

THE FUSING OF SPORT AND POLITICS

Media Constructions of U.S. Versus Iran at France '98

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The World Cup is a site for political discourses and national symbols. In an environment in which global print and electronic media blanket the tournament, it is not surprising that political and national elements are structured by the mass media. This study of U.S. print media coverage of the Iran-United States match at the 1998 World Cup examines how media frames are complex and overlapping. While endeavoring to focus on the athletic dimensions of the match, the print media nevertheless turned to the familiar political and ideological frames for the relationship and interactions between the two nations. The match was, therefore, framed largely in political terms. However, the complications of those very political parameters also generated layers of constructs related to sport, national identity, fans, and participants.

Keywords: Iran; media frames; soccer; United States; World Cup

Various scholars have commented on the political and ideological import of sports, athletic competitions, and athletes (Allison, 1986; Arnaud & Riordan, 1998; Hargreaves, 1982; Thompson, 1978). Viewed from this vantage point, sport becomes yet another arena for nations and communities to engage in conflict and to compete for the symbolic, and sometimes material, benefits that accrue to the victor.

Following along the sport and politics thesis, it is easy to see how particular sporting events become sites of hyperbolic ideological and nationalistic rhetorics. The Olympics, for one example, have long been rife with international political intrigue and are a site of contestation between nations (and blocs) and their political ideologies (Arnaud & Riordan, 1998), perhaps culminating in the various boycotts affecting the 1976, 1980, and 1984 Summer Games. Given the events of the past 30 years, "it is hard to believe that anyone will ever be able to say again, with a straight face, that sport has nothing to do with politics" (Whannel, 1983, p. 3).

The World Cup has similarly been the site of such highly symbolic confrontations between East and West Germany, Argentina and England, and, in the group phase of the 1998 World Cup, Iran and the United States. In this article, I will focus on the group play match involving the United States and

Iran. Such a match, even in a sport largely ignored and neglected by Americans (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001), was bound to gain the attention of the media as well as casual fans of sport (and politics). Moreover, given the fervor with which the two nations have pursued their mutual antipathy over the past quarter century, the match was bound to mean more than simply a contest between two also-rans struggling to maintain their hopes for second-round qualification.

Although a minor sport in the United States, sporting competition with Iran on world football's grandest stage afforded the mainstream North American and Anglo print media the opportunity to legitimately invoke the frames of ideological conflict so as to nearly overwhelm the actual athletic contest between the two nations. The match was politically and symbolically important to both nations, although Iran would infuse its own culturally deep passions for soccer as a spectator sport whereas the United States is less interested in the game.

Markovits and Hellerman (2001) have observed that the U.S. media had two obvious options for framing the match: "First, it was only a game devoid of any politics. . . . Second, though only a soccer game, politics could not help but be part of it" (p. 250). The framing of the match by U.S. print media had to be complicated by the tense political relations between Iran and the United States and the writers' own limitations to articulate the match in a compelling manner to a largely dispassionate readership. The coverage provides us with a series of texts that illustrate how the tactics of nationalism and political tensions get articulated and how the media frames sporting encounters in ideological and nationalistic terms. The fact that world football is relatively remote from the viewing habits and sporting preferences of a majority of Americans makes it all the more logical that the U.S. media would present and frame their coverage through "familiar signs and symbols that are embedded in the routines and conventions of the production and reception process" (Tucker, 1998, p. 143).

Nevertheless, the contextualizing factors—recent history, ideological affiliations, political relations, geopolitical goals, cultural affinity for soccer—associated with the Iran–United States match challenge uncomplicated notions of hegemonic frames. This article will pursue the notion that the mass media, in this case print, cannot so easily and singularly posit a particular frame for a news event. This complicates the unified conception of media frames and "the media's role in constructing common sense" but does reinforce the reality that "while there may be more than one frame operating within the media discourse about a specific issue, a dominant frame usually is fixed within the discourse to become the preferred reading of an issue, event or character" (Tucker, 1998, p. 144).

