

# An Olympian Task: Security for the Super Bowl, World Cup, and Olympics

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Over the next four years, California will host a number of national and international sporting events. These include Super Bowls LX and LXI, which will take place in 2026 and 2027; 14 of the FIFA 2026 Men's World Cup soccer matches; and the 2028 Summer Olympics and Paralympics. Collectively, these events will involve thousands of athletes and officials and bring millions of visitors to the state. It will be a massive and complex logistical undertaking. In today's unsettled world, security will be a major component.

In May 2025, I was invited by the Commonwealth Club World Affairs of California and the Mineta Transportation Institute to talk about the current threat environment and the challenges of securing global sports events. That took me back more than 40 years to when I was asked to assist those charged with security of the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles in appreciating and assessing the potential terrorist threat.

## The 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles

The threat in 1984 appeared as menacing then as it does now. The tense international landscape could—and did—directly affect security calculations. It was the height of the Cold War. Soviet troops had invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and were engaged in a bloody conflict with Afghan *mujahideen* and Arab jihadists, who were being assisted principally by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Moscow had expected the invasion to be a quick military operation—a piece of cake. It was turning into a protracted war, coming into its fifth year with little progress being made against a tough, well-armed resistance.

In September 1983, a Soviet fighter shot down a Korean Airlines Boeing 747 when it briefly strayed into Soviet airspace during a routine flight from New York to Seoul. The 269 dead included 62 Americans, one of whom was a US Congressman. Outraged by the attack, California's State Assembly and Senate passed a resolution urging President Reagan to bar Soviet athletes from participating in the 1984 Olympics.<sup>1</sup> These events raised tensions between the US and the Soviet Union to a level not seen since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provoked a US-led boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980. Payback came in 1984 when the Soviet Union and some of its allies, citing security concerns, pulled out of the Los Angeles Olympics—but it was more than mere revenge. Soviet leadership

1 Senator John Doolittle, "Doolittle Condemns Soviet Aggression," September 2, 1983, Doolittle, John— Banning of USSR from 1984 Olympics. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, [https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/smf/publicliaison/blackwell/box-007/40\\_047\\_7006969\\_007\\_012\\_2017.pdf](https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/digitallibrary/smf/publicliaison/blackwell/box-007/40_047_7006969_007_012_2017.pdf). The resolution was rescinded in February 1984 and replaced by a substitute resolution welcoming athletes from all nations. See: "The California Senate sent to the Assembly Thursday..." UPI Archives. <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/02/09/The-California-Senate-sent-to-the-Assembly-Thursday-a/3774445150800/>

viewed Olympic competition as an extension of the Cold War contest, including the performance of the hosts, and did not want to see unfavorable comparisons in organizational skills between the Western capitalist, privately-run games in Los Angeles with the marred central government-run games in Moscow. It used the boycott as an attempt to undermine the games in Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> Soviet security concerns were propaganda, but they prompted worries that Soviet operatives might create some kind of incident at the Los Angeles Olympics to prove their validity.

Much of our concern in 1984 also focused on the Middle East where Iran and Iraq were at war, a brutal civil war raged in Lebanon, and Israeli forces, which had invaded Lebanon in 1982, still occupied part of the country.

Palestinian militant groups had been forced out of Lebanon in 1982, but they continued their international terrorist campaign. Israel's occupation had reduced the number of attacks in Israel, but attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets abroad increased in 1984. The Abu Nidal Organization, backed by Syria, was one of the most active groups. Between 1980 and the opening of the 1984 Olympics, the group carried out assassinations and bombings in 17 countries, the majority of them targeting Arab governments and the Palestine Liberation Organization—Abu Nidal opposed any resolution of the conflict other than the complete destruction of Israel.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, which had held 52 Americans hostage for 444 days from November 1979 to January 1981, still viewed the US as the “great Satan.” Iran continued to kill its opponents abroad with two murders in Paris in 1984. And it sought to expand its influence in the Middle East. (Iran also decided to boycott the 1984 Olympics.)

