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Do You Believe in Nationalism?

American Patriotism in Miracle

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"Do you believe in miracles? Yes!"

—*Al Michaels* (quoted in Curtright, 2002, p. E1)

The opening ceremony of any Olympic Games is certain to be a nationalistic affair. So it came as little surprise, coming only five months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, that the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City provided a dramatic stage for the performance of American identity. In the words of Silk and Falcois (2005), the television broadcast of the Salt Lake opening ceremony “drew on narrative themes that redefined allies and foes and legitimated military intervention in Afghanistan (and subsequently Iraq) as a ‘just response’ to the attacks on September 11” (p. 457). Given the inclusion of U.S. military personnel, an appearance and speech by President George W. Bush, and NBC’s splicing of images from New York City on 9/11, some

worried that the 2002 Winter Games would become a “jingoistic, flag-waving convention” (Araton, 2002, p. D1).

In this context, the most potent symbol of American patriotism arguably came not from the literal references to terrorism or politics but from the metaphor ascribed to one of American sport’s most enduring memories. As Rachel Nichols (2002) described the culmination of the opening ceremony:

For more than 20 years, the members of the 1980 U.S. men’s hockey team have been the standard-bearers of the improbable . . . [In 2002] they became the symbols of all that is possible when they lit the Olympic flame to open the Salt Lake City Games. (p. D13)

Indeed, when the American men defeated the Soviet Union 4–3 in the 1980 Olympic semifinal, it immediately became acknowledged as among the most stunning upsets in sports history. More importantly, the victory came at a time when American political culture was constituted by a loss of faith in a deteriorating economy at home and a fear of international threats made real by the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, as Chuck Finder (2004) notes:

The perceived miracle of the 1980 Winter Olympics wasn’t merely that a tremendous underdog overcame a juggernaut hockey team but rather that a downtrodden country could overcome its lines at the gasoline pumps, its hostages in Iran, its weak knees at the sight of the Soviets. (p. C2)

In addition, Farrell (1989) argues that the unlikely victory prompted a resurgence of Cold War fervor that “focused attention on Lake Placid’s Olympics as a kind of symbolic confrontation with the Soviets” (p. 163).

That the 1980 Olympic hockey team could symbolize a profound triumph over moments of crisis found renewed rhetorical significance in the wake of 9/11. As a metaphor for American resolve and virtue during the Cold War, the team symbolized the superiority of democracy and freedom over communism and totalitarianism. Hogan (2003) argues that the team’s appearance at the 2002 opening ceremony “evoked these cold war triumphs. The moment served as a symbolic assertion of American power, a promise to once again defeat its enemies in the ‘war on terror’” (p. 108). The celebration of 1980’s “miracle on ice” during the 2002 Winter Games is, then, emblematic of the relationship between the collective memory of sport and national identity. As Hayes (2001) suggests, “Sport, like no other cultural formation,

mobilizes and heightens feelings of identification and collective belonging" (p. 164).

This renewed interest in the 1980 Olympic hockey team overlapped with other retrospective celebrations of the memorable upset. In 1999, *Sports Illustrated* named the "Miracle on Ice" the top sports moment of the 20th century ("The 20th Century Awards," 1999). In 2001, HBO (Home Box Office) produced a documentary titled *Do You Believe in Miracles*, a reference to the famous words of ABC television announcer Al Michaels. Then, in 2004, Disney released a feature-length dramatization of the Olympic triumph called, simply, *Miracle* (O'Connor, 2004). Although a 1981 made-for-television movie had previously chronicled the story, *Miracle* represented the first cinematic treatment of it. Released on February 6, 2004, the film generated a healthy \$64 million in box office receipts in the United States ("Box Office," 2007). While there was no overt symbolism in this timing—it was the 24th anniversary of the 1980 Olympics, and the Summer Games were to take place later in the year—I argue that the release of *Miracle* must be understood in light of the heightened patriotism that was central to American identity after 9/11.

At first glance, it may seem relatively innocuous that a major motion picture would celebrate the patriotism aroused in the United States by the terrorist attacks. However, I contend that *Miracle* contributed to the construction of a form of nationalism that threatened the health of democratic politics. In the years following 9/11, U.S. foreign policy became increasingly belligerent, arrogant, and militant. The central problematic of this shift can be summarized in President Bush's now infamous declaration, "You are either with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001, ¶ 30). Such statements are about more than defining the enemy itself; they simultaneously construct allies and American citizens in ways that delimit the possibilities for democratic participation. As Mouffe (1993) insists, "A healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests" (p. 6). Instead of political contestation, however, political discourse after 9/11 all too often was characterized by appeals to fear, rigid constructions of "us" and "them," and the suppression of democratic rights. Consequently, media representations of national identity are significant sites for rhetorical critique and intervention.

