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China Spotlights Its Rotten Policies

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WASHINGTON — When you put the Olympics in the hands of a dictatorship, the results are predictable. Yet the Chinese government still found a way of surprising even its critics by behaving oppressively in a foolishly unnecessary way.

By revoking the visa of 2006 Olympian Joey Cheek at the very last moment because he had the nerve to speak out about Darfur and the Chinese government's support for Sudan's barbarous regime, Chinese authorities guaranteed that the opening of these Games would focus as much on politics as on sports. The burden is not on China's critics but on its government.

The hope was that this month's events would showcase how much China has changed. Let's stipulate many of the things China's friends regularly assert: China is more prosperous and, in important senses, more free than it has been for generations. It is in the world's interest, and America's interest, to deal peacefully with China and to acknowledge its growing power. We have business to do with China, in the most basic sense of that word, on global warming and also on many diplomatic questions. And, yes, China's economic growth has been staggering.

But a dictatorship is still a dictatorship, a fact that so many who highlight China's achievements try to discuss only in the most guarded tones. There is such fear of antagonizing the Chinese government, but the Chinese government seems to have no compunction about antagonizing those for whom liberty and human rights take priority over sports and making money.

Keeping Cheek out, a speedskater and gold medalist, was an utterly gratuitous act demonstrating that no matter what the Chinese leaders promised in order to host the Olympics, they will not put up with athletes who have the nerve to go crosswise with their policies.

Cheek and former UCLA water polo player Brad Greiner are co-founders of Team Darfur, a group that calls attention to the suffering in Sudan, which provides China with a lot of oil. Greiner also had his visa revoked.

To any who might accuse people like Cheek of politicizing the Olympics, he offered such a clear and persuasive answer that you have to hope that the 29-year-old will start giving advice to politicians on the value of logic and forthrightness.

Speaking to National Public Radio's Melissa Block on Wednesday, Cheek had this to say of the Olympics: "In the same breath that they're said to be apolitical, they're said to be a celebration of human rights and they're said to be a sporting festival we hope that can transcend mere sporting festivals. And when you lay claim to such lofty ideals, at some point unless you're prepared to actually live the ideals you're speaking of, you're going to

run into friction. And I think that's some of the case here.

"I think when we talk about the crisis in Darfur, we talk about the millions of innocent people that are suffering there, and we talk about the positive role that China could play, should they choose to, and the rest of the international community. I mean, these people have been failed, I think, at every level." Note that Cheek's words can be seen as a criticism of our government's Darfur policies, too.

Live the ideals you're speaking of. Those words should be sent on postcards to the people who run the International Olympic Committee, which issued a statement last May explaining that "all actions, reactions, attitudes or manifestations of any kind" had to "comply with the laws of the host state."

In other words, freedom during these Games will be defined the way Chinese officials decide to define it. Friction — Cheek's perfect word for what freedom often requires — will not be allowed to spoil the show.

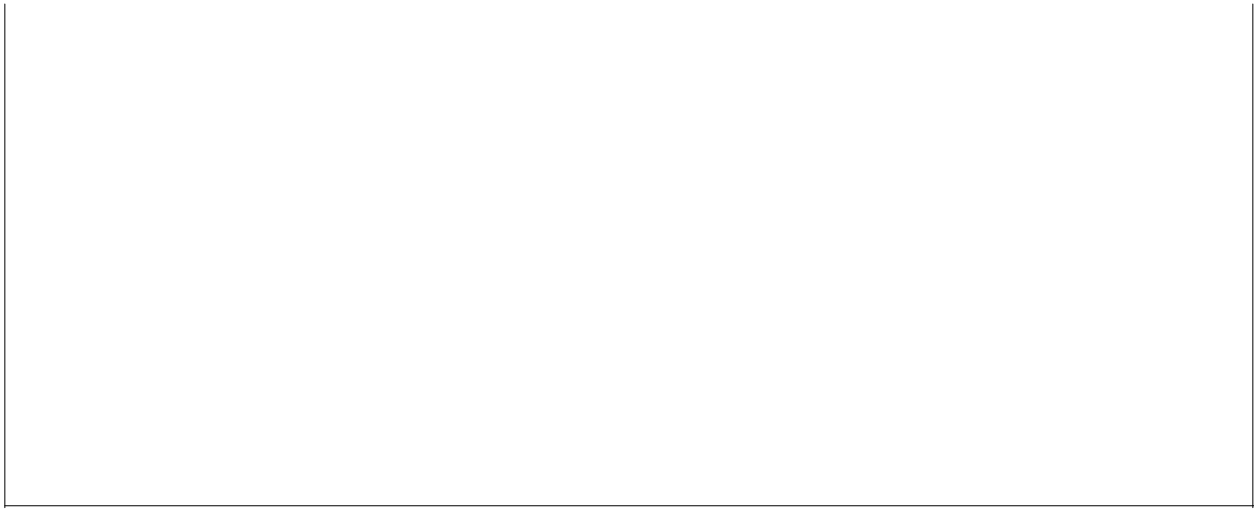
When China secured the Olympics back in 2001, Michael Posner of Human Rights First prophetically argued that "the plus side" was the prospect that "tens of thousands of journalists covering the Games" would "shine a bright light" on the government's practices "and create pressure for change." The "downside" was that "Chinese authorities have in the past cracked down prior to big international events."

You don't have to be longing for a new Cold War — a very bad idea — or want to politicize sports to honor the earnest, soft-spoken Joey Cheek for provoking the Chinese authorities into shining that bright light on themselves. It

is not flattering.

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