In 1983, Shia extremists in Lebanon, supported by Iran, bombed the American embassy, and later crashed a truck bomb into the US Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 Americans. Until 9/11, this event accounted for the greatest loss of American life in a single terrorist attack. A month later, Iranian-backed terrorists bombed the American and French Embassies in Kuwait.

Large-scale hostage incidents, massive vehicle bombings, and blatant state-sponsored assassinations represented a dramatic escalation of terrorism and led to a reframing of how we perceived the threat. Until then, the US had viewed international terrorism essentially as a problem of local law enforcement and international diplomacy.

In the 1970s, terrorists wanted a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead. In the 1980s, terrorists measured their success by body count. These new attacks, which targeted US strategic interests, pushed terrorism toward the domain of warfare.

In November 1983, I had been requested to assist the Pentagon commission investigating the Beirut bombing.<sup>3</sup> The commission concluded “that state sponsored terrorism is an important part of the spectrum of warfare and that adequate response to this increasing threat requires an active national policy which seeks to deter attack or reduce its effectiveness.”<sup>4</sup>

2 Philip A. D'Agati, *The Cold War and the 1984 Olympic Games: A Soviet-American War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

3 Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Lesson of Beirut: Testimony before the Long Commission*. Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1984. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/notes/N2114.html>

4 *Report of the DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983*. December 20, 1983. <https://irp.fas.org/threat/beirut-1983.pdf>

That conclusion was reflected in an April 1984 national security directive that directed the Pentagon to “develop a full range of military options to combat terrorism throughout the entire terrorist threat spectrum.” At the time, this seemed highly hypothetical, but as terrorist attacks continued to escalate, culminating in the 9/11 attacks, it became real.

While the international scene commanded our attention, our immediate security concerns in 1984 focused on violent domestic extremists. During the 1970s, the US experienced an average of 50-60 terrorist bombings a year. The volume had declined by the end of the decade, but domestic terrorist violence continued.

In the months leading up to the Olympics, a Maoist group carried out a series of bombings at the US Capitol Building and other facilities in Washington DC. Dump trucks filled with sand blocked the driveways at the White House. Meanwhile, economic distress in the farm belt in the early 1980s had fueled a rise in domestic rightwing extremist groups like “Posse Comitatus” and “Covenant, Sword, and Arm of the Lord”.

The Los Angeles Olympics also faced possible threats from Puerto Rican separatists who had carried on a decades-long terrorist campaign. In September 1983, they robbed a Wells Fargo depot in Connecticut, netting them \$7 million. Cuban exile groups went after countries and companies doing business with Castro. The Jewish Defense League continued its terrorist campaign against Soviet and Arab targets. Croatian nationalists targeted Yugoslav officials. And Armenian extremists had carried out bombings and assassinated the Turkish consul general in Los Angeles in 1982. Any of these foreign quarrels could endanger the safety of athletes from the targeted countries.

### **Changing Olympics attitude toward security**

In 1972, Palestinian terrorists had seized Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics and held them for 20 hours before the standoff ended with a botched rescue attempt and the deaths of all 11 Israeli hostages. The tragedy—watched on television worldwide—changed the Olympics forever. Security became a major issue in all subsequent Olympic games. Despite the debacle in Munich, however, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) saw its mission as promoting international sports, and above the fray of international politics. It was cautious about involving itself in security matters, which could conflict with its determination to remain politically neutral.

At the same time, however, the turbulent world situation and the obvious conclusion that athletic competition could take place only in a secure environment made this *Olympian* detachment unsustainable. There was also the practical concern that the heavy financial burden of security might cause cities to lose interest in bidding to host the Olympic Games. The shadow of the Munich terrorist incident and the huge debt incurred by Montreal, the site of the 1976 Olympics, discouraged many potential bidders. Los Angeles and Tehran were the only cities to seriously bid for the 1984 Olympics.

Even before the Los Angeles Olympics, the 1988 Olympic Games scheduled for Seoul had already created a tense situation on the Korean Peninsula and beyond as North Korea tried to sabotage the event. In 1983, as part of this campaign, North Korean operatives detonated a huge bomb in Rangoon, Burma (now Yangon, Myanmar) in an attempt to assassinate the president of South

Korean and his cabinet during a state visit. North Korea also boycotted the 1984 Olympics while the Republic of Korea, after boycotting the Moscow Olympics, decided to send 175 athletes to Los Angeles, adding another dimension to the threat landscape. (Less than ten months before the Seoul Olympics, North Korean operatives would bomb a Korean Airlines jet, killing 115 passengers and crew on board.)

