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SPORTS AND FOREIGN-POLICY: PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER AND THE 1980 MOSCOW OLYMPICS BOYCOTT

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the efficacy of sporting boycotts as a foreign-policy tool. Government officials use sporting boycotts, a nontraditional form of a sanction, in contemporary politics. Using the Carter administration’s boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics as a case study, this thesis elucidates why President Carter chose to implement a sporting boycott, and whether the boycott was effective in achieving its intended goals. President Carter chose to boycott the Olympics because of the failure of past sanctions to force the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, the influence of his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the potential to challenge the Soviet Union’s reputation in a very public setting. The boycott did not force Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan; however, it was an effective symbolic tool aimed to embarrass the Soviet Union.
INTRODUCTION

In 1980 in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter announced that the United States would boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. President Carter’s use of an Olympic boycott to exercise foreign policy. This occurrence showcases an intersection between sports and foreign policy that elicits several questions about the Carter administration’s decision-making process and what factors shaped their decisions. What was the Carter administration’s chief objective? Who participated in the decision-making process? What options were available to the Carter administration? Why impose a boycott over other options? In turn, this knowledge will provide further leverage on the larger topic of sanctions in foreign-policy.

In the United States and many other countries, sports and politics are intertwined. Athletes and government officials in domestic and international settings often make political overtures and carry out demonstrations. The president routinely invites various championship teams, both collegiate and professional, to the White House. Athletes often use sporting events as a platform to protest. For example, Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem proceeding the National Football League’s games to raise awareness of police brutality.¹ In the international sports arena, the connection between politics and sports is even more apparent. For example, some journalists claim the joint participation of North and South Korea in the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics as a signal of future peace.² Russia gained notoriety at this same

Olympics because some of its athletes were accused of using prohibited drugs, and the Russian government allegedly played a role in this scandal. Likewise, in the 1980s during the Apartheid era, multiple nations participated in a sporting boycott against South Africa. In the 1970s the Chinese government used “ping-pong diplomacy” to signal its global opening economically and diplomatically. Although sports are nominally apolitical, sports and politics are often connected.

The Olympic Games provide a prime example of a forum where international sports and politics are intertwined. Although the Olympics are supposed to be apolitical, some of the most notable political protests and demonstrations in history have occurred during the Olympics. For example, when African American Jesse Owens defeated Nazi Germany’s runner during the 1936 Berlin Olympics, commentators touted the win as a victory over Germany’s Aryan beliefs. During the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, American medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists on the Olympic podium to express their discontent with race relations in the United States. Olympic hosts often use the Games as a podium for spreading propaganda and demonstrating national pride. Millions of citizens across the globe watch the Olympic Games. Consequently, a myriad of international dignitaries regularly attend the Olympics and often make speeches. Furthermore, since the Olympic Charter only recognizes one delegation per nation, the Olympic Games are often riddled with international conflict. Indeed, the Olympics are among the world’s most politically bound forums for international sports.

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6 Marlene Goldsmith, "Sporting Boycotts as a Political Tool", 18.
Boycotts would appear to be a form of sanctions, and governments often utilize sanctions as a tool of foreign-policy. Governments use sanctions to signal displeasures or to change the behavior of the recipient state. Stuart Murray has framed the use of sports as a foreign-policy tool in another way. Murray’s “sports diplomacy” is less about punishing or embarrassing a country, as would sanctions or a boycott, and more about using sporting events as a way of making amends. From this perspective, initiating a boycott against a foreign adversary, as was the case with the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Olympics, would not constitute sports diplomacy. In this work I define the term “sports diplomacy” more broadly than does Murray. In this study, by sports diplomacy I mean the political use of sporting events and competitions by governments to influence and/or pressure the behavior of, or to embarrass and humiliate, other states. Such political use might include a boycott, sanctions, diplomacy, or a public accusation of corruption or cheating.

Scholarship on the 1980 Moscow Olympics boycott has generally not addressed the decision-making process that led to the boycott. Instead, it has primarily examined the event from an historical perspective. President Carter’s decision to boycott the 1980 Olympics is important and warrants attention because governments continue to use sporting boycotts as a foreign-policy tool. Using President Carter’s decision to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics in reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a case study, this thesis will explain the decision-making process that led to the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Primary sources, including past interviews, speeches, memoirs, and official memoranda, this thesis will place the Carter administration’s decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics within the framework of international sanctions. The Carter administration was aware that the boycott

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would not force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. Instead, President Carter used the Olympics boycott as a symbolic measure to embarrass publicly the Soviet Union. Carter, his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance made the decision to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics in the context of their knowledge and perceptions about Soviet behavior and the potentially powerful impact of such a decision on the Soviet Union’s standing at the Olympics and in the world. The Carter administration chose to adopt this approach despite its view that it would unlikely bring about a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although these American foreign-policy makers understood that other sanctions had repeatedly failed, they believed that it would send a strong message that the Carter administration was ready to get tough with the Soviet Union.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Sanctions and International Relations*

Sporting boycotts in international relations fall within the framework of sanctions. Sanctions are an instrument of statecraft, part of a larger set of foreign-policy tools. Margan, Babat, and Krustev define sanctions as “actions that one or more countries take to limit or end their economic relations with a target country in an effort to persuade that country to change one or more of its policies.”

9 Similarly, Lutfullah Mangi defines a sanction as: “an action initiated by one or more international actors against one or more others with either or both of two purposes: to punish the receivers by depriving them of some value and/or to make the receivers comply with certain norms the senders deem important.”

10 A state-sponsored sanction could include severing diplomatic relations, boycotting cultural or sports events, imposing commercial

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sanctions on imports and exports, or establishing a naval blockade.\textsuperscript{11} Usually, sanctions have a strong economic component. Since sporting boycotts are used to deprive the target state of some value – however broadly construed -- and to pressure the state to comply with certain norms, sporting boycotts fall within the framework of sanctions.

The United States has often utilized sanctions as a foreign-policy tool. Since World War II, the United States has implemented more sanctions than any other country.\textsuperscript{12} Several reasons help to explain why the U.S. has imposed sanctions so frequently, particularly after World War II. In the decade following the Second World War, the international community took steps to bind states together in an international organization that promoted peaceful negotiation, collective security, and in an effort on the part of powerful states to create a balance of power to prevent war and to encourage the superpowers to spend less on its arms race.\textsuperscript{13} Sanctions offered states a mechanism for pressuring other states while avoiding a military confrontation, thus decreasing the likelihood of war. This post-war era thus introduced the routine use of sanctions, including sports boycotts, as a foreign-policy tool. For the Carter administration, confronting the Soviet Union with military force in the case of Afghanistan would have been costly and futile. Thus, the administration utilized sanctions.

Many scholars have debated the efficacy of sanctions in international relations, and overwhelmingly scholars argue that sanctions often fail to achieve their intended goals. Robert Pape argues, for example, that despite their increased use in international relations, economic sanctions routinely fall well short of their goals.\textsuperscript{14} For a sanction to be successful, the target state

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 93.
must concede to a significant portion of the coercer’s demands. Pape’s analysis concludes that sanctions succeed in attaining their goals in only about four percent of cases studied.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, Pape’s analysis found no correlation between the harshness of the punishment and the target’s concessions.\textsuperscript{16} A large group of international relations scholars confirms Pape’s argument that sanctions usually do not work.

Sanctions fall far short for a variety of reasons. First, since states often resort to sanctions after other policies have failed, it is highly unlikely that sanctions will coerce the offending state into changing its behavior.\textsuperscript{17} In this case, the target state is committed to its course of behavior. Modern states appear to be willing to endure the high costs of sanctions in the pursuit of their interests.\textsuperscript{18}

Another reason that sanctions often fall short is because they tend to rally nationalism in the target state. The surge of popular support by citizens who increasingly believe that their state is being bullied by another more powerful state leads to a resurgence of confidence and obstinacy on the part of the offending regime.\textsuperscript{19} Consequently, the targeted state becomes more – not less – troublesome. Third, sanctions often harm the people in the targeted state and have no impact on the ruling elite. Political elites can generally find alternative markets to supply their needs. Citizens, however, are forced to conserve or cut consumption. This sometimes leads to a significant level of suffering on the part of the people.

Fourth, sanctions are often costly to the state imposing them. For example, President Carter’s 1979 decision to cut wheat imports to the Soviet Union in protest of the invasion of

\textsuperscript{17} Lutfullah Mangi, "Sanctions: An Instrument of US Foreign-policy,” 649.
Afghanistan proved to be costlier for the American wheat producer than the Soviet consumer. The Soviet Union simply went elsewhere to procure wheat. Foreign-policy decision makers must weigh the costs associated with sanctions against projected benefits when deciding to impose a sanction. President Carter’s 1980 Olympics boycott failed to modify Soviet behavior, but it did inflict some harm on the Soviet Union and cost the U.S. very little.

While their overall success rate is limited, sanctions sometimes succeed. Scholars generally measure success by the extent to which the sanctions induced the target nation to comply with the wishes of the punishing country. Hovi, Huseby, and Sprinz have argued that a target country will yield to a coercer’s demands if it initially underestimates the impact of the sanctions, miscalculates the sender’s determination to impose the sanctions, or wrongly believes that the sanctions would be imposed whether it concedes or not. Sanctions may also work when the target is already experiencing economic difficulties, the sanction is forcefully implemented, the sender has few costs associated with the sanction, few countries are needed to implement the sanction, and/or the sanction is not imposed in conjunction with covert military action. In the case of the Olympic boycott, the Carter administration implemented it over a course of seven months, in conjunction with covert military action in Afghanistan and declining domestic support.

