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Address by Vice President Mondale to the United States Olympic Committee, 'US Call for an Olympic Boycott'

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Summary:

Vice President Mondale addresses the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), advocating for President Carter's proposed boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Later that day, the USOC voted to uphold the boycott.

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Contents:

Transcript - English

Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 12, 1980^[1]

U.S. Call for an Olympic Boycott

I appreciate the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the honorary President of the U.S. Olympic Committee—the President of the United States. And I am delighted to be in the lovely community of Colorado Springs, the home of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

I speak to you as leaders dedicated to amateur sport and as citizens dedicated to America's best interests. I know that everyone in this room loves our country. And I want to express the nation's gratitude for your efforts at Lake Placid to persuade the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to move or postpone the Moscow games.^[2] I thank your leaders as well for stating that the committee would be guided by the President's decision on the best interests of the nation.^[3]

As we meet today, the lesson of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan still waits to be drawn. History holds its breath; for what is at stake is no less than the future security of the civilized world. If one nation can be subjugated by Soviet aggression, is any sovereign nation truly safe from that fate? If 100,000 Russian troops, and the barbaric use of lethal gas, and the specter of nightly assassinations—if these fail to alarm us, what will? If the Soviet lunge toward the most strategic oil-rich spot on Earth fails to unite us, what will? And if we and our allies and friends fail to use every single peaceful means available to preserve the peace, what hope is there that peace will long be preserved?

While history holds its breath, America has moved decisively. To show the Soviet Union that it cannot invade another nation and still conduct business as usual with the United States, our country has embargoed 17 million tons of grain, tightened controls on high technology trade, limited Soviet fishing in our waters, raised our defense budget to upgrade all aspects of our forces, strengthened our naval presence in the Indian Ocean, intensified development of our rapid deployment forces, and offered to help other sovereign states in the region to maintain their security.

In the U.N. General Assembly, the United States joined more than 100 other nations in an unprecedented majority calling for the immediate, unconditional, and total withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.^[4] But the President, the Congress, and the American people understand that a world which travels to the Moscow games devalues its condemnation and offers its complicity to Soviet propaganda.

I am convinced that the American people do not want their athletes cast as pawns in that tawdry propaganda charade. And I urge you to respect that undeniable consensus. Your decision today is not a question of denying our Olympic team the honor they deserve; for the American people, as you know, deeply respect the sacrifice we are asking our athletes to make. It is no longer a question of whether participation in the Moscow Olympics confers legitimacy on Soviet aggression. When the Communist Party prints a million handbooks to tell its top activists that the Summer Games mean world respect for Soviet foreign policy, surely that issue is behind us.

Nor is it a question of drawing a line between sports and politics. That line the Soviets long ago erased. When billions of rubles are diverted to the games from Soviet domestic needs; when Moscow and other Olympic cities are purged of dissidents who might speak out; when Soviet children who might meet Western people and ideas on the streets are packed off to internal exile; when Soviet emissaries roam the globe offering athletes expense-paid trips to Moscow; when Soviet sports officials distort the number of teams committed to participating—surely the issue of Soviet politics in Soviet sports is also behind us.

Above all, the decision you will make today is not a choice between a sports issue and a national security issue; for the President and Congress have made it clear that the Olympic boycott is a genuine element of America's response to the invasion of Afghanistan. It is an unambiguous statement of our national resolve. It is a keystone in our call to our allies for solidarity.

We must not—and cannot—break that link between America’s power to check aggression and America’s call for an Olympic boycott. Your vote is a test of our will, our confidence, our values, and our power to keep the peace through peaceful means. It is not a partisan issue—for both political parties resoundingly supported the President’s action in Congress. It is not a parochial issue; for the American people overwhelmingly agree that we must not go to Moscow.

And it is not just a national issue—for citizens and governments throughout the world share our judgment. From his exile in Gorky, Andrei Sakharov—the unsilenceable father of human rights and the father of the Russian H-bomb—calls on America, saying that “a united position on the Moscow Olympic Games must obviously be a basic part” of the world’s response. This morning, as many as 50 nations—leading political and sports powers—await your signal to join us.