Montreal was next up after Munich. Canada spent \$52 million (about a quarter billion today) on security for the 1976 Olympics—an unprecedented expenditure more than 25 times what the German government spent on security for the Munich Olympics. It contributed to a massive debt for the host city. It is estimated that \$150 million was spent on security for the 1984 Olympics—over \$462 million in today’s dollars. Olympic security costs in recent Olympics have run between \$1 and 2 billion.<sup>5</sup> (As Los Angeles prepares to host the 2028 Olympics, it faces a variety of financial challenges, including from the January 2025 wildfires. The city already must deal with a nearly \$1 billion dollar deficit<sup>6</sup> while the State of California faces projected \$10-20 billion annual deficits for the next several years.<sup>7</sup>) With security in mind, the IOC in 1980 promoted Ashwini Kumar to its Executive Board. Kumar was active in the international sports movement and a delegate to the IOC, but he was also an experienced former police officer. He then became the IOC “Security Delegate,” a position created for him. It was Kumar who persuaded the IOC that it had to become more involved in security matters.<sup>8</sup>

Kumar visited Los Angeles and presented a terrorist threat assessment for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. It focused mainly on domestic threats and would be a fascinating historical document to read now. Kumar would help to bring stakeholders together with each other and with those who had managed security at previous Olympic games, creating a continuing institutional memory.

To lessen the financial burden of security on the host cities, Kumar and the IOC sought to shift responsibility for security from the local Organizing Committees to national governments where the events would take place, persuading governments to see the games as a national enterprise that required national protection. US government agencies assisted in the security of the 1984 Olympics with personnel and equipment, but did not contribute to security costs. That would later change.

5 James McBride, Noah Berman, and Melissa Manno, “The Economics of Hosting Olympic Games,” *Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder*, July 20, 2024. [https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/economics-hosting-olympic-games#:~:text=Operational%20costs%20make%20up%20a,billion%20and%20\\$2%20billion%20since.olympic-games#:~:text=Operational%20costs%20make%20up%20a,billion%20and%20\\$2%20billion%20since](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/economics-hosting-olympic-games#:~:text=Operational%20costs%20make%20up%20a,billion%20and%20$2%20billion%20since.olympic-games#:~:text=Operational%20costs%20make%20up%20a,billion%20and%20$2%20billion%20since).

6 Shawn Hubler and Orlando Mayorquin, “Los Angeles Faces Nearly \$1 Billion Deficit as It Rebuilds from Fires,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/19/us/los-angeles-budget-deficit.html>

7 California, Legislative Analyst’s Office. The 202-26 Budget: *Multiyear Budget Outlook*. May 24, 2025. <https://www.lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/5052>

8 Jörg Krieger, Stephan Wassong, *Dark Sides of Sport*. Champaign, IL: Common Ground Research Networks, 2019; see also: Vivek Shukla, “Ashwini Kumar: The Indian who made the Olympics Safe,” *Organiser*, July 28, 2024. <https://organiser.org/2024/07/28/249047/bharat/ashwini-kumar-the-indian-who-made-the-olympics-safe/>; Austin Duckworth, *Guards at the Games: The International Olympic Committee and Security, 1972-1996*. Ph.D Dissertation, and, Austin Duckworth and Thomas M. Hunt, “Protecting the Games: The International Olympic Committee and Security, 1972-1984,” *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, Vol. 25 (2016). <https://digital.la84.org/digital/collection/p17103coll10/id/13935>

## Organizational complexities

Organizing Olympic security is a complex enterprise. The 1984 Olympics would reportedly be the largest and most expensive peacetime security effort to that date. The host city's Olympics Organizing Committee, headed by Peter Ueberroth, was officially responsible for *coordinating* security, but it had no authority over local government and police departments, state forces, or federal agencies. The Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee (LAOOC) could get these organizations into the same room, but it could not give them orders.