POLITICS, FOOTBALL AND THE WORLD CUP

At various junctures, the realm of international politics and national-ideological conflicts have intruded on world football's World Cup tournaments. Examples such as moving Israel from the Asian zone into Europe as a

response to Middle Eastern tensions and the suspension of Yugoslavia in light of UN sanctions in the early 1990s illustrate how politics and world football become intertwined. Perhaps this is expected given the connotations associated with nation-based competitions such as the Olympics and the World Cup and how such events arouse nationalistic passions and can be "made an instrument of policy and thus a part of the political culture as a whole" (Hoberman, 1977, p. 83).

In the specific example of FIFA's (the Federation Internationale de Football Association) World Cup, Sugden and Tomlinson (1998) reminded us that FIFA and "international football is now influenced by the constant fluctuations in international relations" (pp. 2-3). Moreover, to add to this political reality, world football "is peerless in its capacity to generate passionate and rooted feelings of local and national pride or shame" (p. 4). Indeed, as Duke and Crolley (1996) reminded us, "when football support and nationalism are combined, the brew is particularly strong" (p. 4).

The World Cup, then, is the ideal vehicle through which political ideologies and senses of nationalism can be expressed and contested. A culmination of nearly 2 years of regionalized competitions between the nearly 200-member nations of FIFA, the World Cup finals themselves only sometimes reflect the truer depth of the complications associated with international politics. Remarking on the qualification competitions leading up to the 1994 World Cup, and shortly after the Gulf War, Sugden and Tomlinson (1998) noted that,

Saudi Arabia found itself in a qualifying group with Iran and Iraq. Included in the same group were North and South Korea and Japan, presenting a mind-boggling series of opportunities through which ancient and contemporary national enmities could be flagged. (p. 9)

Perhaps the most noted fusion between international football and politics or nationalism has been the so-called "soccer war" involving El Salvador and Honduras (Kapuscinski, 1990).

There are marked examples of political and national antagonisms intruding on the World Cup finals, and the soccer's sociocultural importance in many nations lead to the conclusion that "politics is omnipresent in it" (Murray, 1996, p. 171). The Iran-United States match in 1998 is an example of how football, nationalism, and political ideology become entangled. Iran and the United States entered their 1998 match with precious little cultural exchange since the 1979 revolution and virtually no official political relations. Despite that history, and what may or may not have been coincidence, in the weeks before the football match, there appeared to be a thawing of relations between the two nations.

Just 3 days before the match, Schweid (1998) reported that U.S. "Secretary of State Madeline Albright held out the olive branch, responding to openings from Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, in a speech Wednesday to the Asia Society in New York" (p. 26). President Clinton was similarly

clear in his response to President Khatami's previous call for a "thoughtful dialogue" (Gurdon, 1998, p. 18) between the nations, "what we want is a genuine reconciliation" ("19 years later," 1998, p. 14A). The motives behind reconciliation were ascribed to the Clinton administration's attempt to support and cultivate Iranian President Mohammed Khatami. As the *Boston Globe* noted, "a State Department official acknowledged yesterday that U.S. policymakers are unsure of whether [Secretary of State] Albright's 'road map' speech to the Asia Society will help or hurt Khatami in his life-and-death struggle against hard-liners" ("Toward Rapprochement With Iraq," 1998, p. A30). Indeed, it would appear that Khatami's ascension to the presidency in 1997 was the focal point: "Khatami is a man with whom Clinton evidently feels he can do business, and Iran . . . is a country many Americans feel they can no longer afford to shun" (Theodoulou, 1998).

Sport, then, became a vehicle for the Clinton administration to pursue cultivating positive relations with a perceived enemy from a volatile and geopolitically strategic part of the world. As with Nixon and his ping-pong diplomacy, Clinton saw in sport an opportunity to reach out:

as we cheer today's game between American and Iranian athletes, I hope that it can be another step toward ending the estrangement between our nations. I am pleased that over the last year, President Khatami and I have both worked to encourage more people-to-people exchanges, and to help our citizens develop a better understanding of each other's rich civilizations. ("President Clinton to Broadcast," 1998)

As during the cold war, sporting events provided the opportunity and space to compete and to meet in a way that stretches beyond official communiqués between government officials. Although, as Clinton's words suggested, such official language itself helps shape the context for interaction.

