

2011

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Roundtable Review

www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables

Volume XII, No. 26 (2011)

20 June 2011

Roundtable Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse
Roundtable Web/Production Editor: George Fujii

Introduction by Thomas Maddux

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes. *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, The Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 356 pages, 21 b/w illus. ISBN: 9780521176668 (paperback, \$28.99); 9780521194778 (hardback, \$90.00).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-26.pdf>

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes' *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, The Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War* represents another contribution to the shifting historiography on President Jimmy Carter's record as a foreign policy leader. As Sarantakes points out in an extensive footnote,¹ assessments on Carter have ebbed and flowed from initial critical evaluations such as Gaddis Smith's *Morality and Reason: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (1986) to what Sarantakes calls "hybrid memoirs/monographs" by scholar/participants such as Robert Pastor, Anthony Lake, and William Quandt who offered mixed assessments on Carter's handling of specific crisis situations in Latin American and the Middle East.² Several political scientists, such as Erwin Hargrove, challenged the more critical views of Carter, and historians joined in with a revisionist perspective that emphasized Carter's strong leadership and successful diplomacy in the Middle East and with issues such as human rights and the Panama Canal treaty.³ Many historians, however, rejected any consensus on Carter and a number launched critical articles and more sweeping critiques of Carter's foreign policy leadership on specific issues such as human rights as well as overall policy including Kenton Clymer, Burton Kaufman, William Stueck, and Scott Kaufman.⁴

In a recent H-Diplo roundtable on Betty Glad's *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy*, a number of the authors mentioned above contributed reviews that reinforced their earlier assessments. Hargrove, for example, suggested that Glad did not give Carter enough credit for his successes in the normalization of relations with China, the Panama canal treaties, and the Camp David accords and too much blame for the fall of the Shah of Iran and the rise of the Ayatollah

¹ Nicholas Evan Sarantakes' *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, The Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), n. 45, pp. 280-282. In his response Sarantakes does assert that views his study as focusing more on the international dimensions of the boycott than Carter and preferring "Political Games" as a title, an issue that he lost vis-à-vis the publisher.

² Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Anthony Lake, *Somoza Falling: The Nicaraguan Dilemma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1986).

³ See Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Robert Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); and David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, "Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights: The Development of a Post-Cold War Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History* 28:1 (January 2004): 113-43.

⁴ See Kenton Clymer, "Jimmy Carter, Human Rights, and Cambodia," *Diplomatic History* 27:2 (April 2003): 245-278; Burton Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993); William Stueck, "Placing Jimmy Carter's Foreign Policy," in Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham, eds., *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and Scott Kaufman, *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).

Khomeini. Pastor also noted that Glad gives Carter little credit beyond the Panama Canal treaties and Camp David and puts too much emphasis on a clash between Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. As Pastor concluded, “no president—with the possible exception of Harry Truman ... ---accomplished more foreign policy achievements that were strategically essential but politically costly than Jimmy Carter.”⁵ Another Glad roundtable participant, Robert A. Strong, also pushed back against Glad’s critical assessment of Carter’s handling of relations with the Soviet Union from his initial failed proposal for deeper cuts in strategic nuclear weapons than what had been agreed upon by President Gerald Ford at the Vladivostok summit in 1974 to Carter’s failure to get the SALT II accord approved, and speculates about what “would have happened if Carter’s counterpart in the Soviet Union had been Mikhail Gorbachev. Reagan and Gorbachev achieved a great deal; but how much more would a Carter-Gorbachev matchup have accomplished?”⁶ In his review, Scott Kaufman suggested that Glad, making use of newly released Carter presidential documents and interviews, supports a shift back to the original critical assessment of Carter as foreign policy leader, an interpretation articulated in his own book.

In *Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, The Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War*, Sarantakes supports the critical evaluation without much reservation. As the author states at the end of his review of the different interpretations, his study will demonstrate that in the “Olympic boycott, Carter failed as a trustee, that his judgment was poor, and this leadership was ineffective. His ‘hands on’ approach toward leadership was often counterproductive.” (n. 45, p. 281)

The reviewers find Sarantakes’ thesis on Carter persuasive and his research quite impressive. Tim Stanley praises *Dropping the Torch* as an “all too rare example of a narrow policy history that has wider historical value” in its depiction of Carter, his advisers, and how they mishandled the ill-conceived boycott of the Moscow Olympics. Kaufman endorses Sarantakes’ assessment of Carter on the boycott and is impressed by the primary source research that includes “numerous diaries, newspapers and magazines from seventeen nations (and in four languages) and archival materials and government publications from not just the United States but also Ireland, the United Kingdom and Switzerland.” Rowland Brucken agrees on the thesis and research, noting that “Sarantakes describes President Carter as a micromanager, hasty-decision maker, impatient policymaker, poor strategic planner, uncompromising moralist and clumsy diplomat.” Finally, Michael Ezra notes that the “sources serve the thesis well. As the reader begins to understand how various actors around the world perceived Carter’s actions, the clearer it becomes that the boycott was a fool’s errand, doomed from the beginning to alienate potential allies.”

