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Nov 04, 2016 by [Alan Abrahamson](#)

The White House Sochi Delegation ^[1]

President Barack Obama
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

It is with great respect for you and your office that I write this open letter.

I have covered the Olympic movement for 15 years. The Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics will be my eighth Games.

I will remind you that in 1980, the last time the Olympic Games were in what is now the Russia, what was then the Soviet Union, the United States team did not go amid intense pressure from the White House. Today, Mr. President, the official U.S. delegation to the Sochi Games that you have announced does not include yourself, the First Lady, the vice president nor any member of your cabinet.

This marks the first Olympics since the 2000 Sydney Summer Games that the president, vice president or a former president will not be a member of the American delegation for the opening ceremony. A White House statement said your schedule simply doesn't allow your to

travel to Sochi.

Throughout the 1990s, it was typical for First Ladies to lead the American delegations. In 1996, of course, President Clinton led the U.S. delegation at the Atlanta Summer Games.

Again with respect, Mr. President, what you have done today is disrespected the Russians — and in particular the Russian president, Vladimir Putin — big time.

Mr. Putin has for years taken a personal interest in the Sochi project. He even came to the International Olympic Committee's all-members assembly in Guatemala in 2007, at which Sochi won the 2014 Games, to lead its campaign. When Mr. Putin became president again for the third time on May 7, 2012, his very first meeting that day was with the-then IOC president, Jacques Rogge.

To be obvious: Sochi matters, a lot, to Mr. Putin.

And Mr. Putin is a very big deal within the Olympic movement. The Russians are spending at least \$51 billion to transform Sochi from a Black Sea summer resort to a Winter Games destination. That's at least \$10 billion more than the Chinese spent in 2008 for Beijing, and Beijing was a Summer Olympics. For \$51 billion, you get a lot of attention.

Mr. President, you have also sparked potential problems for the athletes on the U.S. team and, looking ahead, for the possibility of an American bid for the 2024 Summer Games, because in this matter of protocol you have also made clear your disregard for the International Olympic Committee.

All of this in the name of politics.

If we're being straight with each other, this centers in some measure around the new Russian anti-gay law. That's why you're sending an icon like Billie Jean King as part of the official U.S. delegation. It's why a White House spokesman said the delegation, headed by former Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, now president of the University of California system, "represents the diversity that is the United States."

Also, too, it assuredly has to do with leverage. You want it. There are complex geopolitics at issue, like your relationship with Mr. Putin, the interplay with the former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden and other matters that we, who do not have access to the daily White House security briefings, have no idea about.

Mr. President, you are a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. You know full well the Olympics are a time when nations are supposed to give politics a rest, if only briefly.

You know, too, that sport has the power to bring people together. Just a few days ago, you were in South Africa, at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela, who understood that ideal perhaps better than anyone in our time.

You flew to South Africa aboard Air Force one with former President President George W. Bush and former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. Mr. Obama, sir, if you were looking to make a statement about "the diversity that is the United States," why not send Mr. Bush and Mrs. Clinton to Russia as your delegation leaders? Both are Olympic delegation

veterans — Mr. Bush in 2008, Mrs. Clinton as First Lady in 1994 and 1996 — and that would have sent a very different signal of respect, indeed.

These things matter.

Instead, what you have also signaled — and this is unpleasant to acknowledge — is that, frankly, you don't respect the American athletes themselves. The statement you're making to them, loud and clear, is that they're not important enough for you to step above politics.

Thinking this through to its logical conclusion, sir:

Compare your action Tuesday with President Bush, who cheerfully demonstrated his unity with American athletes in 2002 by literally sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with them in the stands at the opening ceremony in Salt Lake. You have put politics ahead of the athletes in a way that could potentially compromise the U.S. team's success in 2014 if the Russians take the next steps. What might those steps be? This is not difficult. The Winter Olympics involve a multitude of judged sports. (Think back to the ice-skating controversy in 2002.) Moreover, any Winter Olympics involves transport issues. (It's a long way up a winding road from the ice cluster in Adler to the snow cluster in Krasnaya Polyana.)

Things have a funny way of happening on snow and ice, Mr. President. It can get slippery.

Is your busy schedule — or, indeed, the First Lady's — payback for Chicago's first-round exit in 2009 for the IOC voting for the 2016 Summer Games? Rio de Janeiro won that day. It was historic; you were the first sitting U.S. president to ever appear before the IOC, at the general session in Copenhagen. Yet most of what the IOC members remember about you being there has nothing to do with your fine speech, or even the First Lady's, for she was there, too. It was the Secret Service sweep and the delay it caused them in getting to their seats.

If that seems petty to some — what about this now?

If the fact that the U.S. Olympic Committee is weighing a bid for the 2024 Games is not foremost on your agenda, be sure that it is high on the IOC's list. The new IOC president, Thomas Bach, and his key advisers, are keenly seeking a U.S. bid. But the USOC is willing to jump in only if it has a high likelihood of winning, because Olympic bids in recent years have run to \$50 million and more.

The IOC will pick the 2024 site in the summer of 2017. By then, you will be out of office.

Even so, within the IOC memories run long. And in 2015, three or four dozen IOC members, maybe more, are due in Washington, D.C., for a key assembly, a meeting of the 204-member Assn. of National Olympic Committees.

There they will be reminded vividly that you are there. And that in 2014 you threw this in their face.

All in the name of gay rights? Some of us may see gay marriage as a civil rights measure, Mr. President. But if you were to look at this from afar, it's still the case that only 16 states and Washington, D.C., permit gay marriage. That's not exactly a majority.

This controversial Russian law passed the Duma, their lower house, by a vote of 436-0. We can disagree with the measure, but there can be no question about the numbers.

Which begs the question: who are we Americans to be using the Olympics to lecture the Russians about how to run their country? To be sending Billie Jean King over as a symbol of — what? The purported progressiveness of our society or our moral superiority? Isn't that presumptuous or, worse, arrogant?

After Sochi, are you planning to send Billie Jean King next to states such as Ohio (which you won in 2012), Virginia (ditto) and Colorado (same) to lobby for gay marriage? It's banned there now in all three. And Colorado is home to the U.S. Olympic Committee.

How would we like it if the Russians — or, for that matter, anyone — came over here and told us what to do? Would we welcome their advice on matters such as the death penalty, which virtually every nation in western Europe now considers morally abhorrent? (Should that be an automatic disqualifier for a U.S. 2024 Summer bid? Or just disqualify, say, Texas?) What about our laws regarding assault rifles? Or legalized marijuana? And on and on.

Mr. President, the concept of American exceptionalism is not altogether popular around the world. But it's often the case that we Americans are indeed held to a different standard. Here, you should have gone in a different direction in deciding who was, and was not, going to Sochi in the official White House delegation.

Too, you should have made this decision sooner. It was announced Sunday that France's president, François Hollande, would not be going to Sochi.

Surely, sir, you were not taking your lead from the French?

Respectfully,

Alan Abrahamson
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