

Olympics Boycott:
Editorial Comment!

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Opiate Of The Masses

THE DECISION of the British Olympic Association to participate in the summer games in Moscow in defiance of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the House of Commons adds an asterisk to one of Karl Marx's most famous lines:

"Religion is the opiate of the masses."

To the modern rulers of the Kremlin, sports is the opiate of the masses. They've made it so in the Soviet Union. And now their theory seems to be working elsewhere.

Denis Howell, the opposition Labor Party's spokesman on sports, welcomed the BOA decision as proof that British sportsmen are determined to safeguard the future of international sporting competition.

There should have been little worry about that. Even in a world dominated by the Soviet Union and its bloc, the future of sports would be assured — although the quality of the judging and the equity of the rules might not be. If the Olympics can make the world forget Afghanistan, the Soviet Union might propose that the games be held annually instead of every four years.

Mrs. Thatcher was the only leader of a major Western European nation to join wholeheartedly in President Carter's call for a boycott of the summer Olympics. Former Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark had pledged his support, but his successor, Pierre Trudeau, has backed off.

THE FEELING AMONG many athletes and sports officials, including Americans, seems to be that sports and politics should be kept separate.

The world, unfortunately, isn't that simple. The Soviet Union has made sports an integral part of its domestic and foreign policy. And anyone who doesn't think the Kremlin has elaborate plans for turning the summer games into a propaganda spectacular — as Hitler tried to do in 1936 — must live in a sand box. Moscow in July will be the antithesis of Kabul in January — a peace offensive to put a military offensive out of focus.

Some politicians have objected that the boycott was an ill-conceived and insubstantial idea from the beginning. Trudeau has said that it wouldn't have any impact and that he wouldn't support it unless there was a comprehensive program with wide international participation to penalize the Soviet Union for the invasion of Afghanistan. He apparently doesn't set as much store in symbols as the Kremlin does. The world may be talking about the boycott issue, but Trudeau wants more than words. Nukes, then? Would he rather escalate the confrontation in vague ways difficult to carry out rather than define it in specific terms on which an unequivocal stand can be taken?

THE BOYCOTT MAY fizzle, except for Carter's continued insistence that the United States won't go to Moscow. But that doesn't mean it was a bad idea. The lack of support suggests, instead, that the boycott represented too great a sacrifice and commitment. Unfortunately, they may have to be greater still the next time they're needed to send the Kremlin a message. What the British Olympic Association has sent is a singing telegram.

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