

In Mexico City's most iconic moment, U.S. sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos strike their pose of protest, following their one-three finish in the 200 meters. Australia's Peter Norman, who edged Carlos at the finish for silver, supported the two, wearing a protest button. (*Time & Life Pictures*)

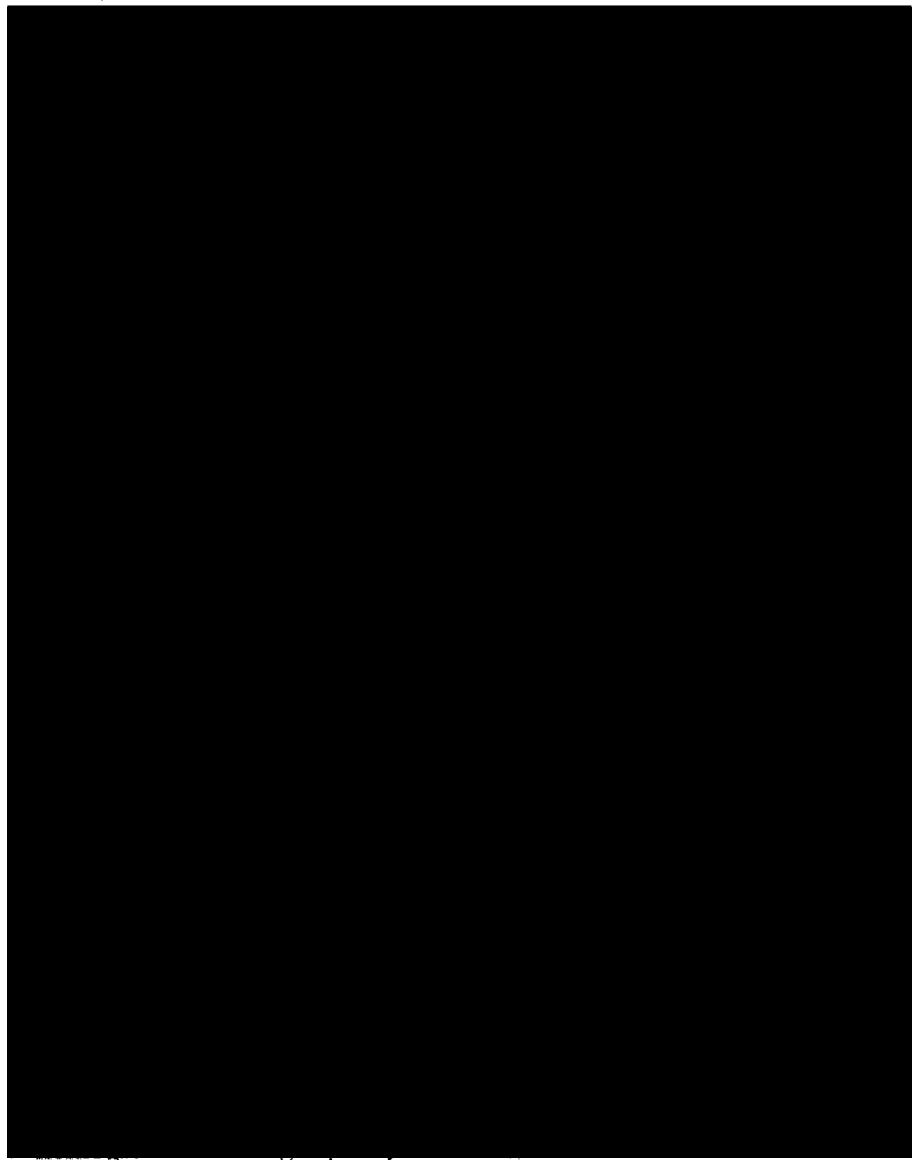
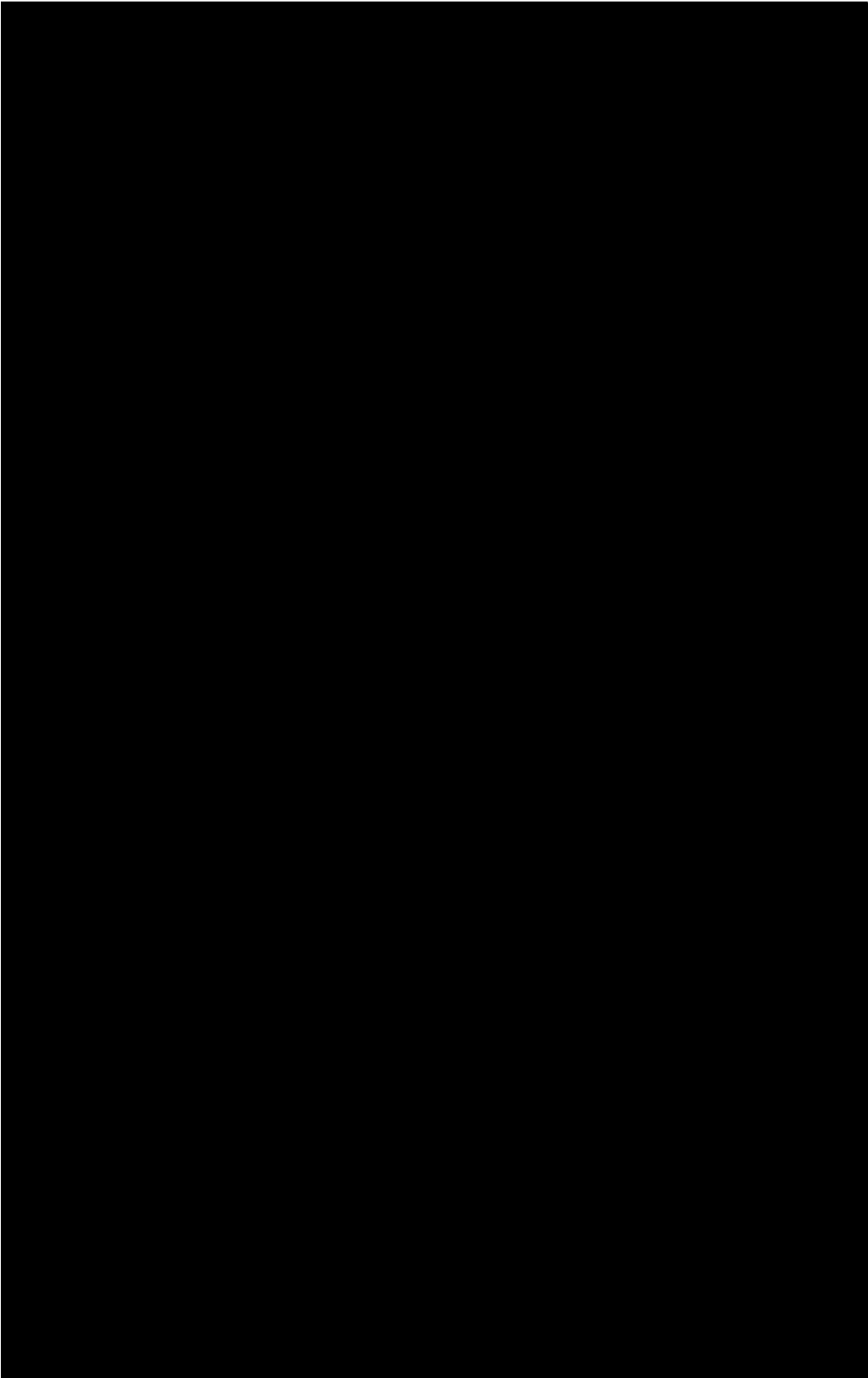
# SOMETHING IN THE AIR