⁵ See H-Diplo Roundtable Review on Betty Glad’s *An Outsider in the White House: Jimmy Carter, His Advisors, and the Making of American Foreign Policy* at <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-6.pdf>, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

The reviewers do take issue with Sarantakes concerning several of his assertions on the boycott and its relationship to Carter's objective, its impact on détente with the Soviet Union, the broader context of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, and the political context of the 1980 election. Sarantakes, for example, refers at several points to the "efforts of the Carter administration to destroy the modern incarnation of the Olympics." (1 and 11) Ezra and Brucken note the lack of direct evidence for this assertion, the author's reliance on several memoranda by White House Counsel Lloyd Cutler supporting a counter-Olympics and the filing of an anti-trust lawsuit against the International Olympics Committee, and state that the repetition of the assertion "does nothing to advance his thesis or make his account more interesting."

The reviewers also would have appreciated more analysis of the relationship between Carter's boycott campaign, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the crumbling of détente between Washington and Moscow, and the election of 1980. Sarantakes asserts that domestic political factors "were the primary influences, rather than international considerations that shaped Carter's decisions." (75) Stanley and Kaufman, however, would have welcomed more development of the domestic political context and Carter's bitter primary battle with Senator Edward Kennedy as well as his considerations on his eventual Republican adversary, Ronald Reagan. Ezra points to the need for clarification on Carter's views on détente in 1980 and whether he thought there was much of value left in détente after the Kremlin sent the Red Army into Kabul. Brucken and Stanley note the absence of the diplomatic context for Carter's response on Afghanistan. In Chapter 4 on "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan", Sarantakes indicates that at least some Soviet officials such as Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko warned that sending the Red Army into Afghanistan would end détente.⁷ (62) In noting that "Soviet leaders were far from clear at the time as to their limited objectives," Brucken emphasizes that considering their backing of communist movements and Marxist governments in Africa and elsewhere "perhaps Sarantakes is being too hard on Carter given the uncertainty surrounding Soviet foreign policy aims and objectives in 1979." Sarantakes does mention that in addition to the Olympic boycott, Carter banned grain sales to the Soviet Union and Washington initiated a military draft. (84) The President also embargoed the shipment of new technology to Moscow, increased military spending, drastically increased U.S. aid to the mujahideen resistance to the Red Army in Afghanistan, and announced the Carter Doctrine in which Carter asserted that the U.S. would resist with force any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region. Since the Olympic movement survived Washington's and Moscow's failed boycotts in 1980 and 1984, the more substantial significance of Carter's overall response may have been the expansion of U.S. involvement with the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan as well as assessments about the long-term impact of U.S. aid to the mujahideen and its contribution to both Mikhail Gorbachev's later decision to withdraw

⁷ In *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*, Vlad Zubok interprets Leonid Brezhnev and his Politburo advisers as trying to retain détente at the same time that they operated within a revolutionary-imperial paradigm that led to continued competition with the U.S. in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Soviet officials realized that détente was over when they invaded Afghanistan.

from Afghanistan, wind down the Cold War, and abandon a Marxist view on international relations and revolutionary competition with the capitalist West, and Washington's long road to its own Afghan quandary.

Participants:

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes is an associate professor of strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Southern California. He also earned a M.A. degree in history from the University of Kentucky. Before that he earned a B.A. in history from the University of Texas. He is the author of *Keystone: The American Occupation of Okinawa and U.S.-Japanese Relations* (2000), *Seven Stars: The Okinawa Battle Diaries of Simon Bolivar Buckner, Jr. and Joseph Stilwell* (2004), and *Allies Against the Rising Sun: The United States, the British Nations, and the Defeat of Imperial Japan* (2009). He has published a number of articles that have appeared in journals such as *Diplomatic History*, *English Historical Review*, *The Journal of Military History*, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, and ESPN.com. He has won five writing awards. He is a book review editor for *Presidential Studies Quarterly*.

Dr. Rowland Brucken is an Associate Professor of History at Norwich University. He has a book manuscript under review by Northern Illinois University Press on American human rights policy during and after World War II. Currently, he is researching a second book on the intersection of President Dwight Eisenhower's psychological warfare strategy, the Cold War, and domestic race relations. Another research interest broadly examines the history of international human rights law and how post-conflict societies can hold the perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable through courts, truth commissions, and other processes.

Michael Ezra has a Ph.D. in American studies from the University of Kansas and is currently associate professor of American multicultural studies at Sonoma State University. His publications include the book *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* (Temple University Press, 2009) and the edited volume *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives* (ABC-CLIO, 2009). He is currently assembling an edited volume under contract with Routledge that explores the economic aspects of the civil rights movement

Scott Kaufman is associate professor of History at Francis Marion University. He is the author or co-author of six books, including *Plans Unraveled: The Foreign Policy of the Carter Administration* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008). He recently completed a manuscript on Project Plowshare.

Tim Stanley is a research fellow at Royal Holloway College, University of London. He took his PhD in history from Cambridge University in 2007. He is the author of *Kennedy vs. Carter: the 1980 Struggle for the Democratic Party's Soul* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2010) and of a forthcoming biography of Pat Buchanan.