The situation in Los Angeles was especially complex. The 31 venues for the events and three Olympic villages where the athletes were housed were spread out over 10,000 square miles in six counties. Los Angeles County alone had 45 separate police departments, not counting the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. California Highway Patrol and the California National Guard would be involved, as well as the FBI, Secret Service, and other federal entities. Jurisdictional disputes, not uncommon in law enforcement, made friction inevitable.

Federal involvement in Olympic security steadily increased over time, reflecting a growing threat. In 1998, as part of another national directive to combat terrorism, the executive branch introduced the concept of a "National Security Special Event" (NSSE). The directive became law in 2000.

An NSSE was a large-scale event, likely to be attended by US officials as well as foreign dignitaries, where the demands for security could involve multiple jurisdictions, and would exceed local and state resources. The current list of NSSEs includes the President's State of the Union Address, the national political conventions, presidential inaugurations, United Nations General Assemblies, as well as major national and international sporting events hosted by the US. The Super Bowl and the Olympic Games were added in 2002.

Legislation gives the lead role to the US Secret Service in planning and coordinating security. This improves overall coordination, but federal authority does not always supersede state and local jurisdictions. As an example, in September 2024, the counting and certification of the electoral votes became an NSSE. However, the conduct of the elections and counting the ballots remain the domain of state governments.

## Local tensions

My charge in 1984 was international and domestic terrorism, but ordinary crime was a headline issue in Los Angeles at the time. Today, we are concerned with deaths and social disintegration caused by the spread of fentanyl. In the 1980s, California confronted the crack cocaine epidemic, which had ruinous effects on communities. Gang violence soared. Black neighborhoods in south central Los Angeles were especially hard hit. The Los Angeles Coliseum was dangerously close to the epicenter. In 1984, then Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates thought that the Olympics "was a nice event—for Greece."<sup>9</sup>

Adding to apprehension, ten days before the Olympics were to begin, a gunman walked into a McDonalds in San Ysidro California and fatally shot 22 people, wounding 19 more. This was

<sup>9</sup> Daryl Gates, Chief: *My Life in the LAPD*. New York: Bantam Books, 1992.



before the dramatic increase in mass shootings in the US, which began around 2000, and it was the deadliest mass shooting in the US at that time. The attacker was mentally disturbed, not ideologically-motivated.

Another preview of what could happen came the night before the Olympics opening ceremony when an angry young man deliberately steered his car onto the sidewalk in Westwood, a Los Angeles neighborhood near UCLA (one of the Olympic villages), to run down pedestrians. He killed one, injured approximately 50, and planned to continue running down more victims, but his rampage ended when his car hit a bus kiosk. His grievances were personal—not political, and he had a history of mental illness, but was judged sane at the time of attack and later sentenced to 106 years in prison. Although neither attack turned out to have anything to do with the Olympics, they provided ominous reminders that terrorists were not the only threat.

Olympic organizers focused on the overall security of the games. Police focused on protecting the athletes and spectators that would be in the area, and on responding to events that might occur. The Los Angeles Police Department worried that the diversion of police to Olympic security—especially a major incident like a protracted hostage situation—could lead to increases in crime elsewhere in the city. LAPD had limited human resources. The New York Police Department at the time had about 36,000 police to protect a population of about 7 million people in a land area of about 300 square miles. The LAPD at the time had 6,850 police officers<sup>10</sup> to protect more than 3 million people spread over nearly 500 square miles.

Given the geographical challenges, it is not surprising that LAPD was one of first departments to exploit aviation and make extensive use of helicopters in crime prevention and response. This provoked complaints about continuous aerial surveillance during the Olympics. Stretched thin, the LAPD tended to preemptive and assertive—critics said it was aggressive.

The LAPD also came with attitude. The Department's Organized Crime Intelligence Division, created in the 1940s and known as the "Gangster Squad", was a source of department pride. It had kept the East Coast Mafia out of Los Angeles—by whatever means necessary. LAPD's CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) unit, organized in the 1970s, targeted street gangs, using police state tactics, said its critics. Chief Gates thought that the street gangs presented "a grave potential for terrorism." "They had firepower and could easily be recruited to carry out attacks."<sup>11</sup>

Whether this assessment is true has relevance today. The government has declared some of Mexico's drug cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, and has proposed attacking them with US military force. US military intervention in Mexico would alter terrorist threat assessments.