Although sanctions rarely work, states continue to utilize them as foreign-policy tools because they can serve as powerful domestic political tools, and they can be powerful symbols. Sanctions can be used to satisfy a domestic group or demonstrate that the government cares and

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23 Ibid., 481.
24 Jon Hovi, Robert Huseby, and Detlef Sprinz, "When Do (imposed) Economic Sanctions Work?" 482.
is acting. The symbolic value of a sanction can operate at both the domestic and international level. By imposing a sanction, a policymaker may garner domestic support while simultaneously signaling discontent with the target.\textsuperscript{25} With President Carter, the American public broadly supported his policy as addressing Soviet aggression, while sending a message of discontent to the Soviet Union.

Looking specifically at sporting boycotts, scholars also question their efficacy as a tool of foreign-policy. For example, Dain and Calder argue that sporting boycotts are not effective in encouraging a government to change its actions.\textsuperscript{26} Strengthening links between countries rather than severing ties is a more constructive approach to highlighting and eradicating problems, they argue. Marlene Goldsmith identifies two examples that support this argument. First, participating in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Jesse Owens ably defeated his German counterpart. This German defeat raised much bigger questions internationally about Adolph Hitler’s questionable belief that the Aryan race was supreme.\textsuperscript{27} Second, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and an overwhelming number of countries boycotted sporting competitions with South Africa during the apartheid. While the sporting boycott likely had little effect on the Apartheid regime, it did raise international awareness of the human-rights abuses in the country.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, sporting boycotts may not achieve their intended goals. They might, however, achieve another lesser, yet important, goal.

\textit{Sports and Foreign-policy}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 18.
Using sports as a foreign-policy tools provides an example of states’ relying on *soft power* to shape the behavior of other states. Stuart Murray found that in the second half of the twentieth century countries have established strong relationships among politics, diplomacy, and sport.²⁹ The main thrust of Murray’s writing is that sports diplomacy could be used to reduce estrangement and conflict, as well as promote greater development and dialogue between two countries or among a collection of states. Sports diplomacy can thus encompass negotiations, compromise, and peace, despite the competitive nature of sports. Sports diplomacy is “low risk, low cost, and high profile.”³⁰ Although Murray highlights the potential for building friendly relations through sports diplomacy, the Carter administration showcases how sports diplomacy could be used as a punitive tool.

Sporting boycotts are a tool of foreign-policy, but sporting federations are actors who are independent of their respective governments. In Trevor Taylor’s examination of the relationship between sports and foreign-policy, he categorizes sports as an international nongovernmental organization (INGO) with respect to their federations.³¹ Within the parameters of an INGO, sports incorporate an international dimension, general rules, and a governing body. Sports are associated with nationalism because many federations’ rules permit only one federation per state.³²

One of the most significant arguments made by Taylor—that sports and sporting federations are actors—helps to provide an often-overlooked component of sports and foreign-policy. Sports authorities seek the maximum amount of freedom in actions from their

³⁰ Ibid., 583.
³² Ibid., 537.
governments. Federations such as the International Olympics Committee (IOC) work to minimize that freedom. For example, the IOC prohibits national federations from exercising political influence. The nominally apolitical relationship between sports federations and governments becomes muddled, however, because many national federations receive governmental funding. Meanwhile, sporting authorities have their own interest in holding competition, and this can conflict with the interests of a state. This tension was very much present during President Carter’s boycott effort.

Taylor also argues that sports are a positive, active, even enjoyable foreign-policy tool. International sports are a source of favorable publicity. Through the use of sports, governments can send diplomatic signals without being directly involved. Taylor cites China’s use of “ping-pong diplomacy” with the United Kingdom and United States as an example of this. China sent a signal that they were ready to open diplomatically and economically by inviting the United States and the United Kingdom for a ping pong competition. This offered a non-confrontational approach to initiating diplomatic discussions.

Sports as a foreign-policy tool can sometimes become problematic. Dain and Calder have identified both the appeals and problems associated with using sporting boycotts as a foreign-policy tool. Sporting boycotts are meant to be symbolic and make a strong statement, given that sports are universal. The use of sports as a foreign-policy tool often undermines the comradery and good relationships that they are supposed to promote. The decision on the part of the international cricket teams to boycott matches with Zimbabwe illustrates this problem.

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33 Ibid., 540.
34 Trevor Taylor, "Sport and World Politics: Functionalism and the State System," 540.
35 Ibid., 551.
36 Ibid., 550.
this perspective, Dain and Calder point to the tension between trying to maintain solid diplomatic relations and a normal sporting relationship with a country while simultaneously pressuring it to improve its human-rights record or administration of justice.\footnote{Edmund Dain and Gideon Calder, “Not Cricket? Ethics, Rhetoric and Sporting Boycotts,” 95.} Regular sporting relations could lead the public to believe that the government retains normalcy, respect, and support.\footnote{Ibid., 99.} Indeed, President Carter argued that since the United States strongly condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the U.S. simply could not conduct business as usual with the U.S.S.R.

Dain and Calder raise other critical issues associated with using sporting boycotts. If an actor imposes a sporting boycott against every state with whom there is conflict, these scholars ask, would not international sports become a farce because of too many boycotts?\footnote{Ibid., 101.} Given that boycotts are meant to make a statement, this could serve as a deterrent from imposing too many boycotts and decreasing their effectiveness.

\textit{President Carter and the 1980 Olympics Boycott}

Although the Olympics are meant to be apolitical, historian Allen Guttmann has argued that the creation of the Olympics had political motivations.\footnote{Allen Guttmann, "The Cold War and the Olympics," \textit{International Journal} 43, no. 4 (1988): 554-68, doi:10.2307/40202563, 559.} According to Guttmann, states established the Olympics, in part, as a means of reconciliation for feuding countries. To ensure reconciliation, the Olympic national federations were to maintain neutral political perspectives.\footnote{Ibid., 559.} Despite the efforts to eliminate politics from the Olympics, politics have remained a central issue in deciding who hosts and who participates in the Games.

The intersection between politics and sport was especially evident during the Cold War. Although the Soviet Union controlled its National Olympic Committee and the U.S. exercises
considerably less control over its Olympic Committee, the United States was the first country of
the two to use the Olympics as a political tool.43 Young and Guttman argue that the Carter
Administration chose to boycott the 1980 Olympics because it could come up with no other
viable options. Military confrontation would have been unwise, and the boycott had little
associated costs economically and politically. The Carter administration clearly understood that
the boycott would not coerce the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan.44 It would,
however, send a strong message of protest and raise international awareness of the invasion,
which was a clear violation of international law and the United Nations Charter.

The Carter administration’s decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow
is one of the most discussed sporting boycotts; however, there is little writing on the subject from
an American foreign-policy perspective. Nicolas Sarantakes’ Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter,
the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War provides an extensive historical analysis of the event.
Sarantakes strongly criticizes the decision to boycott the Olympics.45 This thesis will draw upon
Sarantake’s work by analyzing the decision-making process within the Carter administration.

The way Carter’s foreign-policy advisors framed the issue of the Soviet invasion of
Afghanistan affected the policies that President Carter later implemented. In an examination of
foreign-policy in the Carter administration, Jean Garrison has argued that actors frame issues in a
way that supports their policy positions.46 Brzezinski and Cyrus Vance each presented differing
perspectives on the issue, and each contributed to shaping the administration’s foreign-policy.
During the early stages of the Carter presidency, the president tried to incorporate both the

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43 Christopher Young, "Olympic Boycotts: Always Tricky," Dissent 55, no. 3 (2008): 68
recommendations of Brzezinski and Vance in an effort to create consistency and consensus within his foreign-policy.\textsuperscript{47} Garrison argues that individuals, including Vance and Brzezinski, who enjoyed greater access to President Carter could influence and control his knowledge of the Soviet Union and its invasion into Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{48} National Security Advisor Brzezinski exercised more influence over Carter than did Vance. Brzezinski’s interpretation of the Soviet-Afghan war markedly shaped the president’s interpretation of both Soviet policy and the appropriate options for U.S. response, including an Olympic boycott.

Scholars generally agree that sanctions and boycotts fall short in achieving their intended goals. This assessment extends to sporting boycotts and the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Utilizing the framework provided on sanctions, sports as a foreign-policy tool, the 1980 Moscow Olympics boycott, and drawing on the evidence provided by both primary and secondary sources, this work offers a case study of the Carter administration’s decision to boycott Moscow’s Summer Olympics and the factors that contributed to the decision.

**METHODS**

For this thesis, I will examine the efficacy of sporting boycotts as a tool of foreign-policy and the associated decision-making process. The Carter administration’s decision-making process will be assessed through primary sources, dating from November 1979 to May 1980, that shed light on the Soviet-Afghan war and the boycott. These primary sources include speeches, documents provided by the Carter Presidential Library, written records of interviews with key actors, official memoranda and correspondence during the Carter presidency, and declassified documents provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In addition, I will examine media coverage, and newspapers. The memoirs of President Jimmy Carter, former Secretary of State

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 780.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 781.
Cyrus Vance, and former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski also offer further insight into the decision-making process during this time. The memoirs and historical accounts of secondary actors, such as former White House Counsel Lloyd Cutler, public opinion surveys, and accounts by Olympic athletes, and the U.S. Olympic Committee will also be included in this analysis.

