

SPORT AND SOCIETY

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Globetrotting

*African American Athletes
and Cold War Politics*

DAMION L. THOMAS

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To Johnnie Pearl Knox,
who through the sheer force of her willpower
raised me to be the man that I am today

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5. Black Power

International Politics and the Revolt of the Black Athlete

There were several unsuccessful proposed efforts to organize African American athletes to boycott the Olympic Games because of the persistence of racial discrimination. The outspoken African American activist Dick Gregory in 1963 unsuccessfully proposed a boycott of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. A year later, the idea was resurrected. However, the new proposal came from an unlikely source: Mal Whitfield, the conservative Republican and former Olympic track champion. Whitfield had repeatedly toured internationally as a goodwill ambassador who embodied the State Department's emphasis on racial progress. At the time of his suggestion, Whitfield was employed as a health and athletic adviser to the Nigerian government. "Let's Boycott the Olympics" was the shocking title of an article Whitfield wrote for *Ebony's* March 1964 edition. Whitfield asserted that his State Department-sponsored travels abroad were a prime motivation for his call to action. As he tried to "tell the story of democracy," the three-time gold medalist asserted that he reportedly faced several questions: "Why are you here trying to sell us on democracy when there is no democracy for your kind in America?" "Why are you in front of us talking about what sports can do for integration when some of the best athletes in the world are American black athletes, yet they are accepted only to a point?" State Department reports had expressed relief at the skillful ways Whitfield addressed these legitimate concerns when he toured throughout Africa, Asia, and other parts of the world. Undoubtedly, State Department policy makers could not have predicted Mal Whitfield's discontentment and activism.¹

The impetus for Whitfield's new aggressive posture was the delayed passage and filibustering of the civil rights bill that was languishing before Congress in early 1964. He believed that it was "time for American Negro athletes to join in the civil rights fight—a fight that is far from won, despite certain progress made during the past year." Describing the "conspicuous" absence of wide-scale involvement by athletes in the battle for racial equality, he argued that drastic actions needed to be taken to ensure that greater rights were granted to African Americans. Arguing that "it is time for America to live up to its promises of Liberty, Equality, and Justice for all, or be shown up to the world as a nation where the color of one's skin takes precedence over the quality of one's mind and character," Whitfield issued a conditional challenge to potential African American Olympians. The former Olympic champion said that if civil rights legislation was not passed by the time the Olympic Games began in October, African Americans should stay home.²

Whitfield's suggestion elicited few responses from both the African American and the white communities. Consequently, the Olympic-boycott idea did not receive widespread support. Most of the African American athletes were sympathetic with his frustration, but unwilling to seriously consider forfeiting their Olympic dreams. Ultimately, significant civil rights legislation was passed in 1964 and 1965. Nonetheless, many of the problems plaguing the African American community continued to persist. Consequently, some elite African American athletes, including Lew Alcindor and Tommie Smith, were willing to seriously contemplate boycotting the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

"Black Power: International Politics and the Revolt of the Black Athlete" explores the altered domestic and international landscapes that caused African American athletes to challenge the State Department's propaganda regarding the meaning of African American athletic success. After the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, many Americans believed that the nation's racial problems had been solved. However, after the civil rights movement gave way to the more rhetorically aggressive Black Power movement, the nature of protest in the African American community was altered. I argue that the protest gestures of Tommie Smith and John Carlos in Mexico City were a direct response to the State Department's use of African American athletes as propaganda tools. Furthermore, I show that these athletes saw themselves as picking up Malcolm X's mantle and mission. These athletes were heavily influenced by Malcolm and believed that their actions were the equivalent of taking the United States before the United Nations on charges of violation of international law. Perhaps most

significant, this chapter analyzes the minimalist response from the U.S. government to the protest gestures of Smith and Carlos to demonstrate how and why international pressure ceased to be a dominant impetus for racial reform in the United States by 1968.

The Roots of the Olympic Committee for Human Rights

Tommie Smith, a world-class sprinter and student at San Jose State University, was in Tokyo for the World University Games in the fall of 1967. A Japanese sports reporter asked Smith about the likelihood of a black boycott of the upcoming Summer Olympic Games. "Yes, this is true," Smith responded. "Some black athletes have been discussing the possibility of boycotting the games to protest racial injustice in America." The American press reported the brief exchange widely.³ Many young African Americans applauded Smith's sentiments. However, many Americans were confused by his statement, dismissing him as childish, ungrateful, and unpatriotic. Unsettled by the personal attacks, Smith made an appointment to meet with Harry Edwards, his professor in a Racial Minorities course at San Jose State University. The meeting led them to decide to further survey the "attitudes of other world-class athletes toward a revolt of black athletes over the problems facing black athletes and the black community in general."⁴

Harry Edwards had been a collegiate discus thrower and basketball player at San Jose State College, where he earned a bachelor's degree in sociology. Instead of pursuing an athletic career, Edwards began working on a doctorate degree in sociology at Cornell University. As he was completing his graduate education, Edwards was invited back to his alma mater, San Jose State, to teach in the Sociology Department. As a former student-athlete, Edwards was sensitive to the housing discrimination, low expectations, and hostility that African American student-athletes experienced at the college. Edwards worked with the student-athletes on campus to draw attention to their plight. In the aftermath of his efforts to force San Jose State to address the concerns of the African American student-athletes, Edwards helped organize the Olympic Committee for Human Rights (OCHR) in October 1967. The aims of the OCHR were to extend the political power of African American athletes to address racial injustice in the United States.⁵

By the mid-1960s, it was widely accepted that sports were at the vanguard of African American social advancement and the embodiment of how a just society was ordered and maintained. Consequently, sports par-

participation was viewed as a cornerstone of what Brenda Gayle Plummer has labeled "the Age of Negro Firsts," by which she refers to the era in which African Americans gained unprecedented access to positions of influence, honor, and high prestige. Therefore, the successful integration of the National Football League, Major League Baseball, and the National Basketball Association was said to be advancement for the race: proof that the United States was becoming more egalitarian. Manning Marable termed this widely held belief "liberal integrationism." The notion suggested that "if individual African Americans are advanced to positions of political, cultural, or corporate prominence, the entire black community will benefit."⁶ Thus, sports became a stage to dramatize the American liberal democratic system's emphasis on *individual merit*. The two pinnacle virtues of the merit-based system were fair play within the rules of the system and that individual achievement was the fundamental building block of the American social system. The predominant belief was that any talented and motivated individual could succeed in American society.

Furthermore, African American athletic success was used to suggest that racial injustice was not an impediment to the advancement of individual African Americans. This interpretation gave legitimacy to existing racial inequalities in American society during the Cold War and civil rights era. Athletic achievement suggested that if African American masses were competitive, disciplined, hardworking, and patriotic, loved America, and believed in God, the American Dream would be available to them. This line of reasoning reinforced the perception that African Americans were to blame for their own disproportionately high poverty levels, unemployment, and limited opportunities. Hence, the ability of a few black athletes to achieve athletic success seemed to validate the American way of life for many Americans. For example, Martin Kane, then a senior editor at *Sports Illustrated*, wrote, "Every black child, however, he might be discouraged from a career with a Wall Street brokerage firm or other occupational choices, knows he has a sporting chance in baseball, basketball, football, boxing, or track. [He] has something real to aspire to when he picks up a bat or dribbles a ball." Kane's assessment had been widely accepted among all segments of the population because it offered hope in the face of outright and persistent racism.⁷ This line of reasoning had been used to provide some limited means by which African Americans could still identify with the American Dream.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the sports arena had perpetuated a vision of itself as being above racial antagonism. It deceived itself. Using more intricate, subtle social and political mechanisms, the sports world

sought to keep African Americans complacent and complicit by advocating blind faith in the mere presence of blacks in athletics as a means to alter the American racial structure. The OCHR increasingly argued that despite the prevalent claims about sports as an antecedent for racial integration, sports had not done a lot to alter racist perceptions and the structure of the American social order. A widely read 1968 series of articles in *Sports Illustrated* focusing on "the black athlete," written by Jack Olsen, discussed the plight of the African American athlete on college campuses and professional athletes. Olsen's articles indicated that African American athletes felt the same despair that characterized the disoriented masses in the urban ghettos. Olsen wrote, "Almost to a man African American athletes were disgruntled, dissatisfied, and disillusioned."⁸

The reality that a critical mass had been reached in each of the three major professional sports leagues yet the promised advancements had not trickled down to the masses caused the OCHR to seriously consider the possibility of organizing a boycott. By 1968 approximately one-half of all professional basketball players were African American. Additionally, roughly one-third of all professional football players and one-fourth of all professional baseball players were African American. Between 1954 and 1964, African American athletes had won seven of eleven National League batting championships and led the league in home runs eight of those years. As African Americans became more visible in athletics, their mere presence ceased to be a positive, progressive racial force. Their success did not have the same symbolic meaning. The black athlete increasingly became "part of the status quo, the expected, the taken for granted." Consequently, the "silent symbol model" of athletic behavior exhibited by Jesse Owens and Joe Louis was now interpreted by a new generation of black athletes headed by Tommie Smith, Harry Edwards, and Lew Alcindor as hindering racial advancement and as a form of legitimization of existing racial inequalities.