In this chapter, I view *Miracle* as a rhetorical text that uses the men's hockey victory of 1980 as a metaphor to reconstitute post-9/11 American national identity. As Jeffords (1994) argues, films are especially important vehicles for cultural production because nations exist

“as something to be *seen*” (p. 6). Thus, *Miracle* presents a concrete image of the abstract “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) that nations are often understood to be. In this sense, *Miracle* offers Americans a way of seeing political conflict in contemporary times, a vision that gives them what Burke (1973) terms “equipment for living.” As I argue, however, this metaphor relies on familiar American mythologies that elevate individual heroism, trivialize pluralism, and extend the political divisions that constitute contemporary life. To make this argument, I first situate Olympic hockey within the political terrain. I then analyze four extended sequences from *Miracle* that make clear the connections between the cultural crises that prefaced the 1980 Winter Olympics and that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Finally, I conclude that the critique of media texts such as *Miracle* is crucial if we are to understand national identity and envision a more productive form of democratic politics.

❖ THEORY AND RELATED LITERATURE:
OLYMPIC HOCKEY AND THE POLITICAL

Despite claims to the contrary by the International Olympic Committee and the United States Olympic Committee, the Olympic Games have always been a stage for international politics. For Western democracies such as the United States, the “worth of the Olympics is their importance as a national and international symbol of encirclement of a kind of liberal idealism” (Bass, 2002, p. 12). Indeed, Olympic triumphs have routinely been upheld as demonstrations of national superiority. Historically, the *Summer* Games have provided the most visible moments of political contestation: Jesse Owens’ performance at the 1936 Berlin Games; the Black Power protest of John Carlos and Tommie Smith in 1968; the violent terrorism in Munich in 1972. In the first Summer Games after 9/11, George W. Bush openly articulated the “war on terror” with the Athens Olympics when he took credit for the participation of Afghani and Iraqi athletes, particularly the Iraqi national soccer team. Yet the enduring memory of the 1980 men’s hockey team, and its reinvention in 2004, reminds us that the *Winter* Games also should “be remembered as a crucial site in the context and transmutation of Cold War politics” (Segrave, 2004, p. 228).

King (2007) argues that the Winter Olympics are an especially powerful reminder of the embedded mythologies of Western racial superiority. He notes, “The Olympics gave embodied expression to modern Europe’s desire to project its shared values and vision as

civilized nations, heirs to the institutions and ideals associated with the classical period in Greece and Rome" (p. 90). This is especially true of the Winter Games, where athletes compete in sports that find their origins almost exclusively in Europe and North America. Thus, the Olympic Games serve as an extension of a so-called "clash of civilizations" that constitutes the binaries between West and East, Democratic and Totalitarian, Christian and Godless, Good and Evil. Accordingly, international sporting events cannot be seen merely as athletic competitions; rather, they speak metaphorically for the state of the nation itself (Rowe, 2003).

In 1980, the state of the American nation was largely understood in negative terms. A sagging economy and rising fuel costs caused many Americans to question the direction of the country. President Jimmy Carter attempted to address those concerns in July 1979 but instead alienated many listeners through his "Crisis of Confidence" speech, which failed to affirm the American values of optimism and determination. When Iranian militants seized hostages at the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979, and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December, the combined weight of these crises constituted a culture of pessimism. Thus, when the men's hockey team took the ice against the Soviet Union in Lake Placid, New York, in 1980, it was easy to view the contest as a pivotal moment in the Cold War itself. *Miracle's* co-producer, Gordon Gray, comments:

It is important to understand the political and social environment in our nation a quarter-century ago. The Iran hostage crisis, the gas lines, President Carter's "crisis of confidence" speech and the Russians in Afghanistan. We were down on ourselves and looking for a spark. In many ways it was a genesis of a rebirth of our nation to start feeling good about ourselves. (quoted in Williams, 2006, p. 239)

This national rebirth depended on the relentless construction of the Soviet "other." If the Soviet Union was, as Ronald Reagan later stated, the "evil empire," then the Soviet hockey team was the visible sign of communist aggression and imperialism. Affiliated with the Russian Red Army, the national team thoroughly dominated Olympic competition by winning gold medals in 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976. They were seen as methodical, mechanical—*inhuman*—in their dominance. In the words of Powers and Kaminsky (1984), "the Soviet National team was a marvelously tuned perpetual-motion machine, never out of synchrony, never running down . . . *Emotion never figured* [italics added]" (p. 19). Similarly, Coffey (2005) states, "The Soviets were . . . anonymous

hockey assassins, robotic in their approach and unfaltering in their skating" (p. 33).

