

The Memory of a Moment: The Making and Transformation of Tommie Smith and John Carlos's
1968 Olympic Protest

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the way Americans have come to remember the raised-fist gesture that Black American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos made at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City. For much of 1968, Smith and Carlos were involved in an unsuccessful movement that sought to have Black American athletes boycott the Olympics to protest racial discrimination in the United States. Still wanting to make a statement about racial inequality, Smith and Carlos chose, at the last minute, to bow their heads and raise their gloved fists as the national anthem played at the end of their medal ceremony. The American public paid little attention to their gesture initially, but after International Olympic Committee President Avery Brundage ejected Smith and Carlos from the Olympic Village, the mainstream American press condemned the two sprinters as un-American. Over the ensuing decades, as the Olympics became more political and as the civil rights movement became an idealized part of the past, Smith and Carlos were transformed into civil rights exemplars. This thesis analyzes the factors that led to Smith and Carlos's initial condemnation and the distinct phases through which Smith and Carlos evolved from villains to heroes between 1968 and the early 2000s.

Introduction

On the afternoon of October 16, 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood on the podium in the Estadio Olímpico Universitario in Mexico City. Neither man wore shoes; they instead opted to show off matching long, black dress socks. Smith wore a black scarf, and Carlos wore beads. Both men had an Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) button attached to their jackets.¹ Having taken first and third place in the 200-meter race at the 1968 Summer Olympics earlier that day, the two men accepted their medals and waited for the “The Star-Spangled Banner” to begin playing. As the first few notes of the national anthem blared out, Smith and Carlos assumed their now-famous positions. Smith bowed his head and raised his gloved right fist straight to the sky. Carlos bowed his head and raised his gloved left fist, albeit with less conviction than Smith. The image of Smith and Carlos raising their fists on the podium has become an iconic symbol of the American civil rights movement—but only recently. In decades’ time, the two runners emerged as civil rights icons and symbols of resistance, but in the moment, they were anything but that.

Smith and Carlos caused an uproar on site when they raised their fists. The crowd inside the stadium initially responded with silence, shocked by what they were witnessing. By the time the national anthem ended, the silence had turned into boos and racial epithets.² However, this negative reaction did not make it to the United States in full force, at first. The morning after the race, major newspapers across the country noted Smith and Carlos’s gesture, but they did not offer significant criticism. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, characterized the gesture as a “somewhat discordant note” in what had otherwise been a “gala day” of athletic achievement. The bulk of the *Tribune*’s coverage of the 200-meter race focused upon Smith breaking the world record despite nursing a muscle injury.³ This should have marked the end of Smith and Carlos’s

¹ Richard Hoffer, *Something in the Air: American Passion and Defiance in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics* (Free Press, 2009), 159.

² Harry Blutstein, *Games of Discontent: Protests, Boycotts, and Politics at the 1968 Mexico Olympics* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), 111.

³ George Strickler, “Smith and Seagren Win Gold Medals: World Track Marks Fall in 3 Events at Olympics,” *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), October 17, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/smith-seagren-win-gold-medals/docview/168892795/se-2>.

time in the public eye. With neither runner participating in any other events at these Olympic Games, they appeared destined to yield the spotlight to the athletes who had yet to make their mark. That was until International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Avery Brundage intervened, catalyzing a strong public reaction to Smith and Carlos that triggered decades of discourse around the two runners and their moment on the podium.

Argument

This thesis will explore how the narrative around the raised-fist gesture made by Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City first came to be and how it has changed over time. This paper will first examine the key components of these Olympics, including how Mexico became the first developing country to host an Olympic Games and how Avery Brundage, in his role as IOC president, navigated numerous international crises in the leadup to the Games. It will also trace the events that led Smith and Carlos to raise their fists on the Olympic podium, including a failed effort to organize a boycott of the Games led by Harry Edwards, a professor at San Jose State University (SJSU), the school that Smith and Carlos both attended. Having contextualized the importance of the Olympics for Smith, Carlos, and Brundage, this thesis will then investigate why the American public reacted to the gesture in the way that it did and track how its perception of Smith and Carlos evolved. This project seeks to determine what caused Smith and Carlos to receive such a strong public backlash initially and identify when, why, and how the two runners rehabilitated their images in the decades that followed the Mexico City Olympics.

The first part of this thesis's argument is that Smith and Carlos received notoriety for their raised fists almost exclusively because of the antics of Avery Brundage. Brundage was personally offended by Smith and Carlos because their gesture contravened his longstanding obsession with keeping politics and activism out of the Olympics. Thus, in an act of retaliation, he punished the two runners as extravagantly as he could by ejecting them from the Games. It was only after this that Smith and Carlos became the center of the American media's Olympic coverage and targets of condemnation for journalists nationwide. The second part of this thesis's

argument is that Smith and Carlos's public image subsequently shifted in distinct phases. First, as the civil rights movement wound down in the early 1970s, the public stopped caring about Smith and Carlos. Then, as later Olympic Games became more political, the American public came to realize that it had judged Smith and Carlos too harshly. Finally, as the civil rights movement became a sanitized part of the past in the late 1990s and early 2000s, America elevated Smith and Carlos to civil rights heroes.

Historiography

Two leading monographs focus specifically upon Smith and Carlos's gesture: *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* by Amy Bass and *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* by Douglas Hartmann. These two books were published just a year apart—Bass's in 2002 and Hartmann's in 2003—and they rely upon similar primary source bases: newspaper and magazine archives, various literature written by Harry Edwards, Avery Brundage's personal archives, and the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) archives. Based upon these sources, Bass and Hartmann similarly highlight how Smith and Carlos's gesture came about from the failed Edwards-led movement to have Black American athletes boycott the Mexico City Olympics altogether. Both authors also assert that Smith and Carlos's demonstration on the Olympic stage inspired future generations of Black athletes to be more politically expressive and spearheaded institutional changes that improved conditions for Black athletes. This is not to say that Bass and Hartmann agree on everything; most notably, they differ in their characterizations of Harry Edwards. Bass praises Edwards's "media savvy" and his understanding of the "complexity of race as well as how sport functioned as an economic, industrial, and predominantly white-controlled institution,"⁴ before suggesting that he used these skills strategically to create a boycott movement that—despite its failure—received constant media attention for months in the leadup to the Olympics. Hartmann is markedly more critical of

⁴ Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 86.

Edwards. He argues not only that the Olympic boycott movement was self-serving for Edwards, but also that Edwards was tactically inept, contending that it was “remarkable how little theorized the strategy of a boycott seems to have been.”⁵

Two more recent monographs analyze politics and activism at the Mexico City Olympics more broadly, and each one slightly complicates the arguments of Bass and Hartmann. Richard Hoffer’s 2009 book *Something in the Air: American Passion and Defiance in the 1968 Mexico City Olympics* tells the individual stories of numerous members of the 1968 American Olympic team. The narrative Hoffer presents largely confirms and enriches the work of Bass and Hartmann. Crucially, however, this book introduces the idea that Smith and Carlos’s moment on the podium occurred spontaneously. Hartmann never states how the two runners settled upon their exact gesture. Bass contends that Smith and Carlos knew that “their victory ceremony would be permanently fixed in the memory” of anyone who watched it,⁶ implying that they had thought about the importance of producing a visually powerful gesture. Hoffer, in contrast, argues that their decision to make the raised-fist gesture only came about after the race and before the medal ceremony.

The newest monograph about the politics of the Mexico City Olympics is Harry Blutstein’s 2021 book *Games of Discontent: Protests, Boycotts, and Politics at the 1968 Mexico Olympics*. Like Hoffer, Blutstein largely elaborates upon the arguments of Bass and Hartmann, except he adds one important new claim. He argues not only that the idea of the raised-fist gesture emerged at the last minute, but also that Smith and Carlos’s demonstration could not have occurred without the independent action of their wives. Bass and Hartmann recognize that the wives played a role in their husbands’ moment on the podium; both authors note that Smith’s wife bought the pair of gloves that the two runners wore when they raised their fists. But Blutstein goes further. He assigns the wives an active role in making their husbands’ moment by

⁵ Douglas Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and the Revolt of the Black Athlete: The 1968 Olympic Protests and Their Aftermath* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 149.

⁶ Bass, *Not the Triumph*, 235.

arguing that the two women acted independently when they bought gloves and other objects for their husbands to use to demonstrate on the podium.

This thesis will support Hartmann's claims about Edwards by arguing that Edwards's management of the Olympic boycott efforts was driven by his own interests more than those of Smith, Carlos, and the other athletes involved. It will also reinforce the minor interventions of Hoffer and Blutstein by arguing that the gesture was both spontaneous and only even possible because of the decisive action taken by Smith and Carlos's wives in the days leading up to their husbands' race. However, the primary historiographical intervention of this thesis comes from attending to what happened after the Mexico City Olympics came to an end. While Bass briefly considers how Black athlete activism has evolved since 1968, and while Hartmann takes a cursory look at how the meaning of Smith and Carlos's gesture has changed, this thesis provides a detailed analysis of how the public image of Smith and Carlos initially formed and how it has shifted from 1968 to the present day. It investigates when and why the narrative around Smith and Carlos transformed and analyzes the role that the press, Brundage, the civil rights movement, subsequent Olympic Games, Edwards, and Smith and Carlos themselves played in the two runners' progression from un-American villains to courageous heroes.

In other words, the primary historiographical goal of this project is to extend the story of Smith, Carlos, and their shared gesture to the history of memory by looking at how the public has remembered and interpreted their display of activism. The existing historical work on these two men largely treats their raised fists as an endpoint, the culmination of their struggle as Black athletes. This thesis, on the other hand, treats their gesture as the starting point of a long, complex narrative path defined by race and national identity. Tracking changes in the American public's reaction to Smith and Carlos's gesture reveals how the country's understanding of race, racism, nation, and political activism has evolved since the civil rights movement.

Primary Source Bases

This thesis relies mainly upon three distinct bases of primary sources. The first is the writings of Smith, Carlos, and Edwards. Smith and Carlos have each written an autobiography

that details their upbringings, their tenures at SJSU, and their interpretations of their own gesture. Edwards published a book in 1969, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, in which he outlined his role in organizing the Olympic boycott movement and how he believed he had contributed to Smith and Carlos's demonstration. These sources are invaluable, as they provide the in-depth perspectives of the key figures connected to the gesture. However, they are also flawed works; Smith, Carlos, and Edwards each use their respective books to try to make themselves look as good as possible. This very flaw, ironically, makes these sources especially useful to this project. Understanding the individual biases of Smith, Carlos, and Edwards is essential to analyzing how their skewed outlooks have subtly embedded themselves into the common public understanding of the gesture over time.

The second source base is the Avery Brundage Collection, held at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. This archive features 152.4 cubic feet of documents related to Brundage, and it includes four boxes of documents about his management of the Mexico City Olympics. These documents, mostly statements to the press and letters to other Olympic officials, discuss how Brundage handled the many geopolitical controversies that affected the 1968 Games. The documents outline, among other things, his efforts to feature apartheid states South Africa and Rhodesia in Mexico City and his strong belief that the Soviet Union (USSR), despite invading neighboring Czechoslovakia less than two months before the Olympics, should not be disinvited from the Games. This thesis will analyze documents from this archive both to better understand Brundage's stated Olympic philosophy—which in simple terms can be defined as keeping politics out of the Games—and to see if he maintained or abandoned his ideals under the pressure of unanticipated events.

The third source base used for this thesis is the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, which is accessible online and includes the content of most major newspapers in the United States from the 1960s through the 2000s. This project will analyze articles from a variety of newspapers across decades to track the moments in which the American media's perception of Smith and Carlos changed. Additionally, this thesis will compare articles from the late 1960s that

appeared in different newspapers to understand how distinct demographics initially responded to Smith and Carlos. This involves comparing the views expressed in national newspapers staffed by white writers with those appearing in local Black newspapers to identify the differences in how white and Black America reacted to the gesture. It also entails comparing the viewpoints shared in different Black newspapers to gauge the varying reactions of Black journalists.

Brundage and “Olympism”

To understand what the Olympics were like in 1968, it is imperative to understand the man who ran the Games: IOC President Avery Brundage. By 1968, Brundage had spent 40 years as a top Olympic official. He became the president of the American Olympic Association (AOA, the predecessor of the USOC) in 1928, and he held that position until 1952, when he was elected president of the IOC.⁷ In his leadership positions, Brundage was known as an authoritarian, a man who “controlled the Olympic movement with an iron fist.”⁸ Throughout the decades that he was in charge, the Olympics were organized following his vision and his personal philosophy.

Brundage’s approach to managing the Olympics was guided by an obsession with “neutrality” that was informed by his understanding of ancient history. When Brundage himself was an athlete at the 1912 Olympics, he was taught the concept of “Pax Olimpica.” When the Olympics took place in Ancient Greece, warring groups allegedly—some historians dispute this—put their conflicts on hold for the duration of the Games. This charming, possibly fictional story from two millennia ago shaped Brundage’s Olympic philosophy, known as “Olympism.” To Brundage, the Olympics were an instrument to build bridges, solve international conflicts, and achieve peace. This meant, crucially, that politics could play no part in the Games under any circumstance.⁹

Throughout his reigns as president of the AOA and IOC, Brundage often imposed his personal politics upon the Olympics in the name of Olympism. He was an overt racist and

⁷ “Avery Brundage,” Olympics, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.olympics.com/en/athletes/avery-brundage>.

⁸ “Brundage Hits Denver Plan (Page 33 of 54),” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (1923-), February 3, 1972, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/february-3-1972-page-33-54/docview/1901200331/se-2>.

⁹ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 12-13.

antisemite, and this most infamously showed at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. With the United States loosely considering a complete boycott of the Games to protest Naziism, Brundage came to Germany's defense and made sure that no boycott took place. He commented that he had seen "no reports whatsoever" that Germany had "failed to give Jewish athletes a fair opportunity to qualify for Olympic teams." Still, even if racism and antisemitism had pervaded Nazi Germany, Brundage insisted that the Olympics "must be kept free from outside interference or entanglements—racial, religious or political."¹⁰ When the Games took place, Brundage stood idly as the "Nazis in the stands" gave American athletes "the Hitler salute...when the Star Spangled Banner was played."¹¹ Nazi salutes during medal ceremonies were permissible under Brundage's Olympism. Protesting Naziism, however, was not.

Heading into the Mexico City Olympics, Brundage was untouchable. He had led the IOC for sixteen years, presiding over seven previous Olympic Games, including three editions of the Summer Games. Then, just days before the Mexico City Games began, the 81-year-old Brundage was reelected president of the IOC for a fifth (and final) term. In Olympic circles, his victory was viewed as "a vote of confidence in the more conservative line" he had taken in managing the Olympics.¹² Brundage's philosophy would continue to guide the Games, and his power remained unquestioned.

The Olympics Come to Mexico City

Brundage and his Olympism played a key role in bringing the 1968 Summer Olympics to Mexico City. Though it was one of the four finalists in the bidding to host these Games, the Mexican capital's chances of winning the bid appeared slim. Prior to 1968, hosting the Olympic Games was an honor strictly reserved for countries that were developed and either part of or

¹⁰ Alan Gould, "Nazi Defense Instituted by Brundage: U.S. Olympic Head Says Germany Is Acting in Good Faith," *Washington Post* (1923-1954), August 2, 1935, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/nazi-defense-instituted-brundage/docview/150665865/se-2>.

