

Opinion: L.A. is too good to host the Olympics

By Joe Mathews

Los Angeles should drop its bid for the 2024 Olympics—before it gets chosen.

Paris is the heavy favorite to be awarded the 2024 games during a vote coming up in September. But the contest has changed, with all other contenders for 2024 having dropped out (Budapest bailed last month), leaving L.A. as the only challenger. And when you look at the L.A. and Paris plans, L.A. has the stronger bid; it's far more likely to produce exciting games while avoiding the organizational problems and cost overruns of previous Olympics.



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What's most promising about L.A.'s bid is also what makes it perilous. L.A. is bidding not merely to hold the Olympics, but to transform them. Specifically, L.A. pledges "to create a new Games for a new era."

There's much transforming to be done. The Olympics over the last generation has become more associated with corruption than sport: doping, vote-buying by bid cities, displacement of poor people by Olympic construction, propagandistic use of the games by human rights violators from Russia to China, and overspending that leaves Olympic cities with debt and dead

infrastructure.

All of which begs these questions: How can we be sure that Olympic corruption won't sully our reputation? And, if L.A. succeeds in hosting a "clean" Olympics, what's to prevent the Olympics' wheeler-dealers from exploiting a triumph here to take advantage of other cities for future Games?

Such questions may sound peculiar, but California has a peculiar relationship with the Olympics. While the rest of the world has soured on the corrupt Olympic movement, we remain an island of Olympic love. One L.A. survey showed 88 percent support for the Games.

California's Olympics love is rooted in nostalgia for the famously well-run and profitable 1984 Games, when L.A. embraced a vision of itself as an international city. But the Games we're bidding for now are not those Olympics. Today's Games are bloated, with too many sports and expenses.

They also come with more baggage. The most recent Summer Olympics, held in Brazil last summer at twice the anticipated cost, were a disaster for that developing country, contributing to economic and political turmoil, and leaving behind useless infrastructure. The budget for the 2020 Games in Tokyo is now projected at four times the original estimate. The 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, were beset by state-sponsored doping and massive construction corruption. The 2008 Games in Beijing provided a pretext for China's rulers to crack down on dissent and demolish important neighborhoods

These recent games centered on the "Development Model" of Olympics—using the bid to transform cities by building. L.A.'s bid is a welcome departure; it relies on existing facilities for nearly everything, containing the projected budget at \$5.3 billion. (Sochi spent a reported \$50 billion).

There's a strong case that the Olympics serves L.A.'s self-interest. California's economy depends so heavily on

international trade and tourism that an Olympics could advertise our global connections and openness, particularly as much of America turns isolationist. Plus, a 2024 Games would allow L.A. to show off civic improvements, including its expanding transit system.

And the Olympics would be fortunate to have us host. No city in the world is better suited to the games, from our good weather to our expertise in handling mega-events. "Make Los Angeles the permanent host of the Summer Olympics," the sports economist Andrew Zimbalist advised last year.

Some news reports have suggested that President Trump and his bans on travel and refugees and immigrants could hurt L.A.'s chances of winning. But the French have their own anti-immigrant racist populist—the leading presidential contender Marine Le Pen—to defend.

No, the real question about L.A.'s bid is whether we're too good for the Olympics. Our association is likely to sully us, and require moral compromises. The *New York Times* reported recently that the U.S. Olympic Committee was soft-pedaling its response to the Russia doping scandal because of fears that a hard U.S. line could hurt L.A.'s Olympic bid.

If L.A.'s bid wins, our Games could become an Olympic version of the "The Bridge on the River Kwai," a 1957 film classic about Allied prisoners of war who dutifully build a railroad bridge that serves the interests of their Japanese captors. In the same way, an Olympic movement, restored by Los Angeles' dutiful work, would be newly free to go back into the world and grant the Games to repressive regimes and developing countries that can't really afford it. Do we really want to make that possible?

Nope. It's not California's job to save the Olympics. L.A. should preserve its Olympic ideals by dropping its bid and, yes, handing the 2024 Games to the French. *C'est la vie*. But

we'll always have 1984.

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