

# How a lady, a man and a boy have beaten the world's most powerful man

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## 1. Chicago 2016

On the 2nd of October, 2009, Copenhagen's Bella Center conference hall hosted the 121st IOC session to decide the host city for the 2016 Olympic Games. The four candidate cities were Rio de Janeiro, Chicago, Madrid and Tokyo. The decision to award the Games to Rio de Janeiro was not a surprise – Rio was considered a favourite. The big surprise, though, was Chicago's elimination from the first round, as the city's bid was standing amongst the strong favourites.

Chicago's plan to host the XXXI Olympiad was based on the idea of using most of the existing city's facilities, venues and parks, along with the creation of new ones, all in close proximity to each other; thus, creating a highly concentrated cluster of event locations close to the city centre, "*A Games in the heart of the city*" (Chicago2016, 2009). By that, the organisers were promising easily accessible venues for the spectators and the athletes. The 2016 Chicago bid was an initiative by the city's Mayor, Richard Daley, who believed that, apart from the obvious benefits, the Olympics could bring major investments in Chicago, which would help to the city's poor economic position and help to counterbalance its budget's deficit. According to the official "bid book", the Games, themselves, would create a profit of around \$500 million, but they would also give a long-term boost to the city's economy, through investments and tourist development. Apart from that, the organisers were proclaiming that the Olympics in Chicago would utilize "*the Olympic Movement's power to unite all humanity*" and would "*help America reach out to build and renew bridges of friendship with the world*". Additionally, the Chicago 2016 Olympics would create a legacy, which would "*inspire young people to reach for a better life*" (Chicago2016, 2009).

All these proclamations were no different from those of the other three candidates: Rio 2016 was proposing that the Games will be held within the city's proximity, will create short and long-term financial profits and will inspire the youth (Rio2016); Madrid 2016 bid, too, was a plan for inner-city Olympics that would result in financial benefits and would inspire the youth (Madrid2016) and, of course, Tokyo 2016 was promising "the most compact and efficient Olympics ever", "in the heart of the city" (Tokyo2016), which would create profit and economic benefits and would inspire the youth. These candidature proclamations were the same, in general, as the ones from London 2012, from Beijing 2008, or from Athens 2004.

So, what was the reason for Chicago's bid to be considered a strong favourite, if all the other bids, were "promising" almost the same things? Apart, of course, from the obvious physical differentiation of the city of Chicago and the United States, the Chicago 2016 bid had a major advantage in relation to the other candidates. This advantage was the support, which this bid was enjoying, from eminent American personalities with global blaze. The most notable names among them were: Oprah Winfrey, an American media personality, voted many times as one of the most influential people on the planet, by Time magazine; Michael Jordan, one of the most recognised sports personalities in the world; Michael Phelps, an Olympic who's won the most Olympic gold medals in the history of sport; and lastly and most importantly, Barack Obama, the US president. In the last case, Obama's support of his hometown's bid was not just a backing from the president. Obama's global impact, as a personality

and a political figure was probably Chicago's 2016 "joker card", which covered the bid's weaknesses, either with regard to infrastructure in comparison with Madrid, or in comparison with Rio's temperament.

## 2. The big decision (or the big man coming to town)

Back in Copenhagen, five days before the IOC's decision, the delegations started arriving at the Danish capital. At that point, all four candidates were competing in a head to head race, with Chicago and Rio having a slight advantage according to experts and betting agencies (according to the bookmakers Chicago was a clear favourite at 8/11, followed by Rio 7/4, Madrid and Tokyo on 12/1). The press was taking a cautious stance. No one at that time was willing to risk a prediction. BBC's Matt Slater (2009), was noting:

"...the IOC's heart calling for Copacabana but its head worrying about crime and passing up the riches on offer in Chicago, a confusion that might just let in Madrid or Tokyo. Could that decision be made a little more easier by the presence in Copenhagen of the world's most powerful man? Can Barack, Chicago's top trump, risk so much political capital on anything other than a slam dunk?"