The Boycott Idea and the Backlash

Increasingly, the OCHR began to assert that the best way to use sports to achieve the political and social goals of the black community was to protest against American society rather than to celebrate it. Hence, by the late 1960s, sports not only reflected Black Power's critique of U.S. racism, but also helped shape the politics of the struggle. Jack Scott, a political activist, believed that America was not prepared for the change in behavior of the black athletes. Scott argued that society had "mistakenly assumed that the

docility and acquiescence common in [African American] athletes of the past was an inherent quality rather than a posture" adopted as a means of survival in the racist sports world.¹⁰

Harry Edwards and Tommie Smith met with more than two hundred participants in a Sunday-school room at Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles on Thanksgiving Day, November 23, 1967, at the Western Regional Youth Conference. The theme of the conference was "Liberation Is Coming from a Black Thing." Four of the five world-class athletes who were present at the meeting—Tommie Smith, Lee Evans, Otis Burrell, and Lew Alcindor (later known as Kareem Abdul Jabbar)—spoke in support of the boycott. Alcindor, who was the leading scorer for the two-time defending NCAA men's basketball champion UCLA Bruins, addressed the two hundred assembled athletes to discuss the possibility of a black boycott of the 1968 Olympic Games. "Everyone knows me," Alcindor began. "I'm the big basketball star, weekend hero, everybody's all-American. Well, last summer I was almost killed by a racist cop shooting at a Black [man] in Harlem. He was shooting on the street—where masses of Black people were standing around or just taking a walk." The crowd was mesmerized as he continued, "But [the police officer] didn't care... I found out last summer that we don't catch hell because we aren't basketball stars or because we don't have money. We catch hell because we are Black. Somewhere each of us has to make a stand against this kind of thing. This is how I take my stand—using what I have. And I take my stand here." Harry Edwards maintained that Alcindor's statements were "the most moving and dynamic... [and] memorable" words spoken in behalf of the boycott idea. The attendees gave Alcindor a five-minute standing ovation. Ultimately, the two hundred assembled attendants, including fifty athletes, decided to support an African American boycott of the Mexico City Games.¹¹

The day of the meeting, the *San Jose Mercury News* reported that Tommie Smith said that he was "quite willing not only to give up participation in the Games but my life if necessary if it meant that it will open a door or channel by which the oppression and injustice suffered by my people in America can be alleviated." Smith received a lot of hate mail, telephone calls, confrontations in public, and death threats for his position. The famed *Los Angeles Times* sportswriter Jim Murray compared Smith to a "child who holds his breath to make his parents feel bad." Smith was warned his aggressive posturing would alienate the white people who were empathetic to the plight of black folk and antagonize white racists nationwide.¹²

The arguments against the boycott accepted the notion that civil rights gains through sports participation inevitably reflected a gradualist yet

effective approach. Consequently, the OCHR was accused of trying to artificially speed up the natural evolutionary process. No longer content to be the apolitical "good Negro," the potential boycotters wanted to counteract the notion that sports participation mitigated the harshness of American racism, to alter the political outlook of black athletes, and to control how the United States would have to confront the racial issue before the world. The OCHR's rejection of moral suasion was consistent with the ideas that were at the core of the Black Power era.

In their 1965 treatise, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton argued that racism was a subject that "America would much rather not face honestly and squarely." For most liberal white Americans, racism was embarrassing; to others, it was inconvenient; and for some, it was confusing. Carmichael and Hamilton argued that approaching the racial divide in any of these manners was "a luxury." Consequently, *Black Power* claimed that for blacks to "adopt [white Americans'] methods of relieving our oppression is ludicrous." Instead, African Americans needed to first reject the simplistic expressions that reflected white America's nonchalant and apathetic attitude toward racism: "Granted, things were and are bad, but we are making progress"; "Granted, your demands are legitimate, but we cannot move hastily. Stable societies are best built slowly"; "Be careful that you do not anger or alienate your white allies; remember, after all, you are only ten percent of the population."¹³ By accepting the language and tone of white liberals, African American civil rights leaders implicitly supported white notions that the slow movement toward full equality was satisfactory progress.

The increasing rejection of moral-suasion tactics suggested that Malcolm X was replacing Martin Luther King as the role model for black activists in the late 1960s. In Malcolm X, the youngsters found justification for confronting the "pervasiveness and perversity of white racism." Malcolm X was the "archetype, reference point, and spiritual advisor" for the OCHR. Unlike Dr. King, Malcolm X refused to rely upon the notion that the collective white soul of America could be redeemed. Malcolm rejected appealing to the national conscience by arguing that "America's consciousness is bankrupt." Arguably, what made Malcolm X most popular, particularly after his death, was his rejection of the conciliatory tactics of the civil rights movement. Malcolm's presence provided a counterpoint to the mainstream's unswerving certainty about the inevitability of the nation's path to racial progress.¹⁴

One of the principal factors that distinguished Black Power-era activist-athletes from their counterparts in the civil rights era was their reject-

tion of the Myrdallian analysis. Noted author Charles Silberman argued, "The real tragedy is that there is no American Dilemma. White Americans are not torn and tortured by the conflict between their devotion to the American creed" and racial abuse, as Gunnar Myrdal suggested in his 1944 classic, *The American Dilemma*. Myrdal characterized the American creed as a belief in the "ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity."¹⁵ Rather than being troubled by the moral problems posed by racial injustice and racial discrimination's blatant contradiction with the American creed, the OCHR and similarly minded athletes suggested that white Americans were more concerned about how racial protest threatened peace and destabilized law and order.

African American civil rights leaders had accepted Myrdal's notion and used it as a basis for reform, but as Carmichael argued, an appeal to the morality of American society cast African Americans "in the beggar's role, hoping to strike a responsive chord." The willingness to rely upon white America's conscience revealed to Carmichael that the civil rights movement was operating from a powerless base. For Carmichael and Hamilton, appeals to the conscience of white America were based on the misguided notion that "a black minority could bow its head and get whipped into a meaningful position of power." Carmichael and Hamilton termed that perspective "absurd." Carmichael said that "this country does not function by morality, love and nonviolence, but by power."¹⁶

Media reaction to the proposed boycott was overwhelmingly negative. The response of Charles Maher, a *Los Angeles Times* columnist, reflected the white backlash that frequently accompanied Black Power-era protests. Maher asked, "What can [a boycott] accomplish for the American negro? Suppose that all negro athletes refuse to compete for the United States in the Olympics and that the U.S. squad is so weakened it finishes behind Ecuador. Will the white majority in the United States then be disposed to treat the Negro more generously? Or will it be angered and resist the Negro's demands even more resolutely? We suspect that the latter response is far more probable and that the Negroes who voted Thursday to become athletic dropouts will bring their people less good than grief."¹⁷ Anticomunist sentiments ran high, and most Americans viewed an Olympic victory over the Soviet Union as a matter of national honor that was more pressing than the concerns that the OCHR stressed. Conservative governor Ronald Reagan of California spoke against the boycott, saying that it would be "harmful and injurious to race relations."¹⁸

Those who lashed out at the OCHR pointed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Yet the persistence of slums, ghettos, poverty, and racial discrimination exposed the limitations of legislative reform. The fundamental assumption that limited the purview of the civil rights movement's emphasis on appealing to white moderates was the notion that equal protection of constitutional rights would afford African Americans equal opportunity to acquire wealth, stature, and prosperity. However, civil rights laws alone could not sufficiently mitigate the effects of past discrimination: economic disparity and lingering prejudice.

The removal of the legal impediments led Americans to assert that the market and civil society would fully integrate African Americans in a relatively quick period. The equalization of laws, rules, and norms meant that individual African Americans would be able to rise or fall according to their ability and initiative. However, the OCHR, and other Black Power activists, began to affirm that although legal restrictions had been removed, racism remained institutionalized and visibly demonstrated by urban poverty, limited educational opportunities, and restrictive hiring practices, thus hindering the upward mobility of most African Americans. Living outside of the South, and directly unaffected by the recent legislation, urban African Americans sought to force American society to shift the battle from recognition and protection of formal equality to a broader critique of the American economic and political system.¹⁹ As Kenneth B. Clark, an African American psychologist, noted, the persistence of the ghetto made it brutally clear how little society valued black people.²⁰ The resulting protests emerged because of the inferior conditions of urban African American life: the denial of dignity, inferior housing, unemployment, and limited government services.

Those who were willing to acknowledge the fundamental problems underlying black discontentment suggested that African Americans take their grievances to the courts and ballot box. This perspective left the fundamental problems—joblessness, inadequate housing, poor wages, and institutionalized racism—unacknowledged, unaddressed, and unaltered. Furthermore, it did not appreciate the fact that the protests were a challenge to the notion that American establishments—the courts, traditional political parties, the police, and educational institutions—were, as constituted, capable and willing to redress the problems facing racialized urban areas.²¹

A 1967 University of Michigan survey showed that white interpretations of Black Power differed markedly from African American perspectives.

