

# Opinion

## Why two black athletes raised their fists

In 1968, two American Olympians protested during the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Few understood their message.

**Ted Widmer**

A few hours earlier, it was far from certain that Tommie Smith and John Carlos would be on the medal stand at all. Smith, the favorite to win gold in the 200 meters at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, had strained his adductor muscle in a heat and was unsure he could run at full speed. Carlos, his friend and fellow American, had nearly been disqualified when he left his lane in a heat of his own. But the umpire missed it, and he too survived. When the final was run, it turned out to be the race of their lives. Smith smashed the world record, in 19.83 seconds, and Carlos came in third, a whisker behind Peter Norman, an Australian who came out of nowhere to take silver. No one would run under 20 seconds in the Olympics again until Carl Lewis in 1984.

As they approached the medal stand, Smith and Carlos were holding their running shoes, wearing black socks, as if they had been awakened from a midafternoon nap. All three medalists, including Norman, wore large buttons that read, “Olympic Project for Human Rights.” That may have been hard to read on the TV screen, but the next scene was not. As the tinny sound of “The Star-Spangled Banner” began to fill the Estadio Olímpico, Smith and Carlos looked at the ground, and raised their right and left arms, respectively, in the air. Each was wearing a single black glove, covering a clenched fist: the black power salute.

Snapchat was still decades away, but the athletes instantly created one of the iconic images of the 1960s, to be endlessly reproduced in retrospectives on a decade that continues to inform (and misinform) our politics. Yet the gesture was so misunderstood at the time, on all sides, that it is worth slowing down to review, like a slow-motion replay of the race itself.

For Smith and Carlos, the anger had been building for a long time. They grew up on opposite coasts, in families that knew all too well that black and white America were “separate but unequal,” in the words of the Kerner Commission report of 1968. Separately, they made their way to San Jose State University, a track powerhouse, where a lively conversation was taking place on a campus that was roiled, like so many others, over America’s divisions. Hastily improvised classes on black studies were attracting hundreds of auditors; “workshops” often spilled out from classrooms into large, spontaneous gatherings. Nearly every aspect of college life (including all-white fraternities) was held up to scrutiny as these young Americans tried to understand a country that seemed to be better at promising justice than delivering it. Smith and Carlos were growing quickly; stimulated by a sociology instructor, Harry Edwards, they were asking hard questions of their peers and of themselves.

As much as they loved running, they felt ambivalent about their role in the commercialization of sports, at a time when huge amounts were spent on TV advertising but anti-poverty programs were foundering. In the months that followed the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Poor People’s Campaign that limped along after his death, they wanted to run for something more inclusive than an individual medal.

Many leading black athletes were speaking out against racism and poverty that year, including Bill Russell, Jim Brown and Muhammad Ali, who threw his 1960 Olympic medal into the Ohio River after being refused service

in a whites-only restaurant in his hometown, Louisville, Ky. Would it not restore some balance if these rising track stars could win medals of their own and at the same time give voice to the voiceless? African-Americans were almost entirely invisible in the televised version of America that was beamed out over the networks. Who else could speak for them, if not the athletes whose talents earned a few precious moments before a global audience?

