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**“When the Guns Boom”:
The 1968 Olympics and the Massacre at Tlatelolco**

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by

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Dedication

To those that have lost their lives to state violence,
that their stories are not lost as well.

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Abstract

“When the Guns Boom”: The 1968 Olympics and the Massacre at Tlatelolco

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Fifty years on, we still only have a few of the answers to the many questions surrounding the massacre at Tlatelolco. Not yet do we know how many people were really killed, what became of their bodies, or where the orders came from. But we have at least confirmed the broader strokes of what occurred in Mexico City on the night of 2 October 1968. In this paper, I attempt to answer another question: who was responsible? Traditionally, in response to this question, historians, activists, and reporters have all pointed their fingers toward Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and his underlings, be they ministers or generals. And while blood is most certainly on their hands, I propose we cast a new antagonist: the International Olympic Committee and its president, Avery Brundage.

In most every work on the massacre at Tlatelolco and the surrounding student movement, the Olympics appear as nothing more than a footnote, either a point of leverage for the students to pressure the government, or more simply the backdrop before which the protests occurred. Similarly, sport historians have largely avoided grappling with the massacre itself, instead turning their gaze on any number of other controversies that occurred at the 1968 Olympic Games. What they missed, and what I will show, is this:

Brundage and the IOC not only had foreknowledge of the impending massacre, but they actually pressured the Mexican government into committing it.

For this paper, I have made use of a wide range of secondary sources, as well as a number of newspaper archives, the H.J. Lucher Stark Center's 1968 Oral History Project, IOC records, the National Security Archive, and the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library's archive.

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Chapter 1: Tlatelolco as Proof of Concept

Everything is possible in peace.
-Tagline for the 1968 Olympic Games

On 7 October 1968, the general body of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) met in Mexico City for their 67th session. It was the last meeting before the beginning of the 1968 Olympic Games, and thus there was much to cover—so much so that the meeting took four days. There were reports from Munich and Sapporo on their respective preparations for the 1972 Games, as well as the election of Lord Killanin to the Vice-Presidency of the IOC. There was a report from the Finance Commission on the allocation of new television revenues to various sporting federations, and a report from the Medical Commission on the state of tests for sex and doping. There was even a close vote that almost banned all national anthems and flags from the Olympic Games.¹

But what was perhaps most important was what went unsaid. In the pages and pages of documents from this meeting, no mention is made of the events that transpired five days prior, 2 October 1968. On that day, just nine miles from where the Olympic flame would be lit at the top of *el Estadio Olímpico Universitario*, occurred one of the most important events in modern Mexican history, colloquially referred to as the Tlatelolco massacre. This event resulted in the death of several hundred student protestors, cut down by their own government.

But for as central a role that the massacre has played in Mexican consciousness and identity over the past fifty years, it is not understood in the way that comparable events, like the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre or the 9/11 attacks in the United States, are. There is plenty of blame to go around for the unanswered questions that remain regarding Tlatelolco, from the generations of politicians and bureaucrats who had the power to make

¹ Minutes of the 67th session of the International Olympic Committee. Mexico City, 7-11 October 1968.

change and didn't, to the media who were complicit in the state coverup.² But culpability also rests at the feet of the Olympic movement. After all, the coverup itself occurred in anticipation of the coming Games, "when the 'eyes of the world' would be trained on the nation."³ As Lauren Harper of the National Security Archive wrote, "The 1968 Olympics in Mexico City stand out from other tragedies because the ruling Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) used the international attention of the Olympic games to justify intimidating student opposition groups."⁴ Though it differs from other tragedies in this way, the Tlatelolco massacre is placed firmly within the tradition of governments using sporting mega-events to increase militarization or advance neoliberal policy goals—a tradition that has only accelerated in the fifty years since.

Political scientist Jules Boykoff described these mega-events as "upbeat shakedowns with high human costs."⁵ The most recent, and best documented, of these atrocities took place in Brazil, which hosted the World Cup and Summer Olympics back-to-back.⁶ Per a report released by a local Brazilian watchdog group, "as many as one

² The impact of media complicity cannot be overstated. Gonzalez de Bustamante wrote that reporters in the 1960s would "often sideline journalistic goals of providing accurate and balanced information" in an attempt to promote a more positive image of Mexico. All of Mexico's popular media was in the hands of two or three families who, per Paz, "are more interested in earning money by brutalizing the audience than in analyzing the countries problems honestly and objectively." He went on to say that in Mexico, freedom of the press was "more a formality than a reality." Additionally, Gonzalez de Bustamante showed that these television executives had strong ties with PRI officials, helping to "create and sustain a system of reciprocity that mutually benefited the PRI and media owners." These two factors combined to create a media environment that unfairly portrayed the student protestors while alive, and then worked to erase them once dead. Only one of the three newscasts on 2 October 1968 bothered to cover the events in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas, and over subsequent days all three networks uncritically accepted the government's version of events. Gonzalez de Bustamante, Celeste. 2010. "1968 Olympic Dreams and Tlatelolco Nightmares: Imagining and Modernity on Television." *Mexican Studies*. Vol. 26, No. 1.

³ Noble, Andrea. 2011. "Recognizing Historical Injustice through Photography: Mexico 1968." *Theory, Culture & Society*. Page 189.

⁴ Harper, Lauren. "The Declassified Record on the Tlatelolco Massacre that Preceded the '68 Olympic Games." *National Security Archive*. 2014.

⁵ Zirin, Dave. *Brazil's Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, the Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy*. Chicago: IL: Haymarket Books. 2016. Page 189.

⁶ Brazil, and Rio specifically, were notorious for the lengths they would go to to hide the country's poverty from international tourists. This practice can actually be traced back to Mexico City as well, where the

hundred thousand people were evicted from their homes as a direct result of the World Cup,” which excludes entire neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro that were razed to make room for Olympic infrastructure over the next year and a half.⁷ Brazilian laborers were forced to work unthinkable hours, leading to an epidemic of avoidable deaths at construction sites across the country. One member of the abovementioned watchdog group wrote, in a sentence that could easily have come from Mexico City in 1968, “The federal government pretends not to see it and the International Olympic Committee hasn’t spoken out about the charges of human rights violations caused by the preparations for the Games.”⁸

Similarly, regarding the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the China director of the Human Rights Watch Sophie Richardson wrote:

The reality is that the Chinese government’s hosting of the Games has been a catalyst for abuses, leading to massive forced evictions, a surge in the arrest, detention and harassment of critics, repeated violations of media freedom, and increased political repression. Not a single world leader who attended the Games or members of the IOC seized the opportunity to challenge the Chinese government’s behavior in any meaningful way.⁹

Evidence of this same pattern can be found in the labor practices in Qatar, the austerity in Athens and Vancouver, the political repression in Sochi, and the militarization that took place in London and Los Angeles. Before the South Africa World Cup in 2010, the African National Congress felt the need to put out a statement saying, “The ANC wants to reiterate its condemnation of any murder of any person, no matter what the motive may be,” after two whistleblowers were assassinated in the leadup to the event.¹⁰ As Dave Zirin,

organizing committee would paint the walls of the slums near where the Games were being held in “shocking pink, purple and yellow—temporarily hiding the misery.”

⁷ Zirin. *Brazil’s Dance with the Devil*. Page 31.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Richardson, Sophie. “China: Hosting Olympics a Catalyst for Human Rights Abuses.” *Human Rights Watch*. 22 August 2008.

¹⁰ Zirin. Page 178.

sports editor for *The Nation*, put it, “It’s never a good sign when you have to make clear to the public that you are staunchly against murder.”¹¹ But before all of this was the massacre at Tlatelolco, which acted as proof of concept for what the world’s sport leaders were willing to stomach to have their Games.

The 1968 Olympics have likely elicited more attention from sport historians than any mega-event save the 1936 edition of the Games. Yet most of this attention has been focused on the Olympic Project for Human Rights and the protests that grew out of it, elevation issues, or matters relating to drug and sex testing. Likewise, the Mexican student movement in the summer of 1968 has been written about by numerous scholars. But as historian Kevin Witherspoon put it in his monograph on the 1968 Olympic Games, “Historians have yet to adequately assess the relationship between the student movement and the Olympics.”¹² The intersection between these two defining events of 1968 is mostly barren of scholarly work, each having both been reduced to footnotes in the other’s story.

Other than Witherspoon’s book, *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games*, which offers up an entire chapter on the student movement, sport historians have neglected the subject of Tlatelolco. In any of the books where it is brought up, many of them cited herein, the massacre is often relegated to a passing mention, even by more critical historians. And those sportswriters who seem instead to make their living cozying up to those in power, as Witherspoon put it, all “seem quite in accord with the brutality with which the Mexican student movement was put down.”¹³ This level of attention mirrors most Americans’ level of interest in and knowledge of the topic. As Latin

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Witherspoon, Kevin. *Before the Eyes of the World: Mexico and the 1968 Olympic Games*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press. 2008. Page 118.

¹³ Ibid.

American historian Eric Zolov put it, our visions of the 1968 Games “have largely been telescoped into a single representation of black-gloved defiance.”¹⁴

An explanation for this phenomenon is offered by historian Ranajit Guha, a titan in the field of subaltern studies. In his seminal essay “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” Guha suggests that historians tend to view popular uprisings as simply natural phenomena, a sort of bug in the system common to all modern civilizations. As he wrote, “They break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics.”¹⁵ They are inevitable and unavoidable, and thus it is pointless to address them. Boykoff adds another layer to this explanation, suggesting that scholars of social movements tend to focus on “the emergence, growth, efficacy, effectiveness, influence, and impact of social movements” at the cost of ignoring the movements that are cut down before they can gain any influence.¹⁶ As he wrote, “students of social movements have not yet fully or systematically considered the suppression of dissent or the demobilization of social movements.”¹⁷

Studies centered on the student movement or the massacre itself will mention the Olympics as a source of anger among many students, who viewed it as a symbol of the misplaced priorities of the Díaz Ordaz administration, but rarely will they go further than that.¹⁸ As Zolov wrote, “With very few exceptions, virtually all of the literature focuses on

¹⁴ Zolov, Eric. 2004. “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow’: Mexico and the 1968 Olympics.” *The Americas*, Vol. 61, No. 2, Page 160.