This rhetoric of dehumanization was commonplace in the United States throughout the 1980s. Sabo, Jansen, Tate, Duncan, and Leggett (1996) reveal that the "machine" metaphor was a prominent trope that constructed the Soviet other during international sports broadcasts. Consequently, American identity was asserted as much through the radical otherness of the Soviet Union as it was by affirming inherent principles. As Mouffe (2000) suggests, the construction of any "us" necessarily entails the construction of a "them." However, if we are to envision a *democratic* "us," Mouffe says we must aim to

construct the "them" in such a way that it is no longer an enemy to be destroyed, but as an "adversary" that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question. (pp. 101–102)

In the years following 9/11, instead of maintaining a democratic respect for the plurality of identities and political positions, American political culture turned increasingly intolerant. Therefore, the national memory of the "miracle on ice" risks the "proclivity to marginalize or demonize difference to sanctify the identity you confess" (Connolly, 2002, p. xv).

It may seem odd that the most profound sporting memory in American history took place on the ice. After all, hockey in the United States lacks the "national pastime" mythology of baseball, and it has never enjoyed the popularity of sports such as football or basketball. Even professional hockey's status as one of the four "major" North American sports must be questioned in light of dwindling attendance and television ratings in the 21st century. However, it is precisely this marginal status that assures the enduring significance of the victory over the Soviets. To beat the "Russians" at their own game was far more powerful as a symbol of American superiority—i.e., it affirmed American convictions that "good" will always triumph over "evil." In addition, the U.S. status as underdogs played nicely alongside the American mythology of hard-working rugged individualists who are willing to face and overcome any obstacles placed in their way. This underdog mythology—preposterous, given the United State's economic and military influence—is consonant with a central principle of American nationalism: that the United States is always on the side of good and thus never shoots first (Marvin & Ingle, 1999).

Hockey also affirms a vision of masculinity that *Miracle* promotes as an antidote to a national crisis. As Meân (Chapter 4, in this volume)

points out, international sport is a common site for rehearsals of masculine virtue and superiority. Hockey, specifically, valorizes “notions of rugged athletic masculinity” and “myths of nationhood” (MacNeill, 1996, p. 104). Because the Carter presidency was commonly seen as the embodiment of “weakness,” the “miracle on ice” was a victory over the loss of masculine strength as much as it was a victory over the adversaries of America. When Ronald Reagan defeated Carter in the 1980 election, the longing for a mythic return to masculinity was validated. This became evident, Jeffords (1994) argues, in Hollywood cinema during the 1980s, when “the depiction of the indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body became the linchpin of the Reagan imaginary” (p. 13). In celebrating the events of the 1980 Winter Olympics, therefore, *Miracle* hails an idealized performance of masculinity that uses historic events to negotiate a contemporary crisis.

❖ **METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH:
CLOSE RHETORICAL READING**

While *Miracle* is a credible factual account of the hockey team’s journey, it must be understood in its time and place as at least a partial reaction to the events of 9/11. In light of this, I proceed by integrating the theoretical framework outlined above with an approach to rhetorical criticism commonly called “close textual analysis.” While close textual analysis was originally conceived as a response to the over-emphasis on theory (Burghardt, 2005), I maintain that theory provides a critical context for interpreting the cultural and political dynamics of the film. Thus, by attending “to the elements contained within the text itself” (Leff, 1986, p. 378), I demonstrate the problematic logic of national identity constituted by the film. In particular, four segments of the film demonstrate this conflation of the political climates in 1980 and post-9/11: the opening credits; the multiple scenes during which team unity is fostered; the Christmas party juxtaposed with Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech; and the symbolic death and rebirth of Team USA in New York.

❖ **RESULTS: NATIONAL IDENTITY IN *MIRACLE***

The action in *Miracle* centers around the sport of hockey, but it is not really a story about hockey. Rather, it is a story about the American Dream and the enduring victory of democracy over totalitarianism. Thus, the hockey team is merely the vehicle through which the metaphor of national identity is communicated. Significantly, the film’s plot

focuses almost exclusively on Team USA coach Herb Brooks, who is credited with orchestrating the improbable victory. This allows *Miracle* to follow a familiar trajectory in sports films, which “are especially fond of the idea that history is made by individuals” (Baker, 2003, p. 10).

Brooks was, in fact, a significant reason the team was able to defeat the Soviets. He had been the last player cut from the 1960 U.S. Olympic hockey team, which had been the last American team to win a gold medal. In the years between 1960 and 1980, Brooks became fascinated with the Soviet style of play; he studied game films and looked for ways to attack them. His plan in Lake Placid was to have Team USA play a hybrid style, combining the physical play of North American teams with the quick and fluid play of the Soviets. In the months leading up to the Winter Games, Brooks kept his distance from the players and relied on the unpredictability of his decisions and conditioning drills to create team unity (Powers & Kaminsky, 1984). In many ways he was stubborn, selfish, and uncommunicative (Coffey, 2005). Yet few could argue with the results: a 4–3 victory over the Soviets in the semi-final, and a 4–2 victory over Finland to secure the gold medal.

Miracle faithfully recreates the above narrative through the perspective of Brooks, portrayed by Kurt Russell. Russell’s interpretation, guided by the screenplay, assures the audience that Brooks’ behavior was motivated by what was best for the team. Even though the outcome is common knowledge, the film nevertheless presents multiple obstacles that threaten the team’s success. Most of these obstacles—hovering U.S. Olympic officials, a nagging wife who wishes her husband was home more, a potential Soviet boycott of the Lake Placid Games as retaliation for Carter’s boycott of the Moscow Summer Games—are filtered through Brooks so that they become obstacles to *his* success. The triumph at the end, therefore, is as much about Herb Brooks as it is about Team USA. In addition to focusing on the individual heroism of Brooks, *Miracle* also presents the metaphorical link between the “miracle on ice” and national identity in such a way that it does far more than simply shed light on a particular moment in the nation’s history. More than this, it reinvents the metaphor as a cultural resource for rehabilitating national identity in the wake of 9/11.

❖ OPENING CREDITS

Baker (2003) suggests that when sports films make claims about history they do so by looking “back in time through the lens of present concerns” (p. 7). From the opening credits of *Miracle*, it is clear that the film

constitutes a sense of crisis. For viewers living through the uncertainty and anxiety characteristic of post-9/11 culture, the political crisis evoked by the opening credits likely has resonance. This sequence in *Miracle* does not begin in 1980 or even 1979. Instead, it presents a montage of newspaper headlines and video footage dating back to the start of the decade. As audio and video clips support the text, the following headlines move across the screen:

“U.S. Invades Cambodia”

“100,000 Anti-War Protestors Rally in Washington, DC”

“Munich Olympics Upset: Russia Takes Basketball Gold, Americans Refuse Silver”

“Watergate Break-In: 5 Arrested in Connection to GOP”

“NASA Budget Cuts Mean End of Era”

“Saigon Falls: U.S. Embassy Evacuated”

“America Catches Disco Fever”

“America Celebrates Bicentennial”

“Elvis is Dead: Long Live the King”

Each of these headlines is framed exclusively from the American point of view. It is no doubt memorable, for example, that the Soviets won the basketball gold medal in 1972 in controversial fashion. However, few would deny that the most lasting memory of those Summer Games was the death of 11 Israeli athletes who were murdered by terrorists. The effect of these headlines, then, is to constitute a political crisis of the 1970s that was distinctly American. This is most obvious in the final moments of the opening credits, when a video of President Carter reveals him stating, “It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.” As Carter speaks, the title “Miracle” comes together one letter at a time. At this moment of “crisis,” therefore, it is clear that a national miracle is required.

More than hailing the familiar political problems of the 1970s merely as a plot device, the opening credits define national identity in opposition to moments of crisis in general, regardless of the era. To lose one’s confidence, or to suffer embarrassment and defeat, is to risk one’s status as an American. “Losing” the war in Vietnam, for example, disrupted the expectation held by many Americans that the United States

would always emerge victorious. The subsequent “Vietnam Syndrome” affected national identity to the point that it influenced political campaigns, foreign policy, and national memory. As Ehrenhaus (2001) demonstrates, Hollywood films have been one of the primary sites for coming to terms with the “Vietnam Syndrome.” *Saving Private Ryan*, he argues, reconstitutes the collective memory of World War II, partially as a means for overcoming the lingering memory of Vietnam. *Miracle*, by contrast, does not seek to overcome the unrest of the late 1970s. Rather, it features the inevitable triumph of the men’s hockey team to imply that Americans can overcome the unrest of a post-9/11 world because they have done so in the past. The opening credits, therefore, are not a reminder of a crisis; they are a reminder that American resolve will always overcome a crisis.