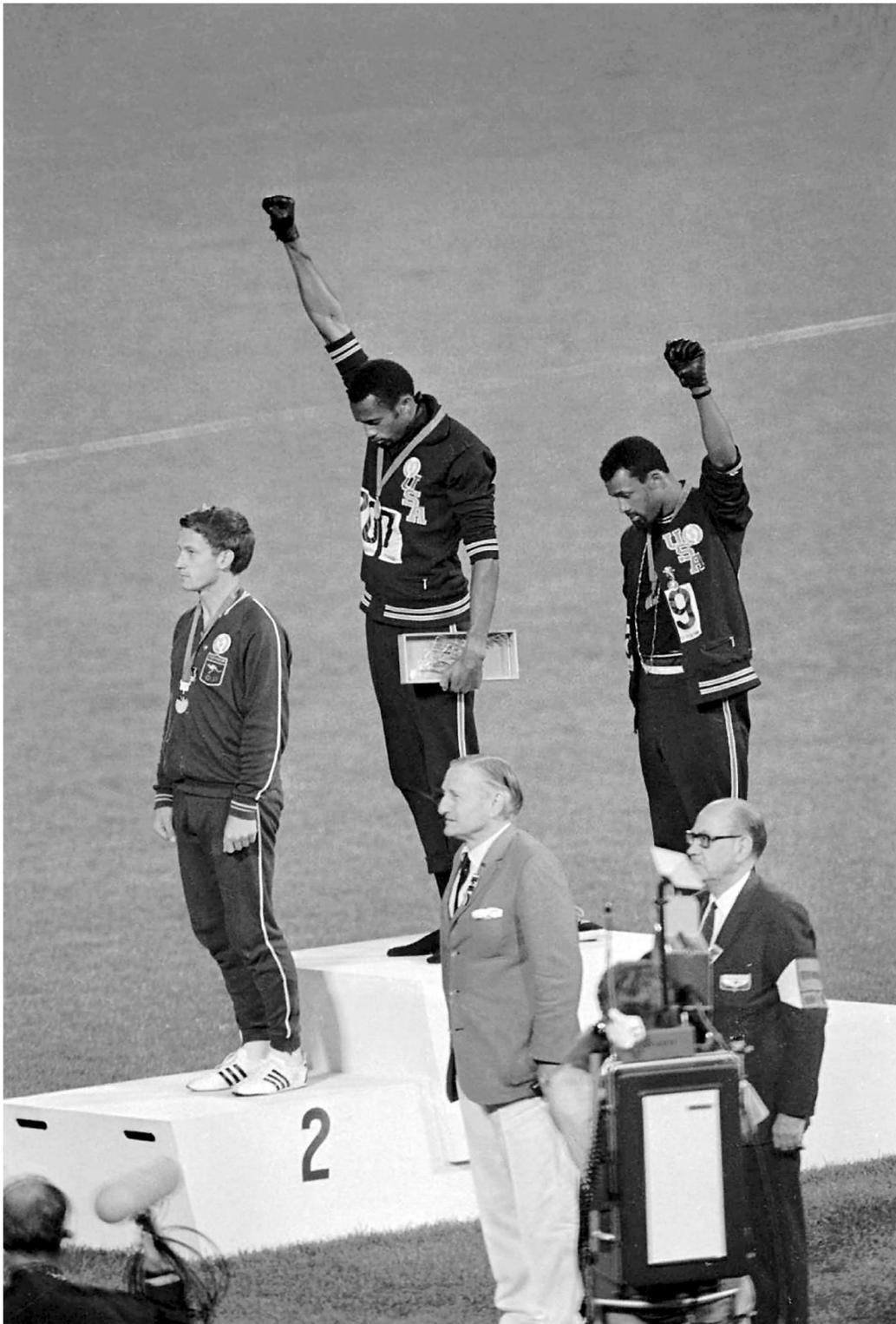
By even appearing at the Olympics, the athletes had avoided a mini-crisis of the year before, when a boycott had seriously been discussed as a protest against the way that black Americans were marginalized. In fact, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then Lew Alcindor) sat out the 1968 Olympics (the men’s basketball team won gold anyway). Carlos and Smith decided to run, but one reason they had black gloves ready is they wanted to avoid shaking hands with Avery Brundage, the chairman of the International Olympic Committee.

Brundage, a white American, was a former Olympian who had run alongside Jim Thorpe in 1912 and steadily made his way upward in a career in high-level sports administration. But he was dogged by rumors of racism and anti-Semitism: In 1936, the year of the Berlin Olympics, he had shown a notable enthusiasm

for the Nazis, and in the years that followed, pursued extensive business interests with them. As war clouds gathered over Europe, he prominently supported the America First movement that opposed United States intervention in World War II. He had led the Olympic committee since 1952 and personified the Old World cluelessness that troubled the young athletes. If they wanted to hear nuanced discussions of poverty, they would have to look elsewhere.

At the same time, Brundage had put all of his weight behind the brave decision to bring the Olympics to Mexico, an important step forward for the games. That in turn had attracted a significant number of new African nations, competing for the first time, and Brundage should get some credit for recognizing, in his way, that a new world was coming into existence. Mexico showed backbone when it refused to receive athletes from the apartheid regime of South Africa. These were to be the “Peaceful Games,” and displays of political tension were unwelcome. Or so the planners hoped.

But that slogan became instantly obsolete with a horrific act of violence as the games were beginning. Youthful rebellions had rattled many nations in 1968 — France was still recovering from the student protests of the spring, and a parallel movement in Czechoslovakia had ended in August when Soviet tanks rolled in. Naturally, Mexican students were keenly aware of these developments, and they too wanted to stand up for democracy in a country where it was hardly an established fact. When young people began organizing mass rallies in Mexico City, just in advance of the Olympics, nervous officials overreacted and sent armed troops after them. On Oct. 2, only two weeks before the 200-meter race, hundreds of students were killed at a rally. That mindless violence did not quite derail the Olympics, but it added to the urgency of an act of conscience, on behalf of the young and disenfranchised. A huge TV audience in the United States was quick to rejoice



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when a courageous Czech gymnast, Vera Caslavská, turned her head away while the Soviet anthem played. They were far less excited when Tommie Smith and John Carlos acted out their own ritual of protest.