¹¹ Davis J. Walsh, "Negro Smashes Mark in Broad Jump, 200 Meter: Woodruff First in 800 Meters as Hardin Knocks Off Low Hurdles Title (Page 15 of 20)," *Minneapolis Star* (1928-1939), August 4, 1936, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/august-4-1936-page-15-20/docview/1848484957/se-2>.

¹² "Brundage Reelected Chief; Big Trek to Olympics Begins: Avery Turns Back French Rival," *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), October 11, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/brundage-reelected-chief-big-trek-olympics-begins/docview/175795109/se-2>.

allied with the “Western World.” Indeed, the only countries outside of the United States and Europe that had hosted the Olympics previously were Japan and Australia. Unsurprisingly, Mexico City was initially the first-choice host of very few Olympic officials. Brundage and others had their own candidates in mind.

The four finalists in contention to host the 1968 Summer Games were Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Detroit, and Lyon. Brundage first offered his support to none of those four. Instead, he hoped that Berlin could organize a last-minute bid. Logistically, this seemed impossible; how could a city that was physically divided by a wall and politically split between separate governments possibly come together to host the Olympics? Nevertheless, Willi Daume, the president of West Germany’s Olympic committee and an advocate of Olympism, did everything in his power to orchestrate a unified Berlin bid. He proposed that the already-existing Olympic Stadium—from the 1936 Summer Olympics—again serve as the main venue. West and East Berlin would host the same number of events. West Berlin would house the male athletes, while East Berlin would house the female athletes. To avoid any political controversy, Daume suggested that Brundage open the Games in lieu of a political official—as is tradition—from either country. Berlin’s Olympic aspirations “drew immediate support” from Brundage, who viewed the idea of a Berlin bid as “a great triumph for amateur sports and the Olympic movement.”¹³ Unfortunately for Brundage, Daume, and other supporters of Berlin, the city’s efforts to host the Games fell through, with the two Germanies being unable to reach agreeable terms.¹⁴

With Berlin out of picture, Brundage and the IOC shifted their focus fully to the four finalists. Buenos Aires had made a bid, but with Argentina in turmoil following a military coup, it seemed highly unlikely that the IOC would consider it. Mexico City had a stronger case than Buenos Aires, but as effectively the lone legitimate bid from a developing country, it remained an

¹³ “Plan to Award Olympics to Berlin Draws Support,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), May 22, 1963, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/plan-award-olympics-berlin-draws-support/docview/168312997/se-2>.

¹⁴ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 13-17.

underdog. The two favorites were Detroit and Lyon, two cities that met the traditional criteria of an Olympic host. Detroit especially was confident that it would win; Brundage himself even characterized Detroit as having the most compelling bid, stating that none of the other cities were “as serious” as Detroit about hosting the Games.¹⁵ In the leadup to the IOC’s final vote, it appeared that the Olympics would be headed to the Motor City.¹⁶

Before sending its representatives to Baden-Baden, Germany to make its final presentation to the IOC, the City of Detroit organized an elaborate celebratory event in which it received an Olympic torch from Los Angeles, the only American city that had previously hosted the Summer Olympics. What was supposed to be a happy day for the city, however, quickly turned sour thanks to picketing civil rights activists. They booed the national anthem when it was played, and they carried signs criticizing Detroit’s segregated housing. Not only did these demonstrators catch the ire of many locally, including Mayor Jerome Cavanagh,¹⁷ but they also garnered the attention of the IOC. In their final consideration of Detroit’s bid, members of the Committee accepted letters from the Black picketers that spelled out how racism and racial violence pervaded Detroit and plagued their lives. Suddenly, just before the final vote, the IOC had newfound concerns about how racism and segregation could affect Detroit’s ability to host the Games. This would greatly weaken its bid.¹⁸

Buenos Aires was riddled with political instability, and the IOC was increasingly concerned about racial tensions in Detroit. Lyon’s final presentation, meanwhile, was disorganized, highlighted by a badly made film. This made the IOC doubt that the French city’s organizing committee could handle putting on the Olympics. Suddenly, Mexico City had the most appealing bid. In its final presentation to the IOC, the Mexican delegation reminded the Committee that it had successfully hosted two major international sporting events in the previous

¹⁵ “Detroit Chances Best, Says Wilson: Motor City Has Inside Track to Land ’68 Games, According to Ex-Olympic Official,” *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)*, March 4, 1963, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/detroit-chances-best-says-wilson/docview/168251221/se-2>.

¹⁶ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 17.

¹⁷ Frank Beckman, “Mayor Blasts Booing Pickets (Page 3 of 28),” *Detroit Free Press (1923-)*, October 12, 1963, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/october-12-1963-page-3-28/docview/1818699302/se-2>.

¹⁸ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 20.

decade: the 1955 Pan-American Games and the 1962 Modern Pentathlon World Championship. It also called attention to the exclusive nature of previous editions of the Games, noting that despite the Olympics being a global event, a Latin American country had never hosted. With the bids of Detroit and Lyon both having glaring problems, this was enough for the IOC; Mexico City won the right to host the 1968 Summer Olympics on the first ballot. For the first time in Olympic history, the Games would go to a developing country.¹⁹

Mexico City's victory garnered much criticism, with many American and European officials believing that it was an unworthy host. Brundage was not among these critics. In fact, few were happier about the Mexican capital's successful bid than he. Brundage had been a longtime supporter of Mexico City. After winning the IOC presidency in 1952, he afforded it the opportunity to host a 1953 IOC meeting, the 1954 Central American and Caribbean Games, and the 1955 Pan-American Games. When Berlin's bid fell apart, he chose to back Mexico City over Detroit or Lyon.²⁰ Publicly, Brundage proclaimed his excitement that "one of the smaller-scale countries" was finally hosting the Olympics; he thought that Mexico City "could do more for the Olympic movement" than the other finalists by virtue of "giving encouragement" to the developing and Spanish-speaking worlds.²¹ Politically, he loved Mexico City for its neutral foreign policy amid the Cold War; unlike the United States and France, Mexico was not a member of the strongly anti-communist North Atlantic Treaty Organization.²² Mexico City's victory was also important for Brundage personally. He had advocated Olympism for decades; he believed in the power of the Olympics to bring people together and unite the world. Now, as IOC president, he would get to watch over the growth of the Olympic movement by presiding over the first Olympics to take place outside the developed world—the crowning achievement of a

¹⁹ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 20-21.

²⁰ Stephen D. Allen, "Irish Journalists and the 1968 Mexico City Olympics," *Studi Irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies* 11, no. 11 (2021): 94, <https://doi.org/10.13128/SIJS-2239-3978-12876>.

²¹ "Mexico City Picked Over Detroit, Lyons and Buenos Aires for '68 Olympics: U.S. Delegation Hurt and Shaken," *New York Times* (1923-), October 19, 1963, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mexico-city-picked-over-detroit-lyons-buenos/docview/116324628/se-2>.

²² Hoffer, *Something in the Air*, 104.

long and hard-fought career. Little did Brundage know how much work lay ahead over the next few years to put on a successful Summer Olympics in 1968.

The Beginnings of the Olympic Project for Human Rights

As Brundage oversaw Mexico City's preparations for 1968, Tommie Smith accidentally started a movement to boycott the Olympics. The idea of Black American athletes boycotting the Games first emerged in 1960, when comedian Dick Gregory suggested it. There had been some surface-level discussion about a boycott among the Black athletes at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, but nothing had come of it.²³ In the years between Tokyo and Mexico City, the American political climate had shifted. The civil rights movement had intensified, and more Black athletes than before appeared willing to consider skipping the Olympics to protest the racism that they were regularly subject to in the United States. Still, an all-out boycott remained unlikely. That was until Smith made an offhand comment about boycotting that inadvertently set the movement into motion.

Smith was born in 1944 in Clarksville, Texas, where he lived until he was six years old. In 1950, his family moved to California's Central Valley, eventually settling near the city of Lemoore. Smith's childhood was defined by hard labor. His parents were sharecroppers, so he spent much of his time helping them in the fields, picking cotton, corn, and sugar.²⁴ Smith started running in fourth grade to get away from the fields, and outrunning his competition kept him out. His dad regularly warned him that if he did not win his races on a given weekend, he would have to go back to picking cotton the next weekend.²⁵ In high school, Smith was recruited by 25 colleges as a football, basketball, and track athlete. He eventually chose to attend SJSU, as it allowed him to remain close to his family, but just far enough from Lemoore that he would not have to go home to work the fields on weekends.²⁶

²³ Bass, *Not the Triumph*, 87-88.

²⁴ Tommie Smith, *Silent Gesture: The Autobiography of Tommie Smith*, with David Steele (Temple University Press, 2007), 43, 54.

²⁵ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 62.

²⁶ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 69-70.

Transitioning to college initially proved difficult for Smith. With most white students at SJSU unwilling to befriend Black students, Smith's social life revolved around a small group of Black student-athletes.²⁷ He especially struggled to support himself financially. His scholarship included a \$95 per month living stipend; that was all the money he had to cover his rent, textbooks, food, clothes, and other essentials. Needing extra money just to survive, Smith spent his college summers working rather than training. He continued to pick cotton for his parents, and he refurbished the facilities of public schools in nearby Oakland.²⁸

Despite these challenges, Smith found his way at SJSU. After struggling to balance multiple sports during his freshman year, Smith placed his athletic focus solely on track from his sophomore year onward.²⁹ He joined the ROTC, something that gave him "a patriotic feeling for the first time."³⁰ As a student, Smith took interest in human rights and the Constitution, eventually turning to sociology as his academic major.³¹ It was during this time that Smith began to engage in political activism. He first participated in a protest in March 1965, during his sophomore year. He, along with a crowd of other students, marched roughly 60 miles from the SJSU campus to downtown San Francisco in solidarity with the Black Americans in the South who were fighting Jim Crow segregation.³² This march was a defining moment in Smith's understanding of his role as an athlete and activist. His participation in this march confirmed to him that "being one of the best [runners] in the world...obligated [him] to contribute" to social and political causes that he cared about. Smith continued to engage in political activism throughout his tenure at SJSU. He had no qualms about taking a stand to fight for what he believed in.³³

²⁷ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 81-82.

²⁸ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 73, 88.

²⁹ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 84-85.

³⁰ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 92.

³¹ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 98-99.

³² Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 103.

³³ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 112.

In the summer of 1967, Smith was competing at the World University Games—a 34-country event³⁴ that served as a precursor to the Olympics—in Tokyo. When a Japanese reporter asked him about the ongoing discourse around a potential Olympic boycott, Smith “casually commented” that some Black athletes were discussing it.³⁵ Major American newspapers took Smith’s words and blew them out of proportion, alleging that he had said that there were a significant number of Black athletes ready to boycott.³⁶ This unexpectedly strong reaction stateside forced Smith to “den[y] hotly...that he had advocated an American negro boycott of the Olympic Games” when speaking to reporters back in Tokyo.³⁷

A few weeks later, now back on campus at SJSU, Smith poured kerosene on the fire he had unintentionally started in Tokyo. Smith and track teammate Lee Evans, another politically active Olympic hopeful, proclaimed that there was a “good chance” that Black athletes would skip the Mexico City Games the next summer. Smith also made sure to remind the public that “[i]f the Negro athletes walk out of the Olympics, the U.S. is going to hurt.”³⁸ This statement further riled up the white press, which responded with numerous articles criticizing Smith. Most notably, *Los Angeles Times* sportswriter Jim Murray mocked Smith in an article titled “Life Goes on Whether Tommie Runs or Not.” Murray characterized Smith as selfish; he summarized Smith’s views on boycotting the Olympics as “unless things are improved considerably for Tommie Smith, he will not compete for this country in the 1968 Olympics.” Murray then downplayed the significance of Smith’s statement, declaring that Smith “has shaken up a multitude of two persons.” Finally, he dismissed Smith as young and naive, suggesting that his opinions had been “solicited by everybody from national magazine writers to regional

³⁴ “U.S. Quintet Wins; Tommie Smith Sets Mark in World Univ. Games,” *Boston Globe* (1960-), September 4, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/u-s-quintet-wins-tommie-smith-sets-mark-world/docview/366760102/se-2>.

³⁵ Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 50th Anniversary ed. (University of Illinois Press, 2017), 40.

³⁶ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 41.

³⁷ “US Sprint Star Denies Report,” *Times of India* (1861-), September 4, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/us-sprint-star-denies-report/docview/347290634/se-2>.

³⁸ Philip Fradkin, “Tommie Smith Tells Negro Threat to Boycott Olympics,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), September 23, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tommie-smith-tells-negro-threat-boycott-olympics/docview/155842505/se-2>.

politicians.”³⁹ Murray and others in the national media may have opposed the idea of an Olympic boycott, but evidently, it made for a compelling enough story to warrant detailed coverage. Anything Black athletes said about boycotting, it seemed, would receive considerable media attention.

Smith’s comments and the reaction that followed gave the Olympic boycott idea a jolt. What had once appeared inconceivable suddenly felt possible. In the following weeks, Smith met with Harry Edwards, whose class he was taking at the time, to discuss how to further advance the boycott initiative. They agreed that the appropriate next step was to reach out to other Black Olympic athletes and gauge how they felt about it. Smith and Edwards found that the idea of a boycott had support from numerous athletes, including fellow SJSU sprinter John Carlos. Knowing that they had support, Edwards began to take steps to advance the Olympic boycott from a casual idea to a formal, comprehensive movement.⁴⁰

Born in 1942 in East St. Louis, Illinois, Edwards was raised in a segregated neighborhood within the city. After a successful high school career as a discus thrower and basketball player, the six-foot-eight Edwards first attended Fresno City College in California before earning an athletic scholarship at SJSU. Edwards was disgusted by the racism he endured in San Jose. Black students were strongly discouraged from attending university social events, and white students, who also frequently called Edwards racial slurs, could choose not to have Black roommates in on-campus housing. Things were no better for Edwards in his athletic endeavors. He quit the track team during his sophomore year due to the racism of multiple assistant coaches, finishing out his time at SJSU only playing basketball.⁴¹

Edwards graduated from SJSU in 1964, becoming the first Black athlete to graduate from the university on time in a decade. He then attended Cornell University, where he would receive

³⁹ Jim Murray, “Life Goes on Whether Tommie Runs or Not,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), September 26, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/life-goes-on-whether-tommie-runs-not/docview/155730109/se-2>.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 46.

⁴¹ Michael A. Fletcher, “Harry Edwards Isn’t Done Just Yet,” *ESPN*, March 25, 2025, https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/44344034/harry-edwards-done-just-yet.

a master's degree (and later a Ph.D.) in sociology. After receiving his master's degree, Edwards returned to SJSU as a visiting professor; in this position, he both taught and organized undergraduate students.⁴² He used his credibility as a former Black SJSU student-athlete to form strong bonds with the current Black student-athletes on campus.