L.A.'s police chief did not believe in community policing, and relations—particularly with the Black community—were not good. There were complaints that police were indiscriminately harassing young African-American men as the games approached. The police chief's later description of LAPD's approach comes close to confirmation that this was the strategy. "We built the 'street thug factor' into our plan" Chief Gates wrote in his memoirs. "Six weeks before the Olympics, we would send our gang detail out to clean up the streets around the Coliseum. We would run the gangs right

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

out of the area with a few well-chosen words, and post enough police officers to discourage them from returning too soon.”<sup>12</sup> Policing in America has changed since then.

The LAPD’s organizational culture clashed with the organizational imperatives of the LAOOC, and Ueberroth and Gates were frequently at odds. For anyone interested in Olympic security, I would recommend Ueberroth’s account of the Olympics *Made in America: His Own Story*<sup>13</sup> and Daryl Gates’ memoir, *Chief: My Life in the LAPD*. I would make it mandatory reading for those with security responsibilities at major sporting events. Fortunately, the tensions between the two men and their organizations did not prevent a successful security effort that became a model for future Olympics.

## Fast forward to 2025

Today’s terrorist “threat matrix” seems more like an abstract expressionist painting. To those accustomed to traditional landscapes, it is difficult to discern what it depicts.<sup>14</sup> Events are less predictable. In addition to terrorist threats, there are substrata of violent actors and potentially disruptive actions. And no one knows what the situation will be like in 2028. For now, foreign quarrels continue to complicate domestic threat assessments.

The war in Ukraine continues with what appears to be diminishing US engagement. Russia could escalate further. Ukraine could fall, creating a new refugee crisis and potentially a resistance movement abroad. The conflict could spread to other European countries.

Iran is under US, EU, and UN sanctions to discourage it from developing nuclear weapons. Iran’s leaders also remain determined to avenge the death of General Soleimani (commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force) who was killed by an American airstrike in 2020. To date, US authorities have thwarted several Iranian assassination plots. Will new negotiations reduce tensions, or will the standoff continue as it has for the past 46 years? India also has been recently accused of involvement in a number of assassination plots directed against dissidents in the US, Canada, and Europe.

The war in Gaza continues. It has deeply divided Americans, aroused passions (especially on university campuses), and fueled violent extremism. Hate crimes against Jews and Muslims are at an all-time high. Pro-Palestinian, far-left extremists, and white supremacists overlap in targeting Jews. But right-wing extremists also attack Muslims.

Israeli forces have invaded Lebanon to destroy Hezbollah, which is backed by Iran. Hezbollah has connections with criminal organizations in the US and around the world. Houthi rebels in Yemen—who are also Iranian proxies—launch missiles and drones against merchant ships in the Red Sea, thus limiting access to the Suez Canal. Confronted with American retaliation, they have promised to suspend attacks on commercial vessels, but they continue to attack ships delivering cargo to Israel and targets in Israel.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Ueberroth, *Made in America: His Own Story*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Michael Jenkins, “The Israel-Hamas War Has Upended the Terrorist Threat Message,” *The Hill*, November 22, 2023. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2023/11/the-israel-hamas-war-has-upended-the-terrorist-threat.html>

A group that originated as an affiliate of al Qaeda and was designated by the United States as a terrorist organization has toppled the Assad regime and taken control in much of Syria, including Damascus. The US has just announced that it will lift sanctions on the new government, but armed conflicts continue in Syria.

Other sources of terrorist threat include Islamic State, which operates in the Middle East, Western Asia, and the Sahel in Africa, where it is attracting foreign fighters. Both al Qaeda and the Islamic State continue to incite homegrown jihadist plots. Young men, increasingly teenagers, continue to respond.

The threats are real. Inspired by al Qaeda, in 2013 two brothers detonated bombs at the Boston Marathon. Three men, who pledged support for Islamic State, plotted in 2014 to detonate pipe bombs at Superbowl XLIX in Glendale, Arizona. Two of the conspirators were killed in a subsequent terrorist attack in Texas. The third was later arrested and convicted in Arizona.