I have tried to rely on primary sources because they provide the best insight on the decision-making process during the Carter presidency. Memoirs written by Carter, Vance, and Brzezinski offer a lucid recounting of the events during that time. Some of the limitations of these sources include the fact that they were written retroactively, and Carter, Vance, and Brzezinski mostly recounted from memory and personal notes in their writing. Such writing may be subject to some inaccuracies and may not be objective. To mitigate these issues, secondary sources are included as a supplement.

**EARLY CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND**

**U.S.-Soviet Relations During the Carter Presidency**

The relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Carter administration was defined by negotiations on nuclear arms deals—such as the Strategic Arms and Limitations Treaty II (SALT II), Cold War politics, and the Carter administration’s foreign-policy goals surrounding human rights. SALT II, a potentially significant nuclear-arms treaty negotiated between the Soviet Union and the United States, was neither approved by the Congress nor signed by President Carter. Carter’s personal principles relating to human rights and its influence on his foreign-policy stood out as a source of tension between the United States and the Soviet Union.49 The Carter administration held the belief that the Soviet Union was an

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aggressor in world affairs, especially in the Middle East and Africa. Although President Carter wanted to improve relations with the Soviet Union, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated rapidly.

As the newly elected President of the United States in 1977, President Jimmy Carter wanted to set a new precedent for American foreign-policy. He believed that the United States had lost its position as the moral authority and primary advocate for democracy after the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and President Gerald Ford’s pardons. President Carter believed that a moral and idealistic approach to foreign-policy was realistic, and that moral principles were the best guidelines in shaping the use of American power and influence abroad. Both National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance wholly supported Carter’s desire to advocate for human rights. Indeed, human rights stood out as perhaps the single most important focus of the Carter administration’s foreign-policy team.

President Carter wanted to improve U.S.-Soviet relations while not ignoring Soviet human-rights violations. Initially, Carter believed he could both build better relations with Moscow and address its human-rights problems. These two goals quickly came into conflict with one another. President Carter’s support of Soviet dissidents such as Vladimir Slepak and Andrei Amalrik effected a source of tension between the Soviet Union and the United States; Soviet leaders viewed Washington’s push for democratization and human rights as an excuse for meddling in Soviet internal affairs. As time progressed Carter became markedly less optimistic regarding his ability to work closely with the Soviet Union. He became more suspicious of

50 Ibid., 147.
51 Lisa Martin, Coercive Cooperation, 107.
53 Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War, 55.
Soviet motives, particularly regarding Moscow’s military ventures in the Middle East and Africa. Instead of cooperating, Carter began to view the Soviet Union pessimistically and assessed their motives in terms of competition.

President Carter was critical of past administrations’ initiatives with the Soviet Union. President Richard Nixon initiated détente, which was meant to ease tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, prevent a nuclear war, and progress toward normalizing relations between the two nations. Carter believed that the détente initiatives, including SALT I, had favored the Soviet Union. Nuclear arms-control was important to President Carter because he viewed it as a first step toward better relations with the Soviet Union. He expressed such sentiments in his memoir: “My intention was to cooperate with the Soviets whenever possible, and I saw a successful effort in controlling nuclear weapons as the best tool for improving our relations.” Carter aggressively promoted SALT II because he believed that it would provide a basis for a reciprocal relationship between the two countries. The Carter administration sought to cap the number of nuclear arms on the part of both countries. But this goal conflicted with his negative perception of the Soviets as an aggressor. The administration and Congress struggled to separate the issue of Soviet military adventurism from the SALT II negotiations. Although the U.S. and U.S.S.R. negotiated the treaty successfully, Congress did not support it, and

55 Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, 262.
57 Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, 223.
58 Ibid., 793.
ultimately the president did not ratify it primarily because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.\(^6\)

*The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*

Part of the reason the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan because it viewed the country’s ruling communist party as untrustworthy and incapable of maintaining control.\(^6\) Afghans rebelled against the Khalq Communist Party, Afghanistan’s ruling party, which was led by Noor Mohammed Taraki and Hafizullah Amin.\(^6\) Before the Soviet-Afghan War, the Khalq Communist Party overthrew the existing Afghan government, installing Nur Mohammad Taraki as president.\(^6\) The modernizing reforms instituted by the Taraki government were unpopular, and the regime repressed political opponents. After the assassination of Taraki, his rival, Hafizullah Amin, seized control of the Afghan government and ruling party. Amin instituted policies in disregard of Soviet counsel. Although Amin’s policies were socialist, they were brutally implemented in an underdeveloped Muslim country.\(^6\) These new socialist policies coupled with Amin’s repressive regime spawned widespread rebellion, which the Amin government could not control despite Soviet military aid.\(^6\) Because of Amin’s disregard for Soviet preferences and the growing insurgency, the Soviet Union viewed the Afghan regime as unruly, unpredictable, and threatening.\(^6\) The Soviets also worried that in desperation Amin would turn to the West or China for help. Thus, the Soviet Union exploited factions within the

\(^6\) Soviet involvement in Afghanistan was present before the invasion; Afghanistan frequently accepted military and economic aid from the Soviet Union, dating back to 1955.
\(^6\) Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 63.
\(^6\) Jiri Valenta, "From Prague to Kabul: The Soviet Style of Invasion," 115.
\(^6\) Ibid., 116.
\(^6\) Ibid., 116.
Khalq Communist Party, and supported Amin’s political opponents, which culminated in the 1979 invasion.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had both offensive and defensive elements. The Soviet Union wanted to restore order in its neighboring country; it was genuinely concerned about the political instability on its border. Soviet leaders also believed that inaction would have a spillover effect in other Muslim countries and Eastern Europe against socialist governments. During that time, the Soviet Union was geopolitically surrounded by adversaries such as India and China.

*Map of the Soviet Union in the 1980s.*

Following the Brezhnev Doctrine, the Soviet Union wanted to defend the ideal of socialism internationally. In Soviet propaganda related to the invasion, the Soviet press claimed that the

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67 Ibid., 117.
invasion was in response to threats from the West. The United States had increased its military budget and military actions in Iran during the hostage crisis. The Soviet Union wanted to be in a better position to exploit chaos in Iran and feared that the United States was attempting to drive Afghanistan into its strategic arc.\textsuperscript{70} Although the Soviet Union was genuinely concerned about its border, it also considered Afghanistan’s strategic position.

Soviet leadership believed that the U.S. would not respond to the invasion because of other world events. On December 25, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Soviets chose this date because they knew that American officials would not be available because of the Christmas holiday.\textsuperscript{71} Furthermore, the Soviet leadership believed that the United States would be too preoccupied with the Iran hostage crisis to respond quickly and effectively to the Afghanistan issue. The distraction of the Iran hostage crisis became more apparent during the boycotting effort after the failed U.S. led rescue mission in Tehran in late April 1980. After initial success in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union struggled to restore order, and the effort became a failure.\textsuperscript{72} The Soviet Union resorted to greater force in the country and ultimately remained in Afghanistan until 1989.

\textit{U.S. Reactions to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan}

From the perspective of the Carter administration, the Soviet Union was meddling in Afghanistan’s political affairs. Publicly, Soviet leadership claimed that it invaded Afghanistan for defensive purposes and that Afghan officials requested its help.\textsuperscript{73} Carter rebuffed the Soviet claim that only military advisors had entered Afghanistan in an attempt to strengthen opposition

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{71} Jiri Valenta, “From Prague to Kabul: The Soviet Style of Invasion,” 134.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 114.
forces in Kabul.\textsuperscript{74} The Carter administration argued that the Afghan government prior to the invasion had wanted to maintain its independence, and that the Soviets had installed a new Afghan president who served as their puppet.\textsuperscript{75} Carter saw Soviet involvement in Afghanistan as a prelude for further activity in the region. During President Carter’s “Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,” on January 4, 1980, he stated:

This invasion is an extremely serious threat to peace because of the threat of further Soviet expansion into neighboring countries in Southwest Asia and also because such an aggressive military policy is unsettling to other peoples throughout the world… We must recognize the strategic importance of Afghanistan to stability and peace. A Soviet-occupied Afghanistan threatens both Iran and Pakistan and is a steppingstone to possible control over much of the world’s oil supplies… In the meantime, neither the United States nor any other nation which is committed to world peace and stability can continue to do business as usual with the Soviet Union. Although the United States would prefer not to withdraw from the Olympic games scheduled in Moscow this summer, the Soviet Union must realize that its continued aggressive actions will endanger both the participation of athletes and the travel to Moscow by spectators who would normally wish to attend the Olympic games.\textsuperscript{76}

Carter believed that Soviet control of Afghanistan could allow the U.S.S.R. access to Iran and thus disrupt the export of oil from the Persian Gulf to the U.S. Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev promised Carter that he would withdraw troops once his military had achieved its objective. But no withdrawal took place. In fact, at one point the Soviet had more than 100,000 troops were deployed in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{77} This increasingly tense situation became a high-priority crisis for the Carter administration.