¹⁵ Guha, Ranajit and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 1988. Page 46.

¹⁶ Boykoff, Jules. *The Suppression of Dissent: How the State and Mass Media Squelch US American Social Movements*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2006. Page 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Page 6-7.

¹⁸ The students’ anger was well-founded. In 1970, according to historian Celeste Gonzalez de Bustamante, half of Mexico City’s residents lived in squatter settlements. Though Mexico was in the throes of a historic economic boom at the time, the new wealth was concentrated in the hands of the few. Per Paz, “In absolute numbers there are more rich people today than there were thirty years ago, but also many more poor people.”

the question of state repression and student protest to the utter exclusion of the broader cultural context of this period.”¹⁹ He added that the role the Olympics played in the events of 1968 “ironically is often overlooked while researchers seek to unravel the politics and power plays behind the dynamic of student protest and government response that culminated in the massacre.”²⁰ Books on international relations between the US and Mexico have treated the event similarly, as worthy of mention but not discussion or analysis. Certainly, the fact that the massacre took place in a developing country colors the discourse around it, but New York University scholar Kristin Ross suggested that Tlatelolco was also overshadowed in our minds by the other great crimes of the 20th century, specifically the Second World War:

And yet even to raise the question of memory of the recent past is to confront the way in which the whole of our contemporary understanding of processes of social memory and forgetting has been derived from analyses related to another mass event—World War II. World War II has in fact “produced” the memory industry in contemporary scholarship, in France and elsewhere, and the parameters of devastation—catastrophe, administrative massacre, atrocity, collaboration, genocide—have in turn made it easy for certain pathological psychoanalytic categories—“trauma,” for example, or “repression”—to attain legitimacy as ever more generalizable ways of understanding the excesses and deficiencies of collective memory. And these categories have in turn...defamiliarized us from understanding, or even perception, of a “mass event” that does not appear to us in the register of “catastrophe” or “mass extermination.” “Masses,” in other words, have come to mean masses of dead bodies, not masses of people working together to take charge of their collective lives.²¹

Most likely none of this negligence is intentional, a sin of omission rather than one of commission. But it still creates an urgent problem that needs to be addressed. This study will hopefully help with that process.

¹⁹ Zolov. “Showcasing the Land of Tomorrow”. Page 160.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ross, Kristin. *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2002. Page 1-2.

In this study, I will combine secondary source analysis with a review of recently declassified documents from the White House, CIA, FBI, Department of State, and Department of Defense to show that the United States government was well aware of the building tensions and potential for violence in Mexico City in 1968. Then, using historian Toby Rider's model of the state-private network, I will examine the close links between the Olympic movement and United States government that formed during the Cold War to establish that the Olympic movement would have known about the deteriorating situation in Mexico as well. I will make use of a number of interviews with athletes at the 1968 Games to show the Olympic movement's purposeful negligence. And then I will discuss the impact their inaction has had on the next half-century of Mexican society.

Chapter 2: Deteriorating Conditions

In this chapter, I will establish the depth of the United States government's knowledge about the deteriorating conditions in Mexico and growing likelihood of violence throughout the spring and summer of 1968, leading up to the massacre on 2 October. But for the violence to make sense, one must first understand what the Olympic Games meant to the Mexican government.

Because of Mexico's peculiar origin, growing out of an orgy of violence between competing cultures, Mexican identity is complex. As Latin American historian Keith Brewster wrote, from

Being dominated by the descendants of European colonisers, Mexicans have found it hard to embrace origin narratives that are rooted in pre-Columbian history. Simultaneously, the nationalistic political rhetoric of post-revolutionary Mexico has made it equally difficult to embrace its Spanish colonial ties. As such, Mexicans have engaged in a constant search for a definition of what it means to be Mexican, borrowing foreign cultural values and ideas in an attempt to sustain an element of civilisation that moves beyond the country's indigenous roots.²²

This lack of a coherent self-identity has left Mexico insecure in its dealings with the rest of the world, according to Mexican essayist Octavio Paz.²³ The Olympics were seen as a way for the country to solidify a cohesive and coherent national identity, a necessary step towards the larger goal of having Mexico take its place among the developed countries of the world. The late scholar Andrea Noble described it as “a unique opportunity to showcase the economic and social modernity of the ‘Mexican Miracle,’” the country's

²² Brewster, Keith. 2010. “Teaching Mexicans How to Behave: Public Education on the Eve of the Olympics.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*. Vol 29. Issue s1. Page 48.

²³ Paz's essay “The Other Mexico” is one of the more significant writings on Tlatelolco. In it, he made the same point as Brewster, though in much prettier prose, writing “As people on the fringes, inhabitants of the suburbs of history, we Latin Americans are uninvited guests who have sneaked in through the West's back door, intruders who arrived at the feast of modernity as the lights are about to be put out. We arrive late everywhere, we were born when it was already late in history, we have no past or, if we have one, we spit on its remains.”

period of rapid economic growth that began in the 1940s.²⁴ As the Mexican paper *El Nacional* wrote in 1967:

The Olympiad will confirm to us that we are now young adults; that it is now time to abandon our short-trousers mentality. This is not only because the world is not as terrible as we thought, but also because we have matured, and that it is good to make ourselves aware of this and the responsibilities that it brings.²⁵

Despite this so-called maturation, the Mexican bourgeoisie was concerned that the denizens of Mexico would not live up to their billing as a civilized people on the world stage. In other Olympics past and future, most of the stress for organizers comes from whether the necessary infrastructure would be completed on time, but this was a problem the authoritarian government of Mexico was well-suited to handle. But people cannot always be manipulated as easily as resources. The government knew the masses would need to be whipped into shape.

Though this campaign to present a well-behaved people to the world would end with hundreds of bullet-ridden bodies, it began much more benignly. In a “top-down imposition of values,” the Mexican government spent the years leading up to the 1968 Games trying to educate its citizenry about how to behave and implementing their vision for Mexico City.²⁶ With the willing assistance of the Mexican media, they launched a fully-fledged campaign to this effect. Street vendors were pushed out of heavily trafficked areas as television commercials and newscasts all discouraged Mexicans from engaging in any unseemly behavior during the Games. As Brewster reports,

In the final year of preparations alone, the Mexico City authorities spent 24 million pesos renovating squares within the city. 200,000 leaflets were distributed offering

²⁴ Noble. “Recognizing Historical Injustice through Photography” Page 189.

²⁵ Brewster. “Teaching Mexicans How to Behave.” Page 49.

²⁶ Ibid. Page 51.

advice on various aspects of being good hosts, while 700 radio broadcasts and 144 television broadcasts pushed the message home.²⁷

This was a widescale operation that the highest levels of government were very invested in. Nothing was going to go wrong during Mexico's coming-out party.

The PRI and the Abandoned Revolution

The US first started to monitor the situation in Mexico City in March 1968. The CIA prepared a memo in advance of Vice President Hubert Humphrey's April trip to Mexico City that read in part:

The political situation in Mexico is stable, and security conditions in Mexico City, a metropolis of nearly five million residents, are good. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) virtually monopolizes Mexican politics, while Diaz Ordaz dominates the party without significant challenge to his authority.²⁸

The memo also mentions that "The Mexican Government maintains surveillance over the activities of most of these [dissident] groups and would probably have advance warning if any major disorders were planned."²⁹

The next month, the Mexican embassy contacted the US Department of Defense "for assistance in obtaining expedited delivery of" military radios.³⁰ As tensions escalated throughout the summer, so would their requests, as they would soon be asking the US for weapons, ammunition, and riot gear to arm their police and soldiers.³¹ As historian Erin Redihan explained, "Washington complied, as it associated the demonstrations with a nascent communist movement in Mexico rather than a rejection of the Olympics."³²

²⁷ Ibid. Page 52.

²⁸ CIA Special National Intelligence Estimate, *Security Conditions in Mexico*, March 28, 1968, Secret.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ DoD letter from State Dept, *Mexican Request for Military Radios*, May 24, 1968.

³¹ DoD letter from State Dept, *Out-of-Channels Request from Mexico*, July 18, 1968.

³² Redihan, Erin. *The Olympics and the Cold War, 1948-1968: Sport as Battleground in the U.S.-Soviet Rivalry*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc. 2007. Page 195.

By 1968, the Mexican government had established a record of brutal repression in response to any protest against the state. In 1940, the Mexican army shot at laborers protesting poor working conditions, killing eleven. Twelve years later during the reign of President Ruiz Corretinez, 200 Mexicans were murdered by their army at another protest of government policies. In 1959, a protest by the railroad workers union resulted in its leaders being arrested and the rest fired. A doctors' strike in 1964 was similarly crushed. This was the political environment in which the students existed.

One might ask why such movements would be necessary just a few decades after the populist Mexican Revolution overthrew the authoritarian regime of Porfirio Díaz. Unfortunately, despite the progressive politics of revolutionary leaders like Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, the Revolution itself birthed a single-party political system. The Revolution was coopted by the ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), as a symbol used to legitimize their undemocratic stranglehold on the Mexican state. As the PRI gained both power and wealth, they quickly abandoned any trace of revolutionary politics. As prominent Mexican historian Josefina Zroaida Vazquez wrote, “The construction of the modern capitalist economy in Mexico required that some of the central elements of the regime’s ideology—such as democracy or social justice—lose much of their content.”³³ Thus instead of this revolutionary lineage, Mexican identity was intentionally constructed around ideas of nationalism, as the PRI preyed on the citizenry’s insecurities about their own country being overshadowed by the United States. As Vazquez wrote, the appeal to “postpone struggles based on class interests for the sake of the national

³³ Zoraida Vazquez, Josephina and Lorenzo Meyer. *The United States and Mexico*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 1985. Page 155.

interest” became the recurring clarion call of the PRI-controlled Mexican government throughout the 20th century.³⁴

Origins of a Movement

The 1968 student movement came from modest beginnings. It can be traced directly back to a chance encounter between two separate student groups marching through the city streets celebrating the 10th anniversary of Fidel Castro’s revolution in Cuba. The two groups were from rival schools—Preparatory School Isaac Ochoterena and Vocational School Number Two of the National Polytechnical Institute—so inevitably when they ran into each other, a fist fight broke out. Mexico’s notorious riot police arrived at the scene and fell upon the schoolchildren, injuring many and sending the rest scurrying back towards their respective campuses. The police pursued them onto campus, beating not just the students but the faculty that tried to protect them. This act violated a hallowed tradition in Mexican culture of university autonomy. As Witherspoon wrote, “Discipline of the students had always been the sacred preserve of university officials.”³⁵ This was the act that catalyzed the movement against police brutality and ignited the protests that would take over Mexico City during the summer of 1968.