In the 2015 terrorist attack on Paris, which was claimed by Islamic State, three suicide attackers wearing explosive vests arrived at the *Stade de France* where the president of France was attending a soccer match between France and Germany. One tried to enter the stadium but was stopped by suspicious security guards. Moments later, all three detonated their devices, killing themselves and one bystander.

After America's disastrous withdrawal, the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan, although several armed groups continue to be active in the country. Islamic State—Khorasan Province (ISK) is one of them. In 2024, ISK claimed responsibility for an attack on a concert hall in Moscow, in which 145 people died. ISK continues to exhort its followers abroad to carry out attacks at stadiums, including the 2024 Olympic games in Paris. In 2024, Austrian police uncovered explosives being prepared to attack a Taylor Swift concert in Vienna. The plot involved a vehicle ramming attack on fans gathering outside the concert venue, followed by an attack with machetes, culminating in the detonation of an explosive device. As a result, all three Swift concerts in Vienna were cancelled.<sup>15</sup> The arrests confirm that ISK operatives remain active in the West.

China and the US continue to confront each other over a range of strategic issues. China itself has been the target of terrorist attacks. In the months preceding the Beijing Olympics in 2008, terrorist bombings occurred in Shanghai and Guangzhou, there was an attempted hijacking of a domestic flight with the intent to crash it into an Olympic site, and a vehicle ramming and bomb attack in Kashgar, which killed 16 people.<sup>16</sup> In March 2008, riots broke out in Tibet, which received worldwide publicity. Chinese authorities blamed Muslim Uighur and Tibetan separatists, who they referred to as “splitists.”

In 2008, I and two colleagues from the RAND Corporation were invited to Beijing to review Olympic security preparations, including the enhanced security measures to protect Beijing's

15 Nicolas Stockhammer and Colin Clarke, “The August 2024 Taylor Swift Concert Plot,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 18, Issue 1 (January 2025). <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-august-2024-taylor-swift-vienna-concert-plot/>

16 Emma Graham-Harrison, “Bomb attack kills 16 in China,” *Reuters*, August 4, 2008. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/uk/bomb-attack-kills-16-in-china-idUSSIB416934/>



subway and central railway station.<sup>17</sup> Security was impressive<sup>18</sup>, but the Olympics were only a few months away when we made our visit and security preparations were well advanced. I suspect that our hosts may have been rattled by the recent attacks, or that they wanted to use our meeting for diplomatic purposes.

## **Domestic foes persist**

We got through the 2024 elections without violent disruption, but not without two assassination attempts and several plots. There was reason to worry about domestic political violence—there still is.

Politically, the country remains deeply divided—plots and attacks by extremists on both ends of the political spectrum continue. Internet and social media algorithms propel us into two different cognitive universes. Intense psychological operations and influence campaigns by hostile governments and domestic actors further deepen the divide.

These are just some of the conflict situations and existing patterns of terrorist activity that point to obvious potential threats. Intelligence operations can uncover actual plots—not all, but it is harder to know about actions planned by individuals who self-radicalize or who are motivated by their individual discontents.

The nail-filled bomb that exploded at Olympic Park in Atlanta during the 1996 Olympics taught us at least two lessons. The first was that security must extend beyond the perimeters of the sporting events. Olympic Park was not a venue for Olympic competition, but a related celebration. As with all Olympics, hundreds of related local events will accompany the forthcoming sports events—concerts, exhibits, watch parties, drone shows—often with large crowds attending.

The second lesson is that unless they thump their chest on the internet, lone actors often escape the attention of law enforcement. The Atlanta bomber (who was arrested five years later) turned out to be a white supremacist who opposed women's and LGBTQ rights. He joins a long list of bombers and gunmen—environmental terrorists, leftwing extremists, white supremacists, members of the incel movement, believers in conspiracy theories, and those whose motives are unfathomable—responsible for lethal attacks. The 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas, Nevada, and the 2020 bombing in Nashville, Tennessee, provide recent examples. We still do not know what motivated the Las Vegas shooter to open fire on a music festival, killing 60 people and wounding more than 400. Nor do we know what motivated the individual who built a large explosive device and blew up his RV with him in it in downtown Nashville.