Building the Team

Most of the members of Team USA came from either Minnesota or Massachusetts. As a result, the rivalry between the University of Minnesota and Boston University presented an initial obstacle for Brooks, especially since he had coached Minnesota to three national championships during the 1970s. An early scene in *Miracle* illustrates the regionalism that threatened team unity. Jack O’Callahan, a former Boston defenseman, initiates a fight with Rob McClanahan as retribution for a confrontation during the 1976 national championship game. After the players spar and bloody each other, Brooks intervenes. Insisting that the Olympic team is not about “old rivalries,” he demands, “We start becoming a team right now.” He has each player introduce himself to his new teammates, asking, “Who do you play for?” The players state their names, hometowns, and college affiliations. This scene foreshadows the transcendental moment later in the film when team cohesion is assured.

Before unity can be achieved, *Miracle* establishes an analogy between hockey rivalries and international politics. Shortly after the fight scene detailed above, assistant coach Craig Patrick is seated in his car next to the team doctor, “Doc.” When they hear a radio report about a nuclear test, Doc comments, “Ah, so much hate and fear . . . between the Soviets and the West.” Nodding in agreement, Patrick responds, “Yeah, like hockey players from Boston and Minnesota.” On the one hand, this moment trivializes the complexities of the Cold War by suggesting that the ideological disputes between the United States and Soviet Union were no more serious than a territorial battle for hockey supremacy. Yet on the other hand, the scene is more complicated, as

Miracle uses the analogy to set up an important contrast. Because we know the outcome of the 1980 Olympics in advance, we can assume that the players will transcend the Minnesota-Boston rivalry.

Subsequent scenes that show the players training and conditioning are interspersed with further player introductions. Each player continues to state his name, hometown, and affiliation. When Team USA travels to Norway for an exhibition, Brooks is incensed by their lackluster play. They are complacent and distracted by attractive women in the stands, and they settle for a 3–3 tie against a team they should beat. When the game concludes, Brooks orders his players back on the ice. Demanding that they must understand how to compete at the highest level, he sends them up and down the ice in a brutal conditioning drill. Even as Patrick and Doc hesitate, and the ice arena's manager turns out the lights, Brooks is unrelenting. Finally, as players are doubled-over on the verge of collapse, team member (and later captain) Mike Eruzione shouts, "Mike Eruzione!" When Brooks replies, "Who do you play for?" Eruzione makes the transcendental leap. "I play for . . . the United States of America!" Recognizing that he has now molded this group of individuals into a team, Brooks allows them to leave the ice.

It is true that Brooks held his players after the Norway exhibition and skated them until they dropped (Coffey, 2005; Powers & Kaminsky, 1984). However, Eruzione's outburst is a moment of cinematic invention. It achieves an important narrative resolution, however, as the audience can now recognize that there is a purpose to Brooks' harsh treatment of the players and that being able to set aside differences is important if the team is to achieve its goal. Unlike the Soviets and the "West," who intimidate one another with nuclear tests, Team USA embodies the national fantasy of being able to assimilate differences into a coherent national identity. This, of course, is the chief illusion of the American Dream, a myth that depends on the metaphor of the "melting pot," where "people of all races commingle, and live and work together as a united citizenry" (Elias, 2001, p. 5). Modern sports provide one of the most visible arenas for witnessing the American Dream in action. Many assume that sports are based strictly on a meritocracy, that free and open competition will allow anyone to succeed, no matter their race, color, sex, or nationality. The fact that every player on the 1980 Olympic hockey team was a White male is unimportant to the myth, because they symbolized how Americans can and should live together.

The American Dream subtext is as relevant in the 21st century as it was in 1980. If anything, the contemporary moment is characterized by an even greater faith in the possibility that differences should be

overcome. It is little wonder, then, that sports are often seen as exemplars of a democratic culture. However, as Mouffe (2000) contends, the belief that differences can be erased in the name of unity is an illusion. A political culture that overemphasizes unity and consensus, she argues, perpetuates the misconception that “antagonisms can be eradicated” (p. 8). Thus, the conflation of Cold War tensions with hockey regionalism threatens to minimize the degree to which legitimate conflicts are a part of our political culture. Moreover, a *democratic* culture requires that, far from erasing difference, we must acknowledge and respect difference, even when that demands “gritted-teeth tolerance of some things you hate” (Connolly, 2005, p. 43). Regrettably, the post-9/11 political climate is characterized by the villainization of difference and otherness. Anything but full-throated support from other nations for America’s “war on terror” is deemed a threat to national security; anything but full-throated support for the president from U.S. citizens is deemed “un-American.” In such a climate, the image of national identity symbolized by Team USA serves as a symbolic lesson for how Americans should behave during the “war on terror.”

