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U.S. Shouldn't Boycott Sochi Olympics Because Of Edward Snowden

by **Arthur L. Caplan & Lee H. Igel**
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Edward Snowden, the former government contractor wanted by United States officials for stealing secret documents from the National Security Agency and leaking them to the press, has been hunkered down in the transit area at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport for the past several weeks. Whatever he's plotting as a next move, it includes a [request for temporary asylum](#) in Russia. The White House is keeping a close watch on what Russia does, and considering canceling plans for a fall summit between President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin if Snowden is given asylum. The request has Congress on edge, too: Lindsey Graham, a senator from South Carolina, thinks Obama should [respond by considering a boycott](#) of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Matters of the pros and cons of presidential summit meetings are in the realm of diplomacy. But would an Olympic boycott send the intended message to the Kremlin?

Some of Graham's colleagues in Congress are equally upset about Russia's willingness to harbor and help Snowden. They insist some response is in the offing. But John Boehner, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and a longtime friend of Graham's, [said](#) the senator was "dead wrong" about the idea of boycotting the Olympics. That's because U.S. athletes would effectively be the ones who end up losing out.

Boehner is on the right track. But there is more reason to participating in the Games than that.

A U.S. boycott of the Olympics brings



US hockey players John Harrington (L) and Michael Ramsey (top R) react after the puck was fired into the net for a goal past Soviet goalkeeper Vladimir Myshkin (C) as his teammates Sergei Makarov (top) and Zinetula Bilyaletdinov stand around during the Olympic semifinal match between the USA and the Soviet Union on February 22, 1980, in Lake Placid at the Winter Olympic Games. The USA upset the defending champions 4-3 to advance to the final, where they played Finland for the gold medal. (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)

up shades of the Cold War. In 1980, then-President Jimmy Carter refused to send the U.S. team to the Summer Games in Moscow after the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The Soviets returned the favor in 1984, when they led a boycott of the Summer Games in Los Angeles. Antagonism like that might have played well at the time. Whether it does now is debatable. But what's certain is that the effects of the boycotts aren't nearly as memorable as when the U.S. and Soviet teams squared off, such as in the [1972 Olympic gold medal basketball game](#) and the [1980 "Miracle On Ice" hockey matchup](#).

The days of the Cold War are over. They have been replaced by a world that is divided, often hostile, and finds few ways to bring everyone on the globe together to participate in—or even talk amicably about—a common event. The Olympics, for all its flaws, is a rare opportunity to do just that.

Would there ever be a case for boycotting the Olympics? Yes. The Nazi-sponsored event in Berlin in 1936, replete with racism and German race hygiene theory, probably made the grade. But Russia, aside from spending far too much money in [a circus of corruption and cronyism](#) ahead of the Games, is not Nazi Germany. Using the Olympics as a chess piece in the game to get Snowden out of Russia and back where U.S. authorities can get at him simply does not rise to the level of moral outrage sufficient to pull U.S. athletes out of the Games.



US President Barack Obama (R) listens to Russian President Vladimir Putin after their bilateral meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico on June 18, 2012 on the sidelines of the G20 summit. (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)

Given its role in the geopolitics of a sharply divided world, the bar for boycotting an Olympic Games ought to be set very high. Saber-rattling with the threat of a boycott every time a nation does not do what the U.S. deems important to do about a controversial figure or cause is like wielding a diplomatic nuclear bomb. A far more targeted and focused diplomatic weapon could well do the trick.

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