And then, four days before the IOC's decision, on the 28th September, "the world's most powerful man" decided to go to Copenhagen to speak in front of the IOC on behalf of Chicago 2016. The news of Obama's visit to Copenhagen changed the ambience drastically in favour of Chicago. Even the city's appearance changed: the shops were selling shirts labelled "*Copenhagen loves Obama*", American flags; people were talking about his arrival, where will he go, what will he say. Most of the press correspondents, around the world, in Copenhagen, estimated that this last-minute call from the American president was the decisive push towards a Chicago win. The Guardian's correspondent, Owen Gibson (2009), admitted a day before the final decision:

"...*Obama's arrival appears to have given momentum back to Chicago*", and, later again, on the day of the decision: "*Obama's late, perfectly timed decision to attend the vote has robbed Rio's attempt to make Olympic history by bringing the Games to South America for the first time of crucial momentum*".

On the afternoon of October the 2<sup>nd</sup> 2009, in the central square of Copenhagen, there was a big scene set for the "Olympic countdown". The presenter announced the first two cities that had been knocked out of the race for the 2016 Olympics: it was Tokyo and Chicago. In fact, Chicago was the first city to be knocked out, as it got the least votes in the first round [18 votes for Chicago, 22 Tokyo, 26 Rio and 28 Madrid IOC, 2009]. The Games were, eventually, awarded to Rio de Janeiro, a favourite. But what happened to the other favourite? How did Chicago fail even to pass the first round? Were the predictions so wrong?

All these questions will remain unanswered except if someone could read the minds of IOC members. But, still, there is another factor that is important for the bids, which deliberately has not been discussed yet, and that is *the public support*. Whether it plays a small or big part in the IOC's decision to award the Games, candidate cities always tend to show that they have a massive public support. In this case, the actual numbers are not so important – usually there are several different polls, but the fact was that Chicago, and probably Tokyo, had the least public support for their bids. But, was that enough to change the outcome of the IOC's vote?

## 3. Up against the Olympic Industry

At the time, while the members of the Chicago bid committee were preparing their presentation to the IOC and were waiting for Obama, three Chicagoans were roaming the streets of Copenhagen in order to deliver a different message. Rhoda, Tom and Martin were the representatives of a group called “No Games Chicago” (NGC). This group was a coalition formed by several citizens of Chicago who had come together to oppose the city’s 2016 Olympic bid. Their campaign was launched in January 2009 at a public forum about the Chicago bid, and since then, they had been actively opposing the idea of bringing the Olympics to Chicago. They had organised a series of events – protests, public meetings - in Chicago and met with the IOC evaluation team who came in Chicago in order to present their arguments. Furthermore, the same representatives, who were in Copenhagen on the days of the IOC decision, had earlier traveled to Lausanne to counter the Chicago 2016 presentation to the IOC. So, for the last few months “NGC” had become the shadow of Chicago 2016 bidding committee.

The reasons why NGC were opposing their city’s bid, were explained thoroughly in their website (NGC 2009a) and more briefly in the leaflets, which they were trying, at any opportunity, to pass to the IOC and anyone else interested: “better hospitals, better housing, better schools” - better life for the citizens, in brief, instead of spending millions of dollars and valuable time, seeking an event that has no guaranteed revenue (NGC, 2009b). NGC, also, accused the Mayor of Chicago of authoritarian and undemocratic behavior. Most of all, the NGC’s campaign was aiming to start a debate, within Chicago, on the utility of the Olympic Games, and by extension, to challenge Mayor Daley and his practices. They suggested that NGC was representing half of the Chicago population, which hadn’t approved the city’s bid and had never been asked about it.

“No Games Chicago” attempted to open the discussion on an issue that concerns every society; its right to take part in the decision making process. They countered a well organised team of politicians, businessmen and PR experts who comprised “Chicago 2016” and despite the problems, the prohibitions and the closed doors, which they faced throughout their campaign, they succeeded in making their voice heard. And in the legacy of similar notable social movements that were opposed to the Olympic Games in their city, like “Bread Not Circuses” in Toronto (Lenskyj, 2000) and “No Games 2010” in Vancouver (Shaw, 2008), they provided invaluable information about the conflict between the local organisers and the community, where mega events are planned, or hosted. As, Martin, a member of NGC, stated in the news of Chicago’s elimination: “*This is a great victory for the grassroots people of Chicago*”. It does not matter if NGC’s campaign contributed 1% or 99% to the IOC’s decision not to vote for Chicago; what matters is that they proved that normal people can win against “*the world’s most powerful man*”.

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