

UNDER COVER

The City and the Race

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For the ancient Greeks the Olympic Games were a homage to the common gods of Hellas, a reminder of the distinction between Greeks and barbarians. The modern Olympics began with a similar dedication to the secular deities of civilized humanity—tolerance, fair play, and honorable competition. It is alarming, consequently, that so many Americans argue for attending the Moscow Games on the grounds that the Olympics should be “above” politics. Quite the contrary, the Games require and celebrate a certain *kind* of politics. A tribute to secular civilization, the modern Olympics presume that there is a difference between civilized and uncivilized conduct.

President Carter’s policy of boycotting the Games is true to this Olympic ideal. It reflects the evident fact that the Soviet Union’s public conduct violates and undermines the decencies on which the Olympic Games depend, and it is no excuse that we have behaved pretty badly ourselves from time to time. Even those who think we were right to attend the Berlin Games in 1936 have not argued that we ought to have conducted the Games during war with the sportsmen who were managing Auschwitz. There are things that the tolerant must not tolerate.

For too many Americans, the Olympics “transcend” the distinction between civility and incivility. The Games, for such Americans, are no longer a tribute to secular civilization; the Games themselves have become the object of reverence, an untouchable holy of holies, and the athlete is not a priest of the sacrifice but the idol we worship. Ancient Rome tried to make the arena substitute for the forum, placing the circus where citizenship and political life once stood, and the precedent should inform us. The heart is going out of the secular city, and its faith is degenerating into form.

It is good that President Carter knows that this is a time for sacrifice, for he may be asked for a greater renunciation than any Olympic athlete.

SAVE THE '80 ELECTION!

The presidential election of 1980 is already a catastrophe for democracy. The Democratic and Republican nominees, it seems, will be candidates whom the majority of voters dislike or loathe and who would have to be promoted to be second-rate.

The problem is the candidates themselves, not the issues that divide them. In ideological terms there is certainly enough choice in 1980. Mr. Carter fumbles, and his liberal intentions have often been pursued in conservative ways; but this bumbling, ambiguous liberality is miles away from Mr. Reagan’s comic strip conservatism. Reagan’s ideas, what there is of them, are a pastiche of error, bombast, and flattery, a farrago which

must embarrass any conservative not lost to shame. Reagan is, however, undeniably conservative. There is far more difference between Reagan and Carter, for example, than there was between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960.

Mr. Anderson has chosen to offer a third “choice.” This should not be a heartening prospect even for those who share the media’s enthusiasm for Anderson or the inexplicable conviction that this intelligent conservative is “liberal” or “left of Carter.” A third-party candidate *confuses* choices without necessarily *improving* them. If Anderson runs third—by far the most likely result—he will not have changed the real choice (Carter vs. Reagan). He will only have made it less likely that the voters will face up to that grim alternative. Of course Mr. Anderson might run second or even win. But in any case voters will have to guess—probably on the basis of the polls—where the real choice lies. And they might easily be wrong.

The problem with the Carter-Reagan contest is not that it offers “no choice,” but that the candidates are inept (Mr. Carter) or stupid (Mr. Reagan), lacking the skills required for the presidency. We cannot blame the politicians for this contretemps. Left to themselves, the politicians would have dumped both candidates and presented us with better ones (like Mr. Ford, for example). The problem lies in the primaries, a fact which deserves serious examination. But even if we agreed on the cause of the catastrophe, it would not be enough to save the election of 1980.

Only one thing *can* save it. Mr. Carter must withdraw from the race. Mr. Reagan will not do so, especially since his conservative supporters are enthusiasts who see him as an inspired champion. Mr. Carter’s followers number few zealots. Mr. Kennedy, of course, is out of the question, since for most Democrats—let alone most voters—he is an even worse choice than the president. In the big event, Carter would probably beat Reagan (or, to be more precise, Reagan would beat Reagan), but the margin would be narrow and chancy. The president’s religious convictions ought to teach him that he is less important than his cause and that the risk of a Reagan victory is too great to permit Carter’s own candidacy. The president could name the party’s nominee, pretty much—perhaps Vice-President Mondale—and so he could protect his policies and exclude any candidates he felt unworthy. Only personal ambition and pride stand in the way of his withdrawal, and a president who has been so public in his devotion to the religion of self-sacrifice and humility cannot object if he is asked to live up to his profession. He ought to tell himself what he has been telling the Olympic athletes: that the city is more important than the race.

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