## **Will America's dark mood give rise to new actors?**

Current stresses in American society add even less-predictable layers of threat. Economic uncertainty, inflation, job insecurity, income inequality, diminishing expectations, accusations that institutions are unresponsive and corrupt, perceptions of violent crime and growing disregard for

17 Du Xiaodan (ed.), "Beijing starts passengers security checks in all subway stations," *CCTV.com*. June 30, 2008. <https://www.cctv.com/english/20080630/102528.shtml>

18 Gladys Pak Lei Chong, Jeroen de Kloet, and Guohua Zeng, "People's Olympics (Beijing 2008), in Vida Bajc (ed.), *Surveilling and Securing the Olympics: From Tokyo 1964 to London 2012 and Beyond*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

the law have put the country into a dark mood. Many have been left behind by globalization and offshoring. AI could cause further disruptions. A significant portion of the US population lives in poverty. Healthcare is increasingly unaffordable for many; budget cuts could make it worse.

A nation of immigrants coexists with deep currents of racism and xenophobia. These divides widen when immigration is high and during times of economic distress. Some currently portray immigration as an invasion. Previous US campaigns of mass deportation during the Great Depression and in the 1950s promoted fear to encourage self-deportation. Visitors to next year's World Cup matches have been welcomed, but with warnings to be sure to leave before their visas expire.

We are still in a post-pandemic era. As with history's previous pandemics, people are on edge, quick to violence.<sup>19</sup> Society has become coarser. Courtesy and comity have disappeared. Threats against public officials have grown. Random social aggression has increased. The legitimacy of political violence is being redefined.

### **A potential for disruptive protests**

The huge global audience watching these major sporting events makes them attractive venues not only for dramatic incidents of violence—but for public protest. I don't for a moment mean to suggest that protest is a form of terrorism. Free speech and freedom of assembly are constitutionally protected in America, but protests can in certain circumstances be disruptive and potentially dangerous. Protesters may deliberately seek confrontations with the police, leading to media coverage of them being dragged off the field. We have seen examples of protesters blocking highways and bridges and disrupting travel at train stations.

This is a sensitive subject. Free speech must be protected, but reasonable restrictions can be imposed to protect the rights of others and prevent dangerous situations. Faced with the possibility of disruptive protests at the 1972 Munich Olympics, even German authorities, who were determined to avoid any reminder of oppression under the Nazi regime, passed a new law prohibiting demonstrations at the Olympic Park.<sup>20</sup> Faced with similar concerns, Korean authorities consulted with Germany and passed legislation making most of the City of Seoul an "Olympic Peace Zone" where demonstrations and protests were banned for the duration of the Olympics.<sup>21</sup>

It is not uncommon for US cities hosting National Special Security Events to adopt temporary ordinances requiring permitting for political demonstrations within designated perimeters and restricting items and actions within the perimeters.<sup>22</sup> Federal authorities, for example, the Secret Service, can also impose limits on protests and other activities in locations where the president

19 Brian Michael Jenkins, *Plagues and Their Aftermath: How Societies Recover from Pandemics*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2022.

20 Jørn Hansen, "The Most Beautiful Olympic Games That Were Ever Destroyed," in Vida Bajc. Op cit.

21 Gwang OK and Kyoung Ho Park, "Cross National Intelligence Cooperation and Centralized Security Control System," in Vida Bajc. Op cit.

22 Edward Connors, *Planning and Managing Security for Major Special Events: Guidelines for Law Enforcement*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2007. It has become common practice for cities hosting NSSEs to adopt pre-event ordinances which institute a special permitting process for political demonstrations, designate security perimeters, and restrict specific items and actions within those perimeters. These ordinances override city codes by making special exceptions for specific events, establishing geographic security boundaries around the event sites, revising permit application processes,

or other protected persons are present. Often these restrictions vary from those affecting a broad area such as rerouting vehicle traffic and no-fly zones or, more recently, “no drone zones,” to smaller areas within these with added restrictions, to facilities where individuals may be subjected to security screening before entry. Civil libertarians complain that these temporary measures have become increasingly aggressive and invasive.<sup>23</sup>

Local officials, event organizers, and venue managers should be up to date on current law and agree in advance what can and cannot be tolerated, the legal consequences of violations, and how the law may be enforced. Officials must also communicate with protest organizers in advance to explore possible alternatives and ensure mutual understanding. The important issue is consistent enforcement. This is an area where we have considerable experience.