During his time as a professor at SJSU, Edwards led numerous demonstrations. He had helped plan the march to San Francisco that Smith attended in 1965.⁴³ In 1967, Edwards organized a protest of SJSU's season-opening football game to call attention to the racism embedded in the university's housing policies, admissions practices, and athletic department. The threat of protest struck enough fear into the SJSU administration that the university's president chose to cancel the game—a decision that received national news coverage, as well as the ire of California Governor Ronald Reagan.⁴⁴ Despite his successful organizing in San Jose, Edwards wanted to extend his efforts further. The racist conditions that he had been subject to when he was an undergraduate student years earlier had not changed, and Black athletes were continuing to suffer as a result. Edwards wanted an all-out revolt against the system in place; he wanted a revolt of Black athletes. The Olympic boycott initiative seemed like a perfect way to create just that.

Edwards's first step in building up the Olympic boycott initiative was to host a small meeting of local activists at his house. This included Smith, representatives from various civil rights organizations, and organizers from other nearby colleges. Here, Smith, Edwards, and the others created the framework for a movement to have Black athletes boycott the Olympics. They gave the movement a name—the Olympic Project for Human Rights—and they settled upon their next step: Smith and Edwards were to drum up support for OPHR at the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference on Thanksgiving.⁴⁵

⁴² "Harry Edwards," The California State University, accessed February 27, 2026, <https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/alumni/Honorary-Degrees/Pages/Harry-Edwards.aspx>.

⁴³ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 103.

⁴⁴ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 48-49.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 46-47.

At face value, the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference was the perfect place for Smith and Edwards to promote OPHR. Many of this conference's attendees had also attended the National Black Power Conference in July, during which delegates passed a measure that encouraged Black boxers not to fight and Black Olympic athletes to boycott the Games unless Muhammad Ali were reinstated as heavyweight champion—Ali had been stripped of his title for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War.⁴⁶ Despite having a seemingly sympathetic audience, however, the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference looked unlikely to generate momentum for OPHR in the way that Smith and Edwards had hoped. For one, they had been largely unsuccessful in recruiting top athletes to Southern California. The biggest stars—Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, and Jim Brown—were all unable to attend.⁴⁷ On top of that, their proposal of an all-out boycott, presented by Edwards, did not resonate with the athletes who did attend. Though the idea received strong support from UCLA basketball star Lew Alcindor, most attendees did not appear interested. After hours of discussion, Edwards's proposal was set to go to a written vote that would determine the fate of OPHR.⁴⁸

Before the voting could begin, the conference was interrupted; there had been a skirmish outside the venue, which forced participants to disperse. Instead of a formal, written vote, the attendees quickly participated in an informal, voice vote as they left.⁴⁹ The result of this vote was unclear, but Edwards took advantage of it to bring new life to the boycott movement. He swiftly released a statement announcing that the athletes that had attended the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference had “unanimously voted to fully endorse and participate in a boycott of the Olympic Games in 1968.”⁵⁰

This was an extraordinarily aggressive, if not disingenuous, move from Edwards. He had tied every athlete that attended the conference to a boycott of one of the biggest sporting events

⁴⁶ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 29-30.

⁴⁷ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 54.

⁴⁸ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 56-57.

⁴⁹ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 57.

⁵⁰ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 50.

in the world. Unsurprisingly, numerous conference attendees, even those who had supported the boycott initiative, were uncomfortable with what Edwards had done; many publicly distanced themselves from him in the following days. Alcindor contradicted Edwards, stating that “there is no boycott as of now.”⁵¹ Even Smith condemned his professor, commenting that Edwards had “taken it upon himself to make a statement,” something that he was “not authorized to do.”⁵² In releasing such a controversial statement and alienating some of his biggest supporters, Edwards had done two things. First, he had made himself the leader of OPHR and the Olympic boycott movement; Smith, the man who had catalyzed the movement, was no longer its face. Second, Edwards had formally declared that the boycott movement was on. Every major newspaper in the country had covered Edwards’s statement. America was now watching OPHR’s every move, and journalists were beginning to place increased scrutiny on the words and actions of all Black athletes who had hopes of competing in Mexico City the following year.

Edwards likely killed the slim possibility of an Olympic boycott as soon as he released his statement after the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference. He had created too much division among the athletes, especially those who had previously expressed an interest in boycotting. Nevertheless, Edwards and OPHR had momentum. The press was eager to write about all things boycott, leading civil rights activists—including Martin Luther King Jr.—were supportive of the effort,⁵³ and the idea of Black American athletes skipping Mexico City alarmed Olympic officials. In fact, as soon as the IOC received word of what had happened in Los Angeles, a contingent of members “commenced working overtime trying to rally strong forces opposed to the idea.”⁵⁴ So Edwards kept going. By the middle of December, he had devised a platform, a list of six demands that would stop Black athletes—theoretically—from skipping the Olympics, if

⁵¹ Jeff Prugh, “Alcindor Says Olympic Boycott Doesn’t Bind Him Personally,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), November 25, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/alcindor-says-olympic-boycott-doesnt-bind-him/docview/155791312/se-2>.

⁵² Jeff Prugh, “Negro Group Votes to Boycott ’68 Olympics,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), November 24, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/negro-group-votes-boycott-68-olympics/docview/155891531/se-2>.

⁵³ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 52-53.

⁵⁴ “Boycott Threat Alarms Olympic World: Officials Want No Boycott,” *Afro-American* (1893-), December 2, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/boycott-threat-alarms-olympic-world/docview/532339439/se-2>.

met. These demands included “[t]he appointment of at least two black people” to the USOC and the “[r]emoval of the anti-semitic and anti-black personality Avery Brundage” from his position as president of the IOC.⁵⁵ The press, still focused on Edwards’s every move, covered the unveiling of the OPHR platform aggressively, forcing Brundage to respond publicly. He claimed that the allegations of racism and antisemitism made against him were “a vicious lie.”⁵⁶ Despite the early challenges, the first few months of OPHR and the Olympic boycott movement had been successful. Still, as 1967 turned to 1968—the year of the Mexico City Olympics—OPHR would need to offer more than just press releases to maintain its hold over the media. It would need to follow its strong words with actions.

1968: The Rise and Fall of OPHR and Brundage’s Management of International Crises

OPHR’s first formal action took place on February 16, 1968 in New York City. The New York Athletic Club (NYAC) did not allow Black members. In fact, the only time Black athletes were allowed to use its facilities was during the Club’s annual track meet. The NYAC meet was one of the biggest events in indoor track and a favorite of many Black runners. The 1968 edition was particularly special, as it marked the meet’s 100th anniversary. To celebrate the occasion, the NYAC put on the event at the brand-new Madison Square Garden, rather than its own facility.⁵⁷ All of these factors made it the perfect event for civil rights activists to interrupt. Edwards, along with many other organizers—including the controversial newly elected chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, H. Rap Brown—led a Black boycott of the event.⁵⁸ Smith—who despite his previous disagreement with Edwards remained “quite willing” to consider an Olympic boycott⁵⁹—Carlos, Lee Evans, O.J. Simpson, and many other Black track stars sat out the event.⁶⁰ As a result, the NYAC meet went on with a half-capacity crowd and only

⁵⁵ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 53.

⁵⁶ “‘Vicious Lie’—Brundage,” *Irish Times* (1921-), December 18, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/vicious-lie-brundage/docview/524946731/se-2>.

⁵⁷ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 100-101.

⁵⁸ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 103.

⁵⁹ “Stars Reveal Boycott Motivations,” *Afro-American* (1893-), December 23, 1967, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/stars-reveal-boycott-motivations/docview/532216715/se-2>.

⁶⁰ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 101.

nine Black participants (according to most sources).⁶¹ This marked a major milestone for Black American athletes. For the first time, they had “translated” their longstanding frustrations “into effective group action.”⁶²

The NYAC boycott was thus successful, and it demonstrated the viability of a Black American Olympic boycott. Even so, another sports story outshone it. On the morning of February 16, American newspapers reported that the IOC had announced the previous evening that “South Africa was reinstated for the 1968 Summer Olympics.” This was shocking news. South Africa had been excluded from Olympic competition since 1963 because of apartheid.⁶³ As it turns out, Brundage had worked behind the scenes to convince other members of the IOC to support the reintroduction of South Africa to Olympic competition.

According to Brundage, “[t]he fundamental basis of the Olympic Movement is no discrimination of any kind, racial, religious, or political.”⁶⁴ At face value, it appears obvious that South Africa defied this fundamental principle. Not quite: in Brundage’s eyes, discrimination outside the Olympics was entirely permissible. Brundage referred to apartheid as nothing more than “a political policy in South Africa with which many other countries do not agree.” The IOC, despite its outwardly anti-discriminatory views, was “not concerned” with apartheid. It only wanted to know if the country’s “National Olympic Committee can comply with Olympic Rules.”⁶⁵ Therefore, South Africa, despite having a white minority that had concentrated political power and used it to segregate and suppress the rights of its Black majority, was welcome to compete in Mexico City.

⁶¹ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 104-105.

⁶² Robert Lipsyte, “Sports of the Times: After Thermopylae, What?,” *New York Times* (1923-), February 19, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/sports-times/docview/118391962/se-2>.

⁶³ Lloyd Garrison, “South Africa Allowed to Compete in Olympic Games at Mexico City: Approval Is Given by Majority Vote,” *New York Times* (1923-), February 16, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/south-africa-allowed-compete-olympic-games-at/docview/118404851/se-2>.

⁶⁴ Avery Brundage to Jerry Liska, statement, September 24, 1968, box 196, folder 2, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

⁶⁵ Avery Brundage, interview, September 1967, box 196, folder 2, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

The IOC's announcement triggered a strong international reaction, especially in Africa. The Organization of African Unity quickly announced that all 35 of its member states would not send athletes to Mexico City were South Africa permitted to compete.⁶⁶ For Edwards and OPHR, the harsh reaction to South Africa's newfound inclusion in the Olympics should have been a good thing, as it gave credence to some of Edwards's main talking points. He was trying to organize an Olympic boycott to protest racial discrimination in sports, and one of the six demands of OPHR was the "[c]urtailment of participation of all-white teams and individuals from the Union of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia in all United States and Olympic Athletic events."⁶⁷ However, the timing of the IOC's announcement took attention away from the efforts of OPHR. The NYAC boycott became a story secondary to the controversy around South Africa, and with nearly an entire continent now threatening to boycott Mexico City, the threats of a Black American boycott became "insignificant, by comparison."⁶⁸

In the aftermath of South Africa's reentry into the Games, Edwards did his best to keep OPHR in the public eye, mostly by making contentious comments. While being interviewed for a *Sports Illustrated* article about the NYAC boycott and South Africa, he proclaimed that the mostly white Olympic brass had "virtually said the hell with us. Now we'll have to reply: Let Whitey run his own Olympics."⁶⁹ Edwards's biggest problem, however, was not maintaining the attention of the media. It was building support for his Olympic boycott among athletes. The success of the NYAC boycott did not translate into new support for OPHR. Sociologist Douglas Hartmann writes that while the NYAC boycott "carried widespread legitimacy and support" among both Black athletes and the Black community "as a whole," the same could not be said for Edwards and the Olympic boycott movement.⁷⁰ Many of the athletes who participated in the NYAC boycott publicly repudiated Edwards, H. Rap Brown, and its other organizers. For

⁶⁶ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 107.

⁶⁷ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 53.

⁶⁸ Paul Zimmerman, "Edwards' Cries Going Unheeded," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), February 21, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/edwards-cries-going-unheeded/docview/155903858/se-2>.

⁶⁹ Pete Axthelm, "Boycott Now—Boycott Later?," *Sports Illustrated* 28, no. 8 (1968): 25, EBSCOhost.

⁷⁰ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 110.

example, when providing his reasons for skipping the NYAC meet, long jumper Ralph Boston stated that “[t]here are reports that Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown and Harlem pickets will be there threatening to bodily harm anybody who participates. I can do without that.”⁷¹ Boston was not alone among Black athletes in his sentiment. He could be convinced to skip a—comparatively—small event like the NYAC meet. In contrast, convincing Boston and others to skip the Olympics was proving to be a difficult task. Even with its success in New York, OPHR had become somewhat stagnant. It had taken second fiddle to South Africa in the public eye, and it had not gained any notable new supporters in some time.

On April 4, OPHR received an unexpected and unfortunate boost. That evening, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. King’s untimely death changed the perspectives of many Black Olympic hopefuls toward a boycott. Ralph Boston, who less than two months prior had expressed no interest in boycotting, was suddenly open to the idea. Fellow long jumper and gold-medal favorite Bob Beamon, also previously indifferent toward skipping Mexico City, began to consider boycotting too. In the weeks that followed King’s murder, Beamon, a student-athlete at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), chose to boycott a track meet hosted by Brigham Young University, citing the school’s long history of racism. UTEP responded by taking away Beamon’s scholarship.⁷²

As Boston, Beamon, and other athletes contemplated boycotting for the first time, Edwards took advantage of the moment to get in front of the press and put OPHR firmly back in the public eye. A week after King’s death, Edwards insisted that there would be a “total and complete...black boycott of the Olympics.” He too claimed that “a number of white athletes...also will boycott the Games” in solidarity. Edwards went on to remind the public that King had been an early supporter of OPHR before declaring that the boycott would be “a solemn

⁷¹ Tom Powell, “Boston Shuns NYAC Track (Page 20 of 32),” *Nashville Tennessean* (1923-1972), February 13, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/february-13-1968-page-20-32/docview/1905702969/se-2>.

⁷² Hoffer, *Something in the Air*, 60-61.

memorial to Dr. King and his family in recognition of their sacrifices.”⁷³ Just like that, the Olympic boycott movement was alive once more, and with new athletes now in the mix, it appeared to have serious momentum.

A few weeks later, the IOC corrected its previous wrong, voting by a wide margin to rescind South Africa’s Olympic invitation. The boycott campaign in protest of South Africa’s looming presence in Mexico City had spread far beyond OPHR and the Organization of African Unity; Brundage estimated that roughly one-third of the countries in the world, including the USSR and its allies, would skip the 1968 Summer Olympics if South African athletes were there. After failed efforts from Brundage to get South Africa to quietly withdraw from these Olympics, the IOC had no choice but to formally exclude the apartheid nation.⁷⁴ Brundage was not happy about this; he felt that the Committee’s decision represented a “sad commentary on the state of the world today.”⁷⁵ But he also knew that he could not jeopardize the Olympics to appease a single—racist—nation. Thus, the Mexico City Games would go on without South Africa.

South Africa’s exclusion from Mexico City was, technically, a victory for OPHR. Curtailing the participation of all-white teams from South Africa in Olympic competition was one of OPHR’s six sporting demands, after all.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the IOC’s quick reversal of its initial decision greatly weakened OPHR. In the aftermath of South Africa’s ban, the two men who had started the Olympic boycott movement—Tommie Smith and Lee Evans—both indicated that they were now inclined to participate in the Games. Smith commented that “[t]he chances of my going to Mexico City would have been much less had South Africa been allowed to participate.” Evans stated that “[t]his certainly changes my mind some about participation.”⁷⁷

⁷³ “‘Total’ Boycott Seen by Edwards,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), April 12, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/total-boycott-seen-edwards/docview/155887416/se-2>.

