

John Kamm Remembers

The Games of the 29th Olympiad: Triumph and Tragedy

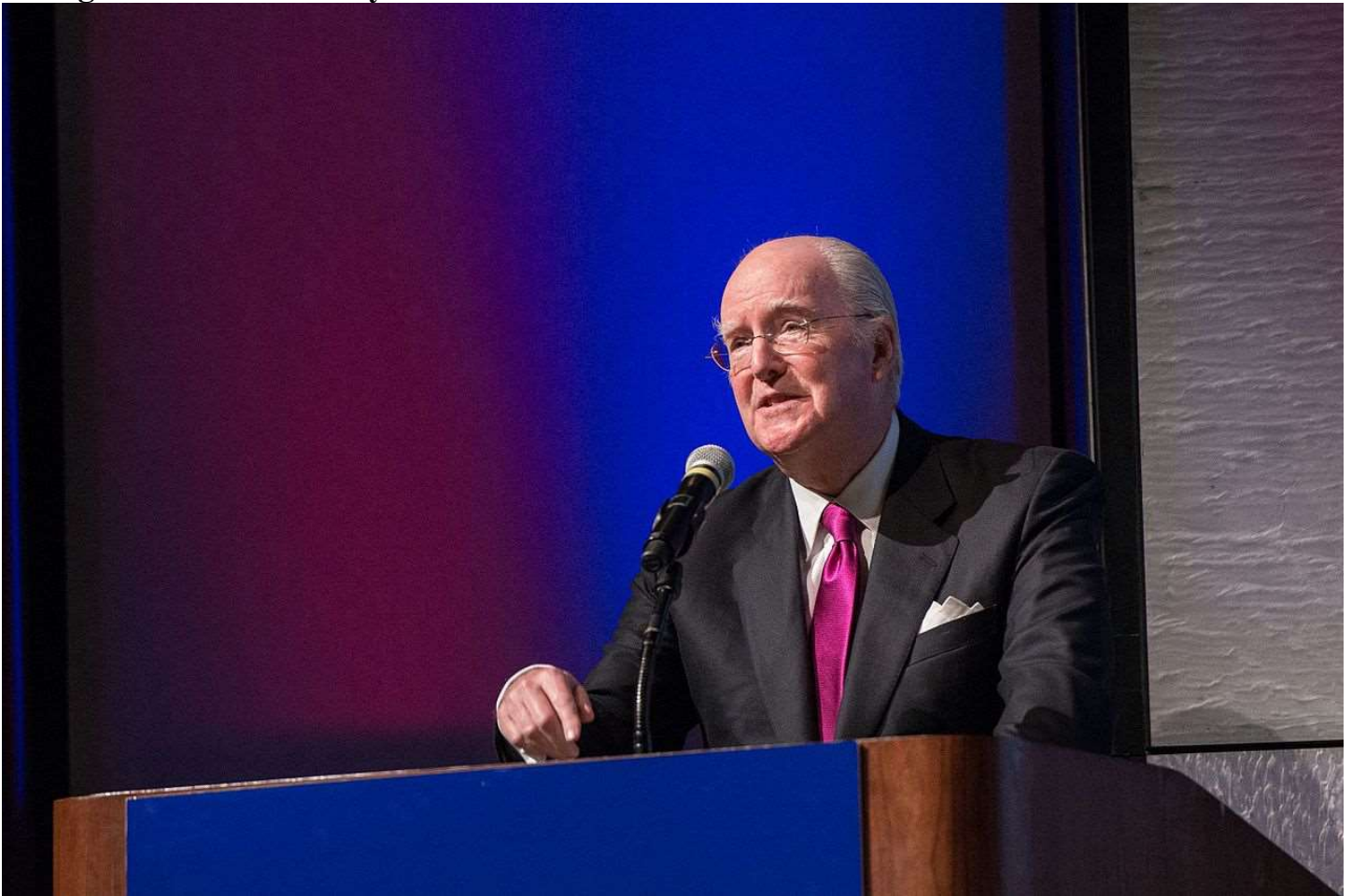


A photo of the 2008 Olympics Opening Ceremony in Beijing National Stadium. Image credit: [WuQiang Beijing / CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Less than four years after the events of May and June 1989, Beijing applied, in 1993, to host the 2000 Summer Olympics. It lost the bid by two votes to Sydney. One of the votes was cast by the US representative on the Olympic Committee.

