

Copenhagen in our Rear View Mirror

Licking our wounds and counting our blessings

Using an all-too-familiar analogy with Chicagoans, on October 2 in Copenhagen, we dodged a very expensive bullet. Yeah, getting ousted in the first round was a bummer, but finishing #2 in a close vote might have encouraged City Hall to try again to fleece the citizenry. Despite all of the cheerleading and misinformation, host cities tend to take a financial bath, and Chicago would have gotten into that same tub.

With the exception of Los Angeles, which was the host in both 1932 and 1984, no U.S. candidate city had gone into the voting in a stronger position than Chicago in 2009. (After the social turmoil surrounding the 1968 Games in Mexico City, the assassination of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972, the financial and tactical disasters in Montreal in 1976, hosting the Olympics was not a hot property; no other city bid against L.A. in 1978. The same was true when it hosted the 1932 Summer Games—in the midst of a worldwide depression, no other city bid.)

We were coming off a presidential election that represented, in part, a turning point for American foreign policy, and the president is from Chicago. Plus the election of John McCain, who chaired a Senate committee that embarrassed the IOC bribe-taking on the part of its officials in advance of the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City, would certainly have doomed Chicago from the outset. And the geographical distribution—with the Games in Asia in 2008 and Europe in 2012—favored us.

Sure, the Asian nations and their co-conspirators, perhaps egged on by Rio, may have gamed the system and resorted to strategic voting to get us booted early, but it would be unseemly for anyone in Chicago to complain about voting irregularities, fixing elections or voter fraud.

By Allen R. Sanderson Then, what went wrong? This is best seen as a multiple-choice question, for which the correct answer is “all of the above.”

A) President Obama gave his three-states-in-one-day campaign stump speech rather than hanging around Copenhagen. Oprah is no Pelé—or Michael Jordan; the face missing from the 1992 Dream Team T-shirt still prefers greener pastures and fairways. And our final presentation was flatter than central Illinois. (In the end, these deficiencies were probably not crucial; an analysis of the vote suggests that all along it was going to be Brazil’s day in the sun.)

B) Two greedy pigs at the broadcast-revenue trough, the USOC and the IOC, continued their long-standing squabble, intensified by the recent, clumsy unilateral attempt by the former to siphon off more spoils for itself, which angered the IOC to no end. And in general the USOC couldn’t organize a two-float parade.

C) America and American foreign policy still stick in the craw for many,



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and being the New York Yankees of the economic world will always bring some scorn and resentment. First-round voting for Chicago in 2009 and New York City in 2005 suggests our friends are few and fickle.

D) Looking inward, maybe a little introspection and finger pointing at those who created and orchestrated the bid in “the Chicago way” is warranted. In potentially damaging situations, successful firms and public officials do better being open and out-front rather than being dragged into the spotlight kicking and screaming. And those images of murdered school children, the parking meter debacle, habitual cost-overruns and elected—and appointed—officials and their clouded cronies doing perp walks were easy fodder for late-night comedians and an appropriately skeptical public. The Cubs were not the only local franchise to have a disappointing year.

E) Finally, perhaps prevailing against Los Angeles in the spring of 2007 did us no favor. That city more than any other in the United States can pull off a giant party on the cheap. And thus we got into a we-can-do-it-cheaper-than-you-can mentality. Once named a candidate city, it was then simply impossible to make an about-face and promise to spend more—Rio committed itself to the largest financial outlay of any of the four candidate cities; we forgot Burnham’s admonition to make no little plans, and the legacy aspects of our bid were sorely lacking.

If there is a silver—or even bronze—lining, it is this: with individual and corporate philanthropy no longer distracted and diverted with fantasies of 2016, we now have the opportunity over the next several years to return to Chicago 2016’s original motto. With well-thought, carefully executed plans and public policies for housing, transportation, education, other civic amenities and the downtrodden, we can really begin to “Stir the Soul” of this magnificent city. □