On 6 April 1980, President Jimmy Carter sent Robert Kane, the President of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), a telegram imploring the organization to support his already proclaimed boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The text of the telegram provides, in a nutshell, the touchstone for Nicholas Evan Sarantakes' thesis. "[The invasion] JEOPARDIZES THE SECURITY OF THE PERSIAN GULF AREA AND THREATENS WORLD PEACE AND STABILITY. [A vote by the USOC to attend the games] WOULD WEAKEN THE INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC MOVEMENT. IF WE CLEARLY AND RESOLUTELY SHOW THE WAY, OTHER NATIONS WILL FOLLOW." (185-186; emphasis in the original)

Three strikes is an out in baseball, and Sarantakes skillfully shows that while the president's three arguments, thrown hard and often without precision, persuaded the USOC to stay out of the Olympics, they influenced few other players who faced Carter's pitches. The author argues that the invasion of Afghanistan was actually a limited move by the Soviet Union to prop up a communist state on its border, not an effort to fell the dominoes and gain access to Persian Gulf oil fields. Carter's exaggeration of the threat, due to pressure by National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, the president's falling approval rating heading into the 1980 elections, and his desire to "look tough" against the backdrop of the Iranian hostage crisis, forced him to find ways to punish the Soviet Union and thereby force a withdrawal. He seized upon an Olympic boycott for several other reasons often based on mistaken assumptions or exaggerated expectations. Believing that Olympic committees were agencies of national governments and therefore not independent bodies, Carter assumed that Western allies would support his boycott and simply ban their athletes from attending. Such a unified display of displeasure would utilize the formally apolitical arena of transnational sport to score a diplomatic victory over the international Marxist menace. American voters, proud of a decisive leader who had justly ended détente by exposing the Soviet Union as a threat to global peace and security, would re-elect Carter over noted anti-communist Republican Ronald Reagan. The favorite of the tiny village of Plains, Georgia, would then enjoy his final full year in office by presiding over the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles.

Carter's high hopes for boycott that would send a pointed message to Moscow rested on naivité and ignorance, according to Sarantakes. Western governments, with the exception of Great Britain and possibly West Germany, refused to interfere with their independent national Olympic affiliates. Even Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, despite publicly backing Carter, refused to seize athletes' passports or take any other measures to keep her nation's Olympians home. At the games teams from 80 nations participated in Moscow, including most of America's closest allies including Canada, Australia, Spain, and France, as well as all of Central America. Efforts within the Carter administration to relocate the Games or to stage an alternative celebration in a non-communist nation, either of which might have persuaded nations to join Carter's initiative, failed once obvious logistical impediments appeared. Moreover, the President's periodic diplomatic blundering undercut his cause. Sending Muhammad Ali, an uninformed, though notably outspoken envoy to

lobby African nations and not informing European allies of the boycott plan until they read about it in the newspapers are only two examples cited by Sarantakes. Moreover, the stay-away led most of the Communist Bloc to refuse to send teams to the 1984 Summer Games. Ironically, the communist bloc might have acted otherwise had it learned from the boycott four years earlier. In both cases the move did little to dampen enthusiasm for the Games and instead only isolated the boycotting nations.

Sarantakes describes President Carter as a micromanager, hasty decision-maker, impatient policymaker, poor strategic planner, uncompromising moralist, and clumsy diplomat described by pundits in the 1980s. Burton Kaufman was one of the first historians to use archival sources and summarized the “traditional” school by explaining in his 1993 book, “Carter failed to establish the base of public support and political legitimacy he needed in order to be successful in his role as a trustee president. Instead the events of his four years in office projected an image to the American people of a hapless administration in disarray.”¹ Douglas Brinkley tried, though, in his 1996 Stuart Bernath Memorial Lecture to publicize a Carter “revisionist” interpretation that celebrated accomplishments in the Middle East, Panama, and China. Yet even he conceded that a major impetus for this view was Carter’s humanitarian work as an ex-president rather than as a result of archival discoveries or a systemic re-evaluation of the administration’s policies.² What Sarantakes has added to this debate is a reminder to heed the advice of David Schmitz and Vanessa Walker. They wrote in 2004 that studies of Carter’s foreign policy “must move beyond the charges that it was weak and naïve to an examination of the actual implementation of the policy and its impact on American interests, and it should be judged on the basis of how the administration set out to conduct its policy and not on the criteria of its critics.”³

Sarantakes accomplishes this by using a vast array of primary sources from government archives, non-governmental organizations, and newspapers from seventeen nations to expose the fallacies of Carter’s vision. His extensive endnotes include several that are lengthy historiographical narratives and leave a clear research trail.

One weakness of the book is its laying of blame for the diplomatic context solely on Carter. While Sarantakes rightfully points out that the invasion of Afghanistan marked the first use of Soviet military power outside of its traditional sphere of influence, he condemns Carter for acting with alarm and fearing the worst about Moscow’s ultimate intentions. However, it is important to remember that Soviet leaders were far from clear at the time as to their limited objectives. Moreover, the 1970s marked a decidedly new commitment by Leonid Brezhnev to support communist movements and governments in Africa and southeast Asia,

¹ Burton Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter Jr.* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 3.

² Douglas Brinkley, “The Rising Stock of Jimmy Carter: The ‘Hands on’ Legacy of Our Thirty-ninth President.” *Diplomatic History* 20 (Fall 1996), 505-529.

³ David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker, “Jimmy Carter and the Foreign Policy of Human Rights.” *Diplomatic History* 28 (January 2004), 143.

which makes it understandable for policymakers such as Brzesinski to believe that the communist giant was becoming more aggressive in staking out a larger theater of action. In his award-winning study of the Cold War, Odd Westad quotes a high-ranking Soviet official as saying that due to communist victories in southeast Asia, southern Africa, and the Horn of Africa, that “the world is turning in our direction.”⁴ Perhaps Sarantakes is being too hard on Carter given the uncertainty surrounding Soviet foreign policy aims and objectives in 1979.