The student movement itself was, initially at least, not the radical leftist crusade the state made it out to be.³⁶ As Witherspoon wrote, “The rank-and-file of the student movement consisted of a diverse group whose motivations ranged from radical political beliefs to mild political interest to the thrill of challenging authority and skipping school.”³⁷

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 109.

³⁶ Brewster described the early movement as “merely the latest symptom of longstanding tension caused by a generational challenge to state paternalism” while Noble wrote that the students’ issue was mainly with “the arbitrary patriarchal authority of the ruling party.”

³⁷ Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 110.

Paz compared the movement to a plague in its ability to transverse social boundaries, writing that it “annulled ideological classification.”³⁸ Unlike the massive student movements that formed across the world in 1968, Mexico’s—in its early stages—lacked the political drive that others had in places like Paris and Detroit. Per Witherspoon:

While they waved pictures of Che Guevara and Mao Tse Tung, Mexican students were not calling for a revolution as some other students around the world were, and they did not call for a significant overhaul of the political system. [...] At its genesis, what the student movement wanted most was an apology and to be left alone by the authorities.³⁹

But in the heat of the summer, the movement’s politics calcified. What began as a protest against police brutality and for university autonomy became a movement for economic justice and democracy, calling for the end of the one-party rule that had defined Mexican politics since the Revolution. Some scholars (as well as at various points both the US and Mexican governments) have suggested this radicalization was due to influences from either Soviet or Cuban agents that infiltrated the movement. But this view can be problematic, as it robs the students of their agency. As Guha wrote, attributing their actions and ideas to outside influence means “denying a will to the mass of rebels themselves and representing them merely as instruments of some other will.”⁴⁰ He suggests this is a trend among western academics when studying popular movements, going on to say that “In

³⁸ Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. New York, NY: Grove Press, Inc. 1985. Page 221.

³⁹ Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 110. Paz expanded on the movement’s politics as well, writing, “Unlike the French students in May of the same year, the Mexican students did not propose violent and revolutionary social changes, nor was their program as radical as those of many groups of German and North American youths. It also lacked the orgiastic and near-religious tone of the “hippies.” The movement was democratic and reformist, even though some of its leaders were of the extreme left. Was this a tactical maneuver? I think it would be more sensible to attribute that moderation to the circumstances themselves and to the weight of objective reality: the temper of the Mexican people is not revolutionary and neither are the historical conditions of the country. Nobody wants a revolution. What the people do want is reform: an end to the rule of privilege initiated by the National Revolutionary Party forty years ago.”

⁴⁰ Guha. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. Page 82.

bourgeois-nationalist historiography it is an elite consciousness which is read into all peasant movements as their motivating force,” and thus something to be guarded against.⁴¹

Despite the popular goals of the student movement, it never got much support from other demographics. This can partly be blamed on the class differences between students and workers. Many viewed the protesters as “spoiled kids marching in the streets when they should have been in class.”⁴² Yet it is critical to note that this lack of support also speaks to the level of control that the PRI had over Mexico in the 1960s. Witherspoon notes that “the most important labor unions and organizing bodies among the workers had been incorporated into the PRI.”⁴³ No serious opposition to the PRI had formed over the past half century, because the PRI never allowed it to.

Since the beginnings of the Mexican Revolution, opposition groups operated only so far as the government allowed, never seriously challenging the established system and yet never entirely snuffed out. Leaders of groups that started to speak too loudly were usually co-opted into the PRI and thus silenced. Often such groups found their voices squelched by a publicity infrastructure that was entirely controlled by the government; paper and ink for printing pamphlets or newspapers, space on billboards, airtime on radio or television, and virtually any other means of reaching a wide audience were either government owned or sympathetic to the PRI.⁴⁴

Rising Temperatures in Mexico City

The first connection on paper between the protest movement and the Olympic Games is found in a 19 July 1968 report on student unrest throughout the country. Detailing the initial protests spreading from university to university, the report read:

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 108. The perception of the protestors was not aided by their penchant for attacking Díaz Ordaz personally through their chants and signage, which was anathema in Mexican society. Mexicans viewed the office of the President as a borderline religious position, criticism of which is sacrilege.

⁴³ Ibid. Page 154.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Page 106.

[REDACTED] have suggested the possibility of disorder at the 90,000-student National University in Mexico City. Chronic unrest there and indications that agitators are planning disturbances during the Olympics have already led the government to tighten its control on the students.⁴⁵

The first records of violence between the students and government can be found less than two weeks later. Executive liaison officer for Latin American affairs William Bowdler sent a memo to the White House, eventually read by the President, which explained:

Since last Friday Mexico City has been the scene of almost constant student turmoil. The difficulty started when an authorized rally to celebrate the Cuban 26 anniversary degenerated into vandalism and arson. The police intervened and had to use tough tactics against student participants to bring the situation under control.⁴⁶

The memo goes on to say that the situation did not stay under control for long. Instead, it escalated into “increasingly violent confrontations between students and security forces in successive days.”⁴⁷ A CIA report on the escalating violence details that “federal paratroopers who were called in to restore order roughed up several hundred youths and broke into university-connected schools, thereby violating university autonomy.”⁴⁸ The Department of Defense was also monitoring the violence, as they created a report describing how the Mexican government met the students’ stone throwing with batons, tear gas, fixed bayonets, and a bazooka. US embassy officials bought the official line of the Mexican government that the unrest was caused by communist agitators with support from the Soviets and Cubans. But as Kate Doyle, director of the National Security Archive’s

⁴⁵ CIA Weekly Summary, *Student Unrest Troubles Mexico*, July 19, 1968, Secret.

⁴⁶ White House memorandum, *Student Disturbances in Mexico City (7/30/68)* U.S. Embassy cable attached, untitled), July 31, 1968, Secret, Bowdler to LBJ.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Mexican universities have a long and valued tradition of autonomy from the state, and so the presence of agents of the state on campus was a very big deal. CIA Weekly Summary, *Students Stage Major Disorder in Mexico*, August 2, 1968, Secret.

Mexico Project, wrote, “Embassy officials were closer than those of other US agencies to the Mexican political class and tended to believe its propaganda.”⁴⁹ That position would quickly be discarded by the US government “as a more realistic analysis replaced the fictions spun for public consumption” by the Díaz Ordaz administration.⁵⁰

On 30 July, student leaders met with Mexico City Mayor Alfonso Corona del Rosal, and presented him with a list of seven demands:

- a) Removal from jobs of Federal District Police chief (army Lt gen Luis Cueto Ramirez) and his assistant.
- b) Firing of those responsible for injuries to students and damage to facilities at Vocational School #5.
- c) Payment of indemnity to students injured.
- d) Changes in law pertaining to intervention of authorities during disorder.
- e) Destruction of police dossiers opened on students arrested.
- f) Release of detained students.
- g) Immediate withdrawal of police and federal troops from all school properties.⁵¹

These demands show how the size of the movement as well as the youth of its participants belied its organization. The mayor agreed to five of the seven demands, and promised to continue to review the other two. The detained students would be released; police and military were to be removed from all schools; no dossiers on students arrested would be opened; and injured students would receive payments from the state for their injuries.⁵² The mayor proposed a “joint commission, composed of governmental, student

⁴⁹ Doyle, Kate. “The Tlatelolco Massacre: U.S. Documents on Mexico and the Events of 1968.” *National Security Archive*. 10 October 2003.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ In a failed effort to build solidarity and link the student movement with past struggles, the demand to release the detained students was eventually changed to the demand to release all political prisoners. Notably, that then included Demetrio Vallejo and Valentin Campa, two of the leaders of the 1959 railroad strike., DIA Intelligence Information Report, *Troops Used to Help Quell Mexico City Student Riots*, c. August 15, 1968, Confidential.

⁵² Ibid.

and faculty representatives” to “investigate the various charges and versions of what had happened, and who was to blame.”⁵³

However, this would not be the unifying and healing experience the mayor wished it to be. Some factions within the student movement called for a strike, and university classes were suspended. Relationships between the students and their government continued to erode, as the first student fatalities occurred during these late July skirmishes. Student organizers claimed those fatalities numbered 48, yet the government refuses to acknowledge any of them. The students continued to march in protest regularly, sometimes numbering close to 100,000 strong. Mexican officials, though, were not concerned with the students or their demands. Rather, according to a White House memo, their concerns were with the optics of the situation, the “image projected by the disturbances and the impact on the Olympics in which they have so heavily invested.”⁵⁴ The Department of Defense believed said impact could be significant, writing in a report that “It is believed that continued demonstrations, and particularly any further violence, will endanger the success of the Olympics.”⁵⁵

In the immediate aftermath of the late July violence, the Mexican government changed tactics. As another White House memo reported, the Mexican regime was now “allowing the students pretty much a free rein of demonstrations and indicating a willingness to negotiate grievances.”⁵⁶ They believed this would be the quickest way to end student demonstrations before the Games began, but the students’ commitment to

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ White House memorandum, *Student Disturbances in Mexico City* (7/30/68 U.S. Embassy cable attached, untitled), July 31, 1968, Secret, Bowdler to LBJ.

