

# A review of tommie smith recalls his 1968 olympic protest



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The 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City helped to change and direct the Civil Rights movement not only in the United States, but throughout the world. This was a tumultuous time for African Americans in general and athletes in particular, considering the global stage of the Olympic ceremony.

Tommie Smith and John Carlos chose to protest the treatment and discrimination faced by black people throughout the world and this was the perfect platform to spread their message of black power and black unity. This brief essay will place the protest in its social, cultural and political context in order to illustrate and highlight the import of this powerful protest.

After the medal ceremony for the 200 meter dash that Tommie Smith claimed gold in Mexico City, Smith told ABC-TV sportscaster Howard Cosell, “ My raised right hand stood for the power in Black America. Carlos’ raised left hand stood for the unity of Black America” (McRae).

The image has become an iconic symbol of black unity in the era of a disheartened Civil Rights movement that had witnessed countless setbacks, most noticeably the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and of Malcolm X.

What is most striking about the protest is its inherent silence. Far from the outspoken protests of the likes of Minister Farrakhan and Jessie Jackson, Tommie Smith and John Carlos subverted the latent racial discriminations by calling attention to the power of silence when utilized in a situation of a mass audience.

Tommie Smith says of the tactic, “ This was our platform, and John and I used this moment to take a stand. We were embracing those who had no

other platform but the streets. My silent gestures were designed to speak volumes" (McRae).

In an era defined by social upheaval and vocal discontents, the bowed heads and raised fists communicated far more reproach than if they had decided to skip the award ceremony altogether.

Even the second place finisher in the race, white Australian Peter Norman supported the protest. His inclusion is often neglected, but his united protest with Smith and Carlos heightened the sense of unity that was displayed on the stