

U.S. SECURITY FOR THE BEIJING OLYMPICS**CHINA, 2008***By Sean O'Brien*

An estimated one billion people watched the 2008 Beijing Olympic Summer Games. China put on a spellbinding show: against a backdrop of ancient and modern architectural wonders, a cast of thousands celebrated Chinese culture and played host to 10,500 international athletes in 37 venues spread over seven cities, from Shenyang to Hong Kong (almost equal to the distance from Boston to Miami).

My two-year-long, behind-the-scenes experience as the United States Olympic security coordinator in Beijing felt almost as complicated and daunting as hosting the games themselves. Given China's historic mistrust of foreign powers, foreign police such as me and my colleagues were regularly reminded that we were simply "guests." We possessed no authority in what was in any case a non-permissive environment.

As a diplomatic security agent thrust into this world of high-level international diplomacy, my watchwords were: be patient, show up every day to meet your counterparts, and respectfully stay on message. And do all that without, regrettably, without speaking a lick of Mandarin or Cantonese.

Our job was, first, to convince our Chinese hosts that cooperating with us was in the interest of both countries. We gained access to the venues in all seven cities, ensuring that our security agents could fulfill their missions there. We also obtained unclassified communication access in China. We drafted operations plans and contingency plans, all within the framework of operating guidelines from the Chinese host government.

It was a proud "coming of age" moment for China, opening the country up to the world while also playing to its historic moniker as the "Middle Kingdom," center of the universe. To host close to 200 countries sending thousands of athletes, along with 22,000 media representatives, Beijing was obliged to become less opaque. With a standing army of about three million, China would have no problem securing any major athletic event. But the country had to meet requirements established by the International Olympic Committee for infrastructure, transportation (airports, highways, trains, and buses), security (police, military, and border control), hotel accommodations, athlete food quality, air quality, and more—all in an open and transparent fashion for the IOC to assess.

Three months prior to the games, 70,000 Chinese citizens lost their lives in the devastating Sichuan earthquake. That tragedy, combined with the televised protests over China's Tibet policy that accompanied many of the Olympic Torch Runs held around the world, put Beijing on the defensive. It was our good fortune that the San Francisco Police Department, along with the Diplomatic Security Service and Federal Bureau of Investigation's field offices, did a superb job during the San Francisco Torch Run. They were able to balance freedom of speech

for protesters with unimpeded passage of the torch through the city. This had a positive impact on our daily negotiations in Beijing.

The United States can at times be the proverbial 800-pound gorilla, creating a huge “footprint” with every step, and Olympic participation is no exception. The unprecedented visit of a U.S. president, George W. Bush, along with his father—himself a past president and former U.S. ambassador to China—required a substantial Secret Service presence. But any overseas Olympics creates its own sizeable security footprint with the need to protect, in this case, a 1,250-member U.S. Olympic team, visiting Cabinet-level officials, 20,000 U.S. corporate sponsors and tens of thousands of U.S. citizen spectators. The Olympic coordination office and Embassy Beijing had to accommodate hundreds of temporary staff involved in the Olympic visit.

The Diplomatic Security Bureau, working with the FBI and Secret Service, under the leadership of Embassy Beijing’s senior management, achieved an unprecedented level of cooperation with our Chinese hosts. We created a 24-hour joint operations center in the embassy comprised of representatives from a dozen federal agencies—including the National Geospatial Agency, the Department of Defense, and the Federal Aviation Administration, among others—and various embassy offices, including public affairs, the American citizen services unit of the consular section, medical, and translation—all to act in concert to protect Americans.

In short, two years of give-and-take negotiations yielded the cooperation necessary for U.S. participation in a successful Olympic Games. Only government service overseas could provide such a unique experience, and the teamwork of outstanding public servants from various federal agencies made it a success.

Sean O’Brien served as United States Olympic security coordinator in Beijing from 2006 to 2008. He has served for 23 years as a diplomatic security special agent with tours of duty in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and the United States.

AL-QAIDA ATTACK ON THE CONSULATE

SAUDI ARABIA, 2004

By Heather E. Kalmbach

Crouching beneath my desk as gunfire flew past my office window at U.S. Consulate General Jeddah was, without a doubt, the most terrifying moment of my life. The al-Qaida attack on our consulate on December 6, 2004, will remain forever imprinted on my mind as a day when five brave souls from the countries of Yemen, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines lost their lives as they stood steadfast in the face of terrorism. During the attack, 10 staff members were injured so gravely that years later, many continue to suffer daily as a result of the