If Carter was guilty of drawing exaggerated conclusions, as Sarantakes clearly proves in his book, the author is likewise implicated on the book’s first page. There he advances the argument that the ultimate goal of the president and his advisors was to “destroy the modern incarnation of the Olympics.” (1) The only evidence to support such a conclusion comes from two policies proposed by White House Counsel Lloyd Cutler. In several memos, Cutler supported the holding of a “counter-Olympics” in 1980 as well as the filing of an anti-trust lawsuit in federal court against the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Neither proposal received any traction within the country or abroad. Only Great Britain was willing to pay for the former, and no country volunteered to host a quasi-Olympics. The Justice Department, which would be the plaintiff in any lawsuit, had no problem listing the terrible international repercussions of an American court action against the organizer of one of the world’s premier sporting events. Moreover, the events fleshing out the latter initiative consume less than four pages of Sarantakes’ narrative and are hardly proportionate to the breadth and seriousness of the claim itself.

Sarantakes perceptively concludes that the boycott “was too weak to change Soviet actions but too strong for them [sic] to ignore.” (264) It fuelled an end to détente, changed nothing in Afghanistan, failed to help re-elect Carter, and exacerbated tensions between the U.S. Government and the IOC. It also divided American athletes and might have politicized and polarized an important global sporting event. Judging by Carter’s own expectations, his policy for Sarantakes was “a failure of Olympic proportions.” (261) His occasional exaggerated assertions notwithstanding, it is hard to argue with Sarantakes’ conclusions, reached as they are in a work based on solid and deep scholarship.

⁴ Odd Westad, *The Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 241.

This book argues that the Carter Administration's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics was foolhardy. President Jimmy Carter refused to understand that the Olympics was an inappropriate site for an American response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He needed the support of the International Olympic Committees for the boycott to succeed, but Carter never took into account that most of them operated independently of their national governments. They were apolitical by nature and therefore would never go along with the plan. Although he could strong-arm the United States Olympic Committee into reluctantly acquiescing, Carter's scheme fizzled on the world stage. When it was all said and done, the legacy of the failed boycott was that it insulted the Soviet Union enough to upset détente and reactivate the Cold War while having no effect on the Afghanistan campaign. It was not the Soviet Union that was inconvenienced by Carter's actions, but instead the Olympic movement and American athletes that suffered. Carter created an unnecessary crisis that singlehandedly undid an uneasy peace between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Two of the book's most obvious strengths are the clear, convincing thesis and the impressive amount of research that went into creating it. Using international material to cover an international event, Sarantakes tells the tale from a wide variety of perspectives, mining the archives of newspapers and organizations from over a dozen countries, many of them in their original languages. The sources serve the thesis well. As the reader begins to understand how various actors around the world perceived Carter's actions, the clearer it becomes that the boycott was a fool's errand, doomed from the beginning to alienate potential allies. The author merits commendation for tackling successfully a project of this scope and his argument benefits from his thoroughness.

The author also deserves praise for his clear writing style and organization of the book's content, as well as his sense of narrative detail. It must have been difficult to process the scope of information that Sarantakes gathered for this study, but he has done so in engaging ways that clarify the story for readers instead of burying them in minutiae, at times to humorous effect. The descriptions of the Los Angeles Olympic Committee's bumbling attempt to bid for the 1976 Summer Games—from its director's accidentally knocking over a table just prior to his presentation to its distasteful use of scantily-clad models to convince international officials of its viability—lend a warmth to the book that not all authors can create. There are other examples—the mention of Carter's hand-correcting a typo on a piece of correspondence as a signifier of his micro-engagement and his staff's administrative sloppiness—that deliver the author's message in an appealing manner while providing the reader precious nuance.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is its portrayal of Jimmy Carter, who is lambasted throughout as an inept strategist saddled with myopic vision and a pig-headed streak. Moreover, Sarantakes hints that Carter's post-presidential pronouncements indicate that he has not changed much since the boycott. American historical memory of his failed presidency has yielded to the respect accorded a Nobel Peace Prize winner, but this

book calls into question just how much stock we should put into Carter's recent renaissance.

It is the portrayal of Carter, however, that at times leads to frustrating narrative turns toward shaky evidentiary ground. Particularly concerning is Sarantakes' repeated claim that Carter wanted to destroy the Olympic movement, even after he knew that the boycott would do nothing to challenge the Soviet position in Afghanistan. The author fails to provide direct evidence to support this claim, but more puzzling is his insistence upon repeating it even though it does nothing to advance his thesis or make his account more interesting. It is utterly unnecessary. There is also no explanation offered regarding what Carter thought he would gain from destroying the Olympic movement. It would seem that even though he failed to do so, Carter wanted only to bend the Olympics to his will, as Ronald Reagan would do so well in 1984, not destroy it.

Conversely, there are times when analytical speculation would have helped readers understand the author's perspective on what Carter's motivation was for knowingly and recklessly attacking détente. Was it Carter's ego, personal insecurity, and poor judgment? An attempt to rectify an image of being indecisive and ineffective? A scheme to bolster the military-industrial complex and jumpstart a recession-bound America? Did the Soviet Union pose a threat to United States national security that most observers have not properly understood? Since the boycott and its threat to détente was one of the biggest blunders of Carter's presidency, it would behoove the author to explain what factors might have motivated Carter as he stumbled down the wrong road. Sarantakes also fails to explore why the Nixon Administration was so anxious to capture the 1976 Olympics, thus marking the games as a key Cold War battle site. Was it Nixon's love of sport? Had Sarantakes offered this kind of analysis, it could have rendered further insight into Carter's presidency and personality via comparisons to Nixon.