Although the Iranians were officially skeptical of such words, claiming they preferred actual demonstrations of "goodwill" ("Iran Radio Doubts U.S.," 1998, p. 17) and, as Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazmi stated, that "words are not enough; they must be followed by acts" (Valinejad, 1998, p. 33), the Clinton administration clearly saw the match as an opportunity to demonstrate that ideological differences could be bridged: "When the United States and Iran meet in the World Cup on Sunday, it will be something more than a soccer game and something less than the ultimate diplomatic breakthrough" (Faruqui, 1998). Indeed, U.S. officials did posit parallels with China in the 1970s, observing that they hoped the match would "produce the sort of rapprochement effected by ping-pong diplomacy in China" (Rhodes, 1998, p. 1). For both nations, the World Cup match was fraught with symbolic and ideological significance for the winner; there was also hope that the game in and of itself would abet the efforts to resolve political disputes.

The central question, then, is not whether a match between two nations with long-standing and mutual enmity would be rife with political overtones but how these political elements were constructed so as to intrude

on, if not overdetermine, the sporting aspects of the game. Specifically, the symbolic dimensions of the match, fused with the sporting implications associated with the World Cup tournament, connect to make the mass media an important filter through which audiences and readers were encouraged to perceive the importance of the match. In short, the stature of the tournament and the heightened sensitivity to athletic competition between the United States and Iran on such an international and heavily mediated stage suggested the centrality of the media in framing the match.

MEDIA FRAMES

Robert Entman (1993) explained,

Whatever its specific use, the concept of framing offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text. Analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human conscious is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location—such as speech, utterance, news report, or novel—to that consciousness. (p. 51)

In this view, framing theory operates as a heuristic to analyze how humans—often in the form of readers, listeners, and viewers—are subject to “subtle alterations in the statement or presentation of judgment and choice problems” (Iyengar, 1991, p. 11). In doing so, “frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience” (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

Frames, then, are constructions of information that are literally composed and structured with the intention of producing particular effects in audiences, although textual frames and perceivers’ frames may not be consonant. The media, however, operates intentionally. That is, media producers conceive of how and why issues will be presented to the audience in the hopes of meeting several goals—promulgation of a political viewpoint, to appeal to the broadest audience, to fit time or space constraints, and, as Gitlin (1980) has observed, “to process large amounts of information routinely and quickly” (p. 7). As a result, Watkins (2001) explained that “framing, then, is an active process, a distinct mode of cultural production informed by a system of professional repertoires, values regarding what constitutes news, and access to sources that enable journalists to routinely construct and process news discourse” (p. 84).

Typically, frame analysis has been attached to print and television coverage of political figures and issues, wherein frames provide “an overall context for viewing a news story” (Solomon, 1992, p. 65). However, as Tucker (1998a) pointed out, “media frames perform specific functions, including problem definition, diagnosis, evaluation and policy recommendation” that often “serve the social interests represented by elite discourses” (p. 143). The consequence, then, is that consumers of these frames are part of the public that is directed to examine public issues in particular ways (Pan & Kosicki, 1991; Tucker, 1998). Thus, what may be constituted at any point as a public

issue can be something more than purely a political, governmental, or electoral concern. As Tucker (1998) concluded, "at issue is the power of media frames to define particular aspects of reality in ways that support specific social interests within the field of public discourse" (p. 143).

Still, this line of argument might suggest that frames are monolithic and unified in their presentation. In fact, definitions and explanations of particular events and/or personalities may have multiple dimensions to them. To wit, the print coverage of the Iran–United States match reflected a range of considerations among soccer writers, general sport writers, wire reports, and editorial decision makers. So, rather than speaking of one hegemonic or ideologically pure frame, the following analysis will examine the overlapping elements associated with sport, political coverage, and the cultural biases that intrude on mainstream American and English-language print media outlets. Indeed, in the analysis that follows, two key frames will be shown to be in operation and often in conflict with one another.