⁵⁵ DIA Intelligence Information Report, *Troops Used to Help Quell Mexico City Student Riots*, c. August 15, 1968, Confidential

⁵⁶ White House message, *Student Situation in Mexico* (U.S. Embassy cable attached, *Student Situation*, August 29, 1968), August 29, 1968, Confidential, Rostow to LBJ.

demonstrating was not dulled. By the end of August, Díaz Ordaz was already pivoting back to “a get-tough, no-nonsense posture with the students,” because that had clearly worked so well the first time.⁵⁷ A US government report stated this would likely result in an increase in violence in the coming days and weeks, which could “seriously affect the pre-Olympic atmosphere.”⁵⁸

In his 1 September state of the union address, Díaz Ordaz angered many of the students, emphasizing “the need to keep dissidence within legal bounds” and stating that in this matter “excess would not be tolerated.”⁵⁹ He ignored many of the students demands, and gave only minor concessions to the others. By the next week, reports suggested violence had decreased sharply in Mexico City once the government moved forcefully against the striking students. The atmosphere was described as uneasy, with widespread “public confusion and panic” as tensions seemed to be mounting.⁶⁰ And with the Olympics only weeks away now, it was certain the Mexican government “will probably meet any attempt to resume demonstrations with very tough measures.”⁶¹ Documents show the US had little faith in Díaz Ordaz’s ability to handle the situation. One CIA report criticized the Mexican government:

At times, since the beginning of the disturbances, the government has not seemed unified or certain as to what action should be take. Aside from forceful repression of violence initiated by students, there was a period when the government took no positive steps. [...] The government seemed unable to mobilize itself to deal with the mounting problem. This experience has shown that the government and the National Revolutionary Party do not possess the power and near total control over public behavior which existed previously.⁶²

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ CIA Weekly Summary, *Mexican Government Stalls Student Movement*, September 6, 1968, Secret.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² CIA Intelligence Information Cable, *Situation Appraisal: Status of the Mexico City Student Movement*, September 9, 1968, Classification excised.

While believing the Mexican government continued to underestimate the student movement, US officials also believed the students would have “only a limited ability to cause serious disruption at the Olympics.”⁶³ Though their marches sometimes featured signs critical of the city hosting the Olympics when there were more pressing needs, stopping the Games was never a goal of the movement.⁶⁴ At most, they saw it as a point of leverage. As Zolov wrote, “The virulence of protestor’s attacks—largely aimed at President Díaz Ordaz—reflected more a critique of the authoritarian nature of Mexican society than an attack on the Games per se.”⁶⁵ The students promised not to disrupt the Games with their protests, but Díaz Ordaz administration’s concerns were not assuaged.⁶⁶

On 18 September, the stakes were again raised as the Mexican army sent between 5,000 and 10,000 troops to occupy *el Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), taking as prisoners 765 students and faculty. The Mexican government brought in troops stationed outside of Mexico City for the first time, marking an escalation of the situation and giving an indication of its growing seriousness. The government released a statement saying the university was taken in response to fallacious “student threats to sabotage the Olympic Games.”⁶⁷ Encounters between the police and students again grew violent over the next few days, and US sources claimed that “the number of injured went into the hundreds” as the groups began to more frequently exchange gunfire.⁶⁸ A top secret

⁶³ CIA Weekly Summary, *Mexican Students Still Spar with Government*, September 13, 1968, Secret.

⁶⁴ In fact, many of the students and intellectuals that made up the movement actively took part in the Cultural Olympics, the year-long series of events that marked the leadup to the Games.

⁶⁵ Zolov. “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow.’” Page 183.

⁶⁶ Ironically, Díaz Ordaz himself never wanted the Olympics. Rather, it was his predecessor, Adolfo Lopez Mateos, who brought the Games to Mexico. Díaz Ordaz, a fiscal conservative, opposed the bid the entire time, “expressing doubts about the cost to Mexico or the benefits it would supposedly bring to the country”. But once Mexico secured the hosting rights and then Díaz Ordaz assumed power, it became an issue of political credibility internationally.

⁶⁷ DIA Intelligence Information Report, *Army Intervenes on Additional Occasions in Mexico City Student Situation*, September 24, 1968, Confidential.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

CIA report stated that with the Olympics growing ever closer, the Mexican government was “fully determined to use as many troops and as much force as needed to ensure peace during the Games.”⁶⁹ By 27 September, “at least 15 are reported dead, large numbers are wounded, and about 2,000 persons have been arrested.”⁷⁰

But on 28 September, it seemed the possibility of compromise found new life. As Witherspoon wrote, “Students and the government alike began speaking of a rapprochement and making concessions, however mild.”⁷¹ The army began to withdraw from the university and President Díaz Ordaz replaced a member of the Congressional Committee on Student Affairs that the students had identified as an enemy of the movement. Students returned to campus, and on 1 October, the US ambassador to Mexico sent the message, “Tensions seem to be easing in Mexico City.”⁷²

The Massacre at Tlatelolco

On 2 October, students again gathered to demonstrate at *la Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (Plaza of the Three Cultures). The Plaza was and is a “site of singular importance” for Mexicans, already seeped in blood and history even before 2 October 1968.⁷³ The protest that would end in tragedy that day was not marked by the anger that had defined the previous months. The mood was described as “entirely peaceful, and over the course of the evening enthusiastic cheers interrupted a pleasant, picniclike atmosphere.”⁷⁴ Celebration was called for, as the movement was finally showing signs of spreading to other demographics. Per John Rodda’s reporting from Mexico City, representatives from

⁶⁹ CIA Weekly Review, *Violence Grows in Mexican Student Crisis*, September 27, 1968, Top Secret.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 115.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid. Page 104.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

the railway workers union were in attendance, while “the petrol workers, the telephonists, and the electricity workers’ union” also signaled their support.⁷⁵ Many students were also accompanied by their families. For what happened next, I borrow from Witherspoon,

Suddenly, at about 6:20 p.m., two helicopters swooped low over the square. A few moments later, thousands of army troops, who had quietly observed the protest for most of the afternoon, moved to seal off all exits from the square. A third military group, the Olimpia Battalion, which had been raised and trained as a security force for the upcoming Olympics, opened fire on the crowd from a number of balconies that lined the square. The crowd was helpless. The unarmed students formed a panicked human wave, rushing desperately for some escape. They trampled one another, a reckless stampede that left some students crushed in their wake. From every side the students met death: from bayonets, from gunfire, from helicopters, even from tanks. The killing continued for over an hour, subsided for a few minutes, then resumed. Until eleven o’clock the firing was nearly constant, and stray shots were heard even into the next day. Students fled into the apartments that ringed the square, huddling on the floor with strangers who took them in. Soldiers and tanks saturated these buildings with bullets and grenades, blowing out windows and wounding many people inside. The barrage burst many of the pipes in the building, soaking the terrified residents and contributing to their discomfort and confusion. The troops then stormed the apartments, arresting not only anyone who looked like a student but many of those who had tried to help them. Those arrests were sent through a gauntlet of soldiers and police, beaten and groped as they were pushed toward the trucks awaiting them.⁷⁶

The US government’s immediate reaction to the massacre was to accept uncritically the Mexican government’s version of events, which falsely blamed the shooting on non-existent armed student snipers.⁷⁷ Several weeks passed before the US government started to more critically view the official telling of the event, thanks to CIA agents on the ground in Mexico whose own versions of events contradicted that of the Mexican state.⁷⁸ Yet even

⁷⁵ Rodda, John. 3 October 1968. “Trapped at gunpoint in middle of fighting.” *The Guardian*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* Page 105.

⁷⁷ The Mexican government’s denial of the massacre even as it was occurring should not be considered a separate crime, but as a continuation of the original one. As historian Yisrael Gutman wrote on the Holocaust, “The denial, the blurring of reality and the eradication of traces of vestiges of the stark truth were part and parcel of the act of murder itself.” A hallmark of genocide is that it is planned in a way in which to maximize deniability.

⁷⁸ U.S. Embassy in Mexico, confidential telegram to Washington. 18 October 1968.

as the truth started to come out, the US government refused to condemn what happened in Mexico, and “quietly accepted the use of force by Díaz Ordaz.”⁷⁹ This early period of unknowing was likely critical in governing reactions to the event, as the Olympics were half over by the time anyone began to question what had happened.

Jacobo Zabludovsky, Mexico’s most prominent anchorman in the 1960s, admitted decades later that “the government applied pressure to [the Mexican media] immediately after the massacre in attempts to limit the amount of information that was broadcast.”⁸⁰ So it seems likely that Díaz Ordaz would reach out to the IOC as well to ensure the fallout was mitigated. IOC president Avery Brundage’s main concerns were, as always, centered on protecting the image of the Olympic Games and, by association, Mexico. As historian Simon Henderson wrote, the IOC “did not want any form of political activism to enter the sporting arena and consistently maintained this approach both in the lead-up to and during the 1968 Olympics.”⁸¹ Brundage had previously emphasized to the Mexicans “the necessity of constructive publicity,” saying that “Mexico can lose all the intangible benefits which come from staging the Olympic Games if the publicity is not favorable.”⁸² He warned against journalists, who “are always seeking sensation and something to criticize adversely.”⁸³ And since the state-sanctioned murder of several hundred of its citizens certainly has the potential to foster such adverse criticism, it follows that Brundage would

⁷⁹ Zoraida Vazquez. *The United States and Mexico*. Page 180.

⁸⁰ Gonzalez de Bustamante, Celeste. 2010. “1968 Olympic Dreams and Tlatelolco Nightmares: Imagining and Modernity on Television.” *Mexican Studies*. Vol. 26, No. 1. Page 28.

⁸¹ Henderson, Simon. 2009. “Crossing the Line: Sport and the Limits of Civil Rights Protest.” *International Journal of the History of Sport*. Vol. 26, No. 1. Page 109.

⁸² Zolov. “Showcasing the Land of Tomorrow.” Page 169.

⁸³ *Ibid.* Page 167.

do what he could to make the event go away, the fallout from which will be explored in later chapters.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Brundage's callous statement, which left Rodda incredulous: "None of the demonstrations or violence has at any time been directed against the Olympic Games. We have been assured by Mexican authorities that nothing will interfere with the peaceful entrance of the Olympic flame into the stadium on October 12, nor will the competitions which follow. As guests of Mexico, we have full confidence that the Mexican people, universally known for their sportsmanship and great hospitality will join participants and spectators in celebrating the Games, a veritable oasis in a troubled world." Rodda criticized Brundage for his reliance on the Mexican government while failing to consult any of reporters that were present.