There are also some minor criticisms. The above praising of the author's use of detail and the request for further exploration of presidential motivation notwithstanding, the book felt slightly too long and at times the narrative felt cumbersome despite the respectable prose. There are at least ten unintentional typos independent of the author's decision to reproduce verbatim quoted material including errors. This sloppiness carries over into the index, from which a number of key figures are omitted.

Overall the author should be proud of what he has done. He has tracked down an international collection of sources and has arranged them in an orderly and readable fashion around a convincing and interesting thesis. This book increased my understanding of how diplomacy works and changed my views about Jimmy Carter.

“The fact is that there is probably no single action short of war that would punish Moscow more than to have the Olympics taken away or spoiled.” So commented *Time* magazine in late January 1980,¹ about a week after President Jimmy Carter threatened to boycott that year’s Summer Olympics, to be held in the Soviet Union. Coming on the heels of the Kremlin’s invasion of Afghanistan, Carter saw his threat as a way of convincing Moscow to withdraw its forces. As Nicholas Saratankes explains in his excellent book, *Dropping the Torch*, not only did the Soviets refuse to back down in the face of American pressure, but the Carter administration’s handling of the boycott was marked by ineptitude, mismanagement, and a failure to understand how the international Olympic movement functioned.

Those involved in the Olympic movement have long claimed that it is beyond politics. “The United States Olympic Committee firmly believes that if the worldwide Olympic movement is to continue successfully, it must remain apolitical,” United States Olympic Committee (USOC) President Robert Kane and USOC Executive Director F. Don Miller wrote to Carter in January 1980.² As Sarantakes and other scholars explain, however, the modern Olympic movement has been politicized from its beginning. The International Olympic Committee (IOC), established in 1894, has had to address international disputes, such as that between China and Taiwan, in determining teams that would attend the games; has awarded the Olympics to certain nations to make a political statement, as seen in its decision to have Belgium host the 1916 games; and has witnessed countries use the Olympics as a propaganda forum, of which the 1936 games in Berlin is a famous example.³ Even today, politics and the Olympics remain intertwined, as evidenced by calls to boycott the 2008 Beijing Games.

The clash between politics and the international Olympic movement which occurred in 1980 traced back to 1974, when the IOC reluctantly awarded the Summer Games to the Soviet Union. At the time the IOC made its decision, détente had shown signs of weakening. Carter had hoped to give détente new life, but the superpowers proved unable to agree on what constituted violations of that policy. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, détente ended up pushed to the wayside. Instead, Carter sought “to hurt the Soviets” (p. 83), and a boycott of the Olympics offered one means of doing so. Although it was West Germany’s ambassador to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Rolf Pauls, who first suggested a boycott of the games, the idea received a wide and positive reception in the United States

¹ “Olympics: To Go or Not to Go,” *Time* 115 (28 January 1980): 15.

² Kane and Miller to Carter, 3 January 1980, Staff Offices, Office of the Staff Secretary, Handwriting File, Box 166.

³ On this score, see, in addition to Saratankes, Derick L. Hulme, Jr., *The Political Olympics: Moscow, Afghanistan, and the 1980 U.S. Boycott* (New York: Praeger, 1990), and John Hoberman, *The Olympic Crisis: Sport, Politics, and the Moral Order* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1986).

among journalists, lawmakers, and the general public. After further consideration, Carter announced on January 20 that the Soviet Union had one month to withdraw from Afghanistan. Otherwise, he wanted to see the Summer Games “postponed or cancelled” (p. 95).

From the start, the plan for a boycott was marked by poor planning and implementation. Carter has become known as a micromanager, even taking the time to write memoranda regarding how many pens to use at signing ceremonies or demanding that the White House tennis courts be cleaned of leaves. Yet he was not a very good micromanager. As Sarantakes notes, Carter would come up with policies without prioritizing them or considering the intricacies of getting them executed. The Olympic boycott was one example. Four days before issuing his threat not to have a U.S. team attend the games, Carter had appointed his counsel, Lloyd Cutler, to oversee any boycott. Comments Sarantakes, “This meeting signaled the beginning of Cutler’s inept and amateurish effort to impose Carter’s will on the international Olympic movement” (p. 92).

That effort appeared on the surface to have some legs, for there was talk outside the United States about a boycott. Here Sarantakes deserves special commendation for using, in addition to a wide variety of secondary materials, numerous diaries, newspapers and magazines from seventeen nations (and in four languages), and archival materials and government publications from not just the United States but also Ireland, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. The author explains that countries such as West Germany, Canada, and Australia had begun as well to consider the implications of not attending the Summer Games. Yet once the Carter administration began in early February to try to organize an international boycott, it became clear just how much the White House was in over its head. First, in some countries, among them West Germany, domestic politics affected their willingness to follow the U.S. lead. Second, the administration did not help matters by sending boxer Muhammad Ali rather than a high-level government official to Africa to round up support on that continent. Third, Washington faced strong resistance from the IOC and its president, Lord Killanin, who, while not a very strong leader, was just as determined to save the international Olympic movement as Carter appeared determined to destroy it. Fourth, the White House did not understand the ideology or the decentralized nature of the international Olympic movement. For instance, many governments did not have the power to compel their national Olympic Committees to accept a boycott. Even the USOC resisted Carter’s call not to send a team to the Summer Games. Finally, a proposal to hold alternate games somewhere outside the Soviet bloc that would offer a place for Olympians to compete proved a non-starter.