PURE FOOTBALL AT THE WORLD CUP: IT'S JUST A GAME

To retain some focus on the match itself, and to appreciate its importance within the context of an international sporting competition, one obvious frame provided by the media is the Iran–United States contest as simply a football match.¹ This is most clearly articulated by the print media's use of quotes from players and coaches of both sides. As Alexi Lalas, a U.S. fullback observed, "This is a game that will determine the future of our planet. It's the single most important event ever staged in the history of the world. Other than that, it's just a soccer game" (Shipley, 1998b, C1).² This humorous and sarcastic observation by one of the U.S. players suggests to and through the print media that the match deserved some degree of proportion and that its significance to both teams was largely based on competition and their efforts to reach the second round of the tournament.

Although perhaps with less sarcasm, other participants picked up the theme of the supposed importance of the match. U.S. captain Thomas Dooley, a lifelong resident of Germany who only rediscovered his U.S. roots (and citizenship) in 1993, observed "this clash is strictly on the field. There's no political points." A sentiment shared in the same story by Iranian coach and U.S. resident Jalal Talebi who offered "we come to play, and to show everybody that there is no problem between the people of the two countries" (Henley, 1998, p. 4).

For the U.S. players, an emergent frame is that of innocence and ignorance. One editorial noted that "the players on the U.S. soccer squad are too young and too apolitical to fret about the hostage crisis of 1979" ("When the Goal is Martyrdom," 1998, p. A14). This point is demonstrated by the position taken by several U.S. players. When asked about representing the so-called Great Satan, U.S. midfielder Frankie Hejduk offered "Man, I don't know what you're talking about" (Henley, 1998, p. 4). Lalas cut right to the point: "It's just a soccer game. There's a lot of crap around here" (Martins,

1998, p. B14). U.S. forward Eric Wynalda, while acknowledging the political shadows, discussed the relevance of the match in sporting terms: "We want to win this game for all the right reasons, which is to get three points [with a win]" (Davis, 1998, p. 1). For players such as Cobi Jones, the political overlay on the game had been "blown out of proportion" (Blum, 1998a, p. SO2). Indeed, the American players were "confident most Iranian care as little about the politics as they do" (Blum, 1998b, p. E4).

The spirit of sportsmanship was also evident among Iranians. Indeed, effectively positing the frame demanded the collaboration of Iranian players, fans from both sides, and the coaching staffs and delegations from both nations. Setting the tone for this was the Iranian coach who disclosed, "I am not a political man. We are here to play football and show that there is no problem between the people of the two countries" (Killion, 1998, p. C1). Talebi's players appeared to share his sentiments. Iranian forward Ali Daei is quoted as observing that "despite what everybody thinks, we are going to play football" (Longman, 1998, p. 1) and that "this is just sport. We're just here to play" (Bondy, 1998a, p. 110). These sentiments were echoed by goalkeeper Nima Nakisa, who stated that "the most important thing is to have a friendly spirit on the pitch" (Blum, 1998c, p. D1). For star forward Khodadad Azizi, the focus was on athletics and sporting competition: "We hope it will be a good game. We want it to be like any other game—well played and not looked at from a political view" (Lopez, 1998, p. F6). This spirit was clearly in keeping with the Iranian coach's position that "on Sunday, we will prove there should be no politics in soccer" (Meynier, 1998, p. 1). Apparently, U.S. coach Steve Sampson concurred with this view as he offered that "we're trying to keep the politics out of it completely" (Blum, 1998c, p. D1).

Fans of both teams were clearly supportive of the efforts to frame the match as simply a sporting contest. One Iranian emigré, distinguishing the soccer match from the ideological game, observed, "but this is a sport, not politics. They're going to play soccer, not fight them" (Kealy, 1998, p. SP12). American fans were presented as sharing similar views: "We don't give a stuff about politics" (Rosenblum, 1998). In the spirit of world football's also-rans sharing the global stage, "Iranians and Americans, in full party mode, tied together the tips of their national flags and danced the linked colors through the streets of Lyon as they headed for the soccer showdown" (Botchford, 1998, p. 5). Indeed, the camaraderie of the fans and players was a significant element in the new reports following the Iranian victory. For example, one writer noted that "both sides exhibited extraordinarily good sportsmanship on the playing field. Their respective fans, some of whom found themselves seated in adjacent sections in the stadium, got along famously, even exchanging hats and souvenirs as the game unfolded" (Curtiss, 1998, p. 34).