The study found that almost 60 percent of whites interviewed associated Black Power with violence and destruction, racism, and black domination. "The Negro wants to enslave the white man like he was enslaved 100 years ago. They want to take everything away from us—We'll all be poor," said one white respondent who foresaw an African American attempt to wrestle control of America away from white America. Another weary respondent complained, "Blacks won't be satisfied until they get complete control of our country by force if necessary." Not surprisingly, only 9 percent of African Americans held similar beliefs.²² As William Van Deburg has argued, the "passion for self-definition better represented the views of the average Black American than did the frustrated cry 'get white!'"²³

Most whites were unwilling or unable to see that Black Power's militant posturing was a tactical means to draw attention. As the *Los Angeles Times* recognized, African American leaders "find that they draw more attention when they hint or threaten a 'long, hot summer.'" ²⁴ For example, as part of his effort to gain media exposure, Harry Edwards had been advised by his friend and mentor, the African American journalist Louis Lomax, whom Edwards described as having a "flair for the dramatic and [abiding] appreciation for the character and power of the electronic media," to replace his traditional suit and tie with clothes that would capture the attention of the nation's African American youth. Lomax revealed to Edwards that his suit and tie, coupled with his Ivy League graduate degree, made the media, students, and the public think that he "was just another middle-class Negro with something to say about civil rights." Shortly thereafter, Edwards began to wear "pseudo-revolutionary" clothing: a black cap, work boots, black jeans, African beads, dark sunglasses, and a black jacket "with an occasional brook of matches pinned to the front." The new image drew enormous media attention. He acknowledged that he sometimes had a difficult time keeping "a straight face, standing before crowded auditoriums, under blazing television lights, delivering a lecture developed for my race relations class from a rostrum festooned with reporter's microphones, or bombarding White Americans with rhetoric calculated to outrage." He continued, "When I couldn't bedazzle them with brilliance, I bamboozled them with bull." Thereafter, Edwards would frequently incorporate inflammatory language—"Uncle Tom," "white man's nigger," "honky," "cracker administrator"—throughout his presentations. Edwards's transformation represents an important shift. Rather than appealing to the conscience of white America, Black Power advocates targeted white fear.²⁵

After the boycott announcement, *Track and Field News* conducted an analysis of the media responses of African American track competitors,

which revealed that the athletes had mixed feelings about the boycott. In the ensuing days, there were twenty-seven world-class athletes quoted in the press: none pledged unequivocal support for the boycott, four said they would boycott if asked by certain leaders, three said they would go with the majority, eighteen said they planned to compete. Triple jumper Art Walker was firm in his opposition to the boycott idea. "I believe every person has to do what his conscience tells him to do," Walker stated. "Mine tells me to go to the Olympics."²⁶ Ralph Boston, a 1964 Olympic champion, said he planned to participate: "What boycott? I've put too much time and effort into track and field to give it up." Articulating the uncertainty that many athletes had, Boston asked, "Do Negroes owe this sacrifice to the cause? Will a boycott advance the cause? If it doesn't is it fair to ask the athletes to make the sacrifice needlessly?" With divided support among the athletes, Edwards sought the help of civil rights leaders.²⁷

Harry Edwards met with Louis Lomax to discuss the future moves of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, the official name of the organization serving as the organizational unit of the boycott effort. They decided to bring the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Floyd McKissick, the director of the Congress of Racial Equality, aboard as advisers. Edwards, who had momentarily been a member of the Black Panther Party, decided to turn to these two pillars of the integrationist philosophy for guidance. Although the eventual protest has been remembered as a watershed moment in the Black Power movement, it is important to note the important continuity that the boycott effort shared with other civil rights tactics. King was supportive of the OPHR because it employed nonviolent direct-action methods. King, and other civil rights activists, had demonstrated the viability of protests, boycotts, and other nonviolent confrontations as a means to foster social change. Furthermore, it is important to note King's attempt to shift the battle for racial equality after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Having achieved equal protection under the law, Dr. Martin Luther King and other advocates attempted to shift the civil rights movement in the direction of the eradication of poverty and urban blight.

On December 15, 1967, in the conference room of New York City's Americana Hotel, Edwards, with Dr. King and McKissick at his side, presented the OPHR's six demands. The OPHR called for the restoration of Muhammad Ali's title, removal of Avery Brundage as the chairman of the International Olympic Committee, curtailment of participation of all-white teams and individuals from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia in the

United States and all Olympic activities, the addition of two black coaches to the men's track and field coaching staff, the appointment of at least two black people to policy-making positions on the United States Olympic Committee, and complete desegregation of the New York Athletic Club.²⁸

For the OPHR, the plight of Cassius Clay–Muhammad Ali epitomized the shifting attitudes of African American athletes and the need to reject the premise that athletic success could insulate African Americans from racism. Notwithstanding his positive assessment of American race relations at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome, Clay ultimately helped establish a new precedent among African American athletes. Rather than adopt an accommodationist perspective, the generation influenced by Ali would be willing, even expected, to offer a harsh critique of American racism. In fact, one's position on civil rights, Black Power, and even Vietnam was evident based on whether the dethroned champion was referred to as "Ali" or "Clay" after he changed his name and political philosophy.²⁹

On February 26, 1964, the day after Cassius Clay became the heavyweight champion of the world by defeating the heavily favored Sonny Liston, he held a press conference. In the Veterans Room of Miami's Convention Hall, the jovial exchanges between Clay and the media ended when one reporter asked if he was a "card-carrying member of the Black Muslims." "Card-carryin'," Clay responded, obviously uneasy with the term *card-carrying*, which reminded him of McCarthy-era communist-baiting, and *Black Muslim*, which was offensive to members of the Nation of Islam: "What does that mean? I believe in Allah and in peace. I don't try to move into white neighborhoods. I don't want to marry a white woman. . . . I know where I'm going and I know the truth, and I don't have to be what you want me to be. I'm free to be what I want." Clay's statements were designed to explain to the media that he did not intend to cater to their vision of whom he should be, whom he should represent, and whom he should follow. His stand suggested that he would break from precedent and the role American society envisioned for him.³⁰ Clay determined that he was going to help chart a new course for African American athletes, a course chosen and navigated by the athletes themselves and primarily responsive to the needs and desires of the shifting political temperament of the African American community.

In March 1964, the World Boxing Association (WBA) temporarily stripped the newly named Muhammad Ali of his championship for "conduct detrimental to the spirit of boxing." It was obvious that his religious and racial beliefs were reasons for the proceedings against the champion. The Nation of Islam differed from other civil rights organizations because

it refused to appeal to the conscience of white America; instead, it sought to establish community control in African American neighborhoods. Its approach threatened most white Americans and was deemed too radical by many African Americans.³¹ However, the WBA's steps were effectively nullified when three major athletic commissions (New York, Pennsylvania, and California) refused to support the WBA.

Several years later, Ali would find himself embroiled in an international issue when he refused to enlist in the military. After he was informed that his draft status would be reclassified, making him eligible for the draft, Ali's response, "Man, I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong," became his most celebrated and most detested statement. His declaration came at a time when most Americans supported the Vietnam effort. Jimmy Cannon, Red Smith, and Arthur Daley, three of the nation's most respected sportswriters, condemned Ali's statement. Red Smith, who like other reporters refused to address the champion by his new name, wrote, "Cassius makes himself as sorry a spectacle as those unwashed punks who picket and demonstrate against the war." Other rebuking statements labeling Ali a traitor and pariah were voiced by several members of Congress. Furthermore, the Kentucky State Senate issued a statement that blamed him for bringing "discredit to all loyal Kentuckians and to the names of the thousands who gave their lives for this country during his lifetime." Ultimately, Ali was stripped of his title. Louis Lomax referred to the decision to vacate Ali's title as a "total castration of the black people in this country."³² Missing Lomax's point, noted white journalist Red Smith wondered if Lomax would feel the same way if another African American won the title. Lomax's hyperbolic statement was designed to illustrate that "sport status was a fragile platform the white man could always take away." Lomax was suggesting that if U.S. officials could take away Muhammad Ali's title simply because they disagreed with his political views, then sports had not significantly altered the social landscape because African Americans were operating from a powerless position.³³

Most likely, Ali would not have been asked to bear arms; instead, the military would have allowed him to reprise the role Joe Louis performed during World War II while he was the heavyweight champion. As an enlisted soldier, Louis conducting boxing exhibitions for the troops stationed abroad. Consequently, Ali's refusal to comply suggested that his resistance was motivated by more than a fear of facing armed combat. Ali was emphatically taking a political stand. Ali joined Dr. King in Louisville to campaign for fair housing and spoke about his refusal to enlist: "No I am not going 10,000 miles from home to help murder and burn another

poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. . . . If I thought going to war would bring freedom and equality to twenty-two million of my people, they wouldn't have to draft me," Ali said. "I'd join tomorrow."³¹

A group of prominent African American athletes, including Bill Russell, Lew Alcindor, and Jim Brown—three of the most famed and politically involved African American athletes—met with Ali to discuss his opposition to the war. Emerging from the meeting, satisfied with Ali's religious and moral convictions, the assembled athletes decided to publicly support Ali's stance. Ali's battles with the American government helped usher in a new consciousness among black athletes that did not accommodate white America and defied the dominant rhetoric regarding racial progress rather than reinforcing it.³² Muhammad Ali's position would be instrumental in the shifting politics that called into question the presumptions and values of the civil rights movement.

