

Olympics: The Rings Of Steel

Since 1896 when the modern Olympic Games were born, the growth in the numbers of countries and athletes participating has increased the Olympics wonder and spectacle. In parallel, the high-profile event has attracted its share of tragedy and crisis as the organisers have had to balance the happy atmosphere of the games with the ever-increasing demands for security. The highest profile crisis to date was the 1972 Munich Olympics Massacre, where terrorists kidnapped and murdered eleven Israeli athletes and coaches. Crisis planners will not be surprised to learn that the tragedy was almost identical to one of a series of 26 potential scenarios written by German police psychologist Georg Sieber. The approach to security adopted by the Olympics after Munich was described as the “rings of steel”, and focused on regulatory management, fortification and surveillance.

After 9/11

In the following decades, crises at the Olympics were reputational, including the boycotts of 1980 and 1984, and did not involve loss of life. Security costs continued to mount to counter the ever-present reminder of Munich. The terrorist bombing of Atlanta in 1996, at which two people died, was cited as a lesson that even massive security investments could not protect the public. More recently, the Olympics security budget has increased as a response to threats and attacks away from the Olympic site. After 9/11 Athens spent an estimated \$1.2 billion on security preparations for the 2004 games. The seven-nation Olympic Advisory Group was formed in 2000 to provide security advice, training and support to Athens as it prepared for 2004, calling on chemical and biological experts to prepare for, and try to prevent, the kind of terrorist incidents that affected Moscow, London, Tokyo and Madrid.

The show must go on

Staging the games has been described as the largest peacetime effort of its host country. The Olympics have only been cancelled three times since 1898: in 1916, 1940 and 1944, due to World Wars. Keeping the games going and making sure that they take place involves many years of preparations and planning. This modern approach to Olympic security was clearly summed up by Mitt Romney, who took over planning for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. The first post-9/11 games, the security budget for 2002 was raised to over \$300 million, three times more than the summer games in Atlanta and 25% of the total budget:

"The main differences between our Games and other Games are things that you won't see. Radar cover, interceptor aircraft flying overhead, the level of intelligence; these things are invisible to the public and the athletes."

The Georg Sieber approach to contingency planning has advanced too; a total of 800 scenarios were tabletopped for the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney (even as organisers prepared for the “801st”).

Cooperation.

From Salt Lake City, the following quote reminds us of the complexities inherent in any large scale cooperation.

“On a bad day getting ready for the 2002 Games, cops were perceived by other disciplines as being prima donnas. Firefighters were seen as lazy. Public work was fragmented. Private and corporate security personnel were viewed as rent-a-cops. Emergency medical groups were looking for someone to tell them what to do. Public health agencies only seemed able to hold meetings. Infrastructure owners did not want to tell anyone about their vulnerabilities. Everyone was afraid the cops would get more than any other group.

The National Guard and the active duty military component disagreed about almost everything; the Secret Service was reluctant to share anything. The FBI worried another agency would invade its turf. FEMA was fretful it would not get called to meetings and the US Attorney kept sticking his nose into everyone’s business. Federal law enforcement agents brought in to help plan the Games looked at Utah public safety as a collection of well meaning but naïve hicks. In turn federal agents were seen as arrogant and inept

Rural agencies didn’t trust their urban counterparts. Sheriffs didn’t trust police. Neither trusted the State. No one trusted Washington. And Washington returned the favor.” (*from Zekulin, below*)

Sound familiar? **See you at 2012!**

Further reading

- *One day in September: the full story of the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre*
By Simon Reeve
- *Turnaround: crisis, leadership, and the Olympic Games*, By Mitt Romney
- *Olympic Security: Assessing the Risk of Terrorism at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games*, by Michael Zekulin

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