The loss to Sydney was a great disappointment for China. A senior official with whom I met to discuss human rights, including political prisoners, told me that the US had created a great deal of good will among the Chinese people and Chinese officials alike over its criticism of China's human rights but, despite this, its decision to maintain China's trade status. "That goodwill has been lost." That was the beginning of the decline in the United States' popularity in China. It has never recovered.

George W. Bush & Sandy Randt



Clark T. (Sandy) Randt photographed on March 31, 2015 speaking at the China-US Private Investment Summit at the LBJ Presidential Library. Image credit: [Lauren Gerson / CC BY 2.0](#)

Amidst this backdrop of Chinese disappointment, George W. Bush was elected the 43rd president of the United States in November 2000. His election was challenged by his opponent Al Gore, touching off a three-week battle that was eventually settled by the Supreme Court.

George W. Bush's father was George H. W. Bush. The senior Bush served as the second US envoy to Beijing, serving as the head of the US Liaison Office (USLO) in Beijing between 1974 to 1975. He went on to become the 41st president of the United States. George W. Bush and his sister spent time in Beijing while his father was head of the USLO; he became familiar with the country and its senior officials long before he became president.



George H.W. Bush (*second from right*) with US Secretary of State Kissinger, Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, Director of the Liaison Office of the People's Republic of China in the United States Huang Zhen, during Kissinger's visit to China, 1975.

Image credit: George H.W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum

George W. Bush took office in January 2001. Not long afterwards, he nominated his friend and classmate Clark (Sandy) Randt as the US Ambassador to Beijing. He was confirmed by the Senate in July 2001 and sworn in by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. I was honored to attend his swearing in. He presented his credentials in Beijing on July 28, 2001.

Sandy Randt had spent 18 years in Hong Kong. He was an attorney, a recognized expert in Chinese law, and a keen observer of developments in China. He had served as a commercial attaché and First Secretary at the US embassy in Beijing from 1982 to 1984. He was also an officer of the American Chamber of Commerce (AmCham) while I was president of the chamber. Our friendship predated his time as an AmCham officer by several decades. We were, and remain, close friends, as were our families. Our children grew up together. Our friendship proved to be decisive for my human rights work in China.

Sandy Randt, who was to become the longest serving US ambassador to China, spoke excellent Chinese, but may not have been as fluent as other US ambassadors to the country, two of whom were born in China. Nor did he have the deep knowledge of the ins and outs of how US state and federal governments work as other ambassadors, two of whom served in the Senate and two of

whom were elected governors. Nor was he as well versed in matters of national security as other US ambassadors, one of whom had served in the CIA.

Yet Sandy Randt proved to be more effective than any other ambassador who held the position since the countries normalized relations in 1979. He was able to pick up the phone and speak directly to the president of the United States without having to go through layers of bureaucrats. For this reason, he was respected and even feared by senior Chinese officials.

Third Time Lucky

A little over a month after George W. Bush was sworn in as president in 2001, China once again put in a bid to host an Olympics, this time for the 2008 Summer Games to be held in Beijing. Its application was considered by the Olympic Committee in July and was accepted on the third ballot. The Chinese government and the Chinese people were overjoyed.

To win the right to host the 2008 Summer Olympics, the Chinese government made a number of commitments. It is said to have promised to stop parading offenders who were sentenced to death, and to stop executing them in public. It committed to an unprecedented degree of openness, allowing free access by media to different parts of the country and to its own citizens for unsupervised interviews, and to lifting the blocking of the websites of human rights groups.