⁷⁴ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 31-32.

⁷⁵ Thomas J. Hamilton, “South Africa’s Ban from Olympics Confirmed: Bid Is Withdrawn After 41-13 Vote,” *New York Times* (1923-), April 25, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/south-africas-ban-olympics-confirmed/docview/118298590/se-2>.

⁷⁶ Bass, *Not the Triumph*, 180-181.

⁷⁷ “So. African Ban Called a Help to U.S. Team: Two Negro Runners Change Attitude About Boycott,” *New York Times* (1923-), April 24, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/so-african-ban-called-help-u-s-team/docview/118396335/se-2>.

Edwards continued to insist that South Africa's exclusion would "[make] no difference" in OPHR's efforts to organize a Black American boycott of the Games.⁷⁸ The words of the athletes affiliated with him, however, said otherwise. If Smith and Evans were favoring going to Mexico City, how could Edwards possibly convince the likes of Boston and Beamon to boycott? Just as quickly as OPHR had gained momentum after King's assassination, it had lost it after the IOC barred South Africa from Mexico City.

Brundage nearly created another South Africa situation in his efforts to include Rhodesia in the 1968 Summer Olympics. In May 1968, the United Nations (UN) imposed a travel ban upon those who carried Rhodesian passports due the country's apartheid system.⁷⁹ This should have ended Rhodesia's hopes of sending athletes to Mexico City. With the UN preventing Rhodesians from travelling internationally, the IOC did not have to formally exclude Rhodesia from the Olympics; all it had to do was quietly honor the UN's restrictions. Instead, Brundage chose to try to defy UN sanctions and get Rhodesian athletes to the Games.

Brundage used the same rationale to justify Rhodesia's inclusion in the Olympics as he had to justify South Africa's a few months prior. Despite Rhodesia practicing apartheid, the Rhodesian Olympic Committee was "recognized and in good standing" by the IOC, and therefore, Rhodesia "received an invitation to participate" in the Mexico City Olympics.⁸⁰

Even though Rhodesians could not legally enter Mexico, Brundage—believing that "this action of the United Nations is contrary to international law"—did everything he could to get them there. Even just a month before the Olympics began, he still was still quietly holding out hope that Rhodesian athletes could "find transportation to Mexico."⁸¹ In the end, they could not, mostly thanks to Mexican Olympic officials quietly refusing to credential anyone from

⁷⁸ "U.S. Negro Boycott Still On," *South China Morning Post* (1946-), April 24, 1968,

<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/olympic-games-u-s-negro-boycott-still-on/docview/1508231251/se-2>.

⁷⁹ "U.N. Bans Trade with Rhodesians; Security Council Bars All Commerce and Travel," *New York Times*, May 30, 1968, <https://www.nytimes.com/1968/05/30/archives/un-bans-trade-with-rhodesians-security-council-bars-all-commerce.html>.

⁸⁰ Avery Brundage to Arden Druce, letter, September 3, 1968, box 196, folder 5, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

⁸¹ Brundage to Druce, letter, September 3, 1968, University of Illinois Archives.

Rhodesia.⁸² This may have frustrated Brundage, but it saved him from another controversy, and likely more threats of an Olympic boycott.

After the IOC reversed course on South Africa, OPHR ran out of steam. Even its most supportive athletes intended to go to Mexico City, and despite the best efforts of Brundage, there had been no new controversies to give OPHR another jolt. Though Edwards continued to insist that the boycott was “still very much alive,”⁸³ he could only keep this “charade” going for so long. At the end of August, just over a month before the Games were set to commence, he finally declared that there would be no Black American boycott of the Mexico City Olympics.⁸⁴

Just as the threat of a Black American boycott faded away, a new crisis emerged for Brundage to manage. On August 20, 1968, the USSR and its close regional allies invaded Czechoslovakia. The invasion was immediately followed by calls for all the countries involved to be disinvited from Mexico City, with the Norwegian Olympic Committee swiftly introducing a formal motion to do just that. The Norwegians were not alone in their views; Brundage conceded that at least one IOC meeting, “there was a majority” of members that backed Norway’s proposal. Brundage, of course, vehemently opposed this idea. He argued that the IOC, “as an international sporting organization, should not mingle politics into sports.” Sure, the USSR and its allies had “marched, rolled, and flied into their neighbour state.” Still, such an action, though “a great pity,” did not warrant a response from the Committee.⁸⁵ After all, if international sporting events were “to be stopped every time the politicians violate the laws of humanity,” the Olympics would never occur.⁸⁶ Olympism may not have prevailed in the cases of South Africa and Rhodesia, but it did here. The athletes of the USSR and its allies would be allowed to participate in the 1968 Summer Olympics, just as Brundage had hoped.

⁸² Avery Brundage to Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, letter, August 27, 1968, box 196, folder 5, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

⁸³ “‘Olympic Boycott Still Alive,’ Edwards Says,” *Afro-American (1893-)*, August 10, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/olympic-boycott-still-alive-edwards-says/docview/532392304/se-2>.

⁸⁴ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 147.

⁸⁵ Avery Brundage to International Olympic Committee, statement, 1968, box 193, folder 11, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

⁸⁶ Avery Brundage to Associated Press, statement, August 23, 1968, box 193, folder 11, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

A Massacre in Mexico City

Brundage was thrilled that Mexico would be hosting the Olympics; he believed that its status as a Spanish-speaking, politically neutral, developing country made it an appealing host nation. The Mexican government was thrilled that its capital city would be hosting the Olympics; it hoped to demonstrate to the world how much economic and infrastructural progress Mexico had made in recent decades. The people of Mexico City, however, were not so excited about the Olympics coming to their home. Among the most frustrated people were university students. They had long been dissatisfied with their government's response—or lack thereof—to the poverty and inequality that had plagued Mexico for decades. They figured that hosting the Olympics, with the lavish spending it required, would only accentuate these problems. One student reflected that while he did not oppose “the Olympics as a sports event,” he objected to “what the Games represented economically” for Mexico. He viewed his country's investments in Olympic infrastructure as an “irreparable drain on Mexico's economic resources” that had “nothing at all to do with the country's real situation.”⁸⁷ Seeing the Olympics as a chance to get the government to consider their concerns, students from universities across Mexico came together to protest.⁸⁸

Students began to protest in July, and they continued through the first day of October. At times, there were demonstrations with as many as 500,000 people.⁸⁹ Finally, with the Olympics set to begin in less than two weeks and with athletes expected to arrive even sooner, the Mexican government decided to put a swift end to the protests. It feared that if the dissenting students managed to disrupt the Games, it would bring Mexico great shame internationally.⁹⁰

On October 2, the Mexican government finalized its plan to shut down the protests in Mexico City. During a demonstration in the Tlatelolco area, undercover military officers would

⁸⁷ Elena Poniatowska, *Massacre in Mexico*, trans. Helen R. Lane (University of Missouri Press, 1991), 310.

⁸⁸ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 67.

⁸⁹ “Mexican Students Protest for Greater Democracy, 1968,” Global Nonviolent Action Database, accessed February 27, 2026, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/mexican-students-protest-greater-democracy-1968>.

⁹⁰ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 70.

arrest the student leaders, who were speaking from the balcony of an apartment building. Meanwhile, soldiers equipped with tanks and other military vehicles would surround the adjacent plaza to intimidate the rally's attendees. Unfortunately, this plan turned violent. Due to a miscommunication, the undercover soldiers in the apartment building and the uniformed military personnel in the plaza started shooting at each other, and eventually both units fired into the crowd of demonstrators.⁹¹ American newspapers initially reported that there had been 20-40 deaths in what became known as the Tlatelolco Massacre. Some experts today estimate that the death count was as high as 400.⁹²

The next day, Brundage, already in Mexico City preparing for the opening of the Games, made a statement on Tlatelolco. He offered no sympathies to the victims, nor did he acknowledge the frustrations of the Mexican students with the Olympics. Instead, he downplayed their dissent. Brundage insisted that "the Mexican people, universally known for their sportsmanship and great hospitality, will join the participants and spectators in celebrating the games." He went on to suggest that the Olympics, as "a veritable oasis in a troubled world," represented the answer to the unrest in the host country. Finally, Brundage confirmed that despite the Mexican state assassinating dissenting citizens, the Games would go on as planned; nothing could "interfere with the peaceful entrance of the Olympic flame."⁹³ Brundage, stubbornly committed to his vision of apolitical Olympism, was determined to put on these Olympic Games as if nothing had happened.

Black Athletes Plan to Protest

Just because there was no boycott did not mean that Black American athletes would be apolitical in Mexico City. Smith and Carlos, among others, expected to make a statement of some kind about racism in the United States. Just before the American track team flew from the

⁹¹ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 70-74.

⁹² Andrea Flores, "Remembering the Tlatelolco Massacre, and the Questions That Remain," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/delos/story/2023-10-02/tlatelolco-massacre-matanza-55th-anniversary>.

⁹³ "Despite 20 to 40 Deaths: Olympics Will Go on in Mexico," *Boston Globe* (1960-), October 4, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/despite-20-40-deaths/docview/367051677/se-2>.

United States to Mexico, its Black members held a meeting where they hoped to organize a joint protest. The meeting went on for hours, with the athletes unable to unite behind any one course of action. Finally, Ralph Boston suggested that each athlete, should he choose, demonstrate individually. Most of the men in the meeting were not thrilled with this resolution, but they accepted it, as it was the only thing they could collectively agree upon.⁹⁴ As soon as the athletes arrived in Mexico City, Carlos, “acting as spokesman for the black athletes,” suggested that “[t]here are bound to be demonstrations.” Though they would not be “anything serious,” Carlos predicted that “they will be dramatic and they will go on throughout the games.”⁹⁵

The stage was now set for the Olympics to begin. Brundage had dealt with multiple international crises, a plethora of boycott threats, and a local student massacre, but he had overcome all these obstacles to make it to Mexico City. The only thing left for him to do was watch the Games unfold. Smith and Carlos, for their part, had overcome a year of heavy media scrutiny and a litany of outside pressure to make it to Mexico City. The only thing left for them to do was medal in the 200-meter race—and demonstrate after they did so.

The Moment on the Podium

Two weeks to the day after the Tlatelolco Massacre, Smith and Carlos competed in the 200-meter finals. Smith won the gold medal in world record time, Carlos won the bronze, and at the medal ceremony, they raised their gloved fists on the podium as the American national anthem played. While their gesture may have appeared planned, it was anything but that. In fact, it unfolded as it did thanks to their lack of planning. As soon as the Black track athletes agreed that it would be up to each individual to make a statement, the two sprinters both felt that they needed to do something when they medaled. But amid their final preparations for the Games, neither man ever decided exactly what he would do. The only reason that Smith and Carlos could demonstrate at all was because of the diligence of their wives. Kim Carlos and Denise Paschal

⁹⁴ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 148-149.

⁹⁵ “Black Athletes Still Threaten Demonstrations at Olympics,” *Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), October 7, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/black-athletes-still-threaten-demonstrations-at/docview/143262897/se-2>.

both supported their husbands' activism. They wanted to see them capitalize upon their moment in front of the world to make a statement about racism in the United States, and they were ready to help. As the 200-meter race approached, the wives became increasingly frustrated by their husbands' inability to provide specifics concerning how they might demonstrate. Consequently, they took it upon themselves to venture to a Mexico City department store and buy objects for their husbands to use: black socks, black scarves, black berets, and one single pair of black, leather gloves.⁹⁶

The articles that Paschal and Kim Carlos purchased informed what Smith and John Carlos did on the podium. As they sat in the athletes' lounge between the race and the medal ceremony, Smith and Carlos used what their wives had given them to quickly determine how they would demonstrate on the podium. Smith pulled out his pair of black gloves and suggested to Carlos that they perform a gloved salute together. There was only one problem: Carlos did not have his own pair of gloves. With no time to find another pair, Smith gave Carlos his left glove, and they agreed upon a raised-fist gesture.⁹⁷ This is why Smith raised his right hand and Carlos raised his left hand. Their now-iconic moment at the Estadio Olímpico Universitario was entirely spontaneous. Indeed, its form reflected the preparation of their wives more than their own political beliefs or activism.

Smith and Carlos's Post-Race Comments

Shortly after the medal ceremony concluded, Smith and Carlos each had the opportunity to make a statement at the post-race press conference, which was attended by over 50 curious journalists.⁹⁸ Smith spoke first. He was diplomatic, but firm in his beliefs. He stated that "we are black and we are proud of it. White America will only recognize Olympic champions, black America will understand this. We are proud we did it." Carlos took a more confrontational approach. He said that when he raised his fist, he wanted to remind white Americans that "we are

⁹⁶ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 105.

⁹⁷ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 106-107.

⁹⁸ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 111.

not animals, not lower animals, not rats and roaches.”⁹⁹ The next day, Smith was interviewed about the gesture by ABC’s Howard Cosell. In the interview, Smith explained what he and Carlos did on the podium as follows:

My raised right hand stood for the power in black America. Carlos’s left hand stood for the unity of black America. Together, they formed an arch of unity and power. The black scarf around my neck stood for black pride. The black socks with no shoes stood for black poverty in racist America. The totality of our effort was the regaining of black dignity.¹⁰⁰

Here, Smith tells a story that is compelling, but untrue. Smith’s statement to Cosell presents the raised-fist gesture as well thought out and planned far in advance. In reality, the gesture was neither. He and Carlos certainly did not connect the individual components of their demonstration to specific components of the Black fight for dignity in the United States ahead of time. They just took the articles their wives had given them and came up with a practical gesture at the last possible moment. Critically, in explaining what he and Carlos did, Smith did not mention Paschal or Kim Carlos. In his first telling of what the gesture meant and how it came to be, Smith cut the wives out of his narrative.

The Calm Initial Reaction in the United States

While people on site in Mexico City took momentary interest in Smith and Carlos’s gesture, back in the United States, few seemed to care. Smith’s interview with Cosell hardly circulated stateside,¹⁰¹ and American newspaper coverage was initially indifferent toward the two runners’ display on the podium. Indeed, the articles published about Smith and Carlos the morning after they raised their fists were mostly neutral, focusing upon their athletic feats, not their post-race politics. The *New York Times* celebrated the “long-striding” Smith winning the

⁹⁹ “U.S. Wins 2 Gold Medals; Fifth, Sixth in Olympics (Page 57 of 72),” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1923-), October 17, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/october-17-1968-page-57-72/docview/1888341325/se-2>.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 173.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 173.

race and bringing another gold medal back to the United States.¹⁰² While it did note that Smith and Carlos accepted their medals “[w]earing [b]lack [g]loves,” the *Times* did not condemn the gesture. Rather, it presented it as “a token gesture...to protest racial discrimination in the United States.”¹⁰³ The *Washington Post* did not even mention the medal ceremony. It too celebrated Smith for “shrug[ing] off an agonizing muscle pull” to achieve a “world record-shattering triumph.” The only note it made related to their protest was that Smith and Carlos wore black socks during the race, which the *Post* described as “a form of Negro protest.”¹⁰⁴ The day after they raised their fists, Smith and Carlos faced little controversy in the United States; their demonstration was hardly even a part of the national coverage of the Olympics.