In reaction to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, the Carter administration took multiple actions. Prior to the Soviet invasion, opposition groups within the U.S. had criticized the president for not countering Soviet gains. In response to this criticism he adopted a tough stance

\textsuperscript{75} Jimmy Carter, \textit{Keeping Faith}, 481.
\textsuperscript{77} Jimmy Carter, \textit{Keeping Faith}, 481.
on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Although Carter had pronounced the Carter Doctrine, he was not ready to engage militarily with the Soviet Union. Thus, President Carter sought other means to hinder Soviet progress in Afghanistan. For example, he implemented an economic embargo, halted grain and technology sales, and revoked Soviet fishing rights in American territorial waters. The U.S. government canceled all diplomatic exchanges with the Soviets. Moreover, the U.S. took the lead at the United Nations (U.N.) in convincing 140 countries, including some Soviet allies, to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In addition, members of the Carter administration met with members of the Afghan insurgency. The U.S. then provided covert military aid to the group. Finally, President Carter announced that the United States would boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

The Olympic Boycott

On January 20, 1980, during a Meet the Press interview, President Jimmy Carter announced that the United States would not send athletes to the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow if the Soviet Union did not remove its troops from Afghanistan within a month. In his Meet the Press interview with Bill Monroe, President Carter stated:

Neither I nor the American people would support the sending of an American team to Moscow with Soviet invasion troops in Afghanistan. I've sent a message today to the United States Olympic Committee spelling out my own position: that unless the Soviets withdraw their troops within a month from Afghanistan, that the Olympic games be moved from Moscow to an alternate site or multiple sites or postponed or canceled. If the Soviets do not withdraw their troops immediately from Afghanistan within a month, I would not support the sending of an American team to the Olympics. It's very important for the world to realize how serious a threat the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan is.

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80 Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, 481.
82 Nicholas Sarantakes, Dropping the Torch, 68.
A month passed, and Soviet troops remained in Afghanistan. Thus, the United States did not send a delegation to the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.

Two other international events are important in relation to the United States’ decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. The first event was the 1979 fall of the Shah of Iran and the subsequent Iran hostage crisis. On November 4, 1979, students in Iran stormed the United States embassy in Tehran, taking 60 Americans hostage after the United States admitted the Shah into the United States for medical treatment. The Iran hostage crisis wholly occupied the attention of the Carter administration’s foreign-policy team and influenced its decisions for the remainder of the Carter presidency. The second event of importance was the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. At this time, it was still uncertain whether the Carter administration would follow through with the boycott, and the Soviet Union participated in the Lake Placid Games. The United States’ hockey team was not expected to earn a medal during the Games but went on to defeat the Soviet Union’s elite and nearly undefeated hockey team. The game was touted as a match between democracy and communism. The win instilled national pride in the American public, and Carter said he hoped the gold medal was an omen for better times. What became known as the “Miracle on Ice,” went on to undermine public support for the Carter administration’s effort to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.

**KEY ACTORS**

Any assessment of the Carter administration’s decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow requires an analysis of the critical actors who influenced the decision to

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84 Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 7.
85 Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 11.
86 Ibid., 11.
87 Ibid., 11.
implement a sporting boycott. The Carter administration wanted to embarrass and punish the Soviet Union. Several factors contributed to the implementation of the sporting boycott as a foreign-policy tool. Each key actor’s background, beliefs, and perceptions of the Soviet Union led to his recommendation of or acquiesce to the boycott. The primary actors identified in relation to the decision to boycott the Olympics are President Jimmy Carter, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. These three actors were the primary decision makers in American foreign-policy from 1977 to 1981.

President Jimmy Carter

Carter’s personal approach to foreign-policy influenced his decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics. President Carter perceived a “malaise” among citizens that reflected widespread disillusionment primarily because of the violent anti-war movement, the defeat in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal. Carter, a deeply religious Christian, sought to restore the public’s belief and commitment to moral values and justice. As an extension of this, Carter wanted the United States to claim the moral high ground in world affairs and advocated for human rights in his practice of foreign-policy. Such sentiments are expressed in Carter’s writing: “Our country has been strongest and most effective when morality and a commitment to freedom and democracy have been most clearly emphasized in our foreign-policy.”

Carter understood that his commitment to human rights was viewed as naïve and idealistic. He argued nonetheless that American idealism was practical and realistic in foreign affairs because moral principles, in his view, offered the best way to exert American power and influence. President Carter also embraced “public diplomacy,” which relied heavily on widely available information and open international exchanges. Carter preferred economic and

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diplomatic action over military action, and this is evinced in his response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Although the U.S. government did not frame the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a human-rights issue, the Carter administration frequently used language couched in moral principles as justification for the Olympic boycott.

The organization and protocols of Carter’s cabinet influenced how the decision was crafted regarding the Olympics boycott. Carter had organized his policy-advisory system to promote open dialogue, an environment in which advisors would listen and participate in a healthy debate.  

During meetings, Carter would remain at the center of the discussions, receiving advice and information from his many advisors. In this setting, Carter was able to hear the arguments of both Brzezinski and Vance regarding the Soviet Union. Although this type of organization of Carter’s advisory system was supposed to promote teamwork among his foreign-policy advisors, it created tension and debates riddled with infighting. Given the tension, Carter grew increasingly dependent on Brzezinski and Vance, who themselves competed with one another to see who could exercise the most influence over the president.

In general, Brzezinski mistrusted the Soviet leaders and emphasized competition when assessing their motives. Vance was more willing to trust Soviet intentions and wanted Carter to move beyond East-West competition. Often Brzezinski was better positioned to gain access to and influence over President Carter. Brzezinski chaired the Special Coordination Committee (SCC), which handled crises such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Brzezinski also had a direct line to President Carter and met with him daily for security briefings. Secretary of State

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90 Ibid., 779.
92 Ibid., 776.
93 Ibid., 780.
Cyrus Vance resented Brzezinski’s influence on President Carter. This resentment ultimately contributed to Vance’s resignation. Observers of the Carter presidency assert that the president was an eager student of Brzezinski, and that Carter’s relationship with Vance was more distant and formal. President Carter was admittedly closer to Brzezinski and the Nation Security Council (NSC) staff. Thus, Brzezinski enjoyed more influence than Vance over Carter’s decision-making process.

President Carter’s perception of the Soviet Union evolved throughout his presidency. During the early stages of his presidency, Carter was optimistic about the Soviet Union’s motives. He hoped to build a better relationship with the Soviet Union and to work towards nuclear arms reduction. Carter’s optimistic view of the Soviet Union aligned with that of Cyrus Vance. As time progressed, however, Carter grew disillusioned and moved to adopt a more negative view of Soviet motives. Carter’s negative perception of the Soviet Union grew out of Moscow’s response to his human-rights advocacy, the influence of Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Soviet military aggression. Given Brzezinski’s access to the president and his negative perception of Soviet motives, he skillfully shaped Carter’s growing perception that the Soviets were to be perceived as an adversary. Soviet behavior, particularly its military activities, strengthened the negative perceptions of both Carter and Brzezinski. Thus, over time Carter adopted a more confrontational approach toward the Soviet Union.

In the case of Afghanistan, Carter believed that the Soviet Union was an aggressor against a deeply religious and independent country. Carter expressed this in his memoir: “The

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95 Jean Garrison, “Framing Foreign-policy Alternatives in the Inner Circle: President Carter, His Advisors, and the Struggle for Arms Control Agenda,” 780.
97 Ibid., 781.
98 Ibid., 781.
invasion of Afghanistan was direct aggression by the Soviet armed forces against a freedom-loving people, whose leaders had been struggling to retain a modicum of independence from their huge neighbor.\textsuperscript{99} Carter believed that the Soviet Union wanted to overthrow the existing Afghan government to expand Moscow’s sphere of influence.\textsuperscript{100} To Carter, Afghanistan had been violently reduced to a Soviet puppet state, which had further implications in the Persian Gulf region.\textsuperscript{101} If the Soviets consolidated power in Afghanistan, then the balance of power would be in Moscow’s favor in the region. At the time of the invasion, Carter wrote in his diary: “This is the most serious international development that has occurred since I have been President, and unless the Soviets recognize that it has been counterproductive for them we will face additional serious problems with invasions or subversions in the future.”\textsuperscript{102} During Carter’s 1980 State of the Union Address, he introduced the Carter Doctrine, which asserted that any threat by a country against the Persian Gulf would be viewed as a threat against the U.S., and the U.S. would respond to the threat by any means necessary.\textsuperscript{103} The Carter Doctrine directly targeted the Soviet Union; indeed, it was a clear response to Soviet aggression.

\textit{National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski}

Although National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski possessed a nuanced knowledge of the Soviet Union as an historian, President Carter initially lacked extensive knowledge of foreign-policy. Consequently, he relied heavily on Brzezinski to educate and instruct him on U.S.-Soviet relations.\textsuperscript{104} In his memoir, Carter described Brzezinski as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 481.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Jimmy Carter, “Address by Carter to the Nation: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.”
\item \textsuperscript{101} Jimmy Carter, \textit{Keeping Faith}, 481.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 481.
\end{itemize}
knowledgeable, providing him with acute analyses of global occurrences. Brzezinski’s approach to foreign-policy was centered on a strong defense. As a part of the National Security Council (NSC), Brzezinski developed innovative policies toward the Soviet Union in an effort to balance the diplomatic aims of the State Department. However, this political strategizing took place within an environment of mistrust. Brzezinski remained highly suspicious of Soviet claims throughout the Carter presidency.