1.9 民众支持

2000年11月间, 盖洛普(中国)咨询有限公司在北京地区进行了民意测验。调查结果表明: 有94.9%的北京市民支持北京申办。

北京奥申委成立不久, 从全国征集到2000多件会徽设计稿和3万余条申奥口号建议。北京市和全国各地的市民、学生、演员、运动员、社会知名人士自发地通过签名、书法、绘画、创作多来诺骨牌申奥画面、演唱会、体育比赛、环球旅行等多种方式和活动表达了对北京申办奥运会的支持。中国境内的许多著名中外企业赞助北京申办奥运会。

1.10 奥运会比赛项目涉及地区的保证

北京如主办2008年奥运会, 将在青岛举办帆船比赛, 在天津、上海、沈阳、秦皇岛举办足球预赛。这些城市的政府和人民对能在自己的土地上举办奥运会比赛感到非常荣幸, 表示将全力配合北京奥运会组委会, 按照国际奥委会和各国际单项体育联合会的要求, 办好2008年奥运会。已得到青岛、上海、天津、沈阳、秦皇岛市长签署的保证书。(见主题18)



1.9 Public Support

A Gallup Survey conducted in Beijing in November 2000 on the extent of popular support for the city's bid for the 2008 Olympic Games indicates that 94.9% of the people in Beijing support Beijing's bid.

Soon after its founding, BOBICO received more than 2,000 submissions for logo designs and 30,000 suggested mottos for the Beijing Olympic bid from all over China. Urban residents, students, performers, athletes, and prominent social identities from Beijing and throughout China have expressed their support for Beijing's bid through a variety of means, including the collection of signatures, and the production of paintings, calligraphy, and other works of art and artistic and sporting performances. In addition, a large number of Chinese and China-based foreign businesses have offered to provide financial support for Beijing's bid.

1.10 Guarantees from Localities Concerned

Should Beijing win the bid, Olympic Sailing will be held in Qingdao, and Olympic Football preliminaries will be held in Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenyang, and Qinhuangdao. The Governments and residents of these cities consider it a great honour to host Olympic events and have expressed their readiness to cooperate with BOCOG and to work for the success of the Olympic Games in accordance with the requirements of the IOC and the IFs. Guarantees have been obtained from Qingdao, Shanghai, Tianjin, Shenyang and Qinhuangdao. (See Theme 18)



Beijing failed to live up to its promises. Parading of those condemned to death continued, as did public executions, albeit in parts of the country outside major urban areas. The websites of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were unblocked, but others continued to be blocked, including the website of Dui Hua. I protested to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to no avail.

Tibet Erupts

On March 10, 2008, five months before the Games were set to begin, protests broke out in Tibet and other Tibetan areas of the country. By the Chinese government's count, demonstrations, some violent, occurred in 150 locations in Tibet and Tibetan areas of other provinces, from March 10 to March 25, 2008. Human rights groups' estimates of the number of demonstrations that occurred after March 10 were much higher.



Tibet's Ganden Monastery photographed in March 2008. Image credit: [Christopher Johnson / CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

Hundreds of people were killed by protesters and police. Thousands were arrested and thousands more remain unaccounted for. Buildings and critical infrastructure were destroyed. The Tibetan uprising prompted increased attention to China's human rights in general, and political prisoners in particular.

In response to the crisis, Dui Hua proposed an Olympics Special Pardon for political prisoners in a speech I delivered in Hong Kong on March 29, 2008. The foundation focused on two long-suffering groups: those still in jail for their participation in the June 4 protests, and counterrevolutionaries. Counterrevolution had been removed from the Criminal Law in 1997.

<p>'Olympic pardon' sought in China</p> <p>By Mark Magnier May 9, 2008 12 AM PT</p> <p>TIMES STAFF WRITER</p> <p>BEIJING — At a time when China is touting its Olympic mascots, stadiums and hospitality, a San Francisco-based human rights group has suggested that it add one more feature for the Games: the first "Olympic pardon" of political prisoners.</p> <p>The Dui Hua Foundation made its appeal public Thursday, offering an approach it believes could help Beijing improve a reputation battered in recent months by its Tibet crackdown, Darfur policies and the protests dogging the global relay of the Olympic torch.</p>	<p>World</p> <h3>China should pardon prisoners in Olympic year: group</h3> <p>By Reuters May 8, 2008 8:02 AM PDT · Updated 16 years ago</p> <p>BEIJING (Reuters) - A U.S. rights group appealed to China on Thursday to grant a pardon to long-serving prisoners in conjunction with the Olympics, saying such a move would leave a humanitarian legacy for future hosts of the Games.</p> <p>The Dui Hua Foundation, which seeks the release of political prisoners in China, sent a letter to Wu Bangguo, who chairs the country's legislature, making the appeal.</p> <p>In a separate statement, John Kamm, who heads the foundation, said a pardon would allow for the early release of remaining prisoners jailed in connection with the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy movement, which was crushed by China's military.</p>
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Screenshots of reporting on Kamm's appeal for pardons in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympics: the *Los Angeles Times* (left) and *Reuters*. Image credit: LA Times and Reuters / Fair Use

