



From Spectacle to Invasion, Let the World Games Begin

EUGENE ROBINSON Syndicated Columnist

WASHINGTON — The Democratic and Republican conventions have a couple of tough acts to follow. Two compelling spectacles — one glorious, one shocking — have stolen the spotlight this summer to remind us all that whatever nostrums we hear from Barack Obama and John McCain about it being morning again in America, the truth is that we live in a much more complicated world.

The glorious extravaganza is, of course, the Olympics. Anyone given to paranoia about China's burgeoning wealth and stature has new cause for alarm, because the Chinese have staged what may be seen as the most unforgettable Games ever.

It helps that marquee athletes such as Michael Phelps and Usain Bolt have come through with unbelievable performances. Even without all the world records, though, we'd still have to be impressed by the scale and audacity of these Olympics. If China is announcing its emergence as a great power, we get the message.

Think back to the climactic moment of the opening ceremonies when one of China's greatest sports heroes, former Olympic gymnast Li Ning, appeared to levitate around the rim of the Bird's Nest stadium before lighting the Olympic torch. It wasn't just the best torch-lighting since 1992, when the cauldron in Barcelona was ignited by an archer's flaming arrow. It was also a nifty bit of advertising — and, arguably, Chinese commercial piracy.

Li Ning is chairman of an eponymous sportswear company that once dominated the Chinese market but has seen its position eroded by global giants such as Nike and Adidas. Li has fought back by signing promotional deals with internationally known athletes such as Shaquille O'Neal as a way of raising the company's international profile, and thus enhancing its cachet at home.

As it happens, Adidas paid an estimated \$80 million to be one of the lead sponsors of the Beijing Games — which meant that company officials had to sit in the Bird's Nest and watch as a competitor stole the show, with the billion-strong Chinese market paying rapt attention. Li's aerial coup should go down in the annals of product placement.

Whenever the television cameras pull back to show Beijing's stunning new architecture — the Bird's Nest, the bubble-wrapped swimming center, the state television headquarters building that has a hole in the middle and no visible means of support for the upper floors — it's impossible not to recall that our relationship to China is that of debtor to creditor. And the fact is that one tends to be polite to the bank that holds one's mortgage.

One other moment from the Games' opening night lingers with me. We saw a shot of President Bush in the stands, fidgeting as usual, talking and smiling, looking around, taking it all in. In the background we glimpsed Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, stone-faced and nonchalant, as impassive as Clint Eastwood in one of his spaghetti westerns. Meanwhile, Russian tanks were rolling into Georgia.

The Russian invasion — the other summer spectacle — proved what should have been obvious all along: that the demise of communism never implied the demise of Russia as one of the world's great powers. It was only a matter of time before any country so blessed with natural resources and human

capital would rise again. That day was hastened by the spike in the price of oil and natural gas, which has made Russia rich, and by Putin's calm and purposeful ruthlessness.

In response to demands by Bush and others that those tanks be rolled back out of Georgia immediately, Russian officials have essentially said, "Yeah, right, whatever, talk to the hand." It's obvious that they'll leave when they're good and ready — and that there's basically nothing anyone can do to hurry them up.

The lesson that's being brought home this summer is that we live in a multipolar world. We certainly knew that, but in our political rhetoric we prefer to ignore it. Now, neither party is going to be able to make it through its convention without acknowledging the world's complications and interconnections.

Obama will probably talk more about engagement and the "international community," while McCain is likely to sound more confrontational.

I'm pretty sure, though, that neither will come clean about a central truth: Our future is being decided not just in Washington but in Beijing and Moscow — and in Riyadh, Islamabad, New Delhi, Dubai, Caracas, Abuja, Brasilia ...

We still have the wherewithal to lead. But we're deluding ourselves if we believe we won't have to adapt to

the new reality.

Robinson's columns, including those not

published in the Journal, can be read at

abqjournal.com/opinion.

