Not Even A Bronze For Chicago In Bidding For 2016 Olympics

Пише: Paul J. Saunders
недеља, 04 октобар 2009 11:37

(The National Interest, 02.10. 2009)

The International Olympic Committee's stunning elimination of Chicago in voting for the 2016 games—as the first city dropped, with the least votes among four contenders—is of limited importance to the United States, but should be ringing alarm bells about the Obama administration and its foreign policy.

Having the 2016 games in Chicago would have been nice, but certainly should not be a major foreign policy goal for the United States. America has hosted the Olympic Games many times and does not particularly need the visibility or the expense.

Still, given President Obama's roots as a Chicago politician, it was not inappropriate for him to lobby a little for his home city. He could have done this fairly easily by making a short statement in front of the cameras during any of a number of appearances in the United   States in advance of the IOC ballot. "Chicago is one of America's and the world's great cities," he could have said, "and Michelle and I are rooting for Chicago as the IOC meets this week. If selected, I know that Chicago will come together and organize a truly spectacular event that embodies the spirit of the Olympics and the spirit of America." Then he would have been done and could check the box and move on.

When this could have been done so easily, why do more?

The answer seems to be a combination of several troubling factors. First is a worrying failure to set priorities. Candidate Obama was critical of the Bush administration—at times correctly—for misplaced priorities, but does not seem to have taken the lesson to heart. His administration has spent the last eight months trying to do too much too fast, both domestically and in foreign policy, and is now starting to pay the price.

Second is a profound over-estimation of President Obama's personal persuasive power (again, both domestically and internationally). This has been clear at home in the health care debate,

Not Even A Bronze For Chicago In Bidding For 2016 Olympics

Пише: Paul J. Saunders
недеља, 04 октобар 2009 11:37

on climate change, and in other areas, where the administration seems mistakenly to have interpreted Obama's election as a mandate to pursue his policy goals rather than as a rejection of the Bush administration. A similar dynamic is at play in foreign policy, where some in the administration seem to think that the President's personal story and charm are sufficient to persuade others to sacrifice their own interests, abandon long-held perspectives, or change their minds even when they may have different preferences or evaluations. This can lead to dangerous and damaging miscalculations and will almost certainly lead to disappointment both inside the administration and abroad.

The root of this lies in a third factor, namely that other governments and peoples make their decisions about the United States based on what we do or persuasively promise to do. Former Russian President Vladimir Putin successfully personally lobbied the IOC to bring the 2014 Winter Games to Sochi by promising that the full power and resources of the then-oil-rich Russian state would stand behind the games. Failing to recognize this in the IOC's new balloting, by focusing his remarks and the First Lady's on uplifting rhetoric rather than the specifics of Chicago's bid, is a relatively minor matter—although the impact of the loss will now be vastly inflated by the President's ill-advised decision to become so deeply involved. But failing to see the difference on real issues—like the Middle East, where President Obama has done nothing to follow up his much-touted Cairo speech—has real consequences.

America doesn't need a gold medal in a global popularity contest and neither does our president. What we do need is others to take us seriously. If the Obama administration doesn't start to focus on what is important and to deliver some results, precious few will.

Paul J. Saunders, Executive Director of The Nixon Center, is the associate publisher of The National Interest