Brzezinski’s personal history shaped his views toward the Soviet Union. Born and raised in Poland, Brzezinski had studied the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries and possessed a profound knowledge of communist governments and ideologies. The son of a Polish diplomat, Brzezinski spent time in Warsaw, Canada, and finally the U.S., where he attended graduate school at Harvard University. Brzezinski’s Polish origin remained a source of controversy among opponents of the Carter administration because they his background made him biased against the Soviet Union. Many of Brzezinski’s critics saw him as overly aggressive. Critics of Brzezinski pointed to the many disagreements between Brzezinski and Vance over the direction of policy as evidence of such aggression. Brzezinski, more vocal and outspoken, continued to wield a more powerful position than Vance. In fact, Carter regularly asked Brzezinski to speak on his behalf at public events. Brzezinski’s tenure as NSA came to be wholly defined by his difficult relationship with Cyrus Vance and his extremely close friendship with the president.

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105 Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith,* 
107 Danielle Lewis, “Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser to Jimmy Carter, Dies at 89.” 
110 Ibid., 788.
During the Soviet crisis, Brzezinski met with Carter daily for the Presidential Daily Briefing.\textsuperscript{111} As chairman of the SCC, Brzezinski took the lead on the administration’s response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{112} Although Vance also served on this committee, his role remained limited. If the SCC agreed to something, chairman Brzezinski personally delivered to the president the Presidential Directive for signing.\textsuperscript{113}

Moreover, Carter trusted Brzezinski and admired his bold and confident style. Brzezinski made decisions quickly and implemented them even more quickly.\textsuperscript{114} The two men also shared a close friendship. They jogged together, watched movies, and often dined together.\textsuperscript{115} Brzezinski had a hand in writing most of Carter’s major foreign-policy speeches, generally prepared by the NSC speechwriters. In his memoir, Brzezinski explained that he intentionally shaped Carter’s views and policies toward the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{116} Brzezinski’s access to Carter on foreign-policy issues was unmatched by Vance, and he used this access to influence the president on Soviet policy.

President Carter’s development of a negative perception of the Soviet Union reflected Brzezinski’s mistrust of the Soviets. Brzezinski’s primary objective upon entering the White House was to improve the United States’ strategic position in relation to the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{117} Zbigniew Brzezinski believed that one of the primary problems that the Carter administration

\textsuperscript{112} Jean Garrison, “Framing Foreign-policy Alternatives in the Inner Circle: President Carter, His Advisors, and the Struggle for Arms Control Agenda,” 780.
\textsuperscript{114} Jean Garrison, “Framing Foreign-policy Alternatives in the Inner Circle: President Carter, His Advisors, and the Struggle for Arms Control Agenda,” 788.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 318.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 3.
had with the Soviet Union was that it had trouble maintaining its credibility in Moscow.\textsuperscript{118} Brzezinski was concerned that the Soviet’s growing military power would exacerbate issues in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Africa. He also worried that the Soviet Union sought to displace the U.S. as an international power.\textsuperscript{119} Consequently, Brzezinski urged Carter to project a tougher stance toward Moscow. From this perspective, Brzezinski saw the human-rights approach as a counter to Soviet ideology.\textsuperscript{120} His chief recommendations to the president included condemning Soviet intervention in Africa, strengthening NATO defense, increasing defense spending, and publicly exposing the Kremlin’s military buildup.\textsuperscript{121} Brzezinski encouraged Carter to promote the image of America as a “city upon a hill”, thus framing the Soviets as an aggressor that the United States must counteract.\textsuperscript{122}

Regarding Afghanistan, Brzezinski’s interpreted the Soviet invasion as a direct threat to the U.S. security. Brzezinski argued that the invasion essentially transformed Afghanistan from a buffer between the United States and the Soviet Union to an offensive Soviet instrument to be used to strengthen control of the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{123} In a memorandum to President Carter, Brzezinski called for a strong and decisive response to the Soviet invasion, which included possible military confrontation and the showcasing of public outrage.\textsuperscript{124} Brzezinski raised the

\textsuperscript{118} Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter,” Memorandum, Atlanta, December 29, 1979, Carter Presidential Library, Brzezinski Donated Material, Box 17.


\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 317.

\textsuperscript{122} Jean Garrison, “Framing Foreign-policy Alternatives in the Inner Circle: President Carter, His Advisors, and the Struggle for Arms Control Agenda,” 782.

\textsuperscript{123} Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter: A Long-Term Strategy for Coping with the Consequences of the Soviet Action in Afghanistan,” \textit{United States Department of State Office of Historian}, January 9, 1980, accessed from https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v06/d256.

\textsuperscript{124} Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Reflection on Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan,” \textit{The National Security Archive at George Washington University}, December 26, 1979, accessed from
issue repeatedly with President Carter during his briefings; he wanted to implement a sustained and costly reaction.

At the time, public opinion had turned somewhat against Carter. It viewed him increasingly as soft and indecisive. Brzezinski encouraged the president to work toward strengthening his foreign-policy image by initiating a tougher approach to Moscow’s expansionism.125 As part of this approach Brzezinski and the NSC pressed for more stringent actions, and the State Department complied reluctantly. Brzezinski recommended a formal expression for the record of the U.S. position in the form of a State Department publication of Soviet activities in Afghanistan. He also urged Carter to demonstrate publicly sympathy for the Afghan insurgents. Carter implemented all these recommendations.126

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was another major actor in the Carter administration’s foreign-policy decision-making process. Like Brzezinski, Secretary Vance was present during the Carter presidential campaign. In his memoir, Vance notes that he spent a lot of time with Carter before his presidency, informing him on foreign affairs, but a close bond did not develop.127 When Carter asked Vance about Brzezinski’s serving as National Security Advisor, Vance requested two commitments.128 First, Vance wanted Carter to be clear and firm that Vance was the sole spokesman for foreign-policy. Second, he wanted to give Carter his

128 Ibid., 34.
recommendations separately from Brzezinski.\textsuperscript{129} As time progressed, Vance describes a breach in this understanding.

Both Brzezinski and Vance had the opportunity to influence President Carter on foreign-policy. During a weekly Presidential Breakfast, Vance, Brzezinski and Carter would meet to speak frankly about foreign-policy issues.\textsuperscript{130} Secretary Vance also submitted foreign-policy briefings to President Carter. While President Carter respected and listened to Vance, he viewed his policies recommendations as too conservative. He much preferred the bold and innovative policies of Zbigniew Brzezinski.

As a lawyer and head of the State Department, Vance’s approach to foreign-policy differed from that of Brzezinski. He viewed the international system as pluralistic, whereas Brzezinski maintained a bipolar view.\textsuperscript{131} Vance’s primary objective as Secretary of State was diplomacy and building a better relationship with the Soviet Union. Vance preferred to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union rather than take a confrontational approach.\textsuperscript{132} Later in the Carter presidency, Vance understood the need for Carter to look tougher on the Soviet Union, but he did not want to damage U.S.-Soviet relations.\textsuperscript{133} Vance advocated for actions that would decrease conflict with the Soviet Union. Brzezinski criticized Vance’s approach to the Soviet Union, arguing that Vance was too accommodating and eager to reach an agreement.\textsuperscript{134} Vance’s differences with Carter and Brzezinski regarding confrontation versus diplomacy led to his

\textsuperscript{129} President Carter rejected Vance’s second condition to give a separate recommendation. Carter argued that the reason why he rejected Vance’s second condition was to reduce the number of leaks during his presidency. Carter later claimed that many of the administration’s leaks originated from the State Department.


\textsuperscript{131} Jean Garrison, “Framing Foreign-policy Alternatives in the Inner Circle: President Carter, His Advisors, and the Struggle for Arms Control Agenda,” 791.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 781.


resignation in April 1980. Cyrus Vance’s beliefs on how to conduct U.S.-Soviet relations in the end differed quite extensively from those of others within the Carter administration.

In the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Vance agreed that it was an issue, but disagreed with Brzezinski and Carter on how the administration should respond. Like Carter and Brzezinski, Vance saw the Persian Gulf as a strategically important region to the United States. Contrary to Brzezinski and Carter, Vance believed that the reason why the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan was because, as the Soviets argued, the Soviets wanted to secure its border.\footnote{Cyrus R. Vance, \textit{Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign-policy}, 388.} Where the Soviets miscalculated, according to Vance, was in their expectation that the U.S. and the international community would not react in any significant way. Although Vance believed that the Soviet-Afghan War was important, he supported a subtler response, one that would not complicate U.S.-Soviet relations.\footnote{Jean Garrison, “Framing Foreign-policy Alternatives in the Inner Circle: President Carter, His Advisors, and the Struggle for Arms Control Agenda,” 793.} He also argued that sanctions of any kind would exacerbate their already deteriorating relationship. Vance routinely opposed any confrontation with the Soviet Union, an approach that the administration ultimately adopted.\footnote{Ibid., 781.}

\textit{Vice President Walter Mondale}

Although Vice President Walter Mondale was not a predominant decision-maker in American foreign-policy during the Carter presidency, he did play a small role in the decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, cognizant of domestic opinion, Mondale began to take notice of calls to boycott the Moscow Olympics. During a SCC meeting on the Soviet invasion, Mondale suggested that the United States boycott the Moscow Olympics.\footnote{Zbigniew Brzezinski, \textit{Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981},” 434.} Later, Brzezinski, Mondale, Press Secretary Jody Powell, Warren Christopher, and
nominally, Secretary Vance recommended to Carter that the U.S. boycott the Games. Although Mondale was not the primary influencer on President Carter on foreign-policy, he was the person who proposed the idea of an Olympic boycott.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BOYCOTT**

*President Jimmy Carter*

President Carter had little prior knowledge of the intricacies of the Olympics and international sport federations before he decided to boycott the Moscow Olympics. He initially ignored the option of boycotting because the response would be delayed, and the move would hurt American athletes.\(^{139}\) However, Carter was swayed to impose the boycott because he believed that the United States’ absence from the Olympics would deliver a significant blow to Soviet prestige.\(^{140}\) Early on, President Carter wanted to host an alternative competition to the Olympics to appease the athletes and retain public support. However, he neither understood the symbolism of the Olympic movement nor committed enough resources to the alternate competition, which would require housing, sporting facilities, and security.\(^{141}\) The administration struggled to obtain support from other countries and athletes for the alternate games; the prestige of the Olympics could not be matched by this alternative competition and few countries agreed to participate.

