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FORGETTING THE OLYMPICS

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The Beijing Olympics seem to be a big thing. Opponents of China's domestic and foreign policies argue its government will use the Games of the XXIX Olympiad to score a public relations coup, a grand spectacle to fool the Chinese people and the world into believing that China is a modern, prosperous and free society. The Chinese government, as seen in President Hu Jintao's recent statement calling on all Chinese to make the successful hosting of the games the nation's top priority, is also betting a lot on the Olympic Games. Chinese leaders seem to believe it will be a historic coming-of-age ceremony, a showcase for China's rapid development in recent years and a display of its legitimacy as the government of more than one-fifth of the world's population.

History suggests that both China's opponents and its leaders will be proven wrong. At the end of the day, both foreigners and the Chinese will most likely remember the Beijing Olympics as just a series of exciting competitions, a collection of inspiring achievements by gifted individuals. There is the potential for an incident with international repercussions — a terrorist attack or crippling protests — and the relatively cleaner air in Beijing may move its citizens to demand that they be able to see the sky every day. But history tells us the games will likely have little lasting effect on the lives of ordinary Chinese.

Consider the historic example set by the Games of the III Olympiad, some 104 years ago in St. Louis, Mo. It was the first Olympics to have a recorded case of doping — a runner took small amounts of strychnine. Athletes battled air pollution; one developed gastric ailments from digesting too much of the dust stirred up by the pace cars. Finally, American Fred Lorz was eventually stripped of his gold medal after it was revealed he had ridden much of his race in his pace car. And these three scandals came out of just one event — the marathon!

Unlike the Beijing Olympics, there was no question of world leaders showing support for the games by attending the opening ceremony. None did. There was no march of nations, no torch relay and very little of the pageantry and commercialism associated with recent Olympics. Few people in the host country or from the other 12 nations that sent athletes even knew that the Olympics were being held. The head and most of the members of the International Olympic Committee did not bother to attend, and neither did the leader of the host country, a newly

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emerging superpower eager to host as many international events as possible in order to demonstrate the ingenuity, industry and strength of its citizens. 1904 was an election year, and President Theodore Roosevelt did not have the time to travel to St. Louis for the first American-hosted Olympics.

The III Olympiad should demonstrate to anxious Chinese hosts and hosts of future Olympics that no matter how badly you screw up, everything will be forgotten —eventually. It might take a century. Few Americans know that the 1904 games were held in St. Louis, and even the citizens of that city on the Mississippi River are not familiar with its story. Only the student-athletes of Washington University in St. Louis realize that their small Francis Field and antique Francis Gymnasium are the few surviving monuments of the III Olympiad.

The historical record also suggests that American critics who compare the Beijing games to the 1936 Berlin Olympics may wish to further indulge their passion for history and read “The Olympic Century: The Official History of the Modern Olympic Movement” (World Sport Research & Publications). As the research therein shows, the American organizers of the 1904 Olympic Games worked with the ethnology department of the nearby St. Louis World's Fair to hold an athletic meet as part of its “Anthropology Days” the week before the official Olympic Games. In this event, American Indians and other “tribal peoples” from Japan, Patagonia, the Philippines and Africa competed in “primitive” sports and competition in order to develop scientific “interracial athletic records.” James Sullivan, the head of the Olympic organizing committee, remarked that the poor performance of the tribal athletes showed that “the savage is not the natural athlete we have been led to believe.” Using sports to tout national racial superiority and justify colonialism was very much in vogue in St. Louis in 1904.

But the failure of the 1904 Olympics to leave any lasting memory in America shows us why the Beijing Olympics will most likely soon be forgotten in China as well. The St. Louis Olympics failed because it was just a sideshow of the much larger and more widely popular 1904 World's Fair. The 1900 Paris Olympics and the 1908 London Olympics were also largely unpopular for the same reason, leading the International Olympic Committee to separate the Olympics from the expos in subsequent years.

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The Olympics are just a few weeks of events, viewed in person by, at most, hundreds of thousands of wealthy ticket holders. World expositions, however, are extravagant multi-month festivals that attract millions of national and international tourists. In 1904, St. Louis had some 500,000 residents, and yet the world's fair drew more than 19 million visitors during the summer months. As the history of that event shows — and this St. Louis is very much aware of, as seen in its enthusiastic 2004 centennial celebration — long-lasting and significant developments in American society came from that exposition and others like it in Chicago and New York. The fair is credited with introducing the newly urban populations of America's rapidly growing cities — half of all Americans were still farmers at this time — to the benefits of child health care, public education, sanitation, support for the arts and music, and a host of other lifestyle benefits to living in cities that Americans now take for granted.

This is the ultimate reason why the Beijing Olympics will most likely have only fleeting significance: In 2010, the World Expo will go to Shanghai — the first world's fair to be held in a developing country. For almost all of the 1.3 billion people in China, the 2008 Olympics will mainly be something merely seen on television. Most of the close interaction with people from other nations will be restricted to the backslaps and high fives of the athletes. The 2010 World Expo, however, will draw tens of millions of urbanites and peasants to press the flesh with each other and with millions of foreigners from hundreds of nations and regions. And all of them will be there to talk about, explore and show off what they believe to be the finest features of their home countries. The history of the 1904 Olympics and St. Louis World's Fair tells us that China's big international coming-of-age party will be in Shanghai in 2010, not Beijing in 2008.