This is not to say that there weren’t American journalists—Black and white—who immediately disapproved of what Smith and Carlos did. Brent Musburger, a young journalist writing for *Chicago’s American*, lambasted Smith and Carlos in an opinion article published the morning after their race. He described the two men as “a couple of black-skinned storm troopers” and chastised them for “insuring maximum embarrassment for the country that is picking up the tab for their room and board here in Mexico City.” Smith and Carlos’s “ignoble performance” at the medal ceremony “completely overshadowed” what they achieved on the track, Musburger wrote.¹⁰⁵

Sam Lacy of Baltimore’s *Afro-American* was nothing like Musburger. For one, he was Black; he had actually experienced racism in the United States. More importantly, he was a long-time advocate of Black athletes and Black athlete activism. Two decades earlier, he had used his platform to aggressively campaign for the integration of Major League Baseball (MLB), and he

¹⁰² Joseph M. Sheehan, “Smith Takes Olympic 200 Meters and Seagren Captures Pole Vault for U. S.: Sprinter Timed in 19.8 Seconds,” *New York Times* (1923-), October 17, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/smith-takes-olympic-200-meters-seagren-captures/docview/118266228/se-2>.

¹⁰³ “2 Accept Medals Wearing Black Gloves,” *New York Times* (1923-), October 17, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/2-accept-medals-wearing-black-gloves/docview/118284882/se-2>.

¹⁰⁴ “Injured Smith Sets Record in 200: Kenyans Run 1-2 in Steeplechase,” *Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), October 17, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/injured-smith-sets-record-200/docview/143233983/se-2>.

¹⁰⁵ Brent Musburger, “Bizarre Protest by Smith, Carlos Tarnishes Medals,” *Chicago’s American*, October 17, 1968, found in box 194, folder 13, Avery Brundage Collection, 1908-82, University of Illinois Archives, University Library, Urbana, IL.

had even traveled with Jackie Robinson when the latter broke MLB's color barrier.¹⁰⁶ During the boycott saga that took up most of 1968, Lacy "openly supported" Smith, Carlos, and others who had expressed interest in skipping the Olympics altogether. When writing about the gesture, however, Lacy echoed Musburger. He portrayed the raised fists of Smith and Carlos as "a stiff-arm gesture reminiscent of the 'heil' salute of the Nazis," arguing that it would have been wiser for them to "leave the recriminations within the borders of the U.S."¹⁰⁷ Fortunately for the two runners, Lacy and Musburger both wrote for small, regional newspapers. Even with their criticisms, it did not appear that Smith and Carlos would have an extended stay in the American news cycle. They had both run a great race, and they followed it up with a controversial, but ultimately harmless, protest. What more needed to be said about them?

A Furious Brundage Forces Smith and Carlos's Ejection

Brundage knew ahead of time that Smith and Carlos planned to make a statement when they received their medals, and he wanted no part of it. On the day of their race, he opted to leave Mexico City and travel over 200 miles to the coastal city of Acapulco, the venue of the Olympic sailing competition. It was in Acapulco, on television, that the IOC president learned of what Smith and Carlos had done. Brundage immediately became incensed. Smith and Carlos had used the Olympic podium to defy his philosophy. They had brought politics into the Olympics, and they had tarnished Olympism in doing so. Brundage had overcome numerous geopolitical controversies and a massacre on site just two weeks before the Games to still put on a world-unifying display of sport. With one fell swoop, Smith and Carlos had ruined that. Brundage, seeing himself as the protector of Olympism, would make sure that their act of defiance would not go unpunished.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Joe Morgan, "Lacy Made Sports, Society Immensely Better," *ESPN*, May 14, 2003, https://www.espn.com/mlb/columns/morgan_joe/1553679.html.

¹⁰⁷ Sam Lacy, "Lacy Hits 'Protest' at Olympics," *Afro-American (1893-)*, October 19, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lacy-hitsprotest-at-olympics/docview/532363044/se-2>.

¹⁰⁸ Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 113.

Brundage was, as a matter of fact, all-powerful in his capacity as IOC president. Nonetheless, as a matter of formal procedure, the USOC was responsible for punishing Smith and Carlos. Following a five-hour emergency meeting,¹⁰⁹ the USOC released an apology to both the IOC and Mexico's Olympic organizing committee for "the discourtesy displayed by two men who departed from tradition during a victory ceremony."¹¹⁰ The USOC also made clear that it would severely punish any other American athletes who made political statements during the rest of the Games.¹¹¹ Smith and Carlos, however, were off the hook. They had been reprimanded, but not tangibly punished.

This was nowhere near enough for Brundage. The next morning, he called Douglas Roby, the president of the USOC, to meet with the IOC's executive board. In this meeting, Brundage laid out his terms: either the USOC would kick Smith and Carlos off the American team, or the IOC would not allow any American track athletes to participate in the rest of the Olympic Games.¹¹² Did Brundage really have the power to do such a thing? He most likely did not. But Roby was not going to disobey him and find out. That evening, Roby led another USOC meeting, and the American committee chose this time to dismiss Smith and Carlos from the team; the two runners were to leave the Olympic Village immediately.¹¹³

The Racially Divided Reactions of the American Press

The USOC announced that it had removed Smith and Carlos from the American Olympic team on October 18. Suddenly, what had previously been "an interesting sideshow" became "the main event."¹¹⁴ Indeed, from October 19 onward, the numerous world records and extraordinary athletic achievements that took place in Mexico City became subordinate to commenting upon

¹⁰⁹ Joe Falls, "There's Gold in Swim Team (Page 37 of 48)," *Detroit Free Press* (1923-), October 18, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/october-18-1968-page-37-48/docview/1819547099/se-2>.

¹¹⁰ "U. S. Apologizes for Protest by Blacks," *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), October 18, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/u-s-apologizes-protest-blacks/docview/168816811/se-2>.

¹¹¹ Bass, *Not the Triumph*, 247.

¹¹² Blutstein, *Games of Discontent*, 114.

¹¹³ Hoffer, *Something in the Air*, 178.

¹¹⁴ Hoffer, *Something in the Air*, 178.

the gesture in the American media's coverage of the Games.¹¹⁵ From the outset, two competing narratives emerged, split largely along racial lines.

The white press condemned Smith and Carlos, often suggesting that they were un-American, and even traitorous. On October 19, the *Chicago Tribune* published an opinion piece titled "The Natural Right of Being a Slob." This article referred to the two runners as "black militants" and "renegades," and lamented that upon their return to the United States, they "will probably be greeted as heroes by fellow extremists."¹¹⁶ On October 20, Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times*—who had previously insulted Smith while criticizing his comments about the Olympic boycott movement—celebrated Smith and Carlos's ejection from Mexico City. Murray reminded his readers that "[t]he American people ponied up over three-quarters of a million dollars to send these youngsters" to the Olympics. In reference to Smith and Carlos having to leave Mexico City, Murray opined that "[a]ny direction will do."¹¹⁷ On October 25, *Chicago Tribune* contributor William E. Carsley expressed a view similar to the one presented in "The Natural Right of Being a Slob." Watching Smith and Carlos raise their fists on the podium, Carsley commented, was like seeing "a pair of boorish refugees from a motorcycle gang." He regretted that Smith, Carlos, and others "who obviously achieved no satisfaction from competing for their country" were able to participate in the Olympics at all. In fact, Carsley would have preferred that the United States "[win] fewer medals" with worse, but appropriately "patriotic," athletes.¹¹⁸ It no longer mattered to the white press that Smith and Carlos had each contributed to the American medal tally. In its judgement, they had disgraced the country when they raised their fists, and that made them unworthy representatives of the United States.

While the white press was quick to criticize Smith and Carlos, much of the Black press—though not Sam Lacy—was just as quick to defend them. On October 26, Ric Roberts of the *New*

¹¹⁵ Bass, *Not the Triumph*, 263.

¹¹⁶ "The Natural Right of Being a Slob," *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), October 19, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/natural-right-being-slob/docview/168856331/se-2>.

¹¹⁷ Jim Murray, "The Olympic Games---No Place for a Sportswriter," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), October 20, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/olympic-games-no-place-sportswriter/docview/155952556/se-2>.

¹¹⁸ William E. Carsley, "Athletes Who Care and Those Who Don't," *Chicago Tribune* (1963-1996), October 25, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/athletes-who-care-those-dont/docview/168799598/se-2>.

Pittsburgh Courier harshly criticized Olympic officials, characterizing them as “touchy” and lacking the “Solon-like qualities” that “would be expected” of the men in charge of a global sporting event. Roberts also reminded his readers that many of the top officials in Mexico City—including Brundage, though Roberts did not mention him by name—were involved in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where they stood indifferently as German athletes “accepted laurel wreaths” on the podium “with outstretched right arms.” While German athletes had been permitted to propagate the ideals of Hitler, Smith and Carlos were “condemned as global trouble makers” for “merely dramatiz[ing] determination to overcome U.S. racism.”¹¹⁹ In the eyes of Roberts, the only bad actors at the Mexico City Games were Brundage and other Olympic officials, who exposed themselves as blatantly racist in their unfair treatment of Smith and Carlos.

Though not all Black newspapers supported Smith and Carlos’s gesture this fervently, they tended to agree that the runners’ punishment was excessive. The *Louisville Defender* thought that Smith and Carlos’s “exhibitionism was in poor taste.” Yet it also believed that the IOC, functioning as “both the judge and the jury in this instance,” gave out “a severe penalty” that did nothing but “[throw] more fat on the fire.” The *Louisville Defender* fundamentally agreed with the central point that Smith and Carlos were making, noting that “Negro athletes may just be plain tired of contributing to the success of nationalist victories while receiving all too little...recognition.”¹²⁰ Even if their gesture was a poorly-conceived form of protest, Smith and Carlos still had valid reasons for demonstrating.

Smith and Carlos’s most sustained defense appeared in the pages of the *Chicago Defender*. Most Black newspapers published an article or two about the runners before moving on. The *Chicago Defender* ran a series of articles that defended Smith and Carlos from all angles. On October 23, it published an article titled “Jackie Praises Olympic Stars.” This story included quotes from Jackie Robinson supporting the two men. Robinson said that he “admired the pride

¹¹⁹ Ric Roberts, “Expulsions Prove It: U.S. Olympic Brass Lapses into Racism,” *New Pittsburgh Courier* (1966-1981), October 26, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/expulsions-prove/docview/202531275/se-2>.

¹²⁰ “Most Severe Punishment,” *Louisville Defender* (1933-), October 24, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/most-severe-punishment/docview/2745566191/se-2>.

in their blackness” and argued that what Smith and Carlos did “had nothing to do with shaming this country.” He thought the IOC and USOC had “made a grave mistake in suspending them.”¹²¹ The *Defender*’s decision to highlight Robinson’s support of Smith and Carlos was almost certainly strategic, as Robinson held a unique place among Black civil rights activists. He was revered by most for desegregating MLB in 1947. He was also staunchly conservative, both socially and politically; he did not drink or use drugs, he was deeply religious, and he supported the Republican Party for much of his life. It was thus somewhat surprising that Robinson publicly vouched for Smith and Carlos, and the *Defender* wanted to capitalize upon that. Robinson’s word carried a lot of weight, especially among socially conservative Black Americans. If someone like Robinson approved of what Smith and Carlos did, there was no reason that any Black American should disapprove.

The next day, the *Chicago Defender* published another article that defended Smith and Carlos through a new lens. This piece focused on the support the runners had from an unexpected international ally: Soviet poet and activist Yevgeny Yevtushenko. In 1968, Yevtushenko was controversial in the USSR; earlier in the year, he had sent a telegram directly to Premier Alexei Kosygin protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. After Smith and Carlos protested on the Olympic podium, Yevtushenko offered a subtle showing of solidarity from the other side of the world. The *Defender* reported that he published a poem in a Soviet magazine titled “The Ballad of Raised Fists.” This “brief verse” was “a complete identification of the poet with the Negroes and their defiant gesture at the games.” The *Defender*’s point was clear: everyone, from Robinson, a conservative, American civil rights activist, to Yevtushenko, an audacious, international human rights activist, approved of the gesture. Only “[t]he Olympic fathers” took offense.¹²²

¹²¹ “Jackie Praises Olympic Stars,” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1960-1973), October 23, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/jackie-praises-olympic-stars/docview/494419386/se-2>.

¹²² “Russian Poet Praises Black Olympians’ Action,” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition)* (1960-1973), October 24, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/russian-poet-praises-black-olympians-action/docview/494381237/se-2>.

On Saturday, October 26, the *Chicago Defender's* "Big Weekend Edition" focused on Smith and Carlos's dismissal from the Olympic team and the subsequent reaction of the Black American public. Sportswriter John A. Helem took the opportunity to shame Black Americans who shared the views of Sam Lacy. In his column, Helem condemned the "Negro who is consistently striving to say what he thinks the 'great white leaders' will have him say" and lamented that "[t]he cries of these Negroes have rung out loud and long, this past week." Helem went on to contend that Smith and Carlos's actions "took more courage than all the do-nothing critical Negroes will do toward the salvation of the black man the rest of their lives." He concluded with a prayer: "May God give us more Tommie Smiths and John Carloses."¹²³ In just one week, the *Chicago Defender* managed to put together a complete defense of Smith and Carlos. It showed that they had support from activists with diverse backgrounds, and it criticized the two runners' Black critics by associating their views with those of the racist white press.

Smith and Carlos's Relative Silence and the Emergence of Black Power Characterizations

As different parts of the American media condemned or defended their gesture, Smith and Carlos largely remained silent. Other than their statements at the post-race press conference and Smith's interview with Cosell, neither man said much about the gesture publicly—though Carlos could not help but start a few arguments with journalists over it before departing Mexico City.¹²⁴ This relative silence came at a cost. The gesture was, undoubtedly, both defiant of Olympic norms and overtly political. It was also ambiguous: the exact point Smith and Carlos were trying to make was far from clear, even if Smith said otherwise. This ambiguity, paired with their silence, allowed the press to interpret the gesture however it wanted. This led to a litany of long-lasting, inaccurate interpretations of what Smith and Carlos did on the podium.

Nearly every newspaper in the country—including Black newspapers that supported Smith and Carlos—characterized the gesture as a radical "Black power" symbol. Was that a fair

¹²³ John A. Helem, "Take Ten," *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1966-1973), October 26, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/take-ten/docview/493514732/se-2>.

¹²⁴ Murray, "No Place for a Sportswriter," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/olympic-games-no-place-sportswriter/docview/155952556/se-2>.

description? Not according to Smith. In his autobiography, Smith described himself as interested in activism “from the aspect of human rights, rather than...black power.”¹²⁵ More than anything else, he wanted to present the world with “something to think about”¹²⁶ when he raised his fist on the Olympic podium. This did not matter to the press. Framing the gesture as radical helped journalists build stronger narratives—from both sides—around it.