The OPHR demands were sent via telegram to Arthur Lentz, executive director of the U.S. Olympic Committee. Lentz correctly replied that the USOC could not meet the demands because several of them were out of their jurisdiction. The World Boxing Association, which stripped Muhammad Ali of his title, was not connected with the USOC. Brundage was elected to his post by more than one hundred nations. Lentz also informed the OPHR that the USOC members were elected by a vast variety of organizations, such as the National Collegiate Athletic Association, Amateur Athletic Union, and National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics. Avery Brundage simply replied to the demands by claiming that the boycotters would be making a mistake and that there were enough talented white athletes to win gold medals for the United States anyway. On another occasion, Brundage labeled the idea of a boycott "foolish," because the Olympics was the "one enterprise against all forms of discrimination." However, he also offered the inflammatory remark that Jesse Owens was "a fine boy" and should be considered for a spot on the USOC Board of Directors.³⁶

Bud Winter, Tommie Smith's coach at San Jose State, expressed concern about the drastic nature of the protest idea: "I am appalled Negro athletes have been driven so far as to consider boycotting a movement that epitomizes the very thing for which they are fighting." Winter's comments reflected a widely held position that the Olympics were the wrong target for protest. The Olympics were seen as historically being a force at the forefront of racial progress. Sportswriter Red Smith labeled the Games "the Negro's best friend" and argued that Olympic participation, not abandonment, would be most beneficial to the cause of black athletes.

Olympism stood for and "fostered peace, international understanding, and harmony among the races," Brundage believed.³⁷ There were several perspectives challenging the boycott idea: black participation in sport was good for African Americans and race relations; a boycott was un-American; the Olympics were a humanitarian gathering of individuals, not a place for members of groups or factions; and politics did not have a place in the world of sports. As sociologist Doug Hartmann has argued, the main arguments against the boycott were individualism, patriotism, and antipolitical sport idealism.³⁸

Jackie Robinson, whose efforts to integrate Major League Baseball paved the way for the widespread integration of professional athletics, initially did not favor the boycott because he did not think that it was practical. Robinson stated, "I admire these youngsters for their determination, but I don't think there are enough athletes to make it worthwhile. I wouldn't do it myself." However, Robinson began to think more favorably about the subject provided that "the leadership is right and their motives are correct." As the issue continued to draw large media interest, Robinson supported the boycott idea because the boycotters were applying the moral-suasion tactics advocated by Martin Luther King. Thus, Robinson was able to articulate a relationship to the larger civil rights struggle.³⁹

Conventional wisdom suggested that African American athletes could have the greatest impact on race relations by letting their athletic accomplishments speak for themselves. African American heroes such as Jesse Owens were welcomed and embraced by white Americans because they displayed quiet and patient personalities, articulated conservative viewpoints, advocated moderation, and were unwaveringly patriotic. Owens was from a generation that believed that black people were proving themselves "qualified for full citizenship by uncritical accommodation to white definitions of the situation, to white characterizations of what was right, what was fair, [and] what was best." The mind-set was that African Americans should be willing to suffer humbly until black people were able to win over the hearts of white Americans. As journalist Kenny Moore has argued, "Owens seemed to glory in overcoming obstacles. He preached that if a man worked hard, if he endured racial taunts the way Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis had, he would succeed, he would win the white man's respect and things would change." Furthermore, Owens's assertion that he had made it in spite of racism reinforced the notion that racial obstacles were not a severe impediment to the advancement of individual African Americans in American society and validated hegemonic ideals about equality in American society.⁴⁰

Similar to Owens, other former African American gold medalists, including Rafer Johnson, Ralph Metcalfe, and Mal Whitfield, expressed sympathy for the OPHRs concerns but did not think that the boycott was the best forum for demonstrations. Whitfield, altering his perspective from 1964, maintained that the Olympics should not be a protest forum in the battle for increased civil rights: "It would be wrong to boycott the Olympics which have given Negro athletes so much international recognition. . . . Members of the so-called boycott movement have not been able to give any solid reason for such a move." When Jesse Owens first heard about the potential boycott in October 1967, he issued a sensitive yet deliberate statement. "We have been conscious of racial problems for many years," Owens commented to a group of reporters. "But it is no good dropping out of the Olympics. We have to be there, we have to be everywhere it counts." However, Owens soon began to offer more frequent and fervent objections to the boycott. On television appearances, public lectures, and radio programs and in the printed press, he argued that African Americans could "bridge the gap of misunderstanding more in athletics than anywhere else." He adamantly rejected the utilization of the Olympics as a battleground for increased civil rights.⁴¹

Jesse Owens along with other prominent older African American athletes such as Rafer Johnson, Roy Campanella, and Don Newcombe made regular media appearances condemning the boycott idea. These athletes expressed faith in the American sports myth. Sports were deemed a "panacea promising salvation, not just for star Black athletes but for the Black masses as well." These athletes argued that athletic participation helped diminish racism, made black people more acceptable to white Americans, and were a "citadel of interracial harmony, a shining example illuminating the route toward a more humane society."⁴² These views received strong condemnation from Harry Edwards and other boycott sympathizers.

John Carlos argued that Jesse Owens's experiences after he returned stateside after his historic four-gold-medal performance at the 1936 Berlin Games suggested that sports had not sufficiently altered white American attitudes about African Americans. The way in which Jesse Owens had been treated exposed the limitations of "good behavior" and "preparation." For example, Avery Brundage barred Jesse Owens from competing as an amateur after he refused a request to tour Europe immediately after the 1936 Olympics. One of Owens's most embarrassing moments occurred at halftime of a soccer game in Havana, Cuba. On December 26, 1936, Owens defeated Julio McCaw, a thoroughbred horse, in a 100-yard race around a wet track in a race promoted by Owens's white American

entertainment agent, Marty Forkin. Years later Owens remarked that the event made him feel like "a spectacle, a freak." Owens told an interviewer in 1971, "What was I supposed to do? I had four gold medals. There was no television, no big advertising, no endorsements then. Not for a black man, anyway." Given Owens's experiences with American racism, young athletes had a difficult time understanding why he attacked their position. Nonetheless, Owens continued to assert that he did not think that "the pride which our black athletes have in themselves and their country will allow them to do anything to embarrass the United States in so conspicuous a world arena."⁴³

Black Power advocates derisively labeled those who attacked them as "Negroes" and argued that they supported the status quo. Harry Edwards, who had a banner that said "Traitor (Negro) of the Week" with a photo of Jesse Owens beneath it, said that black athletes had been expected to "play the role of the responsible Negro, the good Negro, no matter what else was going on in the black world. The Black athlete was the institutionalized Tom, the white man's nigger." On another occasion, Edwards maintained that Jesse Owens "belongs to another generation, a controlled generation."⁴⁴ Eldridge Cleaver also challenged dominant interpretations of the role of black athletes. Cleaver claimed that "whenever a crisis with racial overtones arises, an entertainer or athlete is trotted out and allowed to expound a predictable, conciliatory interpretation of what's happening." He termed this phenomenon an effective "technique of Negro control."⁴⁵ Edwards saw the Mexico City Games as an opportunity to signal a historic shift. Owens, whose four-gold-medal performance at the 1936 Olympic Games made a mockery of Hitler's Aryan-supremacy theories, symbolized the era in which black athletes' passivity was seen as "a credit to the race." Edwards announced that the boycott would end the use of the success of black athletes "in a fun-and-games [festivity] propagandized as the epitome of equal rights so long as we are refused those rights in white society."⁴⁶

Reshaping the International Narrative

As the boycott gained momentum, the OPHR clarified its objectives. The organization's goals were "to protest the persistent and systematic violation of black people's human rights in the United States; to establish a standard of political responsibility among black athletes vis-à-vis the needs and interests of the black community; and to make the black community aware of the substantial hidden dynamics and consequences of their sports

involvement." Harry Edwards sought to put more pressure on athletes to see that by simply being represented in the sports arena was not enough to effect racial change. He asked athletes to make their prestige, influence, and stage a force for the improvement of all African Americans. Arguably, the most important OPHR goal was to expose America's historical exploitation of black athletes as political propaganda tools in both the national and the international arenas.⁴⁷

Malcolm X, whom Harry Edwards labeled "St. Malcolm," was clearly one of the people who had helped shape Edwards's thinking. Edwards gleaned five essential directives from Malcolm X. Malcolm preached that African Americans had to control their community, resources, and institutions; use any means necessary to achieve these goals; develop an ethic that would unify them and prevent outsiders from assuming control of black movements and communities; "recognize that their primary enemy was, is, and has always been the legally established institutions and government of the United States of America and anyone—Negro or white—who supports those institutions or that government in its efforts to maintain the status quo"; and resist the standards defined by white America. Instead, black folk needed to define themselves and control their definition of white America as well.⁴⁸

Malcolm X's rhetorical style and content were evident in Edwards's speeches. When Edwards discussed the global significance of race, he was parroting the words and tone of Malcolm X. For example, Malcolm's influence is obvious in the following passage in which Edwards critiqued U.S. imperialism: "The crackers are losing all over. In Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Bolivia, all over. The blue-eyed devil is in trouble. The third-world power—black, red, yellow, brown—is taking the white man apart in chunks. We must get the cracker off our backs, by Olympic boycott, by out-and-out revolution, by whatever means."⁴⁹ Perhaps Malcolm X's greatest influence upon Edwards was Malcolm's attempt to dramatize U.S. racial issues before an international audience.