If the team provides a metaphor for the citizenry, then Brooks is a metaphor for the nation’s leadership. As a coach, he is dedicated and innovative. He shapes and manipulates his players so he can mold the perfect team. In the process, the team becomes a “family,” a theme that is overtly articulated when Brooks brings in an outside player late in the training process. When he asks a group of players why he should not keep the new addition, one responds, “Because we’re a family.” That satisfies Brooks and the intruder is sent home. “Family” is a relative term to Brooks, however, and *Miracle* shows a number of scenes where his dedication to hockey threatens the stability of his real family at home. These scenes are largely perfunctory, especially because Brooks’ wife is depicted as a stereotypical nag who wishes her husband would just spend more time at home. In one crucial scene, Brooks asks his wife for her support, telling her that his obsessive approach is “the only way I know how” to coach. In these moments, Brooks is stoic and focused—a determined leader who knows he must go it alone in order to succeed. *Miracle*, then, promotes a vision of leadership grounded in rugged individualism, a characteristic often celebrated through sports.

Rugged individualism reminds us that “sports fit squarely within a traditional American mythology that champions the promise of a unified self through individual achievement” (Baker, 2003, p. 11). Central to this myth is the image of the frontiersman who is “characterized primarily by isolation and independence” (Harter, 2004, p. 93). As the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity, the frontiersman has long been

a model of strong leadership in America, especially at times of crisis. The popularity of Ronald Reagan, for example, can be understood, partially at least, by his ability to situate himself as the romantic western hero of American mythology. Similarly, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, George W. Bush deliberately capitalized on his Texas roots and Western image by framing issues of right and wrong in absolute terms and by viewing his actions as unambiguous and morally justified (Woodward, 2002). In this context, *Miracle* valorizes this vision of leadership and lends tacit consent to the current political regime.

Christmas and Carter

When Brooks celebrates Christmas with Team USA instead of at home with his wife and kids, it is clear which “family” comes first for him. Moreover, the scene that shows the team at a holiday party constructs a vision of purity that depends on religious imagery and the strength of masculine youth. The Christmas scene is contextualized by the preceding moments, wherein Brooks and his wife discover that the hostages have been seized in Iran and the Soviet Union has invaded Afghanistan. When Brooks realizes that President Carter might boycott the Moscow Summer Games, he knows the Winter Games are in jeopardy if the Soviets boycott in retaliation. Without being able to compete against the world’s best, any American achievement would be devalued. This certainly heightens the narrative tension, but it also provides an important contrast. In the clash of ideologies that defined the Cold War, religion was a central component. “In order to counteract the Soviet threat,” Hughes (2004) points out, “Americans routinely juxtaposed their religion in general and their ‘deeply felt religious faith’ against ‘godless’ and ‘atheistic’ communism” (p. 172). Thus, as soon as the audience learns that the communists have invaded Afghanistan, *Miracle* shifts to the most optimistic symbol of Christian faith—Christmas.

The focus on Christmas is a subtle reminder that national identity in America is commonly linked to Christian faith. This is driven by the mythology of American exceptionalism, in which “citizens regard the American way of life as though it were somehow chosen by God, uniquely important to the history of the human race” (Novak, 1992, p. 35). Sports have long contributed to this mythology through the cultivation of “muscular Christianity,” a doctrine that depends on “manliness, morality, and patriotism” (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999, p. 14). Sports and Christianity, therefore, are often discourses that mutually affirm the imagined community of America. The faith that is required to believe in “America,” then, is ultimately what this Christmas scene is about.

As Brooks drives away from the Christmas party, he turns on the radio to hear a “best of 1979” segment featuring President Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech from July. In what follows, *Miracle* weaves the audio of the speech with images of the hockey players outside in the snow. Hearing Carter’s words—“The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America”—recalls the opening credits. If a “miracle” is required, then the young men playing football in the snow are surely the ones to whom Americans can turn. Thus, the key to restoring confidence in the future, it is clear, lies with an idealized form of masculine youth. These players are young, they are naïve, and they are *pure*. Significantly, they are all White. As Dyer (1997) demonstrates, “whiteness” has long been associated with purity and innocence, and Christianity “has been thought and felt in distinctly white ways for most of its history” (p. 17). Within the context of sport, then, we must attend to McDonald’s (Chapter 8, in this volume) contention that the “normative power of white masculinity” remains central to media representations and portrayals of athletes and games.

