

In the air: Mexico 1968

# Blood and guts

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**The Beijing Olympics, with their done deals and cynical silences are over. Forty years ago, with the Mexico City Games due to begin in ten days' time, Mexico had its own „Tiananmen“: the Tlatelolco Massacre.**

Revolutionary year 1968 had engulfed the University of Mexico, with months of political unrest, strikes and rioting, as students demanded basic democratic rights and protested against repeated acts of brutality and intimidation by a largely unaccountable police force.

As the Olympics approached, President Díaz Ordaz decided to crack down and in September, sent in troops to occupy the campus. Students were beaten up and arrested, but the demonstrations escalated.

Things came to a head on 2nd October 1968, with a 15.000-strong march through Mexico City. At sunset, 5.000 students and workers and their families gathered on *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* in Tlatelolco for a peaceful rally, chanting „*No queremos olimpiadas, queremos revolución!*“ Police and troops moved in, surrounding the square in armoured cars and tanks, and began firing into the crowd, hitting protestors and bystanders alike. The bodies piled up as soldiers made house-to-house searches throughout the night. Estimates vary, but informed sources talk of 200 to 300 dead, with over 1000 wounded and 1500 arrests.

According to the government, security forces had acted in self-defence against armed „*provocateurs*“ among the demonstrators. But a committee investigating the massacre in October 1997 found evidence that the protestors were unarmed and that the attack was planned in advance in a bid to destroy the student movement. In 2003, documents released under the *Freedom of Information Act* established US government involvement: the Pentagon had sent weapons, ammunition and riot control training material to Mexico in response to government concern over the security of the Games.

The CIA station in Mexico City reported regularly on developments from July to October and 6 days before the massacre, the CIA were assured „*the situation will be under complete control very shortly*“.

The president of the *International Olympic Committee* was an American, Avery Brundage, a notorious white supremacist and Nazi sympathiser, who had opposed the boycott of Hitler's 1936 Olympics. The day after the massacre, the *IOC* met to decide whether events justified cancelling the Games. In one of those courageous stands against human rights' abuse for which they are renowned (as recently over Tibet) the



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Mexico '68: Tommie Smith and John Carlos

*IOC* voted for the show to go on. Had Brundage and Co. decided otherwise, however, the world would not have witnessed a demonstration of genuine courage.

On 16 October 1968, African American athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos won gold and bronze in the men's 200-metre sprint.

They mounted the podium for the medal ceremony and as the *Star Spangled Banner* sounded out and *Old Glory* was run up the pole, the two men bowed their heads and silently raised black-gloved fists in the black power salute. They were shoeless and wore black socks as a sign of black poverty. Smith's black scarf represented black pride and Carlos' beads were a protest against black persecution.

The *IOC* reacted swiftly, condemning the men for violating „*the basic principle of the Olympic Games (...) that politics plays no part whatsoever in them*.“ Brundage ordered the US Olympic Committee to suspend them. The USOC refused, only backing down when Brundage threatened to ban the whole US track team. The two men were then expelled and sent home.

Before he left, Smith told the press: „*If I win I am an American, not a black American. But if I did something bad then they would say, a Negro. We are black and we*

*are proud of being black. Black America will understand what we did tonight.*“

Black America understood only too well. The political atmosphere was already charged. There had been widespread unrest following the murder of Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King six months before. Many black athletes at Mexico had received death threats.

Smith and Carlos had put huge pressure on themselves to win medals in order to make their protest, aimed at drawing attention to black athletes' struggle for equal rights. They wore the badge of the *Olympic Project for Human Rights* - as did Peter Norman, the Australian silver-medallist, out of solidarity with the two Americans - which had called on its members to make gestures of protest. Only Smith and Carlos complied and they paid a heavy price.

Back home, they were victims of abuse and death threats from white supremacists. Smith's marriage broke up and Carlos's wife was driven to suicide.

Peter Norman paid too. Ostracised by the media and the Australian OC, he was passed over for the 1972 Olympics. In 1985 gangrene put an end to his sporting career. Depression and heavy drinking followed and he died from a heart attack on 3 October 2006. Smith and Carlos bore his pall.

„Rehabilitation“ began in the 1980s, helped, ironically, by Reagan's boycotting the 1980 Moscow Olympics, a gesture that suggested that the *IOC's* „*basic principle*“ could indeed be „*violated*“ when it suited.

On 15 October 2005, San Jose State University unveiled a bronze statue, immortalising Smith and Carlos's gesture. Norman's place on the podium is empty, an invitation to step up and to show solidarity with courage, as he did. The Australian was flown in to be with his fellow medallists at the ceremony.

Things change. The men's action is now seen as a heroic blow for Civil Rights. A recent US newspaper article even complained about the lack of political commitment of modern athletes - in contrast to Smith and Carlos.

And the *IOC*?

Mexico was the first Olympics in which its current president, Jacques Rogge, took part, thus experiencing the protest at first hand. But forty years later, true to *IOC* dogma, he maintained a deafening silence over human rights abuses in China, remarking merely that „*the world has learnt more about China*.“

Some things do not change.

-> **The prize-winning documentary film „Salute“ by Peter Norman's nephew Matt was released earlier this year.**