*American Passion  
and Defiance in the 1968 Mexico City  
Olympics*

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Nearly as invisible, and every bit as troubling, was the growing concentration of spooks in Mexico City. There was a fantastic buildup going on, this being the Cold War, with communists lurking everywhere, Cuba was not *that* far off, campuses filled with Trotskyites, and a pretty big and increasingly suspicious international contingent was growing by the day.

This was becoming Spy City in 1968. And the United States was at

least partly to blame for this blossoming community of secret agents. After the Tokyo Games, Mexico had approached U.S. Olympic members and asked about the use of established coaches for its athletes. Mexico had never been an Olympic juggernaut—no country had won fewer medals (one bronze) than Mexico at Tokyo—but this Olympics would have to be different. The country meant to impress on as many fronts as possible and athletic improvement was a priority. The United States didn't immediately cooperate, so Mexico began casting about in other corners of the world for coaching expertise.

Nevertheless, there were a number of U.S. coaches who signed on, one of them Bert Bonanno, the Bud Winter acolyte from San Jose State. Bonanno had left Winter and had been coaching at a California high school when the offer came to become Mexico's track-and-field coach. He immediately relocated to Mexico City. Once there, he recognized some fellow expatriates from the United States, hired hands like him, but also noticed a surprising number of Iron Curtain coaches, some really puzzling characters.

Bonanno hadn't been there very long before the CIA approached him. He was at the track when a man who said he was from the State Department walked up to him and invited him to a meeting at the Reforma Hotel the next morning. Once there, the so-called State Department man admitted he was CIA and that he was asking Bonanno to keep tabs on his foreign colleagues and to report back once a week. Bonanno said, you know, now that you mention it, there are some odd ducks out there. Exactly, he was told.

Bonanno was not practiced in spycraft, and far be it for a Bud Winter acolyte to confuse eccentricity with espionage. But, all the same, he had no trouble producing plenty of material for his weekly briefings. Lots of the coaches, he observed, were fluent in far more languages than their sport required. If this is cause for suspicion, it is the result of an American bias, which associates European bilingualism with the capacity for counterintelligence. But why, indeed, was the Polish coach of the Mexican walking team so fluent in Spanish?

And, for that matter, why did so many of the Iron Curtain coaches bunk in the Olympic Village with the athletes? Why was one of them teaching his Mexican athletes French on the side? And did anybody else think it was strange that one of the foreign coaches was a concert pianist? The boys at the CIA ate it up.

It wasn't all amateur hour, though. The U.S. embassy in Mexico City was its largest, and it was constantly filing cables to Washington in advance of the Olympics. The CIA had a major station there, keeping watch over Cuban and Soviet delegations, filing Situation Reports (Sitreps) regularly, and it was assumed Communist intelligence interests were well represented there, as well. For that matter, not everyone on the U.S. Olympic Committee was on hand to advance the spirit of amateur sport. An assistant Olympic attaché named Philip Agee was actually getting his final CIA posting (he would famously turn on the agency in later years, writing an exposé), and he was meeting with Cuba and KGB there far more often than he was Avery Brundage. "By the summer of '68," said one writer, "Mexico City resembled a spooks' Olympics."

There was plenty to keep them all busy. Aside from banking the embers of paranoia, as was their stock-in-trade, operators there were keeping close tabs on the developing unrest among Mexican students. This was highly important, as it seemed to include all of the major preoccupations of the day: agitating students, creeping Communism, regime change, and international politics in general. And it was occurring in advance of one of the world's most visible extravaganzas. This was one-stop shopping for any spy.

The unrest, which was in a sense just a localized symptom of a worldwide contagion, had begun in July when some students took to the streets to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Fidel Castro's revolution in Cuba. As everywhere else in the world that year, Mexican students were feeling their oats, were looking to flex some ideological muscle, and they were intrigued by the possibility of gathering together to inspire change. Strikes and protests were hardly new to

Mexico but, in 1968, with the government feeling pressure to present an image of prosperity, modernity, and progress—peace above all—to the rest of the world, student reaction was more pronounced than usual. This particular demonstration was not especially organized or even objectionable—it was barely political, degenerating into a street brawl between the students of rival vocational schools—but it was swiftly and vigorously quashed. Two hundred riot police, according to the *New Republic*, were “cracking the heads of all in reach.” It was later reported that four students were killed in the disturbance, two hundred injured.