The USOC nominally had the right to determine whether the United States would boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. No one within the Carter administration had contacted the USOC before announcing the boycott.\(^{142}\) When organizing the boycott, Carter spent much of

\(^{139}\) Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 80.

\(^{140}\) Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 484.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 484.

his time lobbying government officials who had little control over whether their country would send a delegation to Moscow. Later, however, President Carter, his staff, and Congress spent time lobbying the USOC and other countries’ Olympic federations to boycott the Games in Moscow. These events showcased the Carter administration’s progression in the boycotting effort.

Over time Carter came to understand the intricacies of the Olympics. For example, Carter cited the Olympic principles related to good sportsmanship and fair play as justification for the boycott, arguing that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan violated these principles. In relation to the boycotting effort, Carter wrote:

Throughout the spring, Congress and I had been trying to induce the United States Olympic Committee and the committees in as many other nations as possible not to attend the Olympic Games scheduled in Moscow… We had to struggle all the way; the outcome was always in doubt. Most Olympic committees were wholly independent bodies, whose members deeply resented any government involvement in their decisions. Nevertheless, in television interviews, speeches, and through direct appeals during official meetings, I and many other national leaders pointed out that it would be a violation of Olympic principles of good sportsmanship and fair play to be guests of the Soviet Union under existing circumstances.

Despite the boycott being one of many actions that President Carter enacted in response to the Soviet invasion, he acknowledged that none of these actions would force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. Instead, Carter wanted to make the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as costly as possible. In this, Carter wanted to punish the Soviet Union. By boycotting the Moscow Olympics, the United States would send a strong symbolic message to the Soviet Union.

Carter was criticized for announcing the one-month deadline publicly because it committed him to action prematurely. Because of Carter’s early announcement on Meet the

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143 Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, 140
144 Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, 535.
145 Ibid., 535.
146 Ibid., 482.
Press and the one-month deadline, more actors became involved with the implementation of the boycott, and the process lasted longer. After the mid-January one-month deadline passed, the administration had to reaffirm the boycott in February. The question of whether the boycott would be implemented loomed until May, when the USOC voted to boycott the Olympics in Moscow. Finally, some questioned whether President Carter could be swayed on the decision to boycott before the commencement of the Games in June. The implementation of the Olympics boycott was long and delayed.

National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski

Brzezinski supported the boycott. He argued that the Soviets would use the Olympics as a tool of propaganda, and that the boycott would hurt Soviet prestige.\textsuperscript{147} The boycott also had domestic support, which solidified Brzezinski’s support. In fact, Brzezinski played a central role in providing information regarding the boycott to both Carter and the public. For Carter, he delivered briefings on the boycott’s progress.\textsuperscript{148} For the public, he explained the rationale of the policy. For example, when addressing American Olympic athletes, he explained how sports is an extension of politics, providing the justification for the boycott. Brzezinski remained active and aggressive in implementing the boycott in an effort to punish the Soviet Union in an extremely public forum.

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance

Secretary of State Cyrus Vance opposed the boycott. Instead, he wanted to open communications with the Soviets. Despite these reservations, he publicly stood behind the administration’s decision and helped implement the policy.\textsuperscript{149} For example, in a \textit{Washington Post}
interview, Vance defended the boycott as necessary and justified, and he rejected the argument that the 1936 Berlin Olympics set a historical precedent for participating in the Olympic Games.\footnote{Jane Leavy, “The Olympics Uproar,” The Washington Post, published January 22, 1980, accessed from https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/22/the-olympics-uproar/9aa437cd-0914-41e0-820f-b7c2db1930a5/?utm_term=.31a05bbcc149.} Vance argued that Nazi Germany successfully used the Olympics for propaganda, and that the Soviet Union would do the same. Moreover, Vance contended that the purpose of the boycott was to punish Moscow for the invasion, force Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, and serve as a deterrence against similar actions in the future.\footnote{Cyrus R. Vance, Hard Choices: Critical Years in America’s Foreign Policy, 391.} Ultimately, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was one of the few sources of opposition within the Carter administration, but was obligated to show support for the action as a Cabinet member.

\textit{Vice President Walter Mondale}

After suggesting that the Carter administration boycott the Moscow Olympics, Vice President Mondale was involved with implementing the boycott by garnering domestic support. He lobbied the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and appealed to it to persuade the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to relocate or postpone the 1980 Summer Olympics.\footnote{Barry Lorge, “Politics and Patriotism Influenced U.S. Boycott Vote,” The Washington Post, published April 15, 1980, accessed from https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/sports/1980/04/15/politics-and-patriotism-influenced-us-boycott-vote/6c4e88e4-8530-4f8e-a584-f0d3fe2e8b16/?utm_term=.c1c01285b33b.} Furthermore, Mondale served as a spokesman for President Carter, reiterating Carter’s stance that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan threatened national security. During his speech before the USOC vote on whether to boycott the Olympics, Mondale emphasized the symbolism of the Olympics for the Soviet Union:

> 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.\textsuperscript{153}

Mondale also did not want athletes to feel like political pawns. He thanked them for making a sacrifice for the greater good of the country. Drawing upon the sacrifices that American farmers made during the grain embargo, Mondale reiterated the appeal to Olympic athletes and all Americans to make sacrifices for their country.\textsuperscript{154} Walter Mondale sought to legitimize the use of a sporting boycott as a sanction by gaining domestic support.

\textit{White House Special Counsel Lloyd Cutler}

Once President Carter made the decision to boycott the Games, he delegated the task of organizing the boycott to White House Special Counsel, Lloyd Cutler. Cutler’s sole responsibility was to ensure that the boycott succeeded. Shortly after accepting this position, Cutler recommended that Carter used the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to prohibit television networks such as \textit{NBC} from making additional payments to the Soviet Union to broadcast the Olympics.\textsuperscript{155} Cutler was active in lobbying corporations to cease donations to the USOC and to support the boycotts. To supplement the lost donations going toward the USOC, Cutler offered Robert Kane, president of the USOC, $10 million to make up for its losses.\textsuperscript{156} Cutler also organized a meeting between Lord Killanin, the president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and President Carter. Carter agreed to the meeting because he wanted an opportunity to convince Killanin to support the boycott. Killanin refused


\textsuperscript{154} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{155} Nicholas Sarantakes, \textit{Dropping the Torch}, 170.

to support the boycott, and the meeting proved to be unproductive. Cutler then muddled the boycott’s decision-making process by announcing that if the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan after President Carter’s deadline, but before the Moscow Olympics, the administration would reconsider the boycott. This statement was controversial, and Cutler was increasingly viewed as an official who was creating chaos and confusion regarding the boycott.

The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC)

The primary goal of the USOC and the IOC was to hold a successful Moscow Olympics with all nations present. Predictably, both committees viewed the boycott as a significant blow to the Olympics. To express such sentiments, on January 7, 1980, the USOC voted to resist political intrusions into the Olympics, despite the invasion of Afghanistan. Killanin lobbied officials within the Carter administration to change their minds regarding this issue. Observers of the IOC during this period contended that Killanin was charming but unpersuasive as a negotiator. Consequently, some scholars have argued that Killanin’s personal traits undermined the IOC’s effort to change U.S. policy. Along with Killanin, Robert Kane, the president of the USOC, also appealed to Carter to rescind the boycott. USOC and IOC officials argued that Carter administration was overreacting to the Soviet invasion. Ultimately, Kane acquiesced to the boycott because he feared that the USOC would lose its tax status and governmental funding, which had amounted to $10 million since 1978. On April 22, 1980, the USOC voted 1604 to

157 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 222.
160 Margot Hornblower and Nancy Scannell, “President's Threat to Boycott Olympics Strongly Opposed.”
161 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 222.
162 Ibid., 28.
163 Amy Shipley, “U.S. Olympic Committee Weighs the Highly Charged Option of Government Funding for its Cash-Strapped Programs.”
When Kane made the announcement that the United States would not be participating in the 1980 Summer Olympics to the IOC, he cited President Carter’s argument that participating would endanger national security. Robert Kane believed that if the USOC sent a delegation to the Olympics, it would be unwisely challenging the president on foreign-policy. Thus, the USOC accepted and cooperated with the government’s decision.

