

Opinion: Don't forget human rights lessons of past Games

By LZ Granderson, CNN

Usually when we talk about the 1936 Olympics in Berlin we focus on two men – Adolf Hitler and Jesse Owens – and rightfully so. They are the two with an undeniable impact on history, albeit in vastly different ways.

But in light of President Obama's recent remarks on "The Tonight Show" denouncing Russia's new anti-gay laws, laws that have led to bloodshed in the streets, it is important that we remember Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller.

They too were at those Games. They too left a mark.

You see, the day before they were scheduled to run in the 400-meter relay, their coach, Dean Cromwell, replaced them.

They were not injured.

They did not break any team rules nor were they disqualified for any violations.

They were, however, Jewish, and this was Nazi Germany, which had adopted the Nuremberg laws limiting Jewish citizens' rights a year earlier. Apparently, Cromwell, along with leaders from the U.S. Olympic Committee, decided it would be best if Glickman and Stoller did not compete.

At the time I'm sure it seemed like a decision that would only hurt the two men. After all, the 400, led by Owens, still won gold.

Today we know better.

Today we look at that decision and lower our heads in shame,

understanding that it made us complicit with something that evolved into a far worse crime than unjustly replacing a pair of sprinters. In the moment when we should have spoken up, we remained silent.

And so here we are again: an Olympics on the horizon, another host country with recently legislated laws persecuting a group of people, and for a while, we were silent. And then Tuesday happened.

“I’ve been very clear that when it comes to universal rights, when it comes to people’s basic freedoms, that whether you are discriminating on the basis of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation, you are violating the basic morality that I think should transcend every country,” Obama said, going on to talk about how Russia’s treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people goes against the spirit of the Olympics.

He did not call for a boycott.

But on Wednesday he canceled a one-on-one meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin planned for September. The White House cited Russia’s decision to grant asylum to National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden and “lack of progress on issues such as missile defense and arms control” among other reasons. But it also mentioned human rights issues.

Recently, Secretary of State John Kerry received a letter from 88 members of Congress – Republicans and Democrats – urging him to do something to guarantee the safety of LGBT Americans visiting Russia during that time. That leaves 447 lawmakers we should be asking why they did not sign that letter.

Last month BuzzFeed provided the world photos of LGBT people being violently beaten by anti-gay protesters and police in Russia.

There are reports of LGBT teens being kidnapped, bullied,

tortured and killed.

Russian officials have said they don't condone the attacks, but police have stood by while they happened and then arrested the battered victims for being gay. And because it is unclear whether or not the anti-gay laws will be enforced during the Olympics, the safety of all Americans – because you can be arrested if police think you look gay or even if you support gays – is in question.

Which brings me to: Why aren't the names of all 535 members of Congress on that letter?

In talking about the 1936 Olympics, I do not equate what is happening in Russia to what happened to Jewish people during World War II. I just want to remind you that the Holocaust did not happen overnight. It was subtle.

Surgical.

In silence.

These new anti-gay laws are disturbingly similar to the anti-Semitic Nuremberg laws Hitler passed before the 1936 Olympics. And with the Pew Institute finding 84 percent of Russians believe society should reject gay people, perhaps some saying they object to gays for fear of arrest, the world should question how far Russia intends to go.

We should question how far Russia, our lukewarm ally, intends to go and what our participation in the 2014 Olympic Games will look like generations from now.

In one of his final interviews before passing away in 2001, Glickman told the San Diego Jewish Press-Heritage that there had been some talk of boycotting the 1936 Olympics because of Hitler, but no one foresaw what would happen to the Jews a short time later.

“There is no way in the world that I would think of going to

Nazi Germany,” he said. “The Holocaust and those things around Nazi Germany which we all loathe weren’t in existence in 1936.”

No one can predict the future. But last week Obama showed he learned an important lesson from our Olympic past – offering silence to appease evil is a senseless endeavor because evil will never be satisfied. Now it’s our turn to speak up. There are 447 members of Congress who have yet to sign that letter to Kerry – we need to be asking why.