Still, despite these clear efforts to refocus the relevance of the match strictly in terms of the competitive necessities of group play in the World Cup, we shall see how, in the next section, such efforts were overwhelmed by the sheer force of a dominant frame that, while allowing for a complication,

still articulated the match in historical, cultural, and ideological terms centering on the political and national conflict between Iran and the United States. Thus, on June 21, on the date that FIFA designated as Fair Play Day and with the presence of a Swiss referee, layering meanings of sporting and political neutrality, the U.S. and Iranian national teams played what U.S. soccer director Hank Steinbrecher called "the mother of all games" (Jones, 1998, p. C1).

THE POLITICAL FOOTBALL IN PLAY: "THE MOTHER OF ALL GAMES"

Contrast Steinbrecher's assertion about the game with Talebi's plea to "please don't make it too big. For it's only a game, just game" (Shipley, 1998a, p. B01), and we can see how two media frames were in conflict. Clearly, the framing of the match between the nations was going to be replete with political and nationalistic symbolism. For the print media, these ideologically rich symbolic dimensions of the match were too significant to ignore. Thus, when sports columnist Frank Dell'Appa (1998) paradoxically observed that "hostage situations, Great Satans, fatwahs, and negative stereotypes were forgotten when hundreds of Iranian and U.S. supporters converged in what became a spontaneous celebration in Place Bellecour in the city's [Lyons] center just after noon yesterday" (p. C6), he reflected the reality that no matter how hard players, coaches, fans, and even the media tried to blur the political framing of the match, it was all too clear and in focus.

Of course, "trying to sieve the football from the politics was never going to be easy on such a night" (Longmore, 1998, p. 30), especially "with all of the political intrigue" (Chapman, 1998a, p. D27) surrounding the match. Although the mainstream newspapers made an effort to present the game as merely significant in the context of both teams' efforts to continue on in the World Cup, the unavoidable history of relations between Iran and the United States had to make itself felt. Thus, rather than simply match two of divisional play, "the United States-Iran match transcends a mere sporting event. Even if the World Cup is the world's biggest sporting event. This is political football at the very highest" (Chapman, 1998b, p. D27).

The predominant mode of framing the match was through the term *political*. Jones (1998) labeled it the "most politically charged match in years" (p. C1). Cowles (1998) suggested that the match "recalled thoughts of two decades of political differences" (p. 19). New York's *Newsday* ("Olive Branch," 1998) noted that it was a "politically loaded match" (p. A54). Succinctly stated, it was a "game for the political ages" (Jensen, 1998, p. E1). Such constructions suggest that the weight of history and international relations directed the media to employ the obvious frame of political conflict. To a public somewhat removed from the salience of the match in pure football terms and with limited appreciation for the significance of the World Cup, the political frame serves to position the match as important, particularly for U.S. readers. Yet the frame constructs importance in terms of the political and national conflict, perhaps a natural outgrowth of the nations'

relationship but also, as pointed out by both Tucker (1998) and Watkins (2001), as a consequence of journalistic habits and the already existing modes of reception among readers. Thus, although the "reality is that few Americans are even aware of today's game" (Langton, 1998, p. 10), those that were, even "confirmed sceptics (sic)," were likely to watch and participate because "this has little to do with sport and everything to do with politics" (Taylor, 1998).

However, it is one thing to identify an event as political, it is quite another to sustain or contain the actions that are associated with the term *political*. Indeed, if two halves shaped American partisanship—those who cared about U.S. football and the team's chances at the World Cup and those who simply wished to defeat an enemy as a demonstration of American superiority—so, too, were the Iranians split. Clearly, the match and subsequent 2-1 victory produced symbolic and ideological benefits for the ruling clerics. Yet the match was also an opportunity for Iranians in exile and in opposition to those same clerics. Thus, exiles were quoted as showing their support for the Iranian team and their disdain for the ruling government.

