

Bob Ray Sanders: Let's not even think about boycotting the Olympics — ever again

By Bob Ray Sanders

From the day I first met Jimmy Carter, at a time when no one thought the southern governor had a chance to become president, I admired him.

He was obviously smart without being pretentious; sincere without being maudlin; determined, minus the fault of overconfidence.

During his presidency, and perhaps even more after he left the nation's highest office, I've had the utmost respect for the peanut farmer from Georgia who continues to devote his life to serving others, fighting for peace and being an inspiration to people all over the world.

But there is one decision Carter made while in office that was more than ill-advised – it was probably the worst thing he could have done at the time in reaction to a move by the Soviet Union.

Protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Carter decided that the United States would boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, and he convinced several other countries to do likewise. (There was no way to imagine then that one day the United States would invade Afghanistan.)

The boycott, which had no impact on the Soviet Union's aggression, only served to dash the hopes of athletes in this country and around the world who had looked forward to competing against the best each nation had to offer.

One of those young athletes was Fort Worth amateur boxer Donald Curry, who had been chosen to represent the United States in the welterweight division in Moscow. Curry, though never given the chance to win an Olympic gold medal because of the boycott, would turn professional and go on to become the undisputed welterweight champion of the world.

The 1980 boycott of the games was not the first nor the last. Four years earlier, the Summer Olympics in Montreal was boycotted by several African countries because the International Olympic Committee would not ban New Zealand for allowing its rugby team to tour South Africa. And four years after Moscow, the Soviets led a boycott of the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles as payback for what the United States had done in 1980.

In hindsight, I think most people, including Carter, would agree that these demonstrations of national indignation were pathetic examples of how countries sometimes handle their disagreements.

The Olympics should not be used as a tool for diplomatic blackmail or political one-upmanship. They must continue to be a place where the world athletic community can come together free of individual nations' governmental crises, intra-country strife or cross-border turmoil.

That's why I was alarmed at the mere "suggestion" by one U.S. senator that we might consider threatening a boycott of the Winter Games in Sochi next year to protest Russia's harboring of Edward Snowden, the leaker of national security secrets, and that country's support of Iran and the Syrian regime.

I don't think Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., was serious when he floated the boycott idea, but it speaks to the larger issue that politicians tend to think of doing stupid things when they can't figure out diplomatic solutions to difficult international problems.

President Obama should squash that notion immediately even though he's obviously furious

Bob Ray Sanders: Let's not even think about boycotting the Olympics – ever again

*By Bob Ray Sanders
(continued)*

at Russian President Vladimir Putin for not sending Snowden back to the United States to face trial.

The president reportedly is considering another way to snub Putin to show his disappointment at the Snowden affair as well as other action by his Russian counterpart. Obama had scheduled a stop in Moscow when he goes to the Group of 20 nations meeting in St. Petersburg in September. That Moscow leg of the trip, announced in June, may be canceled.

That's certainly a better way to voice displeasure with another leader than taking the drastic measure of boycotting the Olympics.

Let the politicians handle this, and leave the athletes out of it.

Surely Jimmy Carter would agree.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Bob Ray Sanders is a columnist for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Readers may write to him at: 400 W. 7th Street, Fort Worth, Texas 76102, or via email at bobray@star-telegram.com.

**©2013 Fort Worth Star-Telegram. 7-23-13.
Distributed by MCT Information Services**