The antics of Carlos shortly after Mexico City helped legitimize this characterization. In one of his first public appearances since his ejection from the Olympic Village, Carlos appeared on stage at an event at Howard University in Washington, D.C. with H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, both of whom were involved with the Black Panther Party and the Black power movement. Speaking to an audience of hundreds of students, Carlos harshly criticized the IOC and USOC. He declared that “since they disowned Tommie Smith and me, let them disown our medals, too.”¹²⁷

Was Carlos truly aligned with the Black power politics of Carmichael and Brown? It is hard to tell. Carlos grew up in Harlem when it was the center of Black American culture, and during his childhood, he and his friends often busked—using ice cream buckets as drums—for tips outside the famous Savoy Ballroom. Fred Astaire, the renowned actor and dancer, frequently watched Carlos’s performances. Astaire would always “flip” Carlos and his friends “a silver dollar” and complement them for the entertainment they provided. Carlos later claimed that from his interactions with Astaire, he learned the importance of flair: he knew that he could always attract attention if he put on a good enough show.¹²⁸

The lessons of Astaire stayed with Carlos throughout his athletic career: he was a cocky, unpredictable runner, and knew how to put on a show. He sometimes raced under the influence of alcohol or marijuana, and at track meets, he was known to enjoy concession-stand hot dogs

¹²⁵ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 99.

¹²⁶ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 170.

¹²⁷ Robert Maynard, “Ousted Olympian Hailed at Howard,” *Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), October 25, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/ousted-olympian-hailed-at-howard/docview/143395776/se-2>.

¹²⁸ John Carlos, *The John Carlos Story: The Sports Moment That Changed the World*, with Dave Zirin (Haymarket Books, 2011), 9-10.

between his races. He could also be confrontational¹²⁹—as many journalists learned in Mexico City. He also loved the spotlight, leading some to suspect that his activism was motivated by a desire for attention more than genuine conviction. Smith was much more involved with OPHR and the events that preceded Mexico City. On the podium, Smith raised his fist more decisively than Carlos; to some, it looked as if Carlos was not entirely “certain of his cause.”¹³⁰ Yet after the two began to receive notoriety, Carlos became their de facto spokesperson, as shown by his presence and behavior at the Howard event. Thus, it is fair to wonder if Carlos attended this event because he liked the message of Carmichael and Brown, or because he wanted the attention of a large audience. Regardless of his intentions, Carlos’s appearance at this event clinched his and Smith’s place as symbols of Black power.¹³¹ From that point forward, the two runners had little ground for objecting to the American press’s ongoing characterization of them as radicals and of their gesture as a Black power salute.

Harry Edwards Creates His Own Narrative

After the Olympic boycott movement “exploded on the launching pad,”¹³² Harry Edwards received minimal media attention. When Smith and Carlos raised their fists, the press placed its focus firmly upon them; it seldom mentioned Edwards. This was understandable. Edwards did not attend the Olympics,¹³³ and he was not involved in planning Smith and Carlos’s demonstration. However, as soon as the two runners began to receive extensive media attention, Edwards sought to take advantage of his affiliation with them to take undue credit for their gesture. He appeared on stage at Howard alongside Carlos, Carmichael, and Brown, where he condemned the USOC even more harshly than Carlos.¹³⁴ More importantly, Edwards developed a long-term strategy for inserting himself into Smith and Carlos’s moment. In 1969, he published

¹²⁹ Hoffer, *Something in the Air*, 48.

¹³⁰ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 23.

¹³¹ Bass, *Not the Triumph*, 279.

¹³² Charles Maher, “Blacks Balk at Getting Medals from Brundage,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), October 16, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/blacks-balk-at-getting-medals-brundage/docview/156071102/se-2>.

¹³³ Scott Ostler, “Edwards Still Home -- Legacy Goes On,” *SF Gate*, September 29, 2005, <https://www.sfgate.com/sports/ostler/article/Edwards-still-home-legacy-goes-on-2605765.php>.

¹³⁴ “Controversy Still Plagues Olympics (Page 34 of 54),” *Minneapolis Star* (1947-1982), October 25, 1968, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/october-25-1968-page-34-54/docview/1876835471/se-2>.

Revolt of the Black Athlete, a book that discussed the events of Mexico City and tied them to the growing frustrations among Black American athletes with the abuse and inequality that they endured. In this book, Edwards built a new narrative around OPHR and Smith and Carlos's gesture, one in which Edwards himself played a central role in their activism.

Edwards exaggerated, and at times distorted, the truth in *Revolt of the Black Athlete* to make himself look like a more successful organizer than he really was. For example, he claimed that South Africa's banishment from Mexico City came "as a result" of a press release of his,¹³⁵ rather than from the many countries that threatened to boycott the Games in protest. While recent scholarship suggests that most Black athletes were not on board with his proposal to boycott the Olympics,¹³⁶ Edwards said otherwise. He claimed that of the more than 200 attendees at the original Olympic boycott workshop at the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference, only three had opposed the idea.¹³⁷ This example is not to say that Edwards definitively lied in his telling of events—Edwards himself is the only person to have published a full, firsthand account of what happened at the workshop. It is fair, however, to interpret the narrative that Edwards propagates as unreliable. It is apparent that his primary goal in writing this book was to make himself look good.

It is especially important to consider Edwards's motives when analyzing the way that he wrote about Smith and Carlos. Edwards presented himself as a mentor and adviser to Smith. When Smith was "[d]ismayed by the personal attacks" he had received because of the initial comments he made about a potential boycott in Tokyo, he went to "discuss the whole matter" with Edwards.¹³⁸ This much is undisputed. But Edwards also claimed that both Smith and Carlos were so enamored with the idea of a boycott that they had to "be convinced to compete" in the American Olympic trials.¹³⁹ With this claim, Edwards suggested that he drove the decision

¹³⁵ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 77-78.

¹³⁶ Hartmann, *Race, Culture, and Revolt*, 57, 59.

¹³⁷ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 49.

¹³⁸ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 46.

¹³⁹ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 83.

making, and in turn the activism, of Smith and Carlos. This was simply not the case. In his autobiography, Smith acknowledged that Edwards played a role in his development as an activist; he “learned a lot” from Edwards during their time together at SJSU.¹⁴⁰ He also believed that Edwards used him to advance his own agenda. Smith recalled that “[w]hat Harry Edwards was talking about wasn’t always exactly what Tommie Smith was thinking.”¹⁴¹ Furthermore, Smith accused Edwards of trying to coopt the gesture, bluntly commenting that “[t]he world might believe that this was Harry Edwards’ Olympic protest, but the facts say different.”¹⁴² Edwards played no part in what Smith and Carlos did on the podium. He merely took advantage of his relationship with the two to try to take credit for it after the fact.

Since Edwards was attempting to sell the notion that he was responsible for Smith and Carlos’s gesture, he had a vested interest in making the two runners look as good as possible. He described their demonstration on the podium as a “planned protest.”¹⁴³ This statement is technically true, but it requires nuance that Edwards never spells out. Smith and Carlos had long intended to make some kind of statement when they won their medals; in that sense, one could say their gesture was planned. However, they did not arrange the specifics of their protest until just before the medal ceremony. Edwards’s vague language has two effects. First, it suggests—falsely—that Edwards planned the gesture with Smith and Carlos long before they went to Mexico City. Second, and more importantly for his narrative concerning Smith and Carlos, it implies that the two runners put much thought into planning a pointed gesture that brought light to the plight of Black Americans. Edwards then extended this narrative by rehashing what Smith said about the gesture in his interview with Cosell and adding one detail: Edwards claimed that Smith told him that his bowed head was meant to pay homage to the leaders who had fallen “in the black liberation struggle.”¹⁴⁴ In short, Edwards took what Smith had already said about the

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 117.

¹⁴¹ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 121.

¹⁴² Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 123.

¹⁴³ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 85.

¹⁴⁴ Edwards, *Revolt of the Black Athlete*, 86.

gesture and used it to craft a complete, coherent narrative for self-serving reasons. Though this narrative was primarily intended to make Edwards look good, it both portrayed Smith and Carlos in an overwhelmingly positive light and stripped their demonstration of its original spontaneity and ambiguity.

The Short-Term Consequences: Instability, Suffering, and Loss

In the days, weeks, and months that followed the Mexico City Olympics, the harsh narrative created by the white press was the one that won out in the United States. Public opinion was, in the words of Carlos, “dramatically against us.”¹⁴⁵ Back at SJSU, Smith and Carlos found themselves isolated. Smith only took classes at night because he feared that people who opposed him “had too much of a chance to get [him]” in the daylight. He was also forced to leave the ROTC program.¹⁴⁶ The one thing that worked out in Smith’s favor was that he had already exhausted his amateur athletic eligibility; since he no longer competed for SJSU, he managed to maintain some anonymity.

Carlos, in contrast, had one year of eligibility left, and he was SJSU’s top runner heading into the 1969 track season. With the public eye still firmly upon him and feeling “tired of the hate letters”¹⁴⁷ he had continuously received since Mexico City, Carlos decided to change his image. He remained a confident, if not downright cocky, runner. But he was no longer “a militant.” He “transformed himself into a complete team man.”¹⁴⁸ Carlos abandoned the mustache and goatee that he had worn to the Olympics; he was now clean-shaven.¹⁴⁹ After crossing the finish line first during the 200-meter race at an international amateur event in July, he turned around to check if another American had finished behind him; he “wanted to make sure it was a sweep for the United States.” When it came to talking about race and racism, Carlos

¹⁴⁵ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 132.

¹⁴⁶ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 178.

¹⁴⁷ “Carlos Changed; Says He’s Tired of ‘Hate Letters,’” *New York Times* (1923-), May 19, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/carlos-changed-says-hes-tired-hate-letters/docview/118671754/se-2>.

¹⁴⁸ “Sprinters’ Change Complete: Carlos Has New Image: Militant to Team Man,” *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), August 2, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/sprinters-change-complete/docview/569031705/se-2>.

¹⁴⁹ “Carlos Changed,” *New York Times* (1923-), <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/carlos-changed-says-hes-tired-hate-letters/docview/118671754/se-2>.

offered toned-down commentary. He no longer “thought all whites were bad,” and he believed that “a lot can be accomplished by both blacks and whites” if “everybody just comes down to earth.”¹⁵⁰ Carlos’s change in attitude came purely out of necessity. The hatred that he had received—driven by the narratives created by the white press—over the months that followed the Olympics forced him to “be more discreet” politically.¹⁵¹

In practical terms, the biggest challenge for Smith and Carlos after Mexico City was supporting themselves financially. They first tried to earn money at speaking events in front of supportive audiences. They traveled, mostly to historically Black colleges, to events organized by fraternities and sororities. These engagements were not financially rewarding. Smith and Carlos received no honoraria for their time; all that they took home was the money that attendees put into a hat that was passed around. These small events ended up being especially destructive to Carlos. The FBI, now keeping tabs on both men, would send photos of Carlos with female event attendees to his wife to suggest that he had mistresses. Carlos maintains that the FBI’s unethical—and likely illegal—conduct triggered the “unraveling of my family.”¹⁵²

Professional track was far from lucrative in the 1960s, but it represented a way for top runners to make some money. Unfortunately, neither Smith nor Carlos ever had the opportunity to earn from their track talents, as they were both effectively barred from turning professional. The USOC forbade Smith and Carlos from competing in national professional events; the big meets in which they might have been able to win decent money were off limits.¹⁵³ Because of this, the Mexico City Olympics marked the end of Smith’s track career; he ran in no major events afterward. Carlos too concluded his time as a runner after his 1969 season at SJSU.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ “John Carlos Wears a Brand New Image,” *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition)* (1966-1973), July 26, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/john-carlos-wears-brand-new-image/docview/493381880/se-2>.

¹⁵¹ “Carlos Changed,” *New York Times* (1923-), <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/carlos-changed-says-hes-tired-hate-letters/docview/118671754/se-2>.

¹⁵² Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 133-134.

¹⁵³ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 179.

¹⁵⁴ J.D. Bethea, “John Carlos Has Never Stopped His Running: Olympic Sprinter Sees End to Track Career,” *Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), August 26, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/john-carlos-has-never-stopped-his-running/docview/147623476/se-2>.

During their time of need, Smith and Carlos were also let down by their supporters, especially Harry Edwards. Smith alleged that Edwards promised to “set up my son and John’s daughter for the sacrifices we made.” That promise never materialized,¹⁵⁵ even as Edwards landed a well-paid job as a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, partially because of what Smith and Carlos had done.¹⁵⁶ While Edwards reaped the rewards of their activism, the two men who had actually raised their fists were left to struggle to support themselves, their wives, and their children.

Now out of college, desperately in need of money to take care of their families, and unable to run professionally, both men turned to a new sport that they hoped would bring them financial stability: football. Carlos signed to play wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles in 1970. In the locker room, he found that he fit in surprisingly well; Carlos described himself as having “a core of political support on the team.”¹⁵⁷ His only problem was that his talent on the track did not translate to the gridiron. Carlos had never played football before, and it showed every time he took the field. He lasted a year-and-a-half on the practice squad of the Eagles, never playing in a competitive game. After a brief stint with the Canadian Football League’s (CFL) Montreal Alouettes, his football career, and his time as an athlete, came to an end.

Smith had been a star football player in high school, and he was even drafted by the Los Angeles Rams in 1967 while still running track at SJSU. Despite not having played football in years, Smith was invited to join the practice squad of the Cincinnati Bengals in 1969 after a successful tryout. While Smith, like Carlos, meshed well with his teammates,¹⁵⁸ Bengals fans did not take so kindly to him joining the team. After he signed his first contract, a Cincinnati veterans’ group, still unhappy about what he had done on the Olympic podium, published a letter

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 186.

¹⁵⁶ Wallace Turner, “Berkeley Names a Negro Militant: Olympics Boycott Advocate Gets Sociology Position,” *New York Times* (1923-), January 31, 1970, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/berkeley-names-negro-militant/docview/118811177/se-2>.

¹⁵⁷ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 137.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 188-189.

asking Bengals fans “not to ‘cheer for Smith.’”¹⁵⁹ Worse, racist hate mail and letters “threatening him with death”¹⁶⁰ became a common occurrence during his tenure in Cincinnati. Smith endured the racism and the threats of violence for three years, before the Bengals cut him from the team in 1971. After a few months with the Hamilton Tiger-Cats of the CFL, Smith’s athletic career too came to a halt.

As much as Smith and Carlos struggled in the years that followed the Olympics, the people who suffered the most from what they did were the women in their lives. In 1970, when Smith was a member of the Bengals, his mother, Dora Smith, died suddenly at just 57 years old after slumping over while singing at church. Smith “will attest...to the day I die” that “the way she and the rest of my family...were treated after Mexico City contributed to my mother’s death.” Residents of Smith’s hometown did not respond well to his raised fist, and with Smith no longer around, people took out their anger on his family. Smith recalls his relatives receiving “cow manure, dead bugs, nasty notes...in their mailboxes.” While there is no way to know definitively, it is hard to imagine that the undue “worry, and stress” placed upon Dora Smith from the hatred that she endured did not play a role in her premature death.¹⁶¹

Three years after losing his mother, Smith and his wife, Denise Paschal, filed for divorce, something he also attributes to the aftermath of Mexico City. Being married to Smith “brought all the pressures that [he] had to endure onto her,” and this pressure caused their relationship to quickly fracture. It “hurt” Smith to have to split with Paschal, but he recognized that it was “better for the both of us” to be apart.¹⁶²

The person who suffered the most from the public outcry after Mexico City was Kim Carlos, John’s wife. Their marriage began to fall apart almost as soon as the Olympics concluded. It started with the FBI sending her photos of Carlos with other women at the end of

¹⁵⁹ Frank Weikel, “Smith Facing a Handicap (Page 13 of 70),” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1923-), August 6, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/august-6-1969-page-13-70/docview/1888364347/se-2>.

