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Olympic Scandal

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What was being called the Salt Lake City Olympic Scandal and is now clearly the all-world Olympic Scandal is a shock to very few people. Rumors, newspaper articles, and books have all previously raised these issues including some of the more spectacular details. I have in the back of my mind the recollection of a charge that an Olympic official was given a heart transplant, perhaps for a relative, by world renowned heart surgeon Michael DeBakey.

Over the past few months there have been charges of surgeries performed, scholarships given, prostitutes provided, cash payments made, egos massaged and pampered, all in the relentless pursuit of the Olympic games by the major cities of the world. As the story moves out from Salt Lake City to Australia, Japan, and other corners of the globe the sheer volume of the transactions approaches the level of fantasy.

The opportunities for self-righteous posturing are too good to resist, while the stance of sanctimonious self-justification evoking the sacred Olympic aura is predictable. Before all of this gets way beyond the level of the merely human, it might be interesting to raise other cases of comparative ethics.

It is quite easy to see something like a cash payment as bribery, while it is less certain that dinner at the very best restaurant in Atlanta or Sidney or Nagano is in that category. When does the desire to please cross over from "hospitality" to "bribery?"

Anyone who has represented a major organization in a convention site search knows that the "hospitality" of the potential host cities or host hotels can be quite sumptuous. If cities and hotels were willing to roll out the red carpet to land a convention of a thousand people, why then would there be any surprise at the level of "hospitality" for a mega-event like the Olympic games.

It would be interesting to compare the treatment of National Football League officials who select the Super Bowl cities, or the officials who select World Cup sites, to that afforded to Olympic officials: Or to compare this to the treatment of those who determine the site of the National Shriners Convention, the American Historical Association, the Democratic or Republican

National Conventions. I suspect there would be a remarkable similarity.

What we choose to call bribery in one context is often called something else in another. American politics, which is awash in money, makes very interesting and suspect distinctions in this area. Campaign contributions are said to be given only to "get access" to a politician. That this is a bribe is vigorously denied. Although the money flows most heavily to those who vote or act in certain beneficial ways for the donors, there is a happy insistence that there is no "quid pro quo." Therefore there is no bribery.

High officials, be they business or political, have come to expect that gifts of all kinds will be bestowed upon them for their mere existence. When the IOC officials claim that Juan Antonio Samaranch taking gifts of guns from the Salt Lake officials is not a bribe just a common practice, I have no doubt that they believe this. When the head of state or high government official travels internationally, gifts are quite common. In some cultures this practice takes place down to the personal level. Some sort of gift, no matter how small, is absolutely essential to both formal and informal relationships in Russia.

Complicating the judgements and actions in the Olympic scandal is the fact that there are very different concepts of doing business in different cultures. In many places a major payment is necessary for what is called in American politics, "access." In some cultures this is open and above board, in others it is under the table, but both are considered normal business practice. People who conduct business in the international markets can tell you story after story of the payments that must be made to complete a routine business transaction. Are these bribes? Are these local customs? Is bribery in the eye of the giver or the receiver, or both?

The social side of any major business transaction can be quite lavish. Universities are not above the practice of this sort of flattery when dealing with potential donors. University athletic departments routinely take state politicians to bowl games or bring them in to "schmooze" in the sky boxes at the big games. Coaches and boosters go to extraordinary and expensive lengths in the recruitment of star athletes. When do these actions pass over into the realm of bribery?

For many Olympic officials of aristocratic origins "expectations" are quite high. What they consider a gift could easily be seen by lesser mortals as a bribe. For those who come from cultures where "baksheesh" is the norm, or where campaign contributions in six figures are the norm, what is considered a gift may be construed as a bribe in a different context or culture.

What then is to be done? Although human corruption can not ever be totally eliminated, a few reforms might help. First no gifts should be retained by any IOC official. Like the President of the United States, all officials should be required to turn over gifts to a central depository, perhaps an Olympic Museum of some sort. In choosing Olympic sites the mad scramble of cities should be ended by the choosing of one, two, or a few rotating permanent sites. The number of people choosing venues should be reduced, along with the time line for such decisions.

In the meantime I would suggest that although the dimensions of this scandal may seem large and the levels of corruption may seem high, the line between these activities and what we accept as normal business and political ethics in American culture are not as far apart as they may seem.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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