By late March, the boycott was in serious trouble. The White House believed the British Olympic Association’s (BOA) vote to attend the Summer Games was especially damaging. For one, the BOA’s decision echoed throughout Western Europe. Moreover, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), which had a contract with the Soviets to air the games in the United States—a contract on which the White House hoped to get NBC to stop payments—had for some time been airing stories about the impact a boycott would have upon U.S. Olympians, and after the BOA’s decision, both the American Broadcasting Corporation and the Central Broadcasting System began televising similar programs. Even

U.S. public opinion, though still behind a boycott, began to show signs of second-guessing such a move. Rather than back down, the White House redoubled its efforts, using the Export Administration Act to stop NBC from paying its contract and threatening in early April legal action to prevent American athletes from going to Moscow. Determining that continued dissent would mean its destruction, the USOC, to the anger of many U.S. Olympians, voted on 12 April 1980 not to send a team to the games.

The USOC vote was significant, for “it set in motion a series of civil wars between the followers of Jimmy Carter and Lord Killanin for control of the international Olympic movement” (p. 196). Each sought to convince other countries to follow their lead. In some cases, this generated heated disagreement; indeed, in “Australia and New Zealand, the debate was more intense and ugly than any other place on the planet” (p. 208). Ultimately, about 80 nations attended the games, while another 65 refused their invitations.

Sarantakes correctly writes that the story of the boycott did not end with the Summer Games. Because the USOC had violated the Olympic Charter by doing the White House’s bidding, it faced potential sanction. So did the city of Los Angeles. The IOC had awarded that city the right to host the 1984 Summer Games; if it so chose, the International Olympic Committee could strip Los Angeles of that award and give it to another country. In both cases, the IOC decided not to apply any punishments. A final reverberation was in 1984, when the Soviet Union and its European satellites announced they would not attend the Summer Olympics.

Sarantakes persuasively concludes that the boycott was “a failure of Olympic proportions” (p. 261). It was poorly planned and ineptly implemented by the Carter administration. Furthermore, it found intense opposition from Lord Killanin, who refused to budge in the face of American pressure. Finally, “[t]he boycott had no impact on the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan” (p. 264). The Carter administration’s initiative was an example of “soft power” in that it had an impact in the realms “of public relations and propaganda” but was “a weak tool for diplomacy” (p. 12). While the White House’s efforts certainly caught the attention of officials in Moscow, the boycott was not strong enough to convince the Soviets to alter their plans vis-à-vis Afghanistan.

There are a couple of issues which Sarantakes might have addressed. While he points to the relationship between the boycott and Carter’s bid for the presidency, he could have developed this a little further. For instance, at the time Carter announced his threat to use legal measures to keep the U.S. Olympians home, he had largely turned back the challenge posed by Senator Edward Kennedy to his renomination as the Democratic candidate. Yet according to public opinion polls, most Americans considered both Kennedy and the likely Republican nominee, Ronald Reagan, as stronger leaders than Carter; Kennedy had won enough delegates to stay in the race until the Democrats held their national convention; and Representative John Anderson (R-Illinois) had entered the campaign as an independent and stood to draw more votes from Carter than Reagan. Accordingly, it was all the more important that the president achieve some kind of policy victory, which at the very least meant forcing the U.S. Olympic team to stay put.

Another matter is the meeting that took place between Carter and Killanin in May. Sarantakes faults Killanin for waiting so long to meet with the U.S. president. “[This] was a conference that should have taken place in late December or early January, before Carter committed himself and his administration to a boycott” (p. 224). Yet later, the author appears to backtrack. “Should Killanin have made an effort to meet with Carter and other officials before they reached this decision? One would think the answer to this question would be ‘yes,’ but the administration was making no effort to consult with anyone involved in the Olympics....There is no reason to believe that Killanin could have made contact with influential individuals within the White House or that they would have listened to him” (p. 263). One must wonder, therefore, whether Killanin deserves such criticism. Carter had committed himself and the prestige of his office to the boycott, and with both he and Killanin unwilling to give ground, would a meeting in December or January have made any difference?

These comments, however, do not detract from what is a superbly-researched, well-written book. *Dropping the Torch* certainly will be for a long time to come the definitive account of the Carter administration’s endeavor to organize an international boycott of the 1980 Olympics.

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes has achieved two remarkable feats. First, he has written a book about sport that didn't send me to sleep. Second, he has produced perhaps the most damning scholarly indictment of the presidency of Jimmy Carter I have ever read.

Dropping the Torch: Jimmy Carter, the Olympic Boycott, and the Cold War is an all too rare example of a narrow policy history that has wider historical value. Sarantakes' dense and impressively researched narrative charts how and why President Carter chose to use a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics to protest the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The boycott campaign exposed a gulf in values between the White House and the Olympics movement. Carter regarded the event as a political theatre and a weapon of 'soft power'. The athletes and the International Olympics Committee saw it as a trial of individual effort and an opportunity to unite nations through friendly competition. Sarantakes shows how the boycott destroyed athletes' lives and careers, and failed to make any impression upon the Soviets. Perhaps his most controversial claim is that it was the boycott that ended détente, not the invasion of Afghanistan.