This combination of innocence, purity, Christianity, and masculinity provides an image of hope and faith for viewers. In these terms, calling the 1980 victory a *miracle* takes on an even greater significance. Further, the discourse of purity and innocence that has characterized American political rhetoric since 9/11 finds validation in the redemptive mission of the 1980 hockey team. Given the age of the players—all in their early 20s—it takes little work to imagine them as soldiers instead of athletes. Following 9/11, those same young men may well have attempted a “miracle” of a different sort by fighting in the “war on terror.” President Bush framed the war in explicitly religious terms, regularly invoking themes that constitute America’s enemies as the enemies of God. In this way, *Miracle* equates the threat of Soviet communism with the threat of Islamic terrorism. Moreover, if political conditions of 1980 called for a victory on the sports front, then the political conditions after 9/11 called for a victory on the war front. Thus, without making any such explicit claims, *Miracle* is nevertheless a subtle endorsement of the “war on terror.”

Rebirth and Renewal

On February 9, 1980, three days before the opening ceremonies in Lake Placid, Team USA played the Soviet Union in New York City. They were overwhelmed from the start, losing 10–3. *Miracle* uses this exhibition to reinforce how unlikely an American victory would be.

Predictably, the Soviets are portrayed as dehumanized machines. They are large and intimidating, they take cheap shots, and they never smile. Earlier in the film, an exchange between two players foreshadows this imagery. While watching game films of the Soviet team, one player asks, "Do those guys ever smile?" His teammate quickly responds, "They're Russian. They get shot if they smile." Such a stereotype is consistent with Hollywood representations of Russians and/or Soviets during that time period. In the words of Strada and Troper (1997), "Russians—whether friend or foe—tend to be flat and one-dimensional, lacking the depth and genuineness necessary to empathize with them" (p. 201). With the end of the Cold War, some of these images have changed. However, the Soviet demon has frequently been replaced by the Muslim demon. Again, *Miracle* provides the symbolic link between the two, thereby justifying a rhetoric of dehumanization against anyone deemed to be an "enemy" of the United States.

Additional symbolic work occurs during this segment. The establishing shot before the exhibition game shows the New York City skyline as it would have looked in 1980—brightly lit up by Manhattan buildings, the World Trade Center towers prominently rising from the ground. This is either stock footage or a computer-generated image, of course, since the towers had been destroyed more than two years before the film's release. The familiarity of that skyline, however, offers comfort and strength for a population still coping with the terror of 9/11, while simultaneously evoking the confusion of seeing New York without the twin towers. As Lakoff (2001) summarizes:

The image of the Manhattan skyline is now unbalanced. We are used to seeing it with the towers there. Our mind imposes our old image of the towers, and the sight of them gone gives one the illusion of imbalance, as if Manhattan were sinking. Given the symbolism of Manhattan as standing for the promise of America, it appears metaphorically as if that promise were sinking. (§ 15)

Upon seeing the World Trade Center in *Miracle*, it is impossible to ignore the knowledge of its destruction. Once inside the hockey arena that night, Team USA suffers a similar destruction. The team members are shaken, disoriented, and afraid. The Soviets clearly intimidate them, and Team USA is unable even to present a unified front. If the twin towers symbolize the fragility of the promise of America, then the superiority of the Soviets on the ice metaphorically stands in for that threat.

In the wake of 9/11, American culture faced new uncertainties about its future. The destruction of the World Trade Center, and the

damage done to the Pentagon, are well beyond the scope of comparison to the defeat of a national hockey team. Nevertheless, *Miracle* offers a narrative of redemption, thereby renewing the promise of America. This rebirth, of course, occurs during the Olympic Games in Lake Placid. After advancing to the medal round, Team USA has a newfound sense of confidence. As Brooks insists before they play the Soviets, "Tonight, *we* are the greatest hockey team in the world!" When the American players take the ice, they are calm and self-assured. In *Miracle*, they now approach center ice *as a team*, refusing to back down against the mighty Soviets. Against the backdrop of the crowd chanting, "USA! USA," the Americans improbably win the game, 4–3. This 20-minute segment is followed by a remarkably brief voice-over, with Russell as Brooks reminding viewers that Team USA still needed to defeat Finland to win the gold medal. Regardless of that outcome, it was the victory over the Soviets that guaranteed a revitalization of national identity. As Mike Eruzione said about the victory, "By us winning the gold medal, the hostages weren't released and the Soviets didn't pull out of Afghanistan. But we did make Americans feel proud again" (quoted in Curtright, 2002, p. E1).