Add a youthful self-absorption to an already politically charged group, and you have a highly flammable community. The youth movement, which had been vague and amorphous, now gathered purpose as an aggrieved and victimized party. This was all apart from the politics of the Olympics, which were still several months off. Demands, which now had the specific context of police brutality and government oppression, were made. Mexico’s ruling government, led by President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, did not so much quell a public disturbance as light a wick.

And so began a summer of roiling protest, nearly fifty rallies in all, gathering steam, galvanizing even more youth, generating even more protest. By August student marches were drawing fifty thousand protesters. On August 13, one hundred fifty thousand took to the streets, and they were beginning to push Díaz’s buttons. “Díaz Ordaz, where are you?” read the signs. And, “Díaz Ordaz, get your teeth pulled.” They were broadening their protest to include university reform and questioning the tremendous cost of the Olympics. It was clear that the students were gaining intensity as well as numbers. On August 27, they boldly marched in front of the presidential palace and vandalized it with spray paint, insulting the notoriously insecure and not terribly handsome president incidentally. “Come out on the balcony,” they chanted, “monkey with a big snout.”

These events were of keen interest to ruling parties besides Mex-

ico’s, especially with the Olympics scheduled only months away and not so far from one very particular border. U.S. State Department officials in Mexico City were cranking out telegrams as fast as they could type, and so were the fellows at the CIA, but their reporting and analysis were equally flawed. They might have been better off presenting Bert Bonanno’s briefings.

“There are not now present in Mexico conditions such as appear to have caused the French crisis,” read a June 14 classified telegram from the U.S. embassy to Washington, referring to student demonstrations in Paris that nearly toppled the de Gaulle regime. “And it is most unlikely that such conditions will rapidly develop here to critical proportions, at least until after 1970 when President Díaz Ordaz’s term ends.” The report went on to say that student unrest “may break out on a large scale at any time and for any reason” but that the government had shown the ability to “crack down decisively, to date with salutary effects.”

The students, meanwhile, had discovered an even hotter button than the president’s physical appearance and were now leveraging the Olympics in their regular protests. Students from a group called *Comité Anti-Olímpico de Subversión* visited with Harry Edwards in San Jose to pledge the support of one hundred thousand “young people.” They told him, “We are prepared to lose some lives in an initial charge on the stadium, but we will stop the Olympics by any means necessary.”

Nobody knew if the students were organized to do any such thing, but Mexican authorities were certainly getting the jitters. Díaz Ordaz used most of his presidential address on September 1 to remind students that he remained fully committed to the Games and would use “all legal means within our reach” to ensure a proper Opening Ceremony. It was not a particularly conciliatory speech. It would have been even less satisfying to protesters if they’d known that Díaz Ordaz had, starting in May, been ordering riot gear from the United States.

Both the State Department and the CIA were trying to gauge the

potential for mayhem in October, and whether an Olympics would even happen, but they were also typically preoccupied with rooting out Communist influences. According to the *Washington Post's* Jefferson Morley, Winston Scott, the CIA's Mexico City station chief, told Washington in an August cable that the riot in front of Díaz's palace represented a "classic example of the Communists' ability to divert a peaceful demonstration into a major riot."

Nobody else in the intelligence community would go so far as to say that. It was the first place to look, sure, but further fact-finding tended not to support the thesis. The problem, according to Morley, who teased this out of a partly declassified history of the Mexico City station, was that Scott was basing an enormous reliance on his good buddy, President Díaz Ordaz. In fact, Scott had set up a "secret spy network code-named LITEMPO" that consisted entirely of Mexican government officials. One of these paid agents was a nephew of Díaz Ordaz, another was Luis Echeverría, head of Díaz Ordaz's "Strategy Committee," which had been formed to react to the student protests.