Chapter 3: The State-Private Network

Having established the degree to which the US government had foreknowledge about the massacre at Tlatelolco, in this section I will elucidate the depth of the relationship between the Olympic movement and the US government to show that the Olympic movement most likely had knowledge of the developing situation in Mexico City as well. This relationship is part of what was described by historian Toby Rider as the ‘state-private network.’ The roots of this network can be traced back to the early Cold War, when the US government began actively forming relationships with private organizations and individuals to help further government goals, mostly related to propaganda. As assistant secretary for Public Affairs Harold H. Howland rationalized it in 1948, “The brunt of the battle may be borne by the government, but like modern war, this is a total effort in which we are all equally engaged, whether in a commanding or supporting roll.”⁸⁵ George Kennan, the first director of the Department of State’s Policy Planning Staff echoed these sentiments. “Throughout our history,” he said, “private American citizens have banded together to champion the cause of freedom for people suffering under oppression. Our proposal is that this tradition be revived specifically to further American national interests in the [Cold War].”⁸⁶ While the government would create their own ‘private’ front organizations where none were found, they preferred to partner with preexisting groups whenever possible. And as Rider wrote, “Sports could not be insulated from this total war; the Olympics could not be excluded from such a battle.”⁸⁷ This made the USOC an ideal partner for the government.

⁸⁵ Rider, Toby. *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press. 2016. Page 24.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Page 25.

⁸⁷ Ibid. Page 28.

But this partnership was precipitated by a shift in Soviet ideology as it pertained to sport. Previously, the Soviets viewed physical activity more as a practical means to create a strong and healthy citizenry. Sport as competition, including the Olympics, were eschewed as bourgeois Western culture. Yet by the early 1950s, that view had shifted. As Rider wrote, “the Kremlin now viewed sports as a significant platform to promote communist ideology to a global audience through athletic performance and cultural exchanges.”⁸⁸ This plan was no secret. As the US embassy in Moscow reported, any and all Soviet sport participation was meant solely to establish to the world audience the “superiority of either socialist man, the Soviet state, or both.”⁸⁹

Increased Soviet attention to sport demanded that the US government had to match it. Sport became, per historian Thomas Domer, “an arena for ideological conflict” where “Soviets and Americans both drew a direct propaganda link between sport triumphs and the viability of their ideology.”⁹⁰ And nowhere provided a more prominent arena from which to establish superiority than the Olympic Games. Thus, over time, those sport administrators who had previously forsworn any politics corrupting their sports would end up forging “extraordinary ties with Washington.”⁹¹

This courtship began in 1950, when the Department of State reached out to then-USOC President Avery Brundage to discuss approving West Germany’s application to join the Olympic Movement. Ties would deepen throughout 1951, culminating in a meeting in Vienna between undersecretary of state James Webb and J. Brooks B. Parker, an American

⁸⁸ Ibid. Page 52.

⁸⁹ Ibid. Page 50. The Soviets received good early returns on their new sporting initiative. Domer illustrates one example where the United States’ basketball team lost to the USSR in a 1959 Chilean tournament, prompting a Santiago newspaper to compare the basketball game to the space race, writing “When it comes to shooting at the moon or a basket, the United States can’t keep up with the Russians!”

⁹⁰ Domer, Thomas. “Sport in Cold War America, 1953-1963: The Diplomatic and Political Use of Sport in the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations.” Dissertation, Marquette University, 1976. Page 19-20.

⁹¹ Rider. *Cold War Games*. Page 56.

member of the IOC. Here, Parker, who had previously worked for both the Treasury and State Departments, told Webb that the USOC was willing to “abandon its long standing policy of operating without reference to or consultation with” Washington.⁹² And then in 1952, the USOC gave the Office of Private Enterprise and Cooperation, the division of the Department of State tasked with managing the state-private network, a “pledge of close cooperation.”⁹³

This was a serious inflection point in the relationship, as from here on out the level of communication and cooperation between the USOC and government reached unprecedented levels. Two government agents were permanently assigned to the USOC to act as liaisons and provide policy guidance from the government to the committee. Olympic officials like Brundage began to provide both interviews and written articles for the US propaganda machine both at home and in Europe, and the USOC even brought two “US propaganda experts” along to the 1952 Summer Olympics in Helsinki as part of their entourage. Their mission: make the Olympics “serve as a vehicle to define freedom and democracy.”⁹⁴ As one foreign policy expert put it at the time, the Games should work to “project a positive and favorable picture of American life, and support US foreign policy objectives.”⁹⁵ The government rewarded the USOC for abandoning their principles with additional help fundraising for the Games.

Sportsmen-in-Chief

This relationship would continue throughout both the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. As Domer wrote, both administrations took “every opportunity short of

⁹² Ibid. Page 56.

⁹³ Ibid. Page 58.

⁹⁴ Ibid. Page 60.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

direct and total subsidy to enhance the sport image of the United States.”⁹⁶ Hundreds of sport teams and coaches were sent abroad as part of myriad goodwill tours or exchange programs funded by the Department of State, with the goal of creating “a network of positive social interactions” to forestall any future conflict and create new allies.⁹⁷

Eisenhower and Kennedy also used sport as a domestic policy tool. As historian Thomas Hunt wrote, they “believed in the necessity of a broadly-based national fitness campaign to reverse the country’s declining levels of physical fitness,” leading to the establishment of government bodies like the President’s Council on Youth Fitness.⁹⁸ They saw improving fitness in the general citizenry as having the trickle-down effect of improving the pool of athletes from which to pick for international competition as well. Hunt quotes Dr. Shane McCarthy, the executive director of the Council, as saying “If we succeed at getting our country off its seat and on its feet, the victories in the field of international competition will inevitably follow.”⁹⁹

Lyndon Johnson, who occupied the White House in 1968, differed from his predecessors Eisenhower and Kennedy in that he had little interest in sport, either as a tool of international diplomacy or one of domestic policy. One *Washington Post* article put it politely by saying that sports were “an acquired taste” for Johnson.¹⁰⁰ Robert Lipsyte of the *New York Times* was somewhat less charitable, writing that the “current Administration’s poor record in sports” was metaphorically “a record of errors in the field,

⁹⁶ Domer. “Sport in Cold War America, 1953-1963.” Page 25.

⁹⁷ Domer, quoting Walter Boehm. Ibid. Page 26.

⁹⁸ Hunt, Thomas M. “American Sport Policy and the Cultural Cold War: The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Years.” *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 33, No. 3. 2006. Page 274.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Bob Addie. “Olympics Need Funds.” *Washington Post*. 29 July 1964.

dropped passes, missed third strikes, excessive personal fouls.”¹⁰¹ As historian Erin Redihan wrote,

While Eisenhower and Kennedy had both been enthusiastic participants in and supporters of American sports, Johnson did not share this affinity. As such he never ascribed the same importance to sports, either recreationally or on the elite / professional level as his predecessors had. Consequently, he made little impact on the Olympic movement during his first year in office, which spanned the Innsbruck and Tokyo Games, beyond issuing the standard adulatory message following the Games.¹⁰²

This is not to say that the Johnson Administration was a firm believer in the separation of sport and state. That branch of the state-private network was as healthy as ever, as members of the USOC were still meeting regularly with representatives from the Departments of State, Justice, and elsewhere. And the White House was by no means afraid to use sport to make a political point when the situation arose. One such occurrence happened in 1964, when Secretary of State Dean Rusk contacted Avery Brundage, by that point President of the IOC, and convinced him to remove part of the delegation from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea from the Olympic Games in Tokyo.¹⁰³ Another happened two years before the Mexico City Games, when San Juan, Puerto Rico was set to host the Caribbean Olympic Games. Despite frayed political relations at the time, the United States issued visas to the Cuban contingent to attend the Games in Puerto Rico. However, as White House documents show, they had no plans to let this occasion go by without scoring some points first. As one internal memo noted, “Normally, we would refuse authorization because of our air isolation policy and OAS commitments. The Cubans could still go to Puerto Rico by commercial carrier from a third country – Mexico or

¹⁰¹ Robert Lipsyte. “Sports of the Times: A New Bat Sweeps Clean.” *New York Times*. 10 October 1968.

¹⁰² Redihan. *The Olympics and the Cold War, 1948-1968*. Page 195-6.

¹⁰³ Hunt. “American Sport Policy and the Cultural Cold War.” Page 279.

Jamaica.”¹⁰⁴ The Johnson Administration saw the opportunity to use this sporting event as a point of leverage to help further their international agenda, as the memo continued,

In this case, we proposed to the Cubans that if they would authorize special flights to Cuba to pick up Americans and their families (about 2,000) persons) who desire repatriation, we would consider authorizing the Cuban Olympic flights. We have been trying unsuccessfully for weeks to obtain permission to augment our refugee flights to bring out the Americans.¹⁰⁵

Johnson also elevated the Presidential Council on Youth Fitness to a cabinet-level group, replaced the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare as the council chair with the Vice President, and changed the title to the President’s Council on Physical Fitness & Sports. He also began the tradition of welcoming the Olympic team to the White House after returning from the Games, a move that took much pressuring from the USOC and could potentially be seen as a reward for their cooperation with government wishes.

Having established that the US government and USOC worked closely, we can infer that the USOC may have been privy to much of the same information as to the situation in Mexico in the months leading up to the Games, and that their interests would have aligned.

A Growing Relationship

Though Mexico was an ally of the US during World War II, in the following decades, the relationship with Mexico was, if friendly, “remarkably uninstitutionalized.”¹⁰⁶ Regardless, the US government was highly invested in the stability of Mexico. The shared border between the two countries is one reason. As historian and Ambassador and

¹⁰⁴ White House memo from William Bowdler to Walt Rostow, 7 July 1966. LBJ Presidential Library.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. The Cuban team would eventually end up taking a boat to Puerto Rico for the Games.

¹⁰⁶ Dominguez, Jorge I. and Rafael Fernandez de Castro. *The United States and Mexico: Between Partnership and Conflict*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2001. Page 3.