¹⁶⁰ Dick Forbes, “Portrait of Tommie Smith (Page 28 of 238),” *Cincinnati Enquirer* (1923-), August 10, 1969, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/august-10-1969-page-28-238/docview/1888359280/se-2>.

¹⁶¹ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 190-191.

¹⁶² Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 189-190.

1968, and from there, Kim's "fragile mental condition" began to deteriorate. John could not generate enough money to support them and their two children, and being tracked by the FBI put added stress upon her. It also didn't help that John "wasn't faithful" at the time. In 1973, while John was in Montreal trying to revive his football career, Kim and their two children moved out "without telling [him]." Four years later, Kim Carlos committed suicide.¹⁶³ She never recovered from the emotional strain that she was subjected to after the Olympics. She and Paschal both played an essential role in the making of their husbands' moment. Without their decisive action in Mexico City, Smith and Carlos may have never raised their fists on the podium. Neither received the credit they deserved for the gesture, despite bearing the brunt of its burden afterward.

From Hated to Forgotten: Smith and Carlos's First Big Breaks

Smith and Carlos were still struggling at the start of 1972. Both men had washed out of professional football, both men continued to have trouble supporting their families, and both men had failing marriages. It was during this difficult moment that certain corners of American and Olympic society began to open up to them for the first time since Mexico City. In April 1972, Smith acquired something he had sought since graduating from SJSU: a stable job. Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio hired him to be an associate professor, an assistant athletic director, and its head track coach.¹⁶⁴ Smith immediately thrived in his new positions, to the point that he was promoted to Oberlin's head basketball coach later that year.¹⁶⁵ At Oberlin, Smith began to benefit from the American public's short memory. While working there, he was able to live "underground," as students and teachers on campus seldom "bothered [him] about Mexico City."¹⁶⁶ This made Oberlin a pleasant environment for Smith; he felt "safe there."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 151, 153.

¹⁶⁴ "Oberlin Hires Smith," *Chicago Daily Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1966-1973)*, April 15, 1972, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/oberlin-hires-smith/docview/493562958/se-2>.

¹⁶⁵ "Oberlin Promotes Ex-Olympic Star," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, August 19, 1972, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/oberlin-promotes-ex-olympic-star/docview/170274577/se-2>.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 201.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, *Silent Gesture*, 203.

Why did the American public seem to forget about Smith and his controversial gesture so quickly? It primarily came down to timing. The Black struggle for civil rights was a central component of American political discourse in 1968. When Smith and Carlos raised their fists in October 1968 to call attention to the lack of dignity that Black Americans were afforded in the United States, they were engaging with a political topic that was both highly relevant and, as shown by split reactions of the press, divisive. Therefore, in that moment, it is not surprising that they received much criticism, and even hatred, for their gesture.

The Mexico City Olympics took place as the civil rights movement was on its last legs. The “national civil rights coalition” that had spearheaded the enactment of the many civil rights laws of the 1960s had begun to disintegrate in the middle of the decade, and it had fallen apart by the decade’s end.¹⁶⁸ The final piece of legislation to which this coalition contributed was the Fair Housing Act, signed into law six months before Smith and Carlos raised their fists. By 1969, the national coalition was in no position to advocate new civil rights legislation. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King Jr.’s organization, struggled to reorient itself after its leader’s assassination.¹⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, and the Congress of Racial Equality had all become disorganized¹⁷⁰ thanks to frequent changes in leadership. This made it increasingly difficult for these leading civil rights organizations to work together to form strong joint campaigns.¹⁷¹ Because of this, the civil rights movement greatly weakened during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As the civil rights movement declined, new movements emerged. 1969 to 1973 marked the “peak years of feminist activism,” highlighted by the Supreme Court ruling that a woman’s right to an abortion was constitutionally protected in 1973.¹⁷² The environmental movement also

¹⁶⁸ Mark Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Praeger, 2004), 101.

¹⁶⁹ Christopher P. Lehman, *Power, Politics, and the Decline of the Civil Rights Movement: A Fragile Coalition, 1967-1973* (Praeger, 2014), 93.

¹⁷⁰ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 689.

¹⁷¹ Lehman, *Decline of the Civil Rights Movement*, 93.

¹⁷² Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 714-715.

grew strong during the early 1970s. April 22, 1970 marked the first Earth Day in the United States, and a few months later, thanks to popular pressure, the Environmental Protection Agency was created.¹⁷³ The anti-Vietnam War movement expanded during this same time, especially after the United States invaded Cambodia in April 1970. Nationwide protests ensued and at times turned violent; notably, the National Guard killed four protesting students at Kent State University in Ohio, and local police killed two protesting students at Jackson State College in Mississippi. The anti-war sentiment further grew in 1971, when the *New York Times* released the Pentagon Papers, classified documents that revealed that the American government had lied to the public about the Vietnam War for years.¹⁷⁴ In 1968, the civil rights movement was the social and political movement that dominated the public eye. In a few short years, it had been supplanted by the feminist movement, the environmentalist movement, and the anti-war movement.

When Oberlin hired Smith, his gesture was no longer as off-putting to the white public as it had once been; the civil rights and Black power movements with which the gesture was associated no longer carried the weight or courted the controversy that they had a few years earlier. The public had shifted its focus to the new movements that had risen since 1968. Had Oberlin—or any employer—tried to hire Smith right after the Olympics, the members of the white press that were smearing him would have certainly written articles condemning the college for hiring a “Black militant.” Less than four years later, the press hardly cared. A ProQuest Historical Newspapers database search indicates that only five major newspapers—the *Los Angeles Times*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, and Louisville’s *Courier-Journal*—even reported Smith’s hiring; the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and other leading national publications did not consider his hiring newsworthy. The narrative around Smith had shifted. He was no longer villainized. Instead, he had been forgotten.

¹⁷³ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 726-727.

¹⁷⁴ Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 754-756.

The American public may have been quick to forget what happened in Mexico City, but Olympic officials had longer memories. Carlos was reminded of this when he tried to connect with the USOC to work as a sprinting coach ahead of the 1972 Munich Olympics; his application was “not well received.” Nevertheless, he still ended up in Munich for the Games, working as an ambassador for German sportswear brand Puma. This role did not come without difficulties. Avery Brundage—now 84 years old and presiding over his final Olympic Games—was not happy to see Carlos. He alleged that Carlos had been sent to “ruin another Olympics.”¹⁷⁵ Carlos’s actions from four years prior further entered the Olympic discourse when American runners Vince Matthews and Wayne Collett were banned from the Olympics for life for what Brundage described as a “disgusting display” during the medal ceremony that followed the 400-meter race. In his full statement on the action in question—which consisted of the two runners “talking informally” while the Star Spangled Banner played and Matthews “twirl[ing] his gold medal” and “strok[ing] his goatee”¹⁷⁶—Brundage made a reference to Carlos, stating that the Matthews and Collett incident marked the “second time the U.S. Olympic Committee has permitted such occurrences.”¹⁷⁷ Despite the unwanted attention and being “blamed...for the behavior” of Matthews and Collett, Carlos was happy to see Black American track athletes continue to demonstrate “pride and defiance” at the Olympics.¹⁷⁸

The Slow Road to Acceptance

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the narrative around Smith and Carlos shifted from one of forgetfulness to one of acceptance. In 1978, Smith was finally recognized for his sprinting achievements and inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame. This is not to say that all corners of the public had accepted Smith and Carlos by this point. West Virginia Secretary of State A. James Manchin, functioning as a representative of still-peeved white Americans, came

¹⁷⁵ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 142-143.

¹⁷⁶ Neil Amdur, “Matthews and Collett Banned from Olympics,” *New York Times* (1923-), September 9, 1972, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/matthews-collett-banned-olympics/docview/119417497/se-2>.

¹⁷⁷ Jesse Abramson, “Lifetime Ban Pinned on Matthews, Collett,” *Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-1973), September 9, 1972, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lifetime-ban-pinned-on-matthews-collett/docview/148187160/se-2>.

¹⁷⁸ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 148.

out in strong opposition to Smith's induction, stating that "[a]nyone who would dare throw their fist at the American flag, and show disrespect to the National Anthem just has no business being in anybody's Hall of Fame in this country."¹⁷⁹ Regardless of the opposition, Smith's induction marked an important moment for him and his image. The American track body, an entity that he had greatly upset a decade prior, had come around on him; his induction into the Hall of Fame served as "proof that the selection committee holds no grudges," said its executive director.¹⁸⁰ Members of the voting committee may not have necessarily agreed with what Smith had done, but they were ready to let it go and recognize Smith for the remarkable athlete that he was.

In December 1978, a few months after his induction into the Hall of Fame, Smith received a positive profile in the *New York Times*. The biggest newspaper in the United States, and one that had condemned Smith for his actions in Mexico City, was ready to turn the page and portray him without prejudice. In an article titled "Tommie Smith at 34: His Struggle Goes On," sportswriter Neil Amdur praised Smith for "walking as tall as the day" he raised his fist. He included a quote from a sports psychologist who described Smith, Carlos, and others who had demonstrated in Mexico City as "social pioneers in the world of sports." Perhaps most importantly, Amdur characterized Smith's gesture not as a radical or Black power symbol, but rather as a "message of social awareness." He also made note, albeit passively, of the personal struggles that Smith had endured, writing that "[s]ome good jobs were lost because of what happened in Mexico."¹⁸¹ This article was one of the first in a major national newspaper to give Smith credit for his activism and to acknowledge that he had suffered as a result of it. His image was slowly improving in the public eye.

Carlos, meanwhile, returned to the Olympic scene in the early 1980s when the Summer Olympics returned to Los Angeles—and the United States—for the first time since 1932. Carlos

¹⁷⁹ "Disturbed by Smith's Selection," *Michigan Chronicle (1939-2010)*, April 8, 1978, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/disturbed-smiths-selection/docview/2434010161/se-2>.

¹⁸⁰ "Induction of Tommie Smith Called Proof of Hall of Fame Fairness," *Afro-American (1893-)*, March 25, 1978, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/induction-tommie-smith-called-proof-hall-fame/docview/532581647/se-2>.

¹⁸¹ Neil Amdur, "Tommie Smith at 34: His Struggle Goes On," *New York Times (1923-)*, December 24, 1978, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tommie-smith-at-34-his-struggle-goes-on/docview/123547287/se-2>.

had been living in Los Angeles for a few years by this point, and he had quietly started a program, the John Carlos Youth Development League, that mentored children in the inner city.¹⁸² He reemerged in the public eye when the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) hired him to work as a “community relations liaison officer” ahead of the 1984 Games.¹⁸³

In February 1984, the *Los Angeles Times* profiled Carlos and discussed his role with the LAOOC in an article titled “Guess Who’s Coming to the L.A. Olympics.” Carlos took the opportunity to reiterate the “clean” image of himself that he had first presented in 1969, framing himself as older, wiser, and anything but radical politically. He made clear that he was never a militant or “a Black Panther.” Back in Mexico City, he was merely a “young American” who had demonstrated on the podium because he “believ[ed] in the ideals of America.” When asked if he would do the same thing again, Carlos conceded that while he would “still do something today,” he “wouldn’t do what [he] did in ’68.” He would have opted to protest “behind a closed door.”¹⁸⁴ Continuing to present himself in this way helped Carlos appear more palatable to the white American public. This was especially important because the LAOOC selected him to be one of the bearers of the Olympic torch ahead of the opening ceremony of the Games. Carlos would carry the torch for a mile through Los Angeles’s Baldwin Hills before passing it on.¹⁸⁵ His work with the LAOOC ahead of the 1984 Olympics was especially significant for Carlos because it marked the first time since Mexico City that “anyone in the Olympic world” had given him “a degree of respect.”¹⁸⁶ This newfound respect, however, appeared to be predicated upon his continuing to distance himself from what he had done in Mexico City sixteen years earlier.

¹⁸² Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 157.

¹⁸³ “John Carlos Hired by LAOOC as Community Relations Officer,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), January 21, 1982, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/newswire/docview/152990274/se-2>.

¹⁸⁴ Mike Littwin, “Guess Who’s Coming to the L.A. Olympics,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), February 12, 1984, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/guess-whos-coming-l-olympics/docview/153769738/se-2>.

¹⁸⁵ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 160.

¹⁸⁶ Carlos, *The John Carlos Story*, 159.

The White Press Concedes That Its Reaction Was Overblown

After the 1984 Summer Olympics, Carlos returned to living anonymously. A few years later, he left Los Angeles for the quiet California desert city of Palm Springs. Smith too mostly stayed out of public view. He left Oberlin in 1978 to move back to California, where he worked at Santa Monica College as a professor and track coach. As the two men lived privately during the late 1980s and early 1990s, their public image shifted once again. The press became increasingly apologetic for criticizing their gesture so harshly. One year after the Los Angeles Olympics, Emmy Award winning film producer Bud Greenspan, who produced the official film of the L.A. Games, wrote an essay in the *Los Angeles Times* arguing that politics was a “[p]ositive [f]orce” that was “[c]entral to [the] Games.” Greenspan described the Olympics as “perhaps the greatest positive ‘political’ idea ever.” By virtue of their “amazing talents,” Olympic athletes were by default “political actors and actresses.” Taking politics out of the Olympics—as Avery Brundage and others had tried to do for many years—was “a contradiction of the real world.”¹⁸⁷

It was around this same time that even Smith and Carlos’s biggest adversaries started to ease up on them. In 1986, Jim Murray—the same Jim Murray who had made fun of Smith’s comments about a boycott and had celebrated his ejection from Mexico City—walked back some of what he had previously written about Smith. In an article titled “Big Reaction for a Small, Raised Hand,” Murray suggested that the reaction to what Smith had done on the podium had been overblown. He reflected that “[a]s protests go,” the gesture “wasn’t much.” Smith was, in the eyes of an older Murray, “just trying to remind everybody that the land of the free had also been the home of the slave.” Murray went on to make fun of those who had villainized Smith by quipping that Smith “moved into the spot in the public mind with the guy who shot Lincoln” when he raised his fist. This is not to say that Murray had changed his mind completely; he was still no fan of the gesture. He even went as far to suggest that Smith was “carrying coals for

¹⁸⁷ Bud Greenspan, “People Politics: This Positive Force, Missed by Many, Is Central to Games,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), July 28, 1985, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/essay/docview/154259929/se-2>.

demagogues like” Harry Edwards and Denise Paschal, his ex-wife. Nevertheless, no matter who was responsible for the gesture and how it came to be, Murray regretted that the harsh reaction to Smith’s fist overshadowed his world-record run and caused a premature end to his track career.¹⁸⁸

While covering the Seoul Olympics in 1988, *New York Times* sportswriter Robert Lipsyte reflected on the Mexico City Games in an article titled “Mexico City and the Loss of Innocence.” Lipsyte recalled how “swollen with pretension and hypocrisy” the Olympics had been twenty years prior. He reminded his readers that the “murder of youth” (referring to the Tlatelolco Massacre) had been considered “a permissible price” for Mexico City to pay to host the Olympics. Lipsyte then analyzed the absurdity of how Smith and Carlos were treated after they raised their fists. He commented that their gesture “did not seem...outrageous,” before complaining that throughout Brundage’s reign as IOC president, “the rich and aged white men who ran the Olympics had always reserved for themselves the rights to make...political pacts.” Because Smith and Carlos’s views did not fall in line with the politics of Brundage and those around him, the two runners were kicked out of the Olympics.¹⁸⁹

There is a reason why perspectives like those of Greenspan, Murray, and Lipsyte became prevalent in the late 1980s. In his article, Lipsyte observed that prior to 1968, the Olympics were just a “fancy track meet” guided by “British sporting ethic.” In contrast, over the last two decades, the Olympics had grown into an intensely political sporting event. In 1980, the United States and 60 other countries boycotted the Moscow Olympics. Four years later, the USSR and its allies returned the favor by boycotting the Los Angeles Olympics.¹⁹⁰ The ideal of separating politics and activism from the Games had died with Brundage. On both an individual and governmental level, politics was now a permanent, central component of the Olympics. Back in

¹⁸⁸ Jim Murray, “Big Reaction for a Small, Raised Hand,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), April 27, 1986, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/big-reaction-small-raised-hand/docview/154575925/se-2>.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Lipsyte, “Mexico City and the Loss of Innocence,” *New York Times* (1923-), September 25, 1988, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mexico-city-loss-innocence/docview/110457079/se-2>.