It was apparent that Díaz Ordaz wanted to put the disturbances at the feet of the Communists and was able to convince Scott of this, at least for a while. It was a bum steer. Scott, however, was forming impressions independent of his LITEMPO misinformation and was relaying his growing misgivings back to Washington. In late September, Scott cabled that the Mexican government was "not seeking compromise solution with students but rather seeking to put an end to all organized student actions before Olympics." Scott had no idea.

On October 2, after a period of relative calm during which the forthcoming Olympics were beginning to overshadow the summer of protest, students gathered at the Plaza de Las Tres Culturas in the Tlatelolco housing project for a modest rally. There were perhaps five thousand students on the plaza, a square of historical importance for its location near Aztec ruins, a colonial church, and the Foreign Ministry: your three cultures of Mexico. It was also important as a meeting place for students from city campuses. It was fifteen miles

from the Olympic Village and in the middle of the city's biggest housing development, the long block buildings named after Mexican states. And on this afternoon, beginning at five o'clock, it was encircled with tanks, enclosing the students completely. Soldiers sat on top of the tanks, shining their bayonets, and two helicopters fluttered above.

Student leaders by now had very little new to say and, recognizing the military presence, perhaps a thousand troops, called off plans for a march to the National Polytechnic Institute. It was not an especially alarming show of student gusto. It was not in any way provocative.

However, Díaz Ordaz had been provoked enough—it had been a long and vexing summer—and had ordered a maneuver that would put an end to this foolishness. He would not be embarrassed any longer. With the Olympics just ten days away, and visitors beginning to arrive, it was now time to crush this movement once and for all. So at six that afternoon, the hovering helicopters suddenly flashed green and red flares, army troops sealed the exit plaza, and undercover Battalion Olympia—all wearing a single white glove so they could recognize one another—began circulating among the crowd. From balconies and rooftops, shots poured into the plaza, and people simply fell over.

The haze of history would be slow to lift on this one. To the extent that there was any information at all, it was wrong. Not even that. Immediate reports were a total misdirection. The Mexican government at first said four students were killed. State-owned television said there had been a police incident. The more time and distance involved, the greater the numbers, but nothing to correspond to the carnage. The next day *El Sol de México* said student snipers had fired on the troops, killing a general and wounding eleven soldiers. Firing in defense, the army had killed twenty civilians.

The CIA's Scott had a report filed by midnight. And he, too, had swallowed it whole. Scott wrote Washington, "A classified source said the first shots were fired by the students from the Chihuahua apart-

ments." An American classified source "expressed the opinion this was a premeditated encounter provoked by the students." Yet another source claimed "most of the students present on the speaker's platform were armed, one with a submachine gun . . . troops were only answering the fire from the students."

In fact, according to accounts that would unfold over the years, as documents would continue to be declassified, it was murder. It was an outright massacre. It was genocide. The death toll among students and the neighbors that joined them was not 4 as the government announced, was not 8 as Scott first telegraphed, and it wasn't 20 as the *New York Times* reported at first, or even 39 as it wrote a week later. It may have been as high as 325, thousands more disappearing into prisons, some of them for years.

There could never be an accurate count, no census of the dead. Many of the students went into hiding, some joining guerrilla groups in the hinterlands, so it was difficult to say who had been killed and who had simply fled. Ghastly rumors circulated throughout the city that not all the dead were receiving funerals. Enrique Labadie, who was a sprinter on Bert Bonanno's Mexican team and also a medical student in Mexico City, told his coach that bodies from the massacre were being cremated in hospitals.

As Mexican officials had hoped, the massacre was public enough to have effectively ended the student movement, yet underreported enough that the Olympics would not be stopped on its account. "I was at the ballet last night," said Avery Brundage, "and we heard nothing of the riots." Other visitors were equally clueless. Had anyone known the true scope of the disaster, there surely would have been more outcry, possibly national condemnations, and Brundage would have needed more comment than that to keep his Games going. While *Sports Illustrated* published "Grim Countdown to the Games," taking note of the blood-soaked plaza, it agreed, "The only thing anyone

could do was wait and see." There was no question that the Games were going to go on, more or less as planned.