Permanent Representative of the United States to the Organization of American States Gale

McGee wrote:

The fact of proximity makes the management of relationships with Mexico different from the conduct of US affairs with, for example, Argentina or Brazil. Every day, scores of local, state, and federal government agencies are involved in matters that have impact on both sides of the border.¹⁰⁷

Economic and global trade complicated the situation as well. In 1979, future president George HW Bush wrote on the growing ties between the two countries:

Bilateral trade is a significant and growing economic tie between the two countries. More than 60% of Mexico's exports are sold in US markets, and Mexico ranks as the fifth largest importer of US goods. In 1978 US exports to Mexico amounted to more than \$5 billion; the potential for the future is even greater since the Mexican population exceeds 65 million and is increasing. But Mexico's ability to utilize its oil resources effectively and to sustain a rapid growth rate in its domestic economy will depend on its ability to expand nonoil exports to the United States. Thus the evolution of US trade policies toward Mexico will have multiple effects on American producers and consumers.¹⁰⁸

The economic relationship between Mexico and the United States may not have been quite this strong eleven years prior in 1968, but at the time, Mexico was experiencing an era of rapid growth, making the future easy to envision. During the 1960s Mexico was taking its first steps into the expanding global marketplace, as the country welcomed more foreign investment and denationalized its banks. Thus, it made sense for Covey Oliver, the Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, to write a post-massacre letter to Dean Rusk stating, "We believe it important to avoid any indication that we lack confidence in the [Government of Mexico's] ability to control the situation."¹⁰⁹ And from this, we can

¹⁰⁷ Erb, Richard D. and Stanley R. Ross. *U.S. Policies toward Mexico: Perceptions and Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute. 1979. Page 42.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Page xi.

¹⁰⁹ Doyle. "The Tlatelolco Massacre."

assume it's probable that someone in his camp contacted the USOC and IOC with the same message.

Brundage Does His Part

Avery Brundage made the stance of the IOC very clear the day after the massacre, condemning the Mexican government in the strongest possible terms: "I was at the ballet last night, and we heard nothing of the riots."¹¹⁰ True to his character, Brundage wanted nothing to do with anything that would distract from his beloved Games. Brundage indirectly admits to attempting to distance the two events from each other in a letter to the chair of the Mexican Organizing Committee shortly after the Games ended. The Committee, as is customary, was putting together a film of the Games for dissemination and sale, and Brundage discovered they planned to include footage of the Carlos-Smith protest. Outraged, Brundage wrote to Jose de J. Clark, "[The protest] had nothing to do with sport, it was a shameful abuse of hospitality and it had no more place in the record of the Games than the gunfire at Tlatelolco."¹¹¹ Similarly, *Guardian* reporter John Rodda years later confirmed rumors that Brundage had been pressuring Díaz Ordaz in the weeks leading up to the massacre to make sure there would be no disruption of the Games, threatening to pull the celebration if there was.¹¹²

Prior to the Games, at the previously mentioned general body meeting of the IOC, just days after the violence in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas, Brundage was already trying to distance his organization from the violence it was responsible for, saying:

¹¹⁰ Hoffer. *Something in the Air*. Page 116.

¹¹¹ Boykoff. *Power Games*. Page 109. Per C. Brewster, Brundage had always seen Clark Flores as one of his more loyal supporters.

¹¹² Around the turn of the century, Rodda had been writing the biography of Arthur Takac, a prominent Yugoslav athlete-turned-sport administrator. During the 1968 Games, Takac revealed to Rodda, Takac was aide to Brundage, and personally delivered letters to this effect to the Mexican President in mid-September.

We live today in an uneasy and even rebellious world, a world marked by injustice, aggression, demonstrations, disorder, turmoil, violence and war, against which all civilized persons rebel, but this is no reason to destroy the nucleus of international cooperation and goodwill we have created in the Olympic Movement. You don't find hippies, yippies, or beatniks on sports grounds.¹¹³

Of course, even this nod to “a world marked by injustice” was designed to simply get everyone to move past the massacre and onto more important matters. Brundage didn't care about injustice, and most likely approved of Díaz Ordaz's handling of the situation. Though he was technically on the record as an anticommunist, he did not have much love to spare for democracy either.¹¹⁴ A profile in *Life* magazine referred to his dictatorial temperament, while reporter David Miller, who has drunk the Olympic Kool-Aid as much as anyone, described him as “despotic, a moral bulldozer.”¹¹⁵ And he had an affinity for any national government, like Mexico's PRI, that shared these traits. In 1955, Brundage waxed poetic over one such state:

An intelligent, beneficent dictatorship is the most efficient form of government. Observe what happened in Germany for six or seven years in the 1930's. [Germany] had a plan which brought it from almost bankruptcy to be the most powerful

¹¹³ Boykoff. *Power Games*. Page 103. Here, Brundage more or less regurgitated the same statement he used last time his precious Games were threatened by violence, and it didn't sound any better then either. The 1956 Olympics took place in the weeks after the Hungarian Revolution, leading to a few countries deciding to boycott. The always obtuse Brundage responded with the following statement: “Every civilized person recoils in horror at the savage slaughter in Hungary, but that is no reason for destroying the nucleus of international cooperation. In an imperfect world, if participation in sports is to be stopped every time the politicians violate the walls of humanity, there will never be any international contests.”

¹¹⁴ He didn't believe that the people should have the vote, instead saying that our rulers should be ‘drafted’ in the same autocratic way that the IOC added new members. He had similarly troglodytic views on social safety nets, writing “Social security and other socialist measures give support to the lazy, the worthless, and the shiftless. Society thus destroys itself by interfering [sic] with nature's laws, which eliminates those who are unwilling to take care of themselves. It is the same with medication, which extends the life of the unhealthy and eventually destroys virile society. We are doing the same with out tax laws, where we penalize the successful and handicap the strong and intelligent. In this manner, countries have grown soft and been overwhelmed by the so-called more primitive countries which follow the rules of nature.”

¹¹⁵ Miller, David. *The Official History of the Olympic Games and the IOC: Athens to London 1894-2012*. Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing. 2012. Page 144.

country in the world in a half dozen years. Other countries with dictators have accompanied the same thing in a smaller way.¹¹⁶

Brundage was firmly against the incursion of politics in sport, but that didn't stop his own political beliefs from bleeding into how he ran his fiefdom. Brundage was not afraid to lean on the national committees when he needed to, a reflection of the despots he admired throughout history. At that very same Olympics in 1968, Brundage pressured the USOC to send home Tommie Smith and John Carlos after their protest, a move the USOC did not plan to make of their own volition. Henderson quotes the USOC press chief at the time, who stated somewhat bitterly, "The IOC had exerted its authority. The USOC further accepted the IOC authority."¹¹⁷

Thus, it is consistent with his past behavior that Brundage and the IOC he controlled would work to suppress news of the massacre in order to preserve the celebratory atmosphere of the Games. Despite having graduated from the USOC to the IOC a decade and a half earlier, Brundage seemingly pressured the USOC to take a similar stance of 'see no evil, speak no evil.'

U.S. athletes from the 1968 Olympic Team report that much of their movement while in Mexico City was limited. As boxer George Foreman said in a 2012 interview, "We were being warned to steer clear and maybe we shouldn't go out of the Olympic village because there was so much carrying on. [...] They asked us to stay close to the village and not wander off too far."¹¹⁸ Other athletes made it sound like much less of a suggestion. Per swimmer Jane Swaggerty, "Once we got to Mexico City we were pretty well isolated within the Olympic village itself. We weren't able to leave the village until

¹¹⁶ Boykoff. *Power Games*. Page 89. Despite Brundage's many criticisms of the Soviet state, he took time to praise them as well for their lack of political parties and labor strikes.

¹¹⁷ Henderson. "Crossing the Line." Page 109.

¹¹⁸ George Foreman interview. *H.J. Litcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

our event was over.”¹¹⁹ Her teammate Lynn Vidali suggested that even after their events were over they were not encouraged to go exploring, saying that “After I swam and I was done I wasn’t allowed to leave the Olympic village but I did.”¹²⁰ Volleyball player Nancy Owen was a veteran on the team, having attended the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo as well. She said that at her first Games they were much more encouraged to partake in what the host city had to offer, to the extent that “In Japan we had interpreters that went everywhere with us, but in Mexico City we were on our own.”¹²¹

Many athletes referenced this idea of being insulated in the village, and how what news they received seemed to be filtered as well. Regarding the massacre, gymnast Carolyn Pingatore swore she had no idea what had happened: “Nothing was said at the training camp, nothing was said by the other coaches. [...] the number one thing I remember them telling us is don’t be panicked when we get off the plane or we get to the Olympic village and we see army people and guns.”¹²² Swimmer Kimla Brecht echoed this sentiment, saying that she “didn’t actually hear about the student protests or the massacre that occurred until years later.”¹²³ According to her teammate Susan Pedersen, “I’d call home and my mom would say ‘What do you think about that,’ and I’m going ‘I haven’t heard a thing.’”¹²⁴ Canoeist John Pickett explained that there was an embargo on newspapers in the village: “They don’t tell us much out here. We don’t get the papers, so we don’t know.”¹²⁵

Even for those that did find access to outside news, it did not prove informative—or accurate. Shooter Gary Anderson heard about what happened, but what he heard seemed

¹¹⁹ Jane Swaggery interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²⁰ Lynn Vidali interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²¹ Nancy Owen interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²² Carolyn Pingatore interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²³ Kimla Brecht interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²⁴ Susan Pedersen interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²⁵ Steve Cady. “All is Peaceful at the Games Village.” *New York Times*. 4 October 1968.

to be strictly the government narrative and not the true story exposed by *The Guardian* and Mexican activists: “I don’t remember the death toll that was reported but my memory is that it was in the 10s, 15, 20—some number like that. [...] It was clear the Olympics were going to move ahead, they were going to go. The Mexican government, Mexican authorities, Mexican Olympic Committee were committed to making this happen.”¹²⁶ Brecht said that she “didn’t see anything in the news about protests. Once I got down there if you pick up a newspaper it was mostly about the Olympics. [...] the focus was clearly on the Olympics and they tried to get anything that would hazardize [*sic*] our safety behind and very well controlled in the media. [...] I was unaware of the student protest and the massacre.”¹²⁷ Swimmer Debbie Meyer similarly remembers a dearth of information on the massacre in the papers: “The biggest thing in our papers would be the Vietnam war. That was the biggest headline every single day.” She continued on, saying that they were fed a much less violent version of events: “We were told that it was just student unrest and that a few hundred students were injured.”¹²⁸ She said she did not discover the full scale of the atrocity until returning to Mexico City 40 years later with other members of the 1968 team.¹²⁹

Sports-writer Richard Hoffer looked somewhat charitably on these Olympic administrators, describing them as “clueless” but adding that “Had anyone known the true scope of the disaster, there surely would have been more outcry.”¹³⁰ But considering the absoluteness with which the Olympics take over a city, I’m skeptical that any event of that

¹²⁶ Gary Anderson interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²⁷ Brecht interview.

