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Welcome to the Orwell Olympics



By Marty Kaplan

Now that every dissident within a hundred miles of Beijing has been intimidated, jailed or internally exiled; now that the Chinese communist party has shut down formerly legal means of citizen redress, like petitioning the government; now that free assembly has been banned, unsightly small businesses have been bulldozed, hotel computers have been bugged, and the foreign press has been bamboozled, the “quiet diplomacy” favored until this week by President Bush and International Olympic Committee president Jacques Rogge has given way to Mr. Bush’s “deep concerns” about human rights in China.

Prodded perhaps by Condi Rice’s veepstakes vetting, the president is finally saying in public, in Thailand, what he says he has been saying in private: “America stands in firm opposition to China’s detention of political dissidents, human rights advocates and religious activists. We speak out for a free press, freedom of assembly and labor rights — not to antagonize China’s leaders, but because trusting its people with greater freedom is the only way for China to develop its full potential.”

It’s about time, cowboy.

In 2001, the secretary general of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee said that journalists will have “complete freedom to report.” What a difference seven years make. According to the *Washington Post*, spokesmen for Beijing’s Olympic Organizing Committee and for the Chinese Foreign Ministry said at a recent press conference that “reporters did not actually need to visit blocked Web sites to do their jobs.” Sure enough, journalists arriving at the Olympic media center last week found that their Web browsers could not connect to sites like Western news outlets, human rights organizations, Wikipedia and Chinese dissident groups like the Falun Gong and Free Tibet.

Ever since Beijing won the venue for the games, M. Rogge has been telling everyone who’ll listen what a swell development this will be for free speech and human rights in China. Instead, foreign news crews have found their access to Tiananmen Square sharply curtailed — lest those images remind viewers of the tank crackdown of dissidents in 1989 — and thousands of non-violent protesters across China, according

to a new Amnesty International report subtitled “Broken Promises,” have been persecuted, punished and jailed.

Last week Sen. Brownback (R-Kan.), whose rages I have previously not shared, released documents showing that international hotel chains have been required by the Chinese Public Security Bureau, under threat of harsh punishment, to install Internet spyware designed to capture Beijing’s hotel guests’ Web browsing history, their Googling, even their keystrokes, which means their e-mail.

It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if the keystrokes of foreign tourists, athletes’ families and NBC executives were being captured today by the Chinese security apparatus. Nearly 30 years ago, soon after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing, I went to China as part of the highest-level official U.S. visit to date. The Chinese housed us in a campus-like compound of guesthouses, where we took walks between events. One member of our delegation, a National Security Agency staffer, pointed out to me a picturesque bridge where Henry Kissinger had often paused to chat privately with aides during his visits. Turns out that bridge, like all the places we stayed, was bugged. The upside of this was getting to go to a meeting in the new U.S. embassy in Beijing, where confidential conversations were enabled by entering a floating clear-sided room-within-a-room that totally reminded me of the cool cone of silence in the television series “Get Smart.”

China has come quite a distance since 1979. Economically its story is breathtaking, and freedoms like travel and property ownership have made demonstrable gains. But China’s human rights record remains depressing, its tolerance of dissent and minorities is minimal, its environmental damage to the planet is terrifying, its intransigence on the genocide in Darfur is unconscionable and its cheap exports are candy to American consumers.

The \$900 million that NBC paid for the rights to broadcast the Olympics, like the billions that China spent to get ready for the games, have created a Potemkin village for the world to admire. From Rupert Murdoch’s kowtow to the Chinese police state, which enabled him to crack the Chinese market by eliminating BBC News from his satellite television programming; to the complicity of Google, Yahoo, Microsoft and Cisco with Chinese Internet censors, the rationale has always been the same: The more we engage with China, the more free their people will be. Once those 1.3 billion people develop a taste for openness, there’ll be no stopping them.

Why do I have the feeling that if hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of Chinese imports and of American business investments in China were not at stake, “quiet diplomacy” wouldn’t have become the slogan *du jour*?

President Reagan’s “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down that wall!” wasn’t particularly quiet. President Bush doesn’t have to ask Mr. Hu Jintao to tear down the Great Wall of China, but the least he can do — now that the opportunity represented by the years running up to the Olympics has been squandered — is to use in public, in China, some of the lovely human rights language he claims he’s been saying in private.