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IAS 302R
Professor Scott Sanders
Lecture Series: Heather L. Dichter, March 25, 2026, 12:00 p.m.

Hosting the World's Games, Inheriting the World's Problems

Before I ever listened to Heather L. Dichter speak, I first encountered her through her writing. In IAS 302, we read "Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945." I chose to write my class essay about Chapter 1, which explores how sport mega-events served as instruments of soft power during the Cold War. When Professor Dichter walked into our classroom after her Kennedy Center lecture, I had the unusual experience of seeing the scholar behind the argument sitting right in front of me.

I missed her full campus forum because of another class, so my first impression came from the text and then from our smaller discussion. In person, Dichter was thoughtful, direct, and precise. Later that night, I watched the full Kennedy Center lecture online. Seeing both settings clarified her central point: countries host sport mega-events hoping to gain prestige and influence, but those same events often expose political issues they would prefer to hide. Dichter called this recurring pattern the "backfiring of soft power." Governments invest heavily in hosting international events to earn admiration, attract tourism, and reshape their national image. Instead, they frequently encounter global criticism, boycotts, financial strain, and heightened scrutiny. Her examples made this argument especially compelling.

Dichter highlighted instances like the 1962 World Alpine Skiing and Ice Hockey Championships, which were influenced by Cold War politics, the division of Germany, and NATO rules. She pointed to Montreal 1976 and Moscow 1980 as events whose impacts persisted well beyond the closing ceremonies through debt, boycotts, and hosts losing control of the international story. She then linked these earlier examples to more recent ones, such as Sochi 2014 and Beijing 2022. In a 24/7 media environment, every controversy becomes part of the event itself. Governments may try to project unity, modernity, or national strength. Yet, journalists, activists, and foreign governments often use the same spotlight to expose human rights violations, discriminatory laws, or wasteful infrastructure. The attention that such scrutiny draws to countries with mega-events also makes them vulnerable.

Hearing Dichter speak in class and then watching the full lecture shifted how I understood her book. What initially felt like a historical Cold War case study now appears to be a persistent pattern that has endured across decades and political systems. Dichter is not arguing that sport has no diplomatic value. Rather, she questions why governments still treat mega-events as dependable tools of public diplomacy, given that history repeatedly shows how easily they can backfire. That question feels particularly relevant in Utah today, where upcoming Olympic and World Cup events seem increasingly tangible. Dichter's lecture left me with a clear but uncomfortable insight: when a nation invites the world to watch, it also invites the world to judge. The risk may still be worth taking, but it is unrealistic to pretend that the spotlight will illuminate only what a host wants the world to see.