Malcolm X had traveled throughout Africa in 1964 and had begun to fully understand the magnitude of State Department and United States Information Agency propaganda regarding African American advancement. Malcolm X believed that the U.S. propaganda agencies had waged a successful campaign to manipulate African perceptions of U.S. race relations. He maintained that the mission of the USIA was to make "the Africans think that you and I are living in paradise, that our problems have been solved, that the Supreme Court desegregation decision put all of us in school, that the passage of the Civil Rights bill last year solved all

of our problems, and that now that Martin Luther King Jr. has gotten the peace prize, we are on our way to the promised land of integration." He asserted that African American leaders had made a grave tactical error by not developing a communications network that would allow African American leaders to provide African leaders with the latest developments in American race relations, in an attempt to counter State Department releases, which were overly positive and implied that injustices faced by African Americans were rapidly being eliminated.⁵⁰

Malcolm X's main mission during his travels throughout Africa was to get the independent African nations to pressure the United Nations to censure the United States because of racial oppression. On July 17, 1964, Malcolm X addressed the First Ordinary Assembly of Heads of State and Governments at the Organization of African Unity in Cairo, Egypt. Malcolm X called the independent African heads of state "the shepherds of all African peoples everywhere." By doing so, he wanted to get the assembled delegates to see the "African American problem" as an "African problem." He declared his intent to internationalize the plight of African Americans as a human rights violation, so that it would not merely be confined to the domestic jurisdiction of the U.S. government. As a precedent for his intended action, Malcolm X maintained that if South African racial abuses could be subject to UN action, then the oppression of African Americans could also be brought before the international agency. He then issued a plea to the assembled delegates: "We beseech the independent African states to help us bring our problem before the United Nations, on the grounds that the United States Government is morally incapable of protecting the lives and the property of twenty-two million African-Americans."⁵¹

At his first press conference with the American press upon his return to the States, Malcolm X continued to maintain that African Americans had a "strong, airtight case to take the United States before the United Nations on a formal accusation of 'denial of human rights'—and that if Angola and South Africa were precedent cases, then there would be no easy way that the U.S. could escape being censured." Malcolm continued to contend that the African American civil rights struggle needed to be elevated to an international human rights struggle. "El-Haji Malik El-Shabazz," one of the most influential chapters from his acclaimed autobiography, is dedicated to making a compelling case for the need to internationalize the African American struggle. Although convinced of the need for this dramatic action, Malcolm X concluded that the "American white man has so thoroughly brainwashed the black man to see himself as only a

domestic 'civil rights' problem that it will probably take longer than I live before the Negro sees that the struggle of the American black man is international."⁵²

If one looks closely at Edwards's reasoning behind the proposed boycott, one can see that Edwards saw himself and the OPHR as trying to pick up Malcolm X's mantle. At the November 1967 meeting, Edward made his intentions clear: "This is our way of pointing out that the United States has no right to set itself up as a leader of the free world. . . . We're going to put this question before the United Nations. We want to take it out of the sphere of civil rights and bring it into the sphere of human rights." On another occasion, Edwards stated, "We want to get this problem into the world court." Presumably, he was talking about the "court" of international opinion. In his autobiography, Edwards would later write that Smith and Carlos's protest "was the only route both accessible to Blacks and promising an *international* protest platform, an escalation long advocated by many of the more militant spokesmen in the Black struggle who saw the oppression of black Americans, not as a domestic civil rights issue, but as a violation of *international human rights law and principles*." Edwards was right to point out that many 1960s black spokespersons were interested in the internationalization of the American race issue.⁵³ Most would attribute the late-1960s push to draw global attention to the problems in the United States to Malcolm X's initiatives.

The OPHR was determined to reconstruct dominant interpretations of race relations in American culture. The U.S. athletic goodwill exchange programs helped Harry Edwards deepen his understanding of the political nature of black athletic participation in the international arena. "The United States government has taught us well," he observed. "In the ideological wars with other world powers, the U.S. State Department has time and time again used athletes—both professional and amateur—as political adjuncts."⁵⁴ The political potential that he saw exemplified by the U.S. State Department-funded tours illustrated the need for African American athletes to provide a counternarrative to the State Department propaganda of athletics as representative of a just American social system.

The pattern of using black athletes and coaches as evidence of American democracy was still a matter of official State Department policy in the mid-1960s. For example, the State Department sent Joe Yancey on his sixth department-sponsored trip—an eleven-month goodwill tour of Latin America—during 1965–66. One department report said that "Yancey is perhaps the greatest non-salaried globetrotting athletic coach in the world today." Another telegram praising Yancey's work enthusiastically declared

that "Yancey was a superb coach and great ambassador of good will. No task too arduous; no trip too long, he gave of himself unstingingly, willingly and with devotion to his craft." Joe Yancey had coached Olympic teams from four nations, including Jamaica and the Bahamas. Even the head coach of the American national track team labeled Yancey's job with the 1952 Jamaican team the greatest coaching job he has ever seen. Nonetheless, the United States Olympic Committee never saw fit to award him with the opportunity to serve as the coach for the United States Olympic Track Team.⁵⁵ Sights such as those experienced by Yancey increasingly drew the disdain of African American athletes.

The desire to counteract the U.S. government's propaganda campaign as well as a sense of community obligation and the realization that the futures of African American athletes and the African American masses were intertwined and interconnected had a tremendous impact on many athletes. Edwards spoke of the seriousness of the issue:

We must no longer allow this country to use Black individuals of whatever level to rationalize its treatment of the black masses . . . to use a few "Negroes" to point out of the world how much progress she has made in solving her racial problems when the oppression of Afro-Americans in this country is greater than it ever was. . . . We must no longer allow the Sports World to pat itself on the back as a citadel of racial justice when the racial injustices of the sports industry are infamously legendary. . . . [A]ny black person who allows himself to be used in the above manner is not only a chump—because he allows himself to be used against his own interest—but he is a traitor to his race. He is secondly, and most importantly, a traitor to his country because he allows racist whites the luxury of resting assured that those black people in the ghettos are there because that is where they belong or want to be.⁵⁶

Edwards was arguing that those who were still beholden to the notion that individual success was an advance for the race were deluding themselves and contributing to the oppression of African Americans. Bill Russell, one of the 1960s' most outspoken critics of the American athletic sporting scene, agreed with Edwards: "To say that I am an example of the greatness of the country—that's not true. Because I feel to be honest with myself and with the people I deal with, that I'm an exception."⁵⁷ Increasingly, African Americans during the Black Power era came to respect athletes and sports figures such as Russell and Edwards who were involved in the community.