The image of a stronger nation rising from the ashes of disappointment is powerful within the political culture constituted by 9/11. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the nation witnessed public displays of patriotism not seen since World War II. Indeed, sports became one of the primary arenas for healing and patriotic celebration. Quite quickly, however, the discourse of sports, both at the games and through the media, affirmed a presidential rhetoric of war (Butterworth, 2005; Stempel, 2006). Embedded in this discourse was a belligerence and hostility toward dissent or difference, characterized by a rigid construction of "us" and "them." The patriotism that followed the "miracle on ice" rested as much on the villainization of the Soviet Union as it did on the valorization of the United States. In this way, it repeated the redemptive ritual of victimage that Burke (1984a) warns is the hallmark of the "tragic frame." Burke's fear is that the tragic motivates humans toward violence. When we require redemption, we may either look inwardly for a corrective, or we may seek a scapegoat, "a sacrificial receptacle for the ritual unburdening of one's sins" (Burke, 1984b, p. 16). By demonizing first the Soviets and now Islamic terrorists, Americans too often resort to the facile binary of good versus evil as a way to justify a range of actions seen by many around the world as unjust and undemocratic. Following 9/11, a time when careful reflection and deliberation was needed most, American politicians instead stoked fear and division by declaring a "war on terror." *Miracle* summons the familiar

refrain of American exceptionalism through its depiction of America's triumph over totalitarianism. Much like the opening ceremony for the 2002 Salt Lake City Games, *Miracle* offers the promise of an American victory at a time of crisis.

❖ DISCUSSION: A NEW MIRACLE?

Media representations of sport are central to the "process of identity construction in American culture" (Baker & Boyd, 1997, p. xviii). In the case of *Miracle*, national identity is constructed in problematic ways that bolster the belligerence and militarism of contemporary America. Rather than viewing sport as a site of agonistic struggle, in which opponents are defeated but not destroyed, the narrative of the "miracle on ice" depends on the symbolic destruction of the enemy. The Soviets were godless communist machines, persistent threats to the American way of life. As so many have noted, the American victory in Lake Placid was a powerful metaphor for the superiority of the United States, which was made more powerful by the political conditions of the time.

With the release of *Miracle*, this metaphor found renewed life. Several critics who reviewed the film in 2004 noted the obvious parallels: The *Dallas Observer* called it "an unabashed flag-waver . . . authentic charmer does for its young hockey players what John Wayne used to do for the U.S. Marines, and it lifts us, too, onto the boys' cloud of belief." *ReelViews* commented, "*Miracle* is inspirational and uplifting—qualities we are as much in need of today as we were during the winter of 1980." The *Philadelphia Inquirer* added, "*Miracle* really isn't about the game. It's about the game as metaphor for united we stand" (all quotations found in "Miracle," 2004, Critics Reviews section). Finally, the *Christian Science Monitor* summed up the film appropriately:

What the movie does demonstrate is that Hollywood still hasn't tired of refighting the cold war in every way it can think of. Based on the real 1980 Winter Olympics, the story shows Brooks' team, portrayed as a wholesome set of individualized American youths, preparing to beat the Soviet team. (The foes are portrayed as a faceless pack of "win at any cost" fanatics, whose excellence on the ice is somehow unfair to individualized American youths.) (Sterritt, 2004, ¶ 3)

Perhaps it is not the responsibility of a group of filmmakers to insist upon more robust democratic dialogue and a greater respect for political difference. Nevertheless, the ease with which *Miracle* reinvents

familiar villains and presents them to an audience coming to terms with 9/11 is cause for concern. As Hall (1999) notes, Western nationalism is motivated by the quest to constitute the unity of “one people . . . backwards in an apparently seamless and unbroken continuity towards pure, mythic time” (p. 38). Like any other myth, nationalism is remarkably persuasive even as it fails to uphold its promise of a unified American people. Despite its obvious appeal, we would be wise to be skeptical of the nationalism promoted by a film such as *Miracle*. Surely, there must be ways to remember the beauty of that Olympic victory without resorting to predictable slogans and the continuation of a political culture defined by “us” versus “them.” To do so, however, requires a different national miracle altogether.

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