Ironically, in the midst of all this discursive focus on political differences and the political context of the match, the French security chief noted that "we have to be particularly careful about any attempt to exploit this event, either politically or ideologically" (Meynier, 1998, p. 1). Clearly, referring to protest efforts in and around the stadium, the French security authority nevertheless reified the position that certain forms of official exploitation are permissible but that efforts such as those of the "fleet-footed young man who ran onto the field carrying a Rajavi [opposition leader Masoud Rajavi of the People's Mojahedin] picture" (Curtiss, 1998, p. 34) were clearly out of bounds.

The print media did provide evidence within the frame for the potential of inappropriate politicizing at the match. One report noted that "Iranian exiles are threatening to disrupt the United States-Iran game Sunday, adding a new dimension to an event already surrounded by political and cultural sideshows" (Trecker, 1998, p. A97). Indeed, FIFA President Joseph Blatter acknowledged, "we have received more-or-less anonymous letters from groups of exiled Iranians who say they will do something to disrupt the match to show what is going on in their country" ("U.S. Match With Iran," 1998, p. D2).

For some in the media, the event was marked by the marginalization of American interests on the field and in the stands, where Iranians united in their support of their team but differed in their support for the ruling regime: "Actually, the United States was essentially an innocent bystander in all the political maneuvering last night. The action in the stands involved thousands of Iranian exiles wearing T-shirts supporting an opposition movement and trying to wave banners" (Vescey, 1998, p. C1). Yet it would appear that Iran's victory mollified Iranian antagonists because "Iranis danced together, hugged each other, and talked politics mixed with soccer . . . [although] there had been considerable tension between Iranian govern-

ment supporters and members of the Iranian resistance" before and during the match (Bondy, 1998b, p. 54).

Notions of American liberalism and openness to the nation, government, and people of Iran then marked the emerging political frame. Prior to the match, the symbolic and ritualized gestures of the exchange of gifts between team captains took on additional importance, "Iranian starters gave their U.S. counterparts white flowers, and the Americans in turn gave them U.S. Soccer Federation pennants" (Blum, 1998d, p. C1) and both teams were photographed "posing arm in arm en masse in a show of goodwill" (Powers & Dell'Appa, 1998, p. C7). In the aftermath of the match, the media noted that "the Clinton Administration heartily congratulated Iran last night on its victory . . . trying once again to signal its wish for rapprochement with the Islamic Government in Tehran" (Rhodes, 1998b). American fans were similarly open to and pleased with their interactions with the Iranian people, "none of the images of Iranians have held up. We were told the Iranians were crazy, bloodthirsty people" (Dell'Appa, 1998, p. C6).

Iranian fans and players were also placed within this frame of liberalism and openness. From the players' exchange of gifts before the match to the traditional swapping of jerseys after the match, the Iranian team was presented in peaceful and positive terms. Iran's national team "played hard and they played resourceful" and "there was no political zealotry in the eyes of the Iranian players on the field, no holy mission in their faces or their actions" (Vescey, 1998, p. C1). The Iranian players competed for their people, "the whole nation and all Iranian people were waiting for this game" (Kaufman, 1998, p. C01) and the Iranian people responded in the spirit of competition and in sporting terms, "America was not the Great Satan tonight. Tonight, we were friends" and, among friends, Iranian supporters could be charitable, "the Americans are doing their best" (Sciolino, 1998, p. C9).

Yet the media was clear and decisive in distinguishing the attitude of the Iranian players and fans from those of Iranian officials. Thus, although the U.S. government was presented as conciliatory, Iranian officials were often quoted in ways consistent with the historic hostility between the two governments. After the match, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei observed that "tonight again, the strong and arrogant opponent felt the bitter taste of defeat at your hands. Be happy that you have made the Iranian nation happy" ("Iran Rejoices in Win Over U.S.," 1998, p. 007). This is perhaps the logical extension of President Khatami's prematch reminder that "now is the time to defend the sovereignty of the country's sports as well as dignity and might of the Islamic Iran" (Sunderland, 1998, p. F1).