That is also true of addressing all the security challenges we face. To use a mixed sports metaphor, this is not our first rodeo, and we have a deep bench.

## **Public transportation challenges**

Although Levi Stadium in Santa Clara, California seats about 70,000, over a million visited the Bay Area for Super Bowl 50 in 2016. It is more difficult to estimate the total number of visitors arriving for the 14 matches of the FIFA 2026 World Cup to be played in Northern and Southern California, but hundreds of thousands of out-of-towners are expected to join local fans in Los Angeles and the Bay Area.

The 2028 Olympics will include more than 351 medal events at more than 40 venues spread from San Clemente to Pomona to Universal City. In addition to the 15,000 athletes expected to compete, the 2028 Olympics and Paralympics come with a staff of 4,000 and will create an estimated 50,000 temporary jobs directly associated with the events. Fifteen million visitors are also expected during the Olympics. They will find places to stay from Santa Barbara to Palm Springs to San Diego. All of these people will have to move from homes and hotels and Olympic villages to venues and back.

In 1984, Los Angeles depended heavily on private automobiles. Californians still overwhelmingly rely on their cars, but public transportation has expanded tremendously since the 1984 Olympics. Southern California now has the Metro—a light rail system with six lines. With eight lines, Metrolink connects Los Angeles with the five surrounding counties, while Amtrak provides statewide and national connections.

Northern California has a more developed public transportation network. In 2016, the Bay Area’s buses, trains, ferries, light rail vehicles, cable cars, and streetcars had an average of 1.78 million boardings. In addition to local bus and trolley companies, the Bay Area has Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), Caltrain, and the Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority (VTA). Collectively, the three systems carry more than 300,000 riders daily.

Public transportation systems offer terrorists easily accessible concentrations of people in confined environments, and they have often been targets of contemporary terrorism. In recent years, we

<sup>23</sup> Tracy Yoder and Nathan Tempey, *Developments in the Policing of National Security Special Events*. National Lawyers Guild, 2013. [https://www.nlg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NLG-Report-Developments-in-the-Policing-of-NSSEs-at-2012-RNC-and-DNC\\_1.pdf](https://www.nlg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/NLG-Report-Developments-in-the-Policing-of-NSSEs-at-2012-RNC-and-DNC_1.pdf)

have also seen increases in passenger-on-passenger and passenger-on-staff violence that has nothing to do with ideology or ordinary crime. This has become a major challenge. However, transit systems can also facilitate and assist security. Fans on special trains and buses can be screened before boarding and delivered directly to sports venues.

Against this complex array of threats, security must protect athletes, officials, spectators, celebrants, venues, and transportation systems. It is an Olympian endeavor.

## **Stay involved**

Allow me to conclude with a personal appeal that members of the Commonwealth Club World Affairs and my colleagues at the Mineta Transportation Institute remain actively engaged with this topic. Keep it on your agenda. Your organizations are respected, credible, non-partisan forums in the community.

Sporting events demonstrate the remarkable feats humans can achieve as individuals and teams. They also demonstrate what we can achieve as communities—and globally. The people of California will benefit substantially from these upcoming events. Our spirits will be uplifted by their successful conduct. I was at the closing ceremony of the 1984 Olympics and the mood in the Coliseum and the city was ebullient. We did it! We can do it again.

Past success should not breed complacency. Maintaining security while respecting the precepts of an open society is not easy. Americans can be cantankerous, and everything in America has become highly politicized. We all know that relations between Sacramento and Washington are already strained. As we get closer to 2028—a presidential election year—the politics will likely intensify. There is a continuing need for calm voices to understand and explain the limits of what security can do, and the limits on what security should try to do. This is our show. You are that voice.

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This report can be accessed at  
[transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2556](https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2556)



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