] [See APP Note below.] But I've been honored by election to the highest elective office in our country, and there will be a difference, not just a subtle difference, between a gold medal that you might win the last part of August in international games that will not equal an Olympic gold medal. I understand that. But there will be an additional award that I will help to emphasize within the bounds of my capacity and authority and influence and status as a President, and that is a special recognition to you that you not only prevailed in a superb international competition of a world championship quality but that you also are honored along with it, having helped to preserve freedom and having helped to enhance the quality or the principles of the Olympics and having helped in a personal way to carry out the principles and ideals of our Nation, and having made a sacrifice in doing it.

And I hope that at least in the minds of some of you the medal that you might win in competition and the recognition of a grateful nation will at least partially make up for the sacrifice that you'll have to make this summer in not going to Moscow for the Summer Olympics.

I'm very grateful that you came, and I hope that you will help me, and I hope that you will agree, if possible. But this is a free country, and your voice is yours, and what you do and say is a decision for you to make. But whatever you decide, as far as your attitude is concerned, I will respect it. And I will appreciate this opportunity for me as President to meet with you to discuss a very serious matter as equals, as Americans who love our country, who recognize that sometimes we have to make sacrifices and that for the common good, for peace and for freedom, those sacrifices are warranted.

Thank you very much.