**Public Opinion and the Media**

The Carter administration paid close attention to public opinion. Initially, the public supported the boycott, and the media covered it favorably. Knowing the importance of public opinion to President Carter, Brzezinski pointed to supportive news articles as reaffirmation of the decision to boycott. A *Gallup Poll* taken at the time to measure the level of public support of the boycott found that 71 percent of those surveyed supported the boycott; whereas 17 percent were opposed to the measure. Two months later, Gallup polling revealed that the percentage of Americans supporting the boycott had dropped to 61 percent. An *ABC-Louis Harris* survey found 55 percent of the respondents supported the boycott with 39 percent opposing it. The remaining 6 percent were undecided. Other surveys found even more support for the boycott. For example, *The Washington Star* asked respondents “Should the United States boycott the Moscow Olympics?” Slightly over 85 percent responded yes, and 14 percent responded no. Likewise, the *Boston Herald Leader* received similar responses, with 85 percent supportive.

164 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 193.
165 Ibid., 218.
166 Ibid., 222.
168 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 86.
169 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 86.
170 Ibid., 86.
Public opposition to the boycott consisted of athletes and corporations who would have profited from the Olympics. President Carter reminded American athletes that if they attempted to compete in the Olympics, he would revoke their passports. NBC paid the Soviet Union $87 million for the rights to televise the Moscow Olympics. In response to the Carter administration’s boycott announcement, the station began airing individual stories of the athletes opposed to the boycott. This was done even though NBC obtained insurance to recover 98 percent of its financial commitment. Conversely, NBC committed to not airing the Olympics if American athletes were not competing.

Some of the athletes felt that the government was wrongfully using them as pawns in an international political game; others supported the boycott. For example, pentathlon athlete Linda Cornelius Waltman saw the 1980 Moscow Olympics as her only opportunity to compete at a high level. “For me, that was the one chance I had…That is something you shouldn’t take away from an athlete who’s given so much and worked hard.” Conversely, Isaiah Thomas, at the time a sophomore basketball player at Indiana University, stated that he sympathized with the athletes whose careers would be tarnished by not participating in the Olympics, but understood the move. “It was a disappointment. At that time, it was made clear to us by the president of the stance he was taking, and the country was taking. We wanted to do what was right by our country, so we understood and we all followed through.” Some disgruntled athletes sued the USOC for voting to boycott the Olympics, but the case was dismissed. Public support of the boycott began to shift after the U.S. hockey team unexpectedly defeated the Soviet Union during

171 Barry Lorge, “Politics and Patriotism Influenced U.S. Boycott Vote.”
172 Margot Hornblower and Nancy Scannell, “President’s Threat to Boycott Olympics Strongly Opposed.”
173 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid., 133.
the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. After this win a *Gallup Poll* showed that 63 percent of respondents supported attending the Moscow Olympics if the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan before the Games.\textsuperscript{177} Opposition to the boycott was minor and came after the decision had been made.

*Congress*

As an extension of public opinion, both the United States Senate and House of Representatives supported the boycott. After the Vietnam War, members of Congress promoted a more active congressional role in foreign-policy decisions. Consequently, the Carter administration often turned to Congress for support and consultation.\textsuperscript{178} During the Carter administration, Congress stepped up its involvement in Soviet affairs, including the decision to boycott the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow. Congress, in concurrence with the Carter administration, chose to postpone the ratification of SALT II after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and worked with President Carter to implement other sanctions against the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{179} Congress introduced more than a dozen resolutions in support of the Olympic boycott. Senator David Pryor (D-AK) submitted a resolution to boycott the Olympics in Moscow, which his colleagues overwhelmingly supported.\textsuperscript{180} Members of both the House of Representatives and Congress broadly supported the boycott.\textsuperscript{181} In coverage Carter’s State of the Union Address, the media recorded a longstanding applause on the part of both branches of the Congress when Carter mentioned the boycott.\textsuperscript{182} Indeed, support for the boycott was far-reaching.

\textsuperscript{177} Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 133.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 270.
\textsuperscript{180} Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 20.
\textsuperscript{181} Ray Morrison, “Government Documents Relating to the 1980 Olympic Games Boycott.”
The only notable opposition in the Senate came from Senator Barry Goldwater (R-AZ), who argued that participating in the Games was politically important. Goldwater saw the attempt to boycott the Olympics as poor foreign-policy and believed the boycott would politicize a nominally apolitical institution.\textsuperscript{183} Like many in opposition to the Olympic boycott, Goldwater cited Jesse Owen’s defeat of Nazi Germany’s track star in the 1936 Berlin Olympics as evidence that participation rather than a boycott was the most efficient political tool.\textsuperscript{184} Although Congress overwhelmingly supported the boycott, Congressional testimonies revealed some inconsistencies. For example, during the early stages of the boycott, President Carter considered the possibility of holding the Olympics in another location or hosting an alternative to the Games. When Congress began to inquire about the alternatives, problems with the alternative competition effort became apparent.\textsuperscript{185} Ultimately, Congress generally supported Carter in support of a full boycott.

\textit{The International Community}

International response to the United States decision to boycott the Olympics was mixed. In fact, most countries in the North Atlantic Trading Organization (NATO), official U.S. allies, chose not to boycott the Moscow Olympics for varying reasons. Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom supported the boycott because she did not want the Soviet Union to use the Games for propaganda.\textsuperscript{186} However, the United Kingdom’s Olympic federation voted to send a delegation to the Olympics and domestic opinion was opposed to the boycott, so the United Kingdom participated in the Games. Australia also supported the boycott, but later sent athletes.\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{183} Nicholas Sarantakes, \textit{Dropping the Torch}, 20.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{187} Nicholas Sarantakes, \textit{Dropping the Torch}, 92.
some cajoling from both Carter and domestic opinion, West Germany supported the boycott and chose not to send a delegation to the Olympics.\textsuperscript{188} The Netherlands both withdrew funding from its Olympic athletes and refused to send a delegation to the Olympics.\textsuperscript{189}

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\textsuperscript{188} Nicholas Sarantakes, \textit{Dropping the Torch}, bid., 227.

\textsuperscript{189} Margot Hornblower and Nancy Scannell, “President's Threat to Boycott Olympics Strongly Opposed.”
Other allies, such as France, opposed to the boycott. Carter believed that the Olympic boycott would be successful since 140 nations participated in the United Nations condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. However, these sentiments did not transpire to boycotting the Moscow Olympics. Few nations responded to the White House invitation to hold an alternative Olympics. Without the support of other countries and international federations, the Carter administration’s efforts to host an alternative Olympics failed. Unlike the American public, the international community showed demonstrably less support for the boycott.

**WHY BOYCOTT?**

Although the decision to boycott was nominally up to the USOC, President Carter was the primary actor in deciding to boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. He unilaterally announced the boycott during a *Meet the Press Interview*, in which he also warned Olympic athletes not to try to attend on their own, and repeatedly reaffirmed the boycotting effort. Since Carter made the decision, why did he decide to utilize a sporting boycott as a tool of foreign policy?

Sporting boycotts are an extension of sanctions, and governmental officials usually employ sanctions when other efforts have failed. Although sanctions usually are not effective, states still implement them as a symbolic measure, and such was the case with President Carter and the 1980 Moscow Olympics. President Carter knew that military confrontation with the Soviet Union was not an option. The United States military was not prepared for confrontation, and the threat of a nuclear war further undermined such an approach. Thus, the administration’s response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan remained limited to political and economic actions, although economic options were limited since the two countries conducted very little

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190 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 140.
trade with one another. The Carter administration had already implemented numerous sanctions before President Carter’s Meet the Press interview. President Carter believed that these actions—especially the grain embargo—would force the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan, evincing a fundamental misunderstanding of the Soviet Union. The grain embargo failed to achieve its intended goal, so President Carter sought more punitive options. Boycotting the Moscow Olympics was low cost, low risk, and high profile, but largely ineffective in coercing the Soviet Union to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan.

The Carter administration understood the importance of the Olympics to the Soviet Union, stemming from the importance of honor in the Soviet culture. Honor for the Soviets encompasses the ability to defend one’s home and avenge violations and is often associated with nationalism. Historically, honor has been an integral part of Soviet society. Rooted in Eastern Christianity, honor includes the ideal of a strong state with the ability to protect its subjects from internal and external threats. During the Cold War, Soviet propaganda focused on honor, which came to be presented as defending the socialist ideology in conjunction with power and geopolitics.

Moreover, for the Soviet Union, the Olympics symbolized an international recognition of the legitimacy of the Soviet government. Moscow had submitted numerous bids to host the Olympics, and the 1980 Summer Olympics was the first time the bid was accepted. Soviet press covered the progression of the Olympic games during the upcoming months. Although President Carter’s boycott was more symbolic than punitive, the Soviet deeply felt the impact on

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191 Jimmy Carter, Keeping Faith, 483.
193 Ibid., 34.
their honor and self-confidence. President Carter clearly understood that the boycott posed a serious public challenge to Soviet prestige.

The boycott also stood for action. Often political leaders implement sanctions when no other option is available to them. From this perspective, imposing sanctions are better than doing nothing. Furthermore, sanctions send citizens a message of support, express concern, and relay signals to the target state. Carter expressed such sentiments multiple times throughout the boycott effort in public speeches, interviews, and in his writing. Carter argued that the U.S. could not appear complacent in the face of Soviet aggression; attending the Olympics would be conducting “business as usual.”