¹⁹⁰ Lipsyte, “Loss of Innocence,” *New York Times* (1923-), <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/mexico-city-loss-innocence/docview/110457079/se-2>.

1968, Smith and Carlos's gesture had been an isolated moment of defiance. Twenty years later, it was merely the first of many displays of political activism on the Olympic stage. With this change came the change in how the public viewed what Smith and Carlos had done.

Five years after writing "Mexico City and the Loss of Innocence," Lipsyte wrote another article about Smith and Carlos, "Silent Salute, Ringing Impact: Two Small Gloved Fists, One Large Revolution." This article was one of the first from a national newspaper that seriously grappled with the gesture and the controversy that followed. Lipsyte pointed out once more that the gesture was "[a] salute," and nothing more, before reminding readers that the two runners were "forced to leave Mexico...[w]ithout a hearing." He then recalled that "the severe official reaction" to the gesture "elevated a mild demonstration into a defining moment of sports history." Indeed, the harsh public reaction to Smith and Carlos was not a consequence of their gesture, but rather the result of the "personally and professionally corrupted" Avery Brundage "cynically subverting the idealism of the Games to nationalism."¹⁹¹ This article was especially important because it did not just concede that the reaction to Smith and Carlos's raised fists had been too harsh. It also absolved Smith and Carlos of any wrongdoing, instead placing all the blame on Brundage for his overblown reaction to the gesture. Smith and Carlos were no longer villains in any capacity. Their names had finally been cleared.

Civil Rights Heroes and *Fists of Freedom*

As Lipsyte's perspective became more prevalent throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Smith and Carlos each continued to receive more positive recognition. In 1991, Smith was profiled in a *Los Angeles Times* article that praised him for his work with Black youth in the city.¹⁹² In 1994, Carlos was welcomed to a Christmas tree lighting in Palm Springs as the event's

¹⁹¹ Robert Lipsyte, "Silent Salute, Ringing Impact: Two Small Gloved Fists, One Large Revolution," *New York Times* (1923-), October 17, 1993, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/silent-salute-ringing-impact/docview/109134503/se-2>.

¹⁹² Elaine Woo, "Olympics' Tommie Smith Still Delivering a Message," *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), July 3, 1991, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/olympics-tommie-smith-still-delivering-message/docview/1642025886/se-2>.

“guest celebrity”;¹⁹³ his name now carried a positive connotation. In 1996, Smith had the opportunity to carry the Olympic torch ahead of the Atlanta Games. While reflecting upon his time with the torch, Smith said that he felt like he had “come full circle” with the USOC.¹⁹⁴ In 1998, finally feeling like it was socially acceptable to come back together, the 1968 American Olympic track team held its first reunion at a sponsored banquet.¹⁹⁵ As Smith and Carlos became increasingly celebrated, there emerged both a public and an academic interest in learning about their stories, what motivated their activism, and the events that led to their now-famous gesture. Indeed, the first academic books addressing Smith and Carlos’s gesture were published in the early 2000s. The work on Smith and Carlos that has come to reflect and shape the popular understanding of their gesture, however, came in the form of a documentary.

In 1999, HBO released *Fists of Freedom: The Story of the '68 Summer Games*, a one-hour documentary that explores the activism of Smith, Carlos, Lee Evans, and other Black track athletes in Mexico City. The documentary includes interviews with many of the athletes themselves, as well as journalists who were in Mexico City to cover the Olympics. *Fists of Freedom* quickly became an acclaimed film. It won a 1999 George F. Peabody Award, and it was nominated for the Outstanding Sports Documentary Award at the 2000 Sports Emmys. Today, it remains popular and well-regarded; many still consider it one of the best sports documentaries HBO has produced.¹⁹⁶ *Fists of Freedom* tells a story that heavily embraces what Smith said in his interview with Howard Cosell and what Edwards wrote in *Revolt of the Black Athlete*.

¹⁹³ “Olympic Medalist John Carlos to Appear at Christma [sic] Tree Lighting,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), November 26, 1994, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/olympic-medalist-john-carlos-appear-at-christma/docview/1973408022/se-2>.

¹⁹⁴ Beth Harris, “Tommie Smith, Who Flashed Black Power Salute, Returns,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-), May 2, 1996, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/tommie-smith-who-flashed-black-power-salute/docview/565676862/se-2>.

¹⁹⁵ Neil Amdur, “Memories of 1968, with no Regrets: Olympic Team’s Reunion Celebrates Legacy of Change, on and off the Track,” *New York Times* (1923-), June 14, 1998, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/memories-1968-with-no-regrets/docview/109874498/se-2>.

¹⁹⁶ Shane Redding, “10 Best HBO Sports Documentaries, Ranked,” *Screen Rant*, March 4, 2025, <https://screenrant.com/best-hbo-sports-documentaries-tiger-whats-my-name-muhammad-ali/>; Brianna Zigler, “8 Must-Watch HBO Max Sports Documentaries on Right Now,” *Yahoo Sports*, October 23, 2025, <https://sports.yahoo.com/articles/5-must-watch-hbo-max-094032354.html>.

Fists of Freedom starts by giving Harry Edwards undue credit for his role in the political activism of Black athletes in Mexico City. The documentary's narrator describes Edwards as having "used his bully pulpit to turn athletes into advocates and start a revolution,"¹⁹⁷ essentially making Edwards out to be the man who singlehandedly made the Olympic boycott movement, and Smith and Carlos's gesture, possible. The documentary then shows footage of Edwards announcing that the athletes who attended the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference had unanimously voted in favor of an Olympic boycott.¹⁹⁸ A few minutes later, the film presents the NYAC boycott as an effort led entirely by OPHR.¹⁹⁹ Each of these three moments represents a distortion of the truth. Edwards did not start a "revolution" on his own; the idea of a Black Olympic boycott had been around since 1960, and the Olympic boycott movement that preceded the Mexico City Games was started by Smith, courtesy of his comments in Tokyo. From the scholarship of Douglas Hartmann, we now know that there most likely was not unanimous, or near-unanimous, support for an Olympic boycott at the Los Angeles Black Youth Conference. The NYAC boycott was a joint effort of OPHR and a plethora of other civil rights organizations; OPHR did not organize the boycott by itself. Each of these choices in the film makes Edwards look especially good and strengthens the narrative he created about himself in his writings.

This is not to say that *Fists of Freedom* only portrays Edwards in a positive light; the documentary concludes with scathing criticism of him. In his interview for the film, Lee Evans stated that Edwards "had nothing to do with the protests in Mexico City." In fact, from June through October, said Evans, neither he nor any of the other Black track athletes heard from Edwards.²⁰⁰ Additionally, the documentary condemns Edwards for "reaping all the rewards" of Smith and Carlos's actions while the two runners themselves were left to suffer for years afterward.²⁰¹ Even with these—largely personal—criticisms of Edwards, *Fists of Freedom* still

¹⁹⁷ *Fists of Freedom: The Story of the '68 Summer Games*, directed by George Roy (HBO Sports in association with Black Canyon Productions, 1999), 12:45.

¹⁹⁸ *Fists of Freedom*, Roy, 13:50.

¹⁹⁹ *Fists of Freedom*, Roy, 17:35.

²⁰⁰ *Fists of Freedom*, Roy, 51:40.

²⁰¹ *Fists of Freedom*, Roy, 52:30.

portrays him as both a more effective organizer and as closer to Smith and Carlos than he ever was.

Equally significant is what the documentary does not mention: the last-minute nature of the gesture and how unprepared Smith and Carlos were to take the victory stand. *Fists of Freedom* instead claims that Smith was well-prepared for his moment on the podium. The film presents the idea of wearing black gloves during the medal ceremony as something that Smith and Lee Evans came up with together and ahead of their respective races. While it mentions that Denise Paschal purchased Smith's pair of gloves, the documentary suggests that she did so because Smith told her to.²⁰² The film thus downplays the active role that she played in making her husband's moment possible. *Fists of Freedom* also adds something new to the story: an interview in which Smith states that when he raised his fist, his glove was "going toward God." The gesture, Smith added, was "a prayer of solidarity" and "a cry for help" on behalf of the Black Americans who had been lynched, shot, and subjected to other forms of racial violence.²⁰³ To this day, *Fists of Freedom* remains the best-known representation of Smith and Carlos's story, and it continues to shape the way the public understands their gesture. Yet it does not provide the public with a nuanced account of the gesture, what led to it, and what followed. It instead offers a skewed, idealistic version of events that makes Smith and Edwards look especially good and makes everything appear to have turned out just so.

By the mid-2000s, Smith and Carlos were celebrated as heroes in most corners of American society. In 2005, SJSU announced that it would erect a 23-foot statue of their Olympic gesture on its campus. A few weeks later, the university bestowed upon each of them honorary doctorate degrees. They accepted their degrees in front of a crowd of nearly 8000 SJSU students, who gave the two long-retired runners a standing ovation.²⁰⁴ In 2008, ESPN honored Smith and

²⁰² *Fists of Freedom*, Roy, 38:45.

²⁰³ *Fists of Freedom*, Roy, 39:15.

²⁰⁴ Huel Washington, "Smith and Carlos Honored for Advancing Civil Rights: 'Better Late than Never,'" *Afro-American* (1893-), June 11, 2005, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/better-late-than-never/docview/2669728315/se-2>.

Carlos with the Arthur Ashe Award, a prestigious honor that celebrates athletes who are willing “to stand up for their beliefs no matter what the cost.”²⁰⁵ Smith and Carlos took advantage of the continued interest in their stories by releasing autobiographies; Smith’s was published in 2007, and Carlos’s came out in 2011. In their respective books, each runner shared a distinct narrative that made himself look as good as possible. Their stories do have some common features though: mainly, the notion that their shared moment on the podium was thought out in advance. This is to say that both of their autobiographies present versions of the now-popular understanding of their gesture that emerged with *Fists of Freedom*.

The gesture has even inspired recent works of art. In 2024, the Smithsonian American Art Museum installed a permanent exhibit titled “Bridge,” which consists of 200 gold casts of Smith’s outstretched right arm hanging from the ceiling. In its description of the exhibit, the Smithsonian characterizes the gesture as “an assertion of Black solidarity in the fight for human rights.” Furthermore, the exhibit is meant to serve as “a monument to one person’s action and its aftermath, evoking the ways that even small acts can ripple through time and alter the course of history.”²⁰⁶

Conclusion

The rehabilitation of Tommie Smith and John Carlos is now complete. Over the course of several decades, they went from un-American Black militants, to largely forgotten, to partially accepted, to full-fledged civil rights icons. Their gesture—thrown together at the last minute due to failed organizing efforts and clashing egos—defied Olympic norms, but was ultimately harmless. For that reason, it did not initially receive much notice in the United States. That was until Avery Brundage, a racist hypocrite who naively believed that sports and politics could not mix, responded with undue harshness and sent Smith and Carlos home. Brundage’s response made Smith and Carlos the story of the Mexico City Olympics. Only once they were ejected

²⁰⁵ “Arthur Ashe Award,” ESPN, accessed March 3, 2026, <http://www.espn.com/espys/arthurasheaward>.

²⁰⁶ “Fact Sheet: ‘Glenn Kaino: Bridge,’” Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed April 4, 2026, <https://americanart.si.edu/press/2024/25/fact-sheet-glenn-kaino-bridge>.

from the Olympic Village did the American media start to create narratives about the two men and their gesture. So too did opposing forces, such as the Black power movement, which tried to claim Smith and Carlos's moment as their own. The gesture, hardly noticed at first, thus became controversial. Years of pain for the two runners followed. They both lived in poverty; they both struggled to find stable employment; they both lost their wives, and Smith lost his mother. As new political movements emerged in the United States and global politics became a prominent part of the Olympic Games that followed Mexico City, Smith and Carlos slowly evolved from villains to heroes, as white journalists (like Jim Murray) recognized first that their initial reaction to the gesture had overblown and later that Smith and Carlos had not actually done anything particularly troubling when they raised their fists on the podium.

Liberal American memory has now stripped Smith and Carlos's gesture of all its contingency and controversy. Today, the two runners are celebrated for their willingness to take a stand against the mistreatment of Black Americans in the United States; they are celebrated as individuals who spoke truth to power, and their moment on the podium is disconnected from the social forces that enabled it and the vicious reactions that followed it. This emphasis on the individual initiative of Smith, Carlos, and even Edwards downplays just about everything that makes the gesture worth studying: the efforts of the wives, the determination of Brundage to make the runners suffer, and the constant attacks from the press afterward. The discrepancies between the general public's memory of what happened to Smith and Carlos and what actually happened speak to the way that Americans like to tell stories about the United States. Americans today remember Smith and Carlos as two brave men who expressed themselves on the podium. They think less about the structural racism nationwide that inspired the demonstration and the difficulty involved in putting together an effective protest. Americans today remember Smith and Carlos as integral members of the civil rights movement who helped give Black athletes a voice. They don't remember that the visceral reaction to a pair of raised fists had pernicious consequences for the two runners and their families. The idealized story of Smith and Carlos resembles the many other sanitized stories of 1960s civil rights activists, like those about Martin

Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. The now-popular story of Smith and Carlos is one of American exceptionalism, where a pair of determined individuals singlehandedly triumph over racism. The actual events surrounding their gesture tell a more authentic story of America.

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