The New York Athletic Club's track and field Olympic warm-up meet provided a crucial opportunity to test the OPHR's organizational potential because the meet was one of the most prestigious in the United

States. The NYAC had forced Mel Whitfield to use the service elevator when he was honored at the club as the first African American recipient of the Sullivan trophy, which was annually given to the nation's best amateur athlete. It was the club's custom to give memberships to medalists in the Olympic track and field events, but Whitfield and other African Americans were repeatedly denied memberships. Hence, Edwards called a boycott of the February 1968 meet as a means to "regain some of the dignity that black athletes had compromised" by competing at a club where they were not permitted to shower. Edwards marked the NYAC boycott as "the end of an age when Afro-American athletes would compromise black dignity for a watch, a television set, a trophy, or merely the love of competition."⁵⁸

The NYAC decided to hold the meet despite the threat of a boycott. Attendance fell by 50 percent, as track powerhouses Georgetown and Villanova, all of the Ivy League schools, all of the New York high school teams, and O. J. Simpson boycotted. Additionally, the Russian team withdrew. Their withdrawal was magnified because they were to be the first Russian team to compete in the United States since a protest against American policy in Vietnam in 1966 hindered a meet involving the two nations. With the absence of the Russian team, the meet lost its international credentials and lure of an East-West showdown. Performances were mediocre, and only nine African American athletes competed: five of them were from the University of Texas–El Paso. UTEP's Bob Beamon warmed up in the locker room and made only one attempt in the long-jump competition. Sufficiently satisfied that his initial jump would not be matched or bested, Beamon packed his bag and left. In the aftermath of the boycott, the NYAC decided to cancel the meet rather than integrate. "The NYAC meet emerged as a formal coming out party for the politics of race within sport," Amy Bass has argued, "indicating further that a large scale boycott enterprised by African American athletes was feasible."⁵⁹

The importance of the NYAC boycott took on heightened meaning because the day before it began, the International Olympic Committee announced that it planned to allow South Africa to send a team to Mexico City. South Africa had been barred from competing in the Olympics in 1963 because it did not allow interracial competition. Interior Minister Jan de Klerk made the government's position clear when he announced that South Africa would not allow nonwhites to represent the nation in international sporting competitions, despite international condemnation of South African policies as antithetical to Olympic values. After several meetings and visits to South Africa, the IOC announced that it was satis-

fied with the progress that South Africa had made by allowing African Americans to represent the country at the Olympic Games, but the country still refused to have integrated Olympic Trials. The condemnation of the IOC decision was swift.⁶⁰

Within hours of the IOC announcement reinstating South Africa, six African nations announced that they intended to boycott the Games. The international boycott movement continued to gain steam as other African nations announced they would not participate. The Supreme Council for Sports in Africa, which helped develop continent-wide sports policies for thirty-two African nations, voiced its support for the boycott. By the time that the IOC acknowledged that "it would be most unwise for a South African team to participate," on April 21, 1968, in a meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, almost forty African nations, the Soviet Union, and several Middle Eastern nations had announced that they were considering boycotting the Olympics. Emboldened by the success of the NYAC boycott and the temporary reinstatement of South Africa, Edwards was able to make impassioned pleas to those who questioned whether the Olympics were an appropriate venue to challenge racial injustice. However, once South Africa was barred, the boycott movement lost some of its momentum.⁶¹

At the Olympic Trials in Los Angeles, talk of a boycott continued, but a definitive course of action could not be reached. Only half of the twenty-six African American male athletes who made the team said that they would boycott. The boycott idea received a tremendous blow when Jim Hines and Charlie Greene said that they planned to compete in the high-profile men's 100-meter dash at the Mexico City Games. At the trials, there had been speculation that Greene and Hines might be willing to support the boycott idea because they wore OPHR buttons. However, Greene made his thoughts regarding the boycott well known: "They're just buttons. They show sympathy for an idea. They definitely don't mean a boycott." Greene did admit that he had the opportunity to speak with Harry Edwards and had developed an admiration and a level of respect for him. Nonetheless, Greene's decision to compete was based on his identification as an American citizen. "I am American, and I'm going to run," he adamantly maintained.⁶²

Athletes began to argue that the boycott should be canceled if unanimity could not be reached, because the lack of unity would be harmful. At a meeting of black athletes held at the Olympic Trials, it was decided that the boycott would be called off. Athletes realized that they would be replaced by other black athletes who did not stand for the principle of using sports as a vehicle to highlight the oppression of African Americans. Although

the boycott was off, a number of black athletes remained committed to the idea of using the Games to stage some form of protest.⁶³

The athletes began to explore various ways to draw attention to the treatment of African Americans. Some suggested that all of the athletes should refuse to stand on the victory platform during the playing of the national anthem to illustrate the systemic exclusion of African Americans from aspects of American society. Others recommended that the participants refuse to participate in any event after the opening ceremonies. Furthermore, it was proposed that the athletes should deliberately finish last in every event to embody the "last place" position of blacks in American society. It was even suggested that the athletes crawl out of the starting blocks. Although all of these options were rejected, the athletes left with the agreement that each athlete would "do their own thing."⁶⁴

As part of his effort to garner media attention, Edwards was not forthcoming with the media during press conferences after the track athletes had overwhelmingly rejected the boycott idea at the Olympic Trials. Edwards announced, "We are going to tell white people nothing about their Olympic team at this time. . . . At this particular point, our strategy is chaos." Although the boycott effort had been aborted, it made the plight of African Americans and the role of black athletes headline news and stirred debate, and Harry Edwards's efforts helped lay the foundation for the subsequent protest gestures that occurred at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games.⁶⁵

Protests in Mexico City

On October 12, 1968, the Olympic flame was lit in Aztec Stadium. More than seventy-eight hundred athletes from 119 countries attended the opening ceremonies of the first Olympics to be held in a Latin American nation. On the second day of competition, African American athletes were involved in protests. The Jamaican sprinter Lennox Miller won the silver medal in the 100-meter dash; he along with the bronze medal winner, American Charlie Greene, and the gold medalist, American Jim Hines, whose 9.95 time was the first sub-10.00 time and a new world record, refused to have their medals presented by Avery Brundage. The three medalists had asked who was going to present the medals. When they were informed that it would be Brundage, their indifferent attitude suggested that an alternative presenter be used. Instead, the medals were presented by Lord David Burghley of England. Because they had refused to take their medals from Brundage, attention focused on Americans Jim Hines

and Charlie Greene at the victory ceremony. As the American national anthem began, both stood sedately, facing the American flag. Despite their conformity on the victory stand, their gesture aimed at Brundage inspired other black American athletes to assert that if they won, they did not want the IOC president to present their medals either.⁶⁶ It was Olympic custom to have members of the IOC board present the medals to winners from their home nation. Tommie Smith asked his wife, Denise, to purchase a pair of black gloves, in case he was forced to shake hands with Avery Brundage on the victory stand. At this point, it was uncertain whether a more substantive protest was going to take place.

The competition for the men's 200-meter dash began on October 15. Tommie Smith ran a 20.3 in the first qualifying heat, tying the Olympic record set by Henry Carr four years prior in Tokyo. The record was eclipsed a few heats later when the relatively unknown Australian Peter Norman ran a career-best 20.2. Then Tommie Smith tied Norman's mark in the next heat. There was serious doubt whether Smith would be able to compete in the 200-meter final the next day because he had pulled an abductor muscle in his groin during the semifinal, in which he ran an impressive 20.1.

Known for his slow starts, Tommie Smith did not show any discomfort after emerging from the starting blocks at the finals of the 200-meter dash. Trailing John Carlos after 60 meters, a burst of speed propelled Smith to victory in world record time: 19.83. The next two to cross the finish line, Carlos and Norman, were both clocked at 20.0; however, Norman was awarded the silver medal and Carlos the bronze.⁶⁷

Dressed in black stockings but no shoes, a black glove on one hand each, and Tommie Smith wearing a black scarf around his neck, Smith and Carlos, the gold and bronze medalists, took their positions on the award-ceremony dais. With their medals displayed around their necks, the two athletes, along with Peter Norman, who wore an OPHR badge on his jacket, turned to face the American and Australian flags. As "The Star-Spangled Banner" began playing, Smith and Carlos raised their black-gloved fists and bowed their heads in "silent defiance of American prestige and Olympic protocol."⁶⁸ As the crowd, including twenty thousand Americans, recognized their gesture, booing and jeering followed. The booing continued as the two athletes left the stadium, causing Smith and Carlos to defiantly raise their fists again.

As Amy Bass has reported, Smith granted sports announcer Howard Cosell an in-studio interview the following day in which he explained the significance of the protest gesture. The two black gloves and the arc that they formed when the two fists were stretched into the sky symbolized

"the power within black America" and "black unity" Smith's scarf signified "blackness," while the black socks, worn without shoes, stressed the poverty plaguing black America. Later, John Carlos would add that the bowed heads represented praying for black Americans. When asked if he represented all black athletes, Smith responded, "I can say I represented black America." Cosell pushed Smith further by asking if he was "proud to be an American." Smith evasively answered, "I'm proud to be a black American." Despite his elusiveness, Smith made it clear that he believed his actions increased "black dignity."⁶⁹

There were many hostile responses to Smith's and Carlos's gestures. Jim Murray thought that the protest was misplaced. He sarcastically noted that "our secret is out: we got race problems in our country. This will come as a great astonishment to the reading public of the world. I am sure." John Hall, a fellow *Los Angeles Times* columnist, was hostile: "I'm sick of Tommie Smith and John Carlos. I'm sick of their whining, mealy-mouth, shallow view of the world. I'm sick of apologizing and saying they are trying to improve things." Perhaps the most offensive critique came from Brent Musburger. "Smith and Carlos," wrote Musburger, "looked like a couple of black-skinned storm troopers. . . . Carlos ran looking like a trinket shop, beads and badges and the medallions bouncing as he dashed toward the finish line."⁷⁰