Special pardons are provided for under Chinese law. Dui Hua followed up the Hong Kong speech with a letter to Wu Bangguo, chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC), the body that grants special pardons.

The proposal was received favorably by Chinese officials, relatives of Chinese prisoners, and foreign human rights groups. Unfortunately, the NPC failed to act, but several well-known prisoners were granted a measure of clemency, including the Hong Kong journalist Ching Cheong (程翔), who was released and allowed to return to Hong Kong, and American citizen Jude Shao, who was granted parole but forced to remain in China. Jude Shao had been visited by US Ambassador Randt in the Shanghai prison where he was incarcerated.

Tragically, one Chinese citizen who should have received clemency did not. Wo Weihang (沃维汉), a member of the small Daur minority residing in Heilongjiang Province, was executed on November 28, 2008, for espionage. The charges against him were ludicrous and violated the policy of granting leniency to members of ethnic minorities. I had worked hard on his case, having gotten to know his daughters, both of whom are Austrian citizens. I denounced the execution in print and in face-to-face meetings with Chinese officials.



Wo Weihan (*center*) with his daughters. Image credit: Wo family

In 2015 and 2019, President Xi Jinping proposed special pardons that the NPC went on to grant. In all, 47,000 prisoners were pardoned. Principal beneficiaries of the pardon were juveniles and elderly prisoners, two groups that Dui Hua's advocacy work has focused on.

I supported the decision to grant the 2008 games to China, though other commentators and human rights activists opposed. One journalist likened granting the games to Beijing to the decision to hold the 1936 games in Nazi Germany. The journalist criticized Dui Hua's support for the Beijing Olympics. This was especially hurtful to me. Growing up, I knew Holocaust survivors, and my uncle had been an investigator at the Nuremburg trials of Nazi war criminals.

Sichuan Earthquake

On May 12, 2008 – three months before the Games were set to begin -- a massive earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale struck Sichuan Province near the capital city of Chengdu. An estimated 90,000 people were killed, thousands more injured, and countless buildings destroyed. Journalists and all unessential personnel were ordered to leave Sichuan.



Damage caused by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake on the road heading to Wenyuan, the quake's epicenter, taken on May 14, 2008. Image credit: [Miniwiki / Public Domain](#)

On June 10, 2008, activist Huang Qi (黄琦) was detained in Chengdu on suspicion of trafficking in state secrets related to his accusations of shoddy construction that resulted in the collapse of buildings after the earthquake. He was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison. Huang continued his activism after his release. He is currently serving a 12-year sentence for endangering state security, his third imprisonment.

Ai Weiwei (艾未未), a famous artist who was a design consultant for the stunning National Stadium (colloquially known as the Bird's Nest and built specifically for the Games), was impacted by the quake. In April 2011, he was detained at Beijing Airport and subsequently placed under residential surveillance in a designated location. Although Ai was later released on bail some 80 days later, he was confined to his Beijing home, akin to house arrest. He was accused of tax evasion. Many suspected that the real reason he was detained was his vocal support for victims of the Sichuan earthquake, many of them children, and the work of other activists.



Beijing National Stadium, known as the Bird's Nest. Image credit: [Peter 23 / CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

The Bird's Nest was rarely used after the Games, as were other structures erected for the occasion. They became White Elephants. No one knows how much China spent on the Games, but it was doubtless a large sum.