The political frame had to overwhelm the wishes for a purely conceived athletic competition. What intrigues are the continuities and discontinuities within the frame. Iran as a nation appears as both a political foe and a friendly rival. Distinctions among types of fans and between people and nation (or government) are clearly articulated by the media. In effect, although reifying the frame of political and national antipathy, the presence

of various forms of Iranians and the climate of sportsmanship among the Iranian players necessitated a shifting and sometimes contradictory media frame. The mother of all games was, in the end, framed largely and simply as a sporting contest interrupted by the presence of Iranian dissidents occupying the same space as Iranian government supporters and, according to Curtiss (1998), secret police. Nevertheless, the unstated frame that survived the encounter and the prematch hype is that sport once again can be a safe preserve from the political, cultural, and national conflicts between nations.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that World Cup '98 allowed two nations to meet on relatively safe ground. Indeed, on many occasions, sport has provided a peaceful means by which nations can clash and compete. As Shactman (1998) observed on the day of the match,

Political, cultural, historical. And let's not forget soccer, the real reason the countries are in the news today. The fact that it is sport—often a peaceful outlet for political tension—makes it more intriguing that people are once again talking about Iranian and American relations. (p. D1)

One month after the epic soccer match, Iranian wrestlers would compete in New York during the Goodwill Games, participating in "the latest in a recent string of sports meetings between Iran and the United States, which have not had diplomatic relations for 20 years and still deal through the political, cultural and religious fallout of the Islamic revolution" (Bock, 1998). Athletics appear to be a useful vehicle to bridge the ideological differences that separate the two nations.

In terms of the print media framing of the World Cup match, the effort to suggest an apolitical space as part of the frame can be seen as serving the already avowed political aims of President Clinton and Secretary of State Madeline Albright. As one British paper had it, the match could "symbolize the end of nearly two decades of hostility between the Islamic state accused by Washington of sponsoring terrorism, and the power perceived in Tehran as the 'Great Satan'" (Theodoulou, 1998). By framing the match in friendly terms, the media was acting in accordance with its role to "promote elite social discourse as the public discourse or the common sense of society" (Tucker, 1998, p. 143). Yet the historical context and ideological reality associated with perceptions of U.S.-Iranian relations made it impossible for the media to create a consistent and hegemonic frame. As Gitlin (1980) reminded us, "The media create and relay images of order [and disorder]. Yet the social reality is enormously complex, fluid, and self-contradictory, even in its own terms" (p. 11).

It would seem that the remoteness of the match from the sporting knowledge and preferences of many Americans, the historical record of antagonism between the two nations, and the actual events that occurred before, during, and after the match rendered a consistent and unified frame

impractical. Rather, what we see is that salience of certain frames, and their effectiveness, may rely on multiple factors, including knowledge of the event, context for the event and attendant discourse, and the reality of the actors involved. In the end, Iran–United States was a political football match, but its articulation and understanding suggest that the print media have difficulty presenting a singular, let alone unified, frame. And, as with all ideological and hegemonic discourses, there is seepage and slippage inviting media consumers to focus on various elements within the frame.

NOTES

1. I concur with Markovits and Hellerman's (2001) general position on politics and sport, embedded in a chapter on the media's presentation of the World Cup to U.S. audiences, but I take issue with causality and their conclusion: "While it was clear that to all American players the game was all about soccer, this much less the case for many Iranians" (p. 251). This appears to be far too sweeping a generalization and only superficially assesses the tactics of framing and presentation by the print media. Still, Markovits and Hellerman do accurately capture the relevance of the match from within the tournament and the inflated discourse leading up to the match.
2. An interesting side note is how Amy Shipley's story was headlined in two different newspapers. In the version referenced above, *The Austin American-Statesman* headlined "Hey, fans: It's not all politics for the U.S. and Iran." In *The Washington Post*, the story was headlined, "U.S., Iran find politics are afoot: Sampson to alter lineup." Yet the stories, save some very minor changes in language, are virtually the same. Such contrasts do suggest the importance of editorial actions in constructing the frame for readers.

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