Regarding the Afghanistan invasion, Sarantakes offers us little more than we already know about the Soviet mindset (although, as always, he describes it beautifully). The author is sympathetic. He argues that the Soviets regarded the Afghan communist state as an established regime within their orbit that was theirs to discipline as they saw fit. Sarantakes misses the point that the Soviets did not just back the dictatorship for practical reasons; they were also motivated by a genuine sense of internationalist class solidarity. In this regard, *Dropping the Torch* might have benefitted from comparing the events in Central Asia to those in the Horn of Africa—where the USSR threw its weight behind an equally illegitimate socialist regime in Ethiopia, leaving the previously pro-Soviet Somalia to defect to the Western alliance. But this is a tiny quibble.

It is when Sarantakes details Carter's response to the invasion and his decision to boycott Moscow that the book really gets interesting. Sarantakes pulls no punches. He shows how Carter encouraged court politics within his White House, setting Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski against each other with no apparent benefit to policy. He challenges the myth that Carter was weak and vacillating, arguing that he was actually strong willed and unbending. The problem was that his decisions were invariably wrong: "Carter proved to be ineffective in office. He was a technocrat and made it a habit to invest himself in the details of various policy matters. While it is useful for any executive to know what they are doing, Carter went too far in these efforts. He consistently had difficulty in determining priorities and making decisions between competing interests." (p. 262) Pulling no punches with his prose, Sarantakes concludes, "The 1970s were not just a time of weak national will and bad hair. The people wanted visionary leadership. Carter understood the desire but was never able to deliver. His successor, Ronald Reagan could and did." (p. 13) Ouch.

Dropping the Torch is packed with evidence for this assertion. My favorite example was Mohammed Ali's tour of Africa, which Carter sent him on to promote the boycott. Incredibly, the administration didn't bother to brief Ali. America's greatest athlete was barraged with questions he couldn't answer and made to look a fool by the foreign press. Many African journalists demanded to know why the U.S. wouldn't back sanctions on apartheid South Africa when the USSR would. The tour exposed Carter's patronizing attitude towards Africa, his stunningly politically incorrect assumption that leaders of African nations would change policy if asked to by a boxer whose only claim to diplomatic relevance was the color of his skin. And this, alas, was not the first time that the President made appointments on the basis of who someone was rather than their relevant experience.

Many historians have blamed Carter's problems on the difficult set of circumstances he inherited: rampant inflation and a resurgent Marxist movement. Sarantakes demonstrates that—at least in the field of foreign policy—this structuralist analysis is too kind. Carter frequently wasted good will and botched opportunities. He coasted along on an image of high morality, as if the difficulties he faced were the result of a saint trying to do good in a sinful world. But Sarantakes reminds us of the subtle role that race played in his early career in Georgia, and of his cynical manipulation of symbolism and faith. He reminds us that Jimmy Carter left behind him a trail of policy disasters and that, even after he left office, he still managed to upset people. What is most frustrating about Carter is that he has never acknowledged his faults. Sarantakes records that “When asked if the Nobel [prize] vindicated his presidency—a question based on the premise that his time at the White House was a failure—he replied, “I don't know of any decision I made in the White House that were [sic] basically erroneous.” (p.267) There isn't enough time between here and doomsday to list all the disagreements that one might have with that statement, but Sarantakes has convinced me that the Olympic boycott belongs among them.

It is probable that some readers will criticize Sarantakes' relentless focus on the boycott at the expense of much of the rest of the narrative of Carter's last year in office. If the author had devoted more time to his re-election campaign, he would have actually strengthened his argument. The two other 'soft power' weapons Carter used against the Soviets were an embargo on grain exports and registering people for the draft. The embargo did not trouble the Soviets either and it was actually opposed by all but one of the Republican presidential candidates. Carter celebrated the registration drive in his convention speech and was booed. The President's opponent in the Democratic primaries, Ted Kennedy, gets too little a mention. After he lost the Iowa primary, Kennedy took the courageous decision to call the Afghanistan crisis a distraction from domestic politics. His belief that Carter was restarting the Cold War for the sake of his re-election was initially unpopular but, over time, gained some currency. Alas, evidence from the archives suggests that the administration was at least conscious of the fact that picking a fight with the Soviet Union was a vote getter.

One thing I took away from Sarantakes' text is how much the Cold War contest blinded its belligerents to cultural nuances in the developing world. Sarantakes documents how the Soviets only analyzed the situation in Afghanistan in terms of Marxist ideology. They

missed the far more important phenomena of nationalism and Islam. Likewise, Carter misread the Iranian revolution as a power grab by the Soviets. In both Afghanistan and Iran, the superpowers underestimated the power of radical Islam. As an epilogue to Sarantakes' story, it is worth noting that it was Carter who greenlit the provision of military hardware to the Mujahideen resistance. His plan to draw the Soviets into a long, bloody war had the tragic end of arming and empowering the Taliban. He could hardly have foreseen that eventuality, but it is one example of how the drama of 1980 is still with us.

Dropping the Torch is an excellent text that is both readable and important. Perhaps its greatest contribution to the field is to remind us of the role of personality in shaping history. Presidents are not solely the prisoners of interest rates or opinion polls; great men and women can affect their nation's destiny. It was America's tragedy that at the time when it needed a Roosevelt or a Reagan, it got Jimmy Carter.

Response by Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, U.S. Naval War College

Before beginning my reply to this roundtable, I would like to thank the good people at H-Diplo for agreeing to review my book in this forum. Undertakings such as these are a sign that your work is taken serious and that others are engaging with your efforts. I really do not care if they agree or disagree with my arguments; it is gratifying just knowing that others are listening. I would also like to thank all four reviewers for taking the time to read the book and offer their evaluations. These extended discussions are a serious advantage that the internet offers.