¹²⁸ Debbie Meyer interview. *H.J. Lutcher Stark Center Oral History Project*.

¹²⁹ Note that though the news had not penetrated the bubble of the Olympic Village, by 4 October 1968 it was already being covered in the United States by the *New York Times*, *Dallas Morning News*, and others—all of whom took a much more critical view of the Mexican government’s reporting of events than the US government did.

¹³⁰ Hoffer. *Something in the Air*. Page 116.

magnitude could possibly happen just days before the Games open without an Olympic administrator being aware. Per a Reuters report published in the 4 October 1968 edition of *The Guardian*, “Managers of some Olympic teams have meanwhile banned from their headquarters newspapers carrying reports of violence. They said that the reports were upsetting their teams and having a bad effect on training sessions.”¹³¹ This suggests that those Olympic committee members were not at all clueless, but deliberate and ruthless.

¹³¹ Reuter. 4 October 1968. “Dum-dum bullets used.” *The Guardian*.

Chapter 4: The Scars of Tlatelolco

In chapter 2, I showed that the US government was well aware of the deteriorating situation in Mexico and the potential for violence. In chapter 3, I established the strong connections between the Olympic Movement and the US government as evidence that the USOC and IOC were also likely aware of the situation. I then showed that the IOC and USOC suppressed information about the massacre at Tlatelolco. Here in chapter 4, I will discuss the consequences of their actions.

To understand the impact of Tlatelolco, the true scope of the crime must be understood. The list of victims is not limited to the several hundred men, women, and children that were murdered that day. Nor is it just those that experienced the trauma of the event first-hand. Rather, it is every single Mexican citizen whose life is worse off because the progressive student movement was crushed. This is because the massacre was not just a personal trauma for those with a directly link to the event, but a trauma on a cultural level. As sociologist Jeffery Alexander defined it:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.¹³²

The famed Kai Erickson offered a different, though related, definition, writing that cultural trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community.”¹³³ Institutions,

¹³² Alexander, Jeffrey et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. Page 1.

¹³³ Ibid. Page 4.

such as the state, need to fulfill certain expected roles for individuals to feel securely anchored in society, and the massacre clearly violated that role.

Much of this continual, intergenerational trauma comes from the uncertainty surrounding the event. For one, the Mexican people have never been able to get an accurate body count or list of names. Estimates oscillate from the half dozen claimed by the state up into the thousands, with most putting the number somewhere in the 300s¹³⁴. As Hoffer wrote, this problem was exacerbated because after the massacre, “many of the students went into hiding, some joining guerrilla groups in the hinterlands, so it was difficult to say who had been killed and who had simply fled.”¹³⁵ Reports of secret cremations of the bodies at Mexico City hospitals abounded. Even today, despite the PRI no longer casting the shadow over Mexico it once did, many relevant documents are still locked away, leaving unanswered questions about who knew what and who is responsible.

When addressed, cultural traumas can “broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation.”¹³⁶ Unfortunately for those victims of Tlatelolco, governments often play key roles in helping communities move past their trauma. Alexander writes that:

Decisions by the executive branches of governments to create national commissions of inquiry, votes by parliaments to establish investigative committees, the creation of state-directed police investigations and new directives about national

¹³⁴ This number comes from John Rodda’s original reporting on the incident for *The Guardian*. Rodda, a longtime sportswriter, had been in Mexico City to report on the unrest before the Games and happened to be in la Plaza on 2 October. His reporting was key in disproving the government narrative and is the bedrock on which most all future writings on Tlatelolco are based. Most recently, forensic anthropologists who continue to study the massacre say it is “highly probable” that the real number is close to 500, per Gonzalz de Bustamante.

¹³⁵ Hoffer. *Something in the Air*. Page 116.

¹³⁶ Alexander, et al. *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Page 24.

priorities—all such actions can have decisive effects on handling and channeling the spiral of signification that marks the trauma process.¹³⁷

Events, like the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, that help answer these questions and provide closure play an important part in allowing said traumatized groups to move on.¹³⁸

On South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Alexander wrote:

The effort succeeded to a significant degree in generalizing the trauma process beyond racially polarized audiences, making it into a shared experience of the new, more solidary, and more democratic South Africa.¹³⁹

Similarly, in the United States the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 provided reparations for interned Japanese Americans and admitted the culpability of the US government. On the other hand, events like the Rape of Nanking, or Tlatelolco, feature none of this closure. In the early 2000s there was hope. The Mexican people elected Vincente Fox of the National Action Party in 2000, marking the first defeat for the PRI and a potential harbinger of true democracy. While campaigning, Fox pledged to bring to light the crimes committed by the PRI, and when elected established a special prosecutor's office to this effect. But though the PRI no longer occupied Los Pinos, they proved to still control the government.¹⁴⁰ The special prosecutor was hamstrung by an uncooperative judiciary and

¹³⁷ Ibid. Page 19.

¹³⁸ This idea has its roots in said trials. Previously, the consensus was that such atrocities were simply best left forgotten.

¹³⁹ Ibid. Page 20.

¹⁴⁰ Though the individuals that were in power in 1968 no longer are, their legacies are protected by why sociologist Stanley Cohen calls "microcultures of denial." As he wrote, "The group censors itself, learns to keep silent about matters whose open discussion would threaten its self-image. States maintain elaborate myths (such as the Israeli army's 'purity of arms', which asserts that force is only used when morally justified for self-defense); organizations depend on forms of concerted ignorance, different levels of the system keeping themselves uninformed about what is happening elsewhere. Telling the truth is taboo; it is snitching, whistle blowing, giving comfort to the enemy." Stanley Cohen. *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*. 2001. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. Page 11.

an openly hostile military, and the whole project proved to be an abject failure.¹⁴¹ In an effort to live up to his pledge, Fox issued an executive order that “all information relevant to the investigation of past human rights violations and crimes” be entered into the Archivo General de la Nacion (AGN), Mexico’s national archives, where they would be openly available to the public. But even here the PRI and those loyal to them have managed to stymie efforts at uncovering the truth.¹⁴² The archives are now burgeoning with papers documenting the PRI’s reign of terror, but many of the most important collections conveniently lack the indices that would make it possible to find anything and are all overseen by an archivist that, per the Human Rights Watch, “is very selective about the documents he releases.”¹⁴³ Additionally, the PRI-controlled congress refuses to properly fund the archive as to prevent cataloging.¹⁴⁴

As Mexican writer and political activist Jose Revueltas put it, Tlatelolco is “a story that will never end because others will continue writing it,” searching for those answers. Professor Samuel Steinberg echoed that sentiment, writing:

The story, whatever it is, will remain unfinished or open as long as it continues to demand that its writing continue. The seemingly unfinished nature of “Tlatelolco” thus resides in the obscurity of what the signifier hopes to name, the constitutive failure of its consignment to the name that rules over it. Its story will continue being

¹⁴¹ In 2005, the special prosecutor indicted former president Luis Echeverria and his interior minister, Mario Moya Palencia for ordering the murder of 25 student protestors in 1971. A judge threw out the indictments, citing a 30-year statute of limitations. Months later, the same argument was made to block the prosecution of those involved in the planning of the Tlatelolco massacre.

¹⁴² Aguayo Quezada, Sergio and Javier Trevino Rengel. 2006. “Neither Truth nor Justice: Mexico’s De Facto Amnesty.” *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 147, Vol. 33, No. 2. Page 64.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ In 2005, the Mexican government budgeted \$2.9 million to the AGN, a number Fox had been unable to increase. For comparison, that same year the United States budgeted \$552 million to its national archives, while Canada was at \$104 million, Chile \$21 million and Spain \$57 million.

written because the subjective name for whatever event occurred in 1968 has not yet satisfactorily emerged.¹⁴⁵

The lack of closure around Tlatelolco has had concrete political consequences as well. After the massacre, noted Witherspoon, “The student movement was, for all practical purposes, dead.”¹⁴⁶ The goals of the movement and the students’ calls for democracy have been overshadowed by what happened on 2 October. As Mexican writer and political activist Carlos Monsivais said, “Unfortunately, and with troubling consequences, the outward appearance and great symbolic shelter of the 1968 Student Movement is the Plaza de las Tres Culturas.”¹⁴⁷ Any discussion of the student movement has become not centered around their goals or the injustices in Mexican society that led them to protest, but uniformly the historical fact of the massacre. It is the beginning and end, at the cost of any actual politics. As Steinberg wrote, “The massacre has come to obscure, conceal, and protect the memory of the more properly political event that it was intended to interrupt.”¹⁴⁸

The goals of the student movement were sacrificed in favor of ‘finding answers’ and seeking justice for the murdered. Díaz Ordaz and the state won, not because they killed many of the movement’s leaders, but because they redirected energy away from the material gains the people sought and towards more abstract goals. The massacre has turned into the point by which any movement post-1968 would orient itself, from which any future would need to grow out of. Steinberg refers to this as the “double repression” of the student

¹⁴⁵ Steinberg, Samuel. *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico, 1968*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 2016. Page 20.

¹⁴⁶ Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 118.

¹⁴⁷ Steinberg. *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*. Page 22.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Page 23.

movement, with Tlatelolco as both “a literal and metaphorical crypt.”¹⁴⁹ It marks the death of not just those activists but their ideas as well. This defeat is illustrated most clearly by the very structure of Elena Poniatowska’s famous *Massacre in Mexico (La noche de Tlatelolco* in the original Spanish), which professor Chris Harris described as being “perceived as *the* defining account of the student experience in 1968.”¹⁵⁰ The book acts as an oral history of the protests of 1968, up to and beyond the massacre itself. Yet it draws its name from the act that has come to define everything that surrounds it.¹⁵¹

Unfortunately, the massacre fits neatly into the Mexican narrative of progress, a narrative reflected in a historical marker in La Plaza de las Tres Culturas. The marker predates the massacre, instead commemorating the other bloody encounter that space played host to: the capture of Tenochtitlan by Spanish conquistadors. The marker reads:

The 13th of August, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell to the power of Hernan Cortes. It was neither victory, nor defeat. It was the painful birth of the mestizo people, which is the Mexico of today.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. Page 25.