As for Dui Hua, the impact of the quake was immediate. We had been planning our first juvenile justice exchange with Chinese judges to take place in the United States in June. I insisted that the program be postponed, and our Chinese partners eventually agreed. Instead, they arrived in October and visited courts, carceral facilities, and other sites in Chicago, Washington D.C., Maryland, and San Francisco. The program was a success. It opened the door to Dui Hua's cooperation with China's Supreme People's Court in the field of juvenile justice, an important area of human rights.

Before the earthquake related crackdowns, other human rights activists were being impacted by the Games. Hu Jia (胡佳), a prominent dissident sentenced to prison for criticizing the Chinese government's failure to improve human rights before the Games, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. He was serving the sentence while the Games took place. His wife at the time, Zeng Jinyan, had supported the proposal to grant an Olympics Special Pardon.

Hu Jia was nominated for the 2008 Nobel Peace Prize. The Beijing Games were very much on the minds of those who put him forward. He was the odds-on favorite to be chosen as the 2008 laureate, but in the end the Nobel Committee chose someone else. Two years later, Liu Xiaobo

(刘晓波) became the first Chinese to be chosen by the committee for the peace prize. Liu died in 2017 because of poor treatment while serving his sentence.

Torch Run

In keeping with tradition, an Olympic torch relay began in Greece, and ended in the city where the games would be held, in 2008, Beijing. The torch passed through six continents and covered 85,000 miles before arriving in Beijing. The relay lasted 129 days and is the longest distance covered of the modern games.

The relay was marred by protests over Tibet and human rights abuses, which disrupted the relay in London and Paris. Violence occurred in Nepal, home to a large Tibetan population.



A group of pro-Tibetan protesters confront pro-Chinese protesters near Pier 1 during the 2008 torch run in San Francisco. Image credit: Broken Sphere / CC BY-SA 3.0

China learned lessons from these protests. I was in San Francisco when the relay took place and witnessed changes. With the help of the San Francisco Police Department, the route was changed to the outskirts of the city. The Chinese consulate arranged for counter protesters from the Bay Area's large ethnic Chinese community to show up. Buses filled with students were laid on. The result of this effort was film footage used in a propaganda film to give the impression that Americans enthusiastically welcomed the torch relay, and by extension, the holding of the Games in Beijing.

The Games Begin

Shortly after the torch arrived in Beijing, the opening ceremony was held with a stunning display of fireworks and music.

President Bush had been urged by European leaders to join them in boycotting the opening ceremony on account of China's human rights record. Bush declined to do so and wound up attending the opening ceremony. He stuck to the position that politics and sports should not be mixed.

While in Beijing, President George W. Bush presided over the opening of the new US embassy in Beijing with Sandy Randt. He was joined by his father, mother, and Henry Kissinger.



On August 8, 2008, President George W. Bush is greeted by US Ambassador Sandy Randt at the US Embassy in Beijing. Former President George H.W. Bush is behind them. Image credit: Eric Draper / White House photo

The day after the glittering opening ceremony, tragedy struck. A US citizen, the father of an Olympian who played on the 2004 volleyball team, was knifed to death on the Drum Tower. His guide was also murdered, and the Olympian's mother was badly injured trying to protect her husband. Their assailant jumped to his death from the Drum Tower, sparing him from execution.

Results of the Games



(Left) US President George W. Bush, Laura Bush and daughter Barbara Bush cheer on US swimmer Michael Phelps at the 400-Meter Individual Medley event in Beijing on August 10, 2008; (right) President Bush is greeted by Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping during his visit to Zhongnanhai, the Chinese leadership compound in Beijing on August 10, 2008. Image credit: Eric Draper / White House photo

China won the most gold medals at the 2008 Summer Olympics, and the United States won the most medals overall. But the games did little to improve China's international image thanks largely to its brutal crackdown in Tibet, its detentions of Chinese citizens for the peaceful expression of their views, and its failure to honor commitments to greater openness and more restraints on capital punishment.

The success of the games did not help Chinese President Hu Jintao's reputation either. He left office in 2012, widely seen as a weak leader. He was humiliated at the closing session of the National People's Congress in October 2023 when documents were snatched from his hands, and he was denied the opportunity to speak. He was led off the stage a broken old man. He reappeared at the funeral of Jiang Zemin in December 2023 but has not been seen in public since.