It is also nice to have reviewers with four different backgrounds: Michael Ezra is a sport historian, Rowland Brucken and Scott Kaufman are diplomatic historians, and Tim Stanley is a British scholar specializing in U.S. political history. All four have basically offered extremely positive evaluations of my book. Stanley calls this book “the most damning scholarly indictment of the presidency of Jimmy Carter.” He means that as a compliment. Brucken, on the other hand, feels I am a bit too hard on Carter. All I can say, other than letting the reader decide, is that I really did pull my punches.

Their criticisms have been gentle, which surprised me to some degree, because they are not the issues I worried about, or where I thought I could have done more to fill in what I thought was a shortcoming. Most of the criticism focuses on factors and considerations in the United States. This emphasis is understandable, because the title includes Jimmy Carter’s name and focuses the reader’s attention on events in the United States.

In response, I would like to say that I never wrote this book as a Carter monograph; the press threw out my original title “Political Games” which had a sub-title with the phrase “Carter vs. Killanin” and insisted on a Jimmy Carter focus. I deeply regret agreeing to that change and always intended this book to be an international study. “Political Games” might not have been as good a title for marketing purposes, but it was more accurate.

The international focus is important. Although events in the United States were significant, developments in other parts of the globe determined the relative success or failure of the boycott. In one of the few criticisms that focuses on the international nature of the coverage, Stanley states that I offer a sympathetic account of Soviet leaders, but that I fail to understand the ideological factors motivating their decisions. Actually, I am not sure I am all that sympathetic towards the old men who sat in the Kremlin and ran an evil system, but I think I offered an account that documented their ideological motivation. He correctly points out that I basically summarized current understanding of Kremlin decision making. Although I use Russian-language material and Soviet Olympic documents, what surprised me in this study was how little the Soviets mattered.

The boycott really was not an East-West confrontation but rather a battle fought mostly in the United States and Europe. The Olympics were a European phenomenon and that is where the heart of the movement lies. Australia, Canada, and the United States had hosted games but were less significant to the movement than the White House staff understood.

Asia, Africa and Latin America were basically irrelevant. If I had this book to write over again, I would have spent more time looking at the boycott debate in Europe, in particular West Germany, Britain, Spain, France and Belgium. It was in these countries where Carter and his lieutenants failed, even though Germany boycotted Moscow.

Despite the title, Carter was not the only world leader that mattered in this book. Margaret Thatcher of the United Kingdom, Helmut Schmidt of West Germany, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing of France, Malcolm Fraser of Australia, and Joe Clark and then Pierre Trudeau both of Canada all wrestled with this boycott in the context of their domestic political situations, but also as junior allies of a nation led by a man they had good reason to consider weak. Other than Fraser, most handled the situation well and with integrity, regardless of their specific positions. Fraser, on the other hand, was more Catholic than the Pope on the boycott, put Australia through a vicious and ultimately meaningless political debate only to turn a hundred and eighty degrees in 2008 when there was talk of an Australian boycott of Beijing, blaming Carter and only Carter for the 1980 fiasco. It seems his granddaughter was on the 2008 team. Of course, the Olympians of 1980 had grandparents too.

Many in the Olympic community blame Michael Morris, the Third Baron Killanin of Galway, and the President of the International Olympic Committee at the time, for his weak leadership. I am of the opinion that he had a bad hand (in poker terms he had a pair of threes) but he played it very well. Carter and Killanin should have had a face-to-face meeting before the President decided on boycott. They did meet, but in May, which was far too late to do any good. Kaufman asks if an earlier meeting would have mattered. That is obviously an unanswerable question, but had they met in December of 1979 or January of 1980, there is a possibility that Carter might have been warned off this really bad idea. The boycott developed as a policy in only about three weeks time and in failing to talk with Olympic officials, even members of the U.S. Olympic Committee, before making his decision, Carter, not Killanin, set up his administration for a major failure.

In writing this book, I was surprised by another thing: how little attention the modern Olympics get from historians of either sport or foreign policy. I would hope that others would begin examining the Olympics and its intersection with foreign policy. Almost half of the Olympic games have seen some type of boycott. Who now remembers the Indonesian boycott of 1964 or the Cuban boycott of 1988? Carter's boycott was different, though. The official Olympic history argues that the boycott came closer to destroying the Olympic movement than any other political test it faced in its first hundred years, including World War I and World War II. This assessment is, I believe, correct but there are still many areas in this story that need examination. Some will be of interest to sport historians and some will be of interest to diplomatic historians. I believe the boycott killed détente. I was also struck at how many times people thought the boycott and their decision, in particular, was the difference maker between war and peace. I saw this in Australia, France, Germany and the United States. I have two thoughts about this phenomenon: first, Olympic officials were clearly under an amazing amount of stress and had some profoundly arrogant ideas about their own importance. Second, the early 1980s might have been a far more dangerous era than most people remember. From the rise and influence of the Committee on the Present

Danger to the Gwangju Massacre in Korea, from the introduction of Pershing II missiles in Europe to the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, from Soviet fear of the military exercise Able Archer to Sting's 1985 song "Russians," it seems that the first half of the 1980s appeared to people on both sides of the Iron Curtain to be a dangerous time. The boycott was clearly part of unstable era and this topic is one worthy of further exploration from enterprising scholars.

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