

## Politics and the Olympics

**Curriculum links:** Current events, American history, critical thinking, politics, sports

**Briefing:** The Summer Olympics officially begin with the opening ceremonies in China's new National Stadium in Beijing on Aug. 8. But controversy over these games has been swirling since the day China was selected to host. Human-rights activists have protested the decision to award the Olympics to China, because the country's government imprisons political opponents, represses freedom in Tibet—which it occupied by force in 1950—and supports Sudan's leaders, despite the ongoing genocide in that country's Darfur region. The U.S. and other governments have been urged by protesters to boycott the games or at least to keep their presidents or prime ministers away from the opening ceremonies, a traditional gathering of world leaders. Polish, Czech, and German leaders have said they will boycott the opening ceremonies, and France's prime minister may follow suit. The protests have died down since the devastating earthquake in China's Sichuan region, because of a sense that the government has generally responded well to the disaster. Still, this year has marked the first time that politics have affected the Olympic Games in a major way since the U.S. and other countries boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics to protest the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan—and then the Soviet Union and its allies stayed away from the 1984 Los Angeles games. Since 1984, governments have tried to keep the Olympics free from political interference. Still, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter in 1980, says, "The boycott was successful because it ruined what was intended to be a great Soviet propaganda show." But International Olympic Committee member Anita DeFrantz—a 1976 rowing medalist who missed the 1980 games because of the boycott—disagrees: "A boycott cannot accomplish anything except hurting athletes. My mission since 1980 has been to prevent athletes from ever being used for someone else's wishes." Baron Pierre de Coubertin of France, who founded the modern Olympic movement, hoped the games would bring together young people from around the world to increase "friendly understanding among nations." That remains an elusive goal.

### Classroom Debates

Should the U.S. boycott the Olympics in Beijing? Should President Bush attend the opening ceremonies? Do you think the Olympics can increase "friendly understanding among nations"? Explain.

**Newspaper activity:** Scan the paper for articles about politics and the Olympics. How are opponents of China's regime hoping to use the games to make their points? How has China's government responded? After reading several articles on the politics of the Olympics, ask students to write an editorial stating where they stand on the question of boycotting the Olympics or its opening ceremonies.

**Resources:** Books: Tony Perrottet's *The Naked Olympics: The True Story of the Ancient Games* (Random House, 2004), Lillian M. Li, Alison Dray-Novey, and Haili Kong's *Beijing: From Imperial Capital to Olympic City* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), and Susan Bachrach's *The Nazi Olympics, Berlin 1936* (Little Brown, 2000). Websites: Learn more from Dream for Darfur, read the Olympic Charter, and find a column arguing that the Olympics should be abolished.