¹⁵⁰ Harris, Chris. 2010. “Luis Gonzalez de Alba’s *Los dias y los anos* (1971) and Elena Poniatowska’s *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971): Foundational Representations of Mexico ’68.” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*. Vol 29. Issue s1. Page 108. Poniatowska’s book has received its share of criticism, most notably from Mexican writer and journalist Luis Gonzalez de Alba. He accused her of publishing factual inaccuracies in her book, leading her to publish a ‘corrected’ version in 1998. Gonzalez de Alba’s own book on Tlatelolco and the student movement, *Los dias y los anos*, though influential among scholars of 1968, has yet to be translated into English.

¹⁵¹ Even the naming of the event works to obscure the movement. As Jacques Derrida wrote on the idea of crypts, “No crypt presents itself. The grounds are so disposed as to disguise and hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds.”

¹⁵² The parallels between the two events are not lost on Mexicans. The massacre of the Aztecs is known as *la noche triste* in Mexican history. The massacre of the student protestors is known as *la nueva noche triste*.

This idea that moving forward can only come through martyrdom is the leitmotif of Mexican history, as these acts become not crimes but origins. Steinberg calls it “sacrifice as politics,” saying how the massacre comfortably fits the tragic pattern of Mexican history where violence and death are necessary precursors to social progress.¹⁵³ The 1968 massacre was, to the people of Mexico, only an echo of the past, an echo that has come to define Mexican identity. As Steinberg explains, this new Tlatelolco massacre obeys “the maxim that there is neither triumph nor defeat, but *always* the painful birth of the mestizo people.”¹⁵⁴

For decades, the mestizo people received no answers about their most recent violent birth. Then concurrently with the rise of Vicente Fox, a breakthrough occurred as Mexican current affairs weekly magazine *Proceso* famously published the first ever widely circulated group of images from 2 October 1968. The 35 photographs, submitted anonymously to reporters at the magazine, contained graphic images of the brutality the students were subjected to at the hands of their government. But more importantly, they acted as final confirmation to the citizenry that what they had been told by their government was a lie, finally bridging the gap between knowledge and proof. For decades, rumors had circulated that much of the violence was perpetrated by the Batallon Olimpia, a military group raised solely for the Olympic Games, identified by the single white glove its members wore. That glove, and the truth it represented, were featured prominently on the

¹⁵³ Steinberg. *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*. Page 24.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

historic December 2001 cover of *Proceso* next to the battered body of student leader Florencio Lopez Osuna.



Lopez Osuna died under very suspicious circumstances within a few weeks of the publication of this issue, and no further information about the massacre followed these

images, but it that moment it seemed that answers were within reach, and that moving on would soon be possible. As Monsivais wrote on the photos:

Had they been published the third or fourth of October [1968], these photos would have instantly given lie to the official explanations and to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's discourse of perpetual whitewashing. [...] In 2001, the photos from *Proceso* don't allow "grumblings between the teeth," the extremely forced apologies of the regime and its party, and prove what is already known: the attempt to eradicate the spirit of the movement by force follows the military-led massacre.¹⁵⁵

This is the true crime that falls at the feet of the IOC—not their failure to stop the violence but rather their failure to speak up afterwards. They could have cut through the lies of the Díaz Ordaz administration immediately, sparing the Mexican people decades of uncertainty.

¹⁵⁵ Monsivais mentions these are not technically the first images of Tlatelolco ever published. The weekly journal *Por Que!* obtained and published "devastating photos of children in the morgue and piles of bodies" in October 1968. Yet tragically, its circulation was so small that barely anyone saw them.

Conclusion

In 1965, Lyndon Johnson invited playwright Arthur Miller to the White House to celebrate the signing of the Arts and Humanities Act. Miller, in protest of Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War, decided not to attend. He famously responded to Johnson's invitation by replying "When the guns boom, the arts die." Three years later, we learned that no such fate would befall sport in the face of violence.

In its most idealistic form, the Olympics were supposed to prevent crimes like this, not cause them. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who revived the Olympic Games in the late 19th century, wrote,

War breaks out because nations misunderstand each other. We shall not have peace until the prejudices which now separate the different races shall have been outlived. To attain this end, what better means than to bring the youth of all countries periodically together for amicable trials of muscular strength and agility?¹⁵⁶

But almost immediately, it was evident the concept would never match the praxis. As early as 1908, Theodore Roosevelt, an early champion of physical culture, grumbled "I do not believe in these international matches, where the feeling is so intense it is almost impossible that there should not be misunderstandings."¹⁵⁷ In 1924, *The Times* of London wrote that the idea of using sport to form "a brotherhood so close and loving that it would form a bulwark against the outbreak of all international animosities" was fantastical. "There has for a long time been profound and widespread misgiving whether the Games had not in practice served to inflame animosities rather than to allay them."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Rider. *Cold War Games*. Page 31-2.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. Page 32.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

The mistake that was the 1936 Games in Berlin did not prove to be the course correction that it should have been. World War II caused both the 1940 and 1944 iterations of the Games to be cancelled, but the advent of the Cold War extinguished any hope of the poison of nationalism being expelled from the Games upon their reinstatement. This thought was expressed most passionately in George Orwell's famous 1945 essay, "The Sporting Spirit." Orwell wrote, reflecting on a recent tour of Britain by the Soviet national football team, that "sport is an unfailing cause of ill-will, and that if such a visit as this had any effect at all on Anglo-Soviet relations, it could only be to make them slightly worse than before."¹⁵⁹ He added that "even if one didn't know from concrete examples that international sporting contests lead to orgies of hatred, one could deduce it from general principles."¹⁶⁰ But even at his most pessimistic, Orwell still managed to understate the pain that sport could bring down upon a community. He wrote,

Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting.¹⁶¹

But the Mexico City Games had all these things, plus the shooting. The Olympics are in theory supposed to be "a two-week window of peace, an international armistice, a truce."¹⁶² Mexico City proved that to be a lie, confirmed by every subsequent iteration of the Games.

¹⁵⁹ Orwell, George. "The Sporting Spirit." *Tribune*. 1945.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² Hoffer. *Something in the Air*. Page 13.

Mexico City gave us the best of what the Olympics have to offer: incredible feats of strength and speed, showcases of the world's finest artists, exhibits on the indomitability of the human spirit. But it also gave us the worst parts, the death and misery that is not a bug in the Games, but a feature. The 1968 Olympics were a turning point in many regards. They were the first Olympics to be broadcast live on television. They were the first Games to feature doping and sex testing of athletes. And they were the first Games to establish the high cost the world would pay to have them.

People died in Mexico City because of the Olympic Games. People also died in Los Angeles, Rio, and elsewhere, and they will continue to die because the IOC established in 1968 that they do not care if people die or not. The ideals the Olympic Movement profess to hold are good ones and should not be dismissed out of hand. But for the past 50 years at least, those ideals have been nothing more than window dressing, a nice paint job on the bulldozer the Games have become. The Games could have been a positive force in a world that needs more of them. But such courses have been eschewed in exchange for shiny new stadia and large revenue streams.

And so it was with Mexico. Their Olympic bid started out as a potential sign of the country's bright future, so easy to imagine in the heady days of the early 1960s. As Witherspoon wrote, "Winning the Olympic bid was perhaps the signal achievement in an image building project in Mexico that had been decades in the making."¹⁶³ What these Games were really about, he explained, was "Mexico's quest to join the ranks of the

¹⁶³ Witherspoon. *Before the Eyes of the World*. Page 3.

world's "modern" nations."¹⁶⁴ But by the time the Games actually rolled around, the pressure to perform on the world stage proved too much for Díaz Ordaz and company. As the situation grew progressively more tumultuous, the Mexican government sought stability. And said stability, again as Witherspoon put it, "came at the price of true democracy."¹⁶⁵

Things have changed in Mexico in the 50 years since Tlatelolco. As Noble wrote, Tlatelolco was something of an inflection point in Mexican history:

This was the moment at which the full force of the repressive authoritarianism of the PRI made itself publicly felt, triggering the slow process of democratic reform that eventually led to its historic—defeat after 71 years in power—in the 2000 presidential elections.¹⁶⁶

But others caution against such optimistic views. Paz believed that Tlatelolco effectively marked the death of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, confirming finally the state's inability to stand up to the pressures of slowly encroaching neoliberalism. One Latin American scholar conceded that "Because of the wave of criticism that followed the Tlatelolco massacre, the Mexican government is much more reluctant to engage in large-scale repressive activities," but added that "it would be a mistake to believe that Tlatelolco 1968 has produced substantive improvements in Mexico's social system."¹⁶⁷ The so-called "democratic reform" has mostly been cosmetic, as the PRI has decided to allow other

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Page 6.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. Page 4.

¹⁶⁶ Noble, Andrea. 2011. "Recognizing Historical Injustice through Photography: Mexico 1968." *Theory, Culture & Society*.

¹⁶⁷ Young, Dolly. 1985. "Mexican Literary Reactions to Tlatelolco 1968." *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2. Page 82. Just 3 years after Tlatelolco, the Mexican government murdered 25 more student protestors in a similar matter.

political parties to exist without really affecting the governance of the state. The PRI retook the presidency in 2012 after two terms out of office, a period that was not the reformist era many expected it to be.

And so even today, thanks to the failures of not just the Mexican state and media, but also Avery Brundage, the IOC, and the USOC, Tlatelolco haunts the Mexican consciousness. Information will continue to trickle out as scholars complete the Sisyphean task of combing the AGN. As Zolov wrote, research on Tlatelolco “continues to expand as access to government documents on both sides of the border becomes available.”¹⁶⁸ Yet for all the questions that have been answered, still no one has been held responsible; very little healing has taken place. And with the PRI back in power, that seems unlikely to change any time soon. So, as Steinberg wrote, “The truth of the massacre is largely known yet, simultaneously, held as an open secret, in lucid obscurity.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Zolov. “Showcasing the ‘Land of Tomorrow.’” Page 160.

¹⁶⁹ Steinberg. *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco*. Page 46.

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