Athletes and sports organizations and national bodies around the world await your lead to mobilize their commitment. They do so for good reason. Today virtually every industrial nation on Earth is dangerously dependent on Persian Gulf oil. How could we convince the Soviets not to threaten the gulf, if a blow was dealt to our deterrent? How could our government send a message to Moscow, if tomorrow’s Pravda brags that our policies have been repudiated?

It is fitting that the same ancient nation that gave us the Olympics also gave us democracy; for your decision here is truly a referendum on freedom.

Berlin Olympic Games

And thus it is also a referendum on America’s character and fundamental values. The athletes here, and the athletes you represent, may have been born a full generation after the Berlin Olympics. But as their advisers and trustees, you bear the responsibility of linking that history to their duty. For the story of Hitler’s rise is more than an unspeakable tragedy, more than a study in tyranny. It is also a chronicle of the free world’s failure—of opportunities not seized, aggression not opposed, appeasement not condemned.

By the fall of 1935, the Nazis had passed the notorious Nuremberg laws reducing the Jews to nonpersons and were flexing their military muscle. For a hopeful moment, American opinion was galvanized—and editorials and amateur athletic unions across the country urged a boycott of the Berlin Olympics. An American member of the International Olympic Committee, Ernest Jahncke, made the plea most eloquently when he wrote the President of the IOC.

If our committee permits the games to be held in . . . Germany, . . . there will be nothing left to distinguish [the Olympic idea] from the Nazi ideal. . . . It will take . . . years to reestablish the prestige of the games and the confidence of the peoples of the world. Sport will lose its beauty and its nobility and become, as it has already become in Nazi Germany, an ugly, ignoble affair.

The call for a boycott was rejected. And the reasons for rejection are bone chilling—even across all these decades. Do not drag sports into the arena of politics, they were told. It will destroy the Olympic movement, they were told. It will only penalize our American athletes, they were told. Solutions to political problems are not the responsibility of sporting bodies, they were told. Let us take our Jews and blacks to Berlin and beat the Nazis, they were told. If America refuses to go, we will be the only ones left out in the cold, they were told.

Such reasons prevailed. Only weeks after American attendance was assured, Nazi troops took the Rhineland; and Hitler readied Germany for the games. His preparations cast uncanny foreshadows. For he expelled foreign journalists, who told the truth about persecution. He ordered his vicious propaganda concealed from foreign visitors. And he too looked forward to legitimacy. As Joseph Goebbels boasted on the eve of the Olympics, the Reich expected the games “to turn the trick and create a friendly world attitude toward Nazi political, economic, and racial aims.”

It worked. Not even Jesse Owens’ magnificent personal triumph diminished Hitler’s international propaganda success—a coup he linked directly to his master race doctrine. We revere Jesse in death as in life; for he was an exemplary American, an inspiration to millions everywhere, and a personal friend loved by many of you here today. But neither Jesse’s achievements in Berlin nor any words spoken at the games prevented the Reich from exploiting the Olympics toward their own brutal ends.

Listen to Nazi War Minister Albert Speer's report on the Fuhrer's mood as the happy spectators left Berlin: "Hitler was exulting over the harmonious atmosphere that prevailed. . . . International animosity toward Nazi Germany was plainly a thing of the past, he thought." Before long, the Nazi war machine scarred the face of Europe, and soon the night closed in.

The Need for Sacrifice

We are far from that time—but not from that script. Like you, I understand the ideals of sport—for sportsmanship is synonymous with fair play. Like you, I am in awe of the Olympic tradition—stretching over centuries, reaching out across cultures.

And like every American, I know the exhilaration of Olympic victory. Few moments in my life match the electricity I felt at Lake Placid. And few human experiences can compare to the years of sacrifice, pain, and yearning that you and our athletes have invested in this summer. But I also know, as you know, that some goals surpass even personal achievement. To any young athletes who feel singled out for suffering, I say, it is war above all that singles out our young for suffering. And it is war that our peaceful resolve can prevent.

Everyone across the board is being asked to sacrifice. We need only ask the farmers of the midlands if they have sacrificed. Or ask the workers in our export industries if they have sacrificed. Or ask the computer companies whose products have been embargoed. Or ask the businesses whose years of planning have come undone. Or ask the young sailors in the Indian Ocean task force. Or ask the American families whose taxes support our defense budget. Or ask the Afghan athlete who faces the Soviets not on a field in Moscow but as a resistance fighter in Kabul.