Jesse Owens, who was a guest of the Mexican government, a radio commentator for the Mutual Broadcasting Company, and a consultant for the USOC at the Mexico City Games, was sent by the USOC to talk with Smith, Carlos, and other black athletes. The meeting between Owens, twenty-five African American athletes, and a smattering of white athletes degenerated into hostile accusations, exposing the cultural divide between the two generations. Owens left the meeting saddened and frustrated. As the Smith-Carlos incident continued to be front-page news, Jesse Owens feared that most Americans would think that Smith and Carlos spoke for the majority of African Americans. After the Games, Owens, along with ghostwriter Paul Neimark, started work on a book, *Blackthink*, to assert that most black Americans did not support the "racial anger and disrespect of the flag" exemplified by the two track stars. He described Black Power advocates as "pro-Negro bigots," "professional haters," and "soapbox blackthinkers." Owens affirmed his belief in the justice and legitimacy of the American racial order, arguing that "if the Negro doesn't succeed in today's America, it is because he has chosen to fail." Although Owens would retreat from his strong statements a few years later in his follow-

up book, *I Have Changed* (1972), while reviewers, with virtual unanimity, praised *Blackthink*.⁷¹

The International Olympic Committee held the United States Olympic Committee responsible for the actions of Smith and Carlos, claiming that their gestures violated a basic principle of the Olympic Games that "politics play no part whatsoever." After a five-hour emergency session, the USOC issued a formal apology to the IOC for the "discourtesy" displayed by Smith and Carlos. The USOC decided not to take action against Smith and Carlos, but warned that a "repetition of such an incident will be viewed as a willful disregard of Olympic principles." Unsatisfied, the IOC was concerned that the USOC did not have control of its team and threatened to disqualify the entire U.S. team if stronger action was not taken. The IOC overreacted and multiplied the impact of the protest by forcing their suspension. Nonetheless, the international body was determined to ensure that the protest did not lead to a broader demonstration.⁷²

Intense pressure from the IOC forced the USOC to revoke Smith's and Carlos's Olympic credentials and expel them from the Olympic Village. Had the IOC not demanded such harsh action, the impact of the protest probably would have been forgotten in a few days. The expulsion of the medalists placed the protest at the forefront of the international media, alongside coverage of the possibility of Russian intervention in Vietnam, George Wallace, Apollo 7, and Jacqueline Kennedy's wedding to Aristotle Onassis.

One month before the Games, a group of twenty-one African American athletes had signed a petition asking for the resignation of Avery Brundage because the athletes thought that Brundage specifically threatened African American athletes with expulsion from the Olympic Village if they protested. Brundage clarified his point: "I made a general statement that demonstrations are not permitted at the Games and that the word boycott is not used in Olympic circles and that demonstrators of any nationality would be sent home. This is permanent Olympic policy." By insisting upon upholding this policy, Brundage's actions granted the two athletes "instant martyrdom."⁷³

Despite Brundage's claims that the Olympics were apolitical, America had touted the success of African American athletes as emblematic of democracy and testaments to the virtues of American equality. However, as Doug Hartmann has argued, Olympic symbolism did not allow participants to represent nonnational identities, including race, religion, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The racial concerns that Smith and Car-

los introduced could not effectively be expressed in accepted individual and national Olympic identities. Traditionally, African American athletes were expected to be patriotic, to suppress their grievances in order to buttress America's international prestige and honor. By injecting race into the Olympic dialogue, Smith and Carlos co-opted the traditional symbolism associated with the "black athlete" and inserted a new definition for themselves and the world. The "Black Power salute" denounced America before a world audience and offered a new "lasting racial consciousness" that historian and former NAACP executive office Julian Bond claims united black America.⁷⁴

Smith's and Carlos's defiance and subsequent suspensions led to speculation regarding further protest gestures. After their suspension, Lee Evans, whom one reporter referred to as "the number three militant" and who had been one of the most vocal and active supporters of the OPHR, became the center of attention. Evans heard about the expulsion on his way to breakfast on October 18. Evans had considered not running the final of the men's 400-meter dash when he heard about the suspensions. However, one of the last things that John Carlos did before he left the Olympic Village was to remind Evans of the team's pledge: "You run, win, and then do your thing, man." After sweeping the race, when the three African American medalists, Lee Evans, Larry James, and Ron Freeman, took the victory stand, wearing black berets on their heads, and raised bare black fists into the air, an act of defiance seemed imminent. However, the three smiling athletes lowered their fists and took their berets off as "The Star-Spangled Banner" began to play. The actions of the trio did not draw the wrath of the USOC. The *New York Times* ran a photo of Evans, James, and Freeman on the victory dais with the caption "Not Quite the Same Thing."⁷⁵

After the victory ceremony, Evans said that they donned black berets simply because it had rained. He explained away the clenched fist as "just a salute. Some do it like this, some do it like that. This is our way of saluting." The gold medalist said, "I won it for all the black people in America." When asked if he had won it for some white people, he acquiescingly acknowledged, "I have a lot of white friends at San Jose State and a lot all over the world. This was for them too." However, to questions regarding the suspension of Smith and Carlos, Evans answered, "No comment." The USOC was appeased by Evans's explanation. Douglas Roby described the ceremony as "perfectly all right."⁷⁶ Evans's behavior helped further isolate Smith and Carlos's protest as gestures by two individuals rather than a statement representative of a larger community.

Harry Edwards contemptuously condemned Evans for taking the victory stand, "waving and smiling. There was no sign of protest. Evans had disappointed his people." Even after winning a second gold medal as a member of the men's 1,600-meter relay team, Lee Evans did not make a bold statement against racial oppression. "Evans tried to do the impossible," Edwards maintained. "He attempted to stand up and be counted on both sides of the fence at once. Because this is a struggle for black survival in which there is no middle ground, he failed on both accounts."⁷⁷

Harry Edwards did not attend the Games in Mexico City. On different occasions, Edwards has claimed that he was turned away at the border and that death threats kept him away. His critics maintain that he made only a token attempt to get to the Games. Others have offered different speculative possibilities: he was threatened with imprisonment in Mexico, he accepted a bribe from the CIA, he opted to concentrate on his studies, he was fearful of violence, or he realized that his boycott movement was dead. Notwithstanding his criticism of Lee Evans, where was Harry Edwards? At the critical juncture when the African American athletes in Mexico City could have benefited from his guidance and perspective, Edwards remained in the United States.⁷⁸

Smith's and Carlos's raised fists became the "high-water mark in the liberation efforts of black youth during the 1960s." Their defiant actions became the defining moment of the XIXth Olympiad. "Smith and Carlos were banished for having committed the ultimate black transgression in a white supremacist's society," argued Harry Edwards. "They dared to become visible, to stand up for the dignity of Black people, to protest from an international platform the racist inhumanity of American society."⁷⁹ Young African Americans loved the duo for their courage; they returned home heroes.

Stateside, Tommie Smith and John Carlos immediately began a national speaking tour that began at Howard University, a historically black university. At the rally, Stokely Carmichael noted, "We are letting white America and everybody else know we will pick our own heroes. Our heroes are not those who will bow down to white America, but those who will stand up for our people."⁸⁰ Thousands of telegrams and acknowledgments from African Americans, including black leaders Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Elijah Muhammad, and H. Rap Brown, were sent. Receptions in their honor were hosted by black African nations. The defiance of the two American Olympic champions signaled the end of the "accommodating" soft-spoken athlete as heroic in the African American community. Edwards likened the "New Black Athlete" to the generation to which

Malcolm X had alluded to—"a generation to which black dignity meant more than individual Negro gains."⁹¹

Gauging the Response to Mexico City

International attention placed on U.S. race relations had been instrumental in previous instances of civil rights reform. The drive to desegregate the military, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were all implemented because of the geopolitical implications of continued racial oppression upon the United States' effort to win the Cold War. However, by the 1968 Olympic protest, the impetus to reform the U.S. system waned within government circles. There are several reasons for this: most important, government officials began to realize that U.S. racial policies were no longer as severe a hindrance to U.S. foreign policy as had been the case since the beginning of the Cold War. The international response to the violence at Selma in 1965 had marked a significant shift for State Department officials.