Individuals can become bound to an unfavorable course of action by escalating their commitment to an action. President Carter publicly committed to the boycott on Meet the Press. After publicly announcing the one-month deadline on national television, Carter could not retract the boycott because it would have questioned his credibility. President Carter cared deeply about his credibility and his popularity among voters, particularly given the looming reelection campaign. When public opinion turned against the boycott after the Winter Olympics, Carter reaffirmed his intentions to boycott. Even if Carter later realized that implementing the boycott could not achieve his intended goals, he was bound to continue the boycott because he had publicly committed to the action.

Beyond President Carter, other individuals in the administration also contributed to the decision to boycott. Brzezinski saw the Soviet Union as an adversary and viewed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a threat to U.S. national security. Given the organization of Carter’s advisory system, Brzezinski, who chaired the SCC, was able to impart his beliefs to President

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Carter multiple times during the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Cyrus Vance, who exercised considerably less influence than Brzezinski, also helped to shape the boycott policy.

Carter was cognizant of the public’s and Congress’s opinion during this time, and the public initially supported the move to boycott the Moscow Olympics. Surveys conducted during the initial stages of the boycott showed that public opinion favored the boycott. Media coverage of the boycott also favored the boycott. Both the Senate and House of Representatives supported the boycott. Even those who did not initially support the boycott—the State Department, the United States Olympic Committee, and the International Olympic Committee—eventually acquiesced to boycott the Moscow Olympics. Allies and other countries’ governmental officials supported the boycott, albeit they did not always have the authority to ensure that its delegation participated in the boycott. With public opinion, the media, and Congress supporting the boycott, Carter had the domestic support to follow through with the decision.

President Carter and others within his administration knew that boycotting the Moscow Olympics would not force the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan. President Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski both argued that the purpose of the boycott was to make the Soviet-Afghan War as symbolically costly as possible for the Soviet Union. The Olympic boycott was aimed against the Soviet Union’s prestige. Carter wanted to convey to the Soviet Union that the United States did not approve of the invasion. Carter was aware that the Soviet Union would use the Games for propaganda and had made significant investments to building facilities for the Games and would ultimately use them to propagandize about Soviet superiority and American
President Carter wanted to inflict the most harm possible upon the Soviet Union without the risk of direct military conflict.

**THE MOSCOW OLYMPICS BOYCOTT: IN ACTION AND THE AFTERMATH**

Despite the U.S. absence from the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow, the Games were successful, especially for the Soviet Union. The Opening Ceremony of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow was exceptional. The Soviet Union exuded national pride through the performances by dancers, musicians, and flags carriers. Most notably, a Soviet basketball player climbed a human tower created by Soviet citizens in order to light the Olympic flame. The stadium was at full capacity, and the Soviet Union earned a sizeable profit from hosting the Games. Without participation from United States and Germany, the Soviet Union won 195 medals, 80 of which were gold. Looking beyond the performance of the Soviet Union, 36 world records were set. Given Soviet performance and the number of world records sets at the Games, the Moscow Olympics were successful for the Soviet Union despite the Carter administration’s effort to foil the event as punishment for the invasion of Afghanistan.

Scholars dispute the question of whether the Olympic boycott succeeded. In total, 80 countries attended the Moscow Olympics, compared to 92 countries participating in the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics. Eighty countries participated in those Olympics. In addition, other delegations competed independently, without a country affiliation. Records also show that 65 nations did not attend the Olympics. Not all nations, however, that did not attend did so in

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196 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 89.  
198 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 238.  
200 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 238.  
202 Nicholas Sarantakes, *Dropping the Torch*, 236.
protest. Some nations simply lacked the resources to send athletes.²⁰³ Indeed, most of the countries that chose to boycott were developing countries, whereas the Olympic movement was more important to developed countries.²⁰⁴ These countries most likely were not coerced into boycotting the Olympics, but wanted to gain favor with the U.S. According to Brzezinski, the boycott was successful since the United States, China, Japan, and West Germany boycotted the Moscow Olympics.²⁰⁵ However, China and Japan may have been important in world politics, but not sports. Furthermore, China, threatened by the Soviet military presence in a bordering country, boycotted not in response to U.S. pressure but for its own reason. According to U.S. State Department’s records, all 65 absent nations were counted as boycotting states.²⁰⁶ The State Department also alleged that the 65 nations that did not attend the Moscow Olympics won 71 percent of the medals in the last Summer Olympics in Montreal.²⁰⁷ According to Nicholas Sarantakes’ assessment, the nations that attended the Moscow Olympics made up 70 percent of the medals won at the 1976 Montreal Olympics.²⁰⁸ Clearly, scholars do not agree regarding the overall effectiveness of the boycott. However, it must be noted that with the absence of athletes from West Germany and the United States, the competition of the Moscow Olympics could not be deemed as elite since a significant number of athletes were missing.

The Carter administration was not successful in forcing the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, but that was not the primary goal of the Olympic boycott. Soviet citizens exposed to Western media were aware that the boycott was in response to international disapproval of

²⁰³ Ibid., 226.
²⁰⁴ Ibid., 226.
²⁰⁷ Nicholas Sarantakes, Dropping the Torch, 226.
²⁰⁸ Nicholas Sarantakes, Dropping the Torch, 226.
their government. Brezhnev espoused that the boycott was an attempt to reignite Cold War competition: “Not a day goes by when Washington has not tried to revive the spirit of the ‘Cold War,’ to heat up militaristic passions. Any grounds are used for this, real or imagined. One example of this is Afghanistan.” To General Secretary Brezhnev, the Carter administration showed disrespect for important interstate exchanges by boycotting the Olympics. In the Soviet press, journalists argued that if the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had not occurred, then the Carter administration would have found another reason to boycott the Moscow Olympics. The Soviet Union was cognizant of the absences of so many countries from the Olympics, including the United States. Evincing the negative sentiments associated with the 1980 Moscow Olympics, Soviet press stated that it was regrettable that the U.S. did not attend the Olympics, but despite the Carter administration’s attempt to destroy the Olympics, the Soviet Union prevailed.

In 1984, the Soviet Union and other communist bloc countries did not attend the Los Angeles Olympics. Soviet officials claimed that Reagan administration would not provide necessary security for Soviet athletes. However, many viewed the Soviet’s absence as simply a pay-back from the U.S. 1980 boycott.

Although scholars agree that the Carter administration’s Olympic boycott did not force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, some argue that the boycott succeeded symbolically. President Carter conveyed clearly to the world U.S. disapproval of Soviet aggression against Afghanistan. The Carter administration’s boycott punished and embarrassed the Soviet Union on

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209 “Olympic Boycott: 'A Genuine Punishment',”
210 Nicholas Sarantakes, Dropping the Torch, 229.
a widely observed global stage. Moreover, given that more than 60 countries refused to attend the Moscow Olympics, its success was enhanced. In addition, the absence of American and German athletes undermined the value of the medals the Soviets claimed at the Games. The Soviet Union flaunted the fact that it had dominated the Moscow Olympics, but its victories were not viewed as fully legitimate. Four years later the Soviets retaliated by inflicting similar embarrassment on the U.S. by refusing to attend the Los Angeles Olympics. Thus, the imposition of a sporting boycott as a foreign-policy tool worked because the boycott did what it was intended to do—embarrass the Soviet Union.

CONCLUSION

President Carter boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics to punish the Soviet Union for invading Afghanistan. The leaders in his administration knew that utilizing the sporting boycott as a foreign-policy tool would not force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan. However, they still chose to implement the Olympic boycott because it would challenge the Soviet Union’s prestige in a very public setting.

Key figures in the Carter administration, including President Carter, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, framed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a threat to the United States. Other actors such as Vice President Walter Mondale, White House Special Counsel Lloyd Cutler, the United States Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee, Congress, public opinion, the media, and the international community influenced the decision to boycott and contributed to its implementation. The Carter administration chose to enact a sporting boycott because past economic and diplomatic sanctions failed as a means of inflicting harm on Moscow. Moreover, it wanted to embarrass and diminish the Soviet Union, which was hosting the Olympic Games at the time. By refusing to attend and
convincing other countries to stay home, the U.S. effectively undermined the quality of the Moscow Games and undermined the legitimacy and value of Soviet Olympic victories.

Sports and politics are often deeply intertwined. This connection is especially apparent during international sporting competitions such as the Olympics. The increasingly overt connection between sports and politics has prompted some scholars to deem the use of diplomacy or other foreign-policy tools in influencing sporting competitions as *sports diplomacy*. Sports diplomacy can be utilized to improve or strengthen friendly relations or to inflict punishment, shame, or embarrassment. In the case of the 1980 Olympic boycott, President Carter’s use of sports diplomacy sought to punish and embarrass the Soviet Union on a very global stage.

Historically, scholars such as Robert Pape, Jon Hovi, Robert Huseby, and Detlef Sprinz have argued that sanctions are not effective in coercing a state to alter its behavior. Their theory certainly holds true in this case. But the goal of the Carter administration reached beyond forcing Soviet withdrawal. This boycott provides an example of a country using soft power as a mechanism for exposing, reprimanding, and punishing a recalcitrant regime. This outcome, while difficult to measure, fulfilled its objective. Given the circumstances and the constraints on available tools, the Carter administration chose the right tool and wielded it effectively.
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