A heavy burden lies on your shoulders. We recognize the enormous price we are asking our athletes to pay. We recognize the tremendous sacrifice we are asking of sports officials. But on behalf of the President of the United States, I assure you that our nation will do everything within its power to insure the success of the Los Angeles games; [5] to help the Olympic Committee restore its finances; to provide even greater assistance to the development of amateur sport; and, above all, to recognize the true heroism of our athletes who do not go to Moscow.

I believe all Americans will thank you—both for the contribution you make to our national security and to the further integrity you confer on amateur sport; for I believe that the Olympic movement will be forever strengthened by your courage. You will have restored to the modern Olympics the ancient "truce of the gods." No nation may serve as the Olympic host while invading and subjugating another: That was the rule for the Greek city-states, and that must be the rule again today.

Forty-five years ago, when an American official took his stand against Berlin, he said this:

Place your great talents and influence in the service of the spirit of fair play and chivalry—instead of the service of brutality, force, and power . . . Take your rightful place in the history of the Olympics . . . The Olympic idea [has been rescued] from the remote past. You have the opportunity to rescue it from the immediate present—and to safeguard it for posterity. [6]

His words reach out to us across the decades. History rarely offers us a second chance. If we fail to seize this one, history itself may fail us.

[1] Source: Department of State Bulletin, May 1980, pp. 14–15. All brackets are in the original. Mondale delivered his address before the U.S. Olympic Committee House of Delegates. Earlier drafts of the address are in the Minnesota Historical Society, Mondale Papers, Vice Presidential Papers, Special Assistant for Speech Writing, Speech Text Files, Address to United States Olympic Committee House of Delegates, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 12, 1980. Later that day, the United States Olympic Committee voted to support the President's call for a boycott of the Moscow games. (Steven R. Weisman, "U.S. Olympic Group Votes to Boycott the Moscow Games," *The New York Times*, April 13, 1980, pp. A-1, A-18) Earlier, the President sent a mailgram to Kane, dated April 5, and similar mailgrams to the House of Delegates members reiterating his belief that the USOC should vote not to send the U.S. Olympic team to Moscow: "There are times when individuals and nations must stand firm on matters of principle. This is such a time. If we clearly and resolutely show the way, other

nations will follow.” (Public Papers: Carter, 1980–81, Book I, p. 616) Documentation on the Olympic boycott is scheduled for publication in *Foreign Relations, 1977–1980*, volume XXV, United Nations; *Law of the Sea*.

[2] On February 8, Kane addressed the executive board of the International Olympics Committee, meeting in Lake Placid, New York, prior to the start of the 1980 Winter Olympics, and requested that the Summer Olympics be relocated from Moscow. (Neil Amdur, “U.S. Olympic Chief Says Soviet Broke Games Contract,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 1980, pp A-1, A-4) Vance, an honorary Vice President of the U.S. Olympic Committee, spoke before the International Olympics Committee on February 9; for his remarks, see *Department of State Bulletin*, March 1980, p. 50. On February 12, the International Olympics Committee reaffirmed the decision to allow the Olympics to proceed in Moscow. (Neil Amdur, “World Committee Reaffirms Moscow as Site of Olympics,” *The New York Times*, February 13, 1980, pp. A-1, A-12)

[3] The White House, on February 20, released the text of a statement indicating that the President had informed the USOC that the United States should not send an Olympic team to Moscow. (Public Papers: Carter, 1980–1981, Book I, p. 356)

[4] Jahncke wrote this in a November 25, 1935, letter to Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, President of the International Olympic Committee. (“Jahncke Asks Ban On Olympic Games: American Committee Member Charges Germans Violate Tenets of Fair Play,” *The New York Times*, November 27, 1935, p. 2)

[5] The 1984 Summer Olympics were scheduled to take place in Los Angeles, California. The Soviet Union ultimately boycotted those games.

[6] Reference is to Jahncke, who included the statement in his November 25 letter; see footnote 4, above.