If anyone could be counted upon to make a confusing situation worse, it was Avery Brundage. The same figure, so untroubled by Nazi salutes in 1936, was outraged by the clenched fists of his fellow Americans. By coincidence,

clenched fists were historically linked to anti-fascism, but any sense of historical context was quickly lost as everyone got angry at everyone else. Brundage denounced Smith and Carlos for their “warped mentalities” and complained loudly about the “nasty demonstration against the American flag by Negroes,” as if “Negroes” were not fully American. That was exactly the point Smith and Carlos were trying to make. But they were quickly booted

out of the Olympic Village and sent packing. The hysteria that followed was fanned by the media. The sports commentator Brent Musberger was particularly adenooidal, comparing Smith and Carlos to “dark-skinned storm-troopers” as if they, and not Brundage, had Nazi skeletons in their closet. All points of subtlety were quickly overwhelmed by the tidal wave of racialized anger that swept over the

**Tommie Smith, center, and John Carlos, right, after Smith won the gold and Carlos the bronze in the 200-meter run at the 1968 Summer Olympic Games in Mexico City.**

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## Is the dollar stronger than Trump?

When the president undermines the independence of institutions like the Fed, he threatens a pillar of American economic strength.

**Eswar Prasad**

The United States dollar seems to be under threat from multiple quarters. Countries that have been hit by American sanctions, such as Iran and Russia, economic rivals like China, and even allies in the European Union want to shake off the dollar’s tight grip on global finance.

For now, they are out of luck. The American economy and financial markets are the largest in the world, and there are no good alternatives.

In the long run, however, the rest of the world might get its wish. The dollar’s status as the dominant global reserve currency is the result of faith in America’s strong institutions. This includes the checks and balances among different arms of government, the rule of law and an independent central bank. These institutions have proved durable and earned the trust of global investors, who see the dollar as a safe haven in troubled times. But

President Trump and his acolytes are undermining those very institutions with their words and actions.

Other countries have long chafed at the dollar’s dominance in global finance. Nearly two-thirds of the foreign exchange reserves held by the world’s central banks, essentially their rainy-day funds, are held in dollars. It is the currency used to denominate and settle a significant part of international financial transactions. Almost all commodity contracts, including

those for oil, are priced and settled in dollars.

This gives the United States a lot of power. Since dollar transactions usually involve the American banking system, the United States government can put a chokehold on countries like Iran and Russia by limiting their access to global finance. Emerging markets’ fortunes remain tied to the dollar.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, when interest rates in the United States fell toward zero, investors looking for higher yields poured money into emerging markets, causing sharp increases in stock prices and inflation. When the Fed started raising interest rates, capital quickly fled. Countries such as Turkey, India and South Africa, which have borrowed extensively in dollars, face another problem. When American interest rates rise and the dollar strengthens, their debt burden becomes worse.

Emerging markets are keen to shift away from a dollar-dependent global financial system so they are not subject to the spillover effects of the Fed’s actions. China and Russia are setting up their own payment systems to lessen their dependence on American banks. Eurozone officials are eager to do the same so their banks are not held hostage, as they see it, by regulators in the United States.

In the past, none of this would have made a dent in the dollar’s dominance. No other country has the unmatched combination of size, trust and influ-

ence enjoyed by the United States. The global ripple effects of last week’s stock market fluctuations were a clear illustration. But the Trump administration, and its allies in Congress, are wreaking havoc on the institutions that have made the dollar dominant for so long. Republicans in Congress have abrogated their role to act as a check on the powers of the President. They have merrily gone along with harmful economic policies, including tax cuts that will add at least \$1 trillion to government debt when the economy is doing well and needs no help from the government. And they have willingly accepted weakening of regulation on banks and other parts of the economy, raising the risks of financial market problems in the future.

The rule of law is being eviscerated by an administration that is openly venal and sees itself as above the law. And stacking the courts with judges who are chosen for their willingness to advance a particular agenda is eroding confidence in the judicial system.

Finally, Mr. Trump’s open attacks on the Federal Reserve could hurt its

credibility. Households, firms and investors trust the Fed to do what’s necessary to manage inflation, even if that means taking politically unpopular decisions such as raising interest rates when the economy is growing fast. When the president says that the Fed is “crazy” and “out of control” or comments that he is “not happy” or “disappointed” with the Fed’s rate decisions, he could cause irreparable damage. Investors’ confidence in the Fed as an institution that is unmoved by shifting political winds is essential to keeping the dollar strong.

The dollar’s dominance may outlast the Trump era, but it is not inevitable. If the president continues to hack away at America’s institutions, the dollar, too, will suffer. This might end up becoming one of the biggest scars the administration leaves on the American economy.

**ESWAR PRASAD** is a professor at Cornell University, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and author of “The Dollar Trap: How the U.S. Dollar Tightened Its Grip on Global Finance.”