

# Obama's Olympic failure

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US President Barack Obama's failed effort to attract the 2016 Olympics to his adopted home city of Chicago reveals much about the character and priorities of his administration.

Obama flew to Copenhagen on October 2 to deliver a personal appeal to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which was entertaining final arguments from four would-be host cities: Chicago, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo.

Michelle Obama took a leading role in the efforts on behalf of Chicago, as did billionaire television host Oprah Winfrey, whose program is broadcast from the city. American media commentators assured their audience that Chicago was now the favorite among the finalists to host the 2016 games, with the personal intervention of the US president presented as the *coup de grace* that would ensure victory.

In the event, Chicago was eliminated in the first round of voting, and Rio de Janeiro was ultimately selected as the host city, with Brazil the first South American country to host the Olympics.

"I think to be eliminated in the first round is very embarrassing, to put it mildly," commented presidential historian Stephen Hess of George Washington University.

Obama was not the only head of state to intervene in the deliberations. The king and queen of Spain, Juan Carlos and Sofia, joined Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in Copenhagen to support Madrid's bid. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and new Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama made appeals on behalf of Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo, respectively.

With the world in the throes of its greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression, the pleading by heads of state to host the enormously costly commercial event was a conspicuous display of indifference toward the suffering of the planet's population—in whose name the

games are ostensibly celebrated.

In Spain one in five workers is unemployed. Japan has weathered the better part of two decades in recession. Brazil's newly-anointed Olympic city, Rio de Janeiro, is home to arguably the most extreme poverty in the Western hemisphere.

But there was something particularly degrading, and revealing, about Obama's appeal on behalf of Chicago. As always in US politics, impelling Obama's intervention were crude, and scarcely concealed, commercial interests.

Obama's appeal to the Olympic committee on behalf of Chicago was payback to those commercial and real estate interests that years ago took the once-obscure Illinois state senator's career in hand and began to shepherd him to the White House.

The heiress of the Hyatt Hotel empire, Penny Pritzker, was both a major backer of the Chicago Olympics bid and the head of Obama's election finance committee. Her estimated net worth is over \$1 billion, according to *Forbes*.

The co-chair of Obama's inaugural committee, Patrick Ryan, was also the head of Chicago's Olympic committee. Ryan is the CEO of the multi-billion-dollar Aon corporation, located in Chicago's loop, which underwrites specialty insurance policies.

David Axelrod, Obama's top political advisor, was already a financial beneficiary of Chicago's bid. His public relations firm, AKDP Media, was hired to promote the city's effort.

And then there is Valerie Jarrett, one of Obama's closest advisers and herself a Chicago real estate multi-millionaire. According to media reports, it was Jarrett who convinced Obama to make the last minute trip to Copenhagen, advising him his presence would secure Chicago's bid.

The Chicago and Illinois state Democratic Party machines also mobilized behind the bids, with Chicago

mayor Richard Daley and Illinois governor Patrick Quinn traveling with Obama to Denmark.

Hosting the Olympic games and other major sporting events is a boon only to such wealthy and politically-connected interests. The enormous resources required to build and upgrade sporting venues, and to put in place highly specialized housing, beautification, and transportation projects, inevitably divert funds away from real social needs.

While Chicago spent \$50 million just to organize its Olympics bid, it has been furloughing city workers, shutting down schools, and cutting back on essential social services. Unemployment, homelessness, hunger, and crime have increased dramatically in recent months.

Besides the city's Olympics bid, international news coverage of Chicago last week focused on the brutal beating death of a sixteen-year-old Chicago high school student. There has been a wave of teen homicides in Chicago since Arne Duncan, formerly the CEO of the Chicago public school system and now Obama's education secretary, shuttered dozens of schools, forcing youth to commute across hostile gang territory en route to school.

Little wonder that Chicago's Olympic bid has been met with little enthusiasm by the city's population, and outright hostility by some. A recent *Chicago Tribune* poll found that only 47 percent of those surveyed supported the bid, and a sizable protest movement against the city's selection had been picking up steam.

The catastrophic conditions in Chicago are a concentrated expression of a social disaster without parallel since the Great Depression. While Obama was in Copenhagen pleading on behalf of the Chicago elite, it was announced that the US unemployment rate had climbed to 9.8 percent.

There is something telling, as well, in the Olympic committee's emphatic dismissal of Chicago's bid. The rejection of Chicago in the first round—after the president's personal intervention—was a humiliating moment for Obama and another indication of the decline of the US on the world stage.

The verdict was met with shock in establishment quarters. "A sense of stunned bewilderment suffused Air Force One and the White House," as Obama traveled back to Washington, the *New York Times* reports.

Though the US had hosted the Olympics, both winter and summer, on a number of occasions, never before had a president intervened to boost an aspiring host city's chances—which have always been selected, in the last word, by geopolitical horse-trading.

Tokyo's bid was considered a long shot, since Beijing in neighboring China had just hosted the Olympics. Madrid is the capital of the nation arguably worst affected by the economic crisis and, moreover, Barcelona hosted the 1992 Olympics and another European city, London, will host them in 2012. The poverty and gang violence in Rio de Janeiro were considered major handicaps in Brazil's bid.

Yet Chicago was eliminated in the first round of voting. Only four years ago, New York City's bid to host the 2012 Olympics was also dismissed by IOC.

No doubt the hostility toward foreigners that the US government has codified in difficult and degrading new entrance requirements since the 9/11 terrorist attacks played a role in the decision. Residents of all but a few dozen countries must have a visa—which is both expensive and cumbersome to gain—in order to visit the US.

How would the athletes and others be treated? Especially those from so-called "rogue" states such as Iran, North Korea, Cuba, etc.? Would people even be allowed into the US by the Department of Homeland Security? The US has a bad odor overseas, and for good reason.



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