Early in the morning on Sunday, March 7, 1965, six hundred Africans American gathered outside Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church to prepare for a march through Selma, leading to the state capitol in Montgomery. King had favored delaying this march until Tuesday, hoping that federal judge Frank Johnson would overturn the ban that Alabama's governor, George Wallace, had ordered against the march. Nonetheless, with grassroots organizer Hosea Williams and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's John Lewis at the helm, the marchers approached the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where sheriff's officers on horseback and state troopers wearing gas masks waited on the other side. Major John Cloud, the spokesman for the state troopers, warned the approaching marchers: "Turn around and go back to your church." The assembled masses refused, and the troopers charged. John Lewis and others stood their ground. Struck by a fierce blow, Lewis's skull was fractured in the same place where he had been assaulted during the Freedom Rides. Vicious billy-club swings sent other innocent citizens to the ground, while some white onlookers cheered. Notwithstanding the bravery of John Lewis, most ran as the baton-swinging officers approached. However, numerous marchers were unable to outrun the brutish law enforcement agents. By the end of the savage beating, seventy African Americans were hospitalized, including five women who were found unconscious at the initial site of the attack. Other bloody, bruised, and limping marchers sought relief in the black community surrounding Brown Chapel.⁹²

The violence at Selma moved President Johnson to address a joint session of Congress. On Monday evening, March 15, the president entered the House of Representatives to make his case for a powerful civil rights bill focusing on voting rights. If the United States did not resolve its civil rights issue, he said, "then we will have failed as a people and as a nation." He likened Selma to other turning points in American history: Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox. Johnson told the members of Congress and the national television audience that "the effort of American Negroes to secure themselves the full blessings of American life . . . must be our cause, too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice." In a speech punctuated with nearly forty ovations from the floor of Congress, President Johnson concluded with a pledge and battle cry that brought tears to the eyes of Martin Luther King: "We shall . . . overcome."⁹³

The United States Information Agency tracked press coverage of the Selma incident; despite its brutality, Selma was not front-page news. One foreign newspaper argued that President Johnson's speech marked "the end of official United States indifference, hypocrisy and passivity toward the position of African Americans." The agency gleefully reported that the world recognized that in "one year the United States has moved rapidly toward a new phase of race relations based upon the Civil Rights Bill" of 1964. "The world," the report concluded, "is seeing that African Americans are winning their struggle with the support of the United States government and the support of most Americans." Editorials continued to be critical of the violence, but rather than condemning the United States for permitting the violence, foreign nations began to assert that the United States was doing its best to make sure all Americans could exercise their constitutional rights, the report suggested.⁹⁴

Selma signaled a major shift: a sharp distinction was made between the actions of the American government and "racial bigots." Before the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, that distinction had not been widely made. Worldwide, there was a general acceptance of the notion that the violence of Selma was part of the evolutionary process toward equality that the majority of Americans favored; the violence was interpreted as a "sign of the tension when integrating a national minority. The United States could be seen as good, even when racism was abhorrent." Therefore, racial discrimination was increasingly interpreted as a sectional issue that was moving toward eradication, according to the State Department report. Editorials in Tunisia, Nigeria, and Kenya expressed confidence that the American federal government would take the necessary course of action

to ensure that African Americans were afforded the rights guaranteed by the Constitution.⁸⁵ This notion was strengthened when Congress moved swiftly by passing the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed a variety of measures that were used by local and state governments to disenfranchise African American voters.⁸⁶

A widely circulated 1966 USIA report, "Racial Issues in the U.S.: Some Policy and Program Indications of Research," revealed that international condemnation of American race relations had been replaced by criticism of U.S. policy in Vietnam as the principal threat to U.S. influence in the world. Nonetheless, nations around the world continued to harbor "unrelieved disapproval" of U.S. race relations. The report noted that reaction to U.S. racial problems continued to be an aspect of American society where international opinion was "universally adverse . . . [and] strongly negative." The report argued that the "unfavorable view is widespread, strong, and persistent." Yet it also made the vitally important observation that instances of racial justice appeared "to be more conspicuous as a blot on our image . . . than as a problem for our influence." This was a crucial recognition. Rather than a mounting obstacle, "Racial Issues in the U.S." suggested that confronting international condemnation of U.S. racism occupied government officials more "than the facts warrant." Therefore, while nations were critical of the treatment and living conditions of African Americans, it did not mean that racial discrimination was still a hindrance to U.S. foreign policy objectives.⁸⁷

State Department officials had worked hard to portray the African American struggle as a story of progress. "Racial Issues in the U.S." suggested that their goal had been achieved because there was a new "general belief that things have changed, will continue to change, and that the change is for the better."⁸⁸ The report maintained that the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act had caused foreign audiences to view U.S. race relations through different philosophical lenses. Increasingly, the U.S. government was perceived as being in full support of the extension of political and social rights for African Americans.

Terming the new foreign attitudes about U.S. race relations a "watershed" moment, the report suggested a change in policy. Instead of intensive programming directed at countering potential hostile attitudes after public incidents like the 1968 Mexico Olympic protest, "Racial Issues in the U.S." suggested that the government should allow the issues to play out in the public media. Rather than responding "dramatically to drama," it was suggested that the best action that the U.S. State Department could take was to allow the public to draw their own conclusions about U.S.

racial injustice. Because foreign audiences were now more willing to see instances of racial confrontation as representative of progress, and no longer as "shameful exposures of a static and evil situation," the report effectively minimized the importance of foreign condemnation of U.S. racism as a consideration that should preoccupy the State Department. A consequence of the new policy was that the leverage that civil rights activists and Black Power proponents had successfully used to force the United States to work toward solving America's domestic civil rights problems dwindled.⁸⁹

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs' budget cuts seem to support the conclusions of "Racial Issues in the U.S." The bureau's reduced appropriations after 1964 were in part because the government did not believe that the programs were as essential to U.S. efforts to win the Cold War in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, areas where the racial issue had caused the most damage. The bureau was allocated \$2,869,241 for fiscal year 1964. Then the budget fell to \$2,000,000 for 1965 and 1966. Because of budgetary reductions by the administration and then by Congress in 1967, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs was forced to cancel approximately one-third of the musical, athletic, and other cultural tours proposed. Because of fixed commitments to some phases of the bureau's program, such as the academic and leadership exchanges, the cuts fell heaviest upon the smallest but one of the most successful aspects of the program—the presentation abroad of American cultural and athletic achievements. The available funds dropped to around \$1,000,000 at the close of the Johnson administration. Given the declining significance of race as a foreign policy concern, the areas of concentration shrank to just the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. With a few exceptions, the State Department completely sponsored tours that were sent to the Soviet sphere of influence. In order to reach other parts of the world, the department increasingly relied upon the practice of extending and supplementing privately sponsored trips arranged for Africa, Asia, Latin America, and other regions.⁹⁰

The legacy of the 1968 Mexico City Olympic protest is that it helped spotlight American racial abuses. Decades later Tommie Smith maintained that "what hurt—an agonizing hurt—for old heart of America was everybody saw it—the entire world saw it."⁹¹ The editorial comments that the protest engendered bespeak the ways in which Americans who supported Smith and Carlos and those who opposed them both saw the protest gesture as potentially harmful for the United States' world image. However, there is no evidence that the USIA or the State Department tried

to assess the international implications of the Smith and Carlos actions, as it had in other high-profile instances prior to the 1966 publication of "Racial Issues in the U.S." Given the lack of State Department records regarding Mexico City, it appears that the protest gestures of Smith and Carlos did not spark the concern of the federal government. The speculative claims that the State Department may have been instrumental in the forced suspension of Smith and Carlos cannot be substantiated with declassified State Department records.

Certainly, the image of Smith and Carlos on the dais is one of the most iconic moments in sports history. Their bravery and commitment to social justice continue to serve as a model for past athletes and contemporary sports figures. By no means am I suggesting that their protest was unfruitful or counterproductive. However, it must be acknowledged that Smith and Carlos achieved only a partial victory. Indeed, their protest served to highlight U.S. race relations abroad. However, their actions did not lead the U.S. government to aggressively work to solve civil rights problems.

Conclusion

The raised fists of Tommie Smith and John Carlos are the enduring symbols of the co-optation of the symbolic meaning of African American athletes. The notion that docility and acquiescence in the face of racial discrimination would be a benefit to the struggle for equal rights became associated with "Uncle Tomism." Coupled with political protests by Muhammad Ali, economic ventures by Jim Brown and the Negro Economic Industrial Union, and the massive protests on college campuses involving African American athletes, the Mexico City Games were the high point of the struggle to place the athletic world at the center of efforts to fight racial oppression, under terms set by African Americans.

Epilogue

The use of sport as a tool of U.S. foreign policy did not end after the Mexico City Olympic protests. The United States as well as other global powers continued to utilize sport as a means to solidify friendships, antagonize rivals, and advance claims about the viability of their political, social, and economic systems. Two of the most widely used tactics to express displeasure with other nations were boycotts and the denial of visas for potential competitors. Conversely, sport continued to be viewed as a means to initiate and foster positive relationships. In this regard, some of the most widely employed strategies included sports exchanges, training assistance, and facility construction. Hence, sport remained a venue through which nations articulated political alliances, battleground issues, and counter-narratives that frequently went unnoticed by the general public when expressed through traditional diplomatic channels.¹

Arguably, the two most high-profile Cold War-related incidents that involved the United States after the Mexico City protests were the visit of the United States Table Tennis Team to Beijing, China, to participate in a series of matches dubbed "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" and the U.S.-led boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games held in the Soviet Union. Diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China had been virtually nonexistent since a Communist government rose to power in China in 1949. However, both President Nixon and Chairman Mao had made public pronouncements that signaled their desire to improve Sino-U.S. relations in the late 1960s.

Table tennis provided an opening through which both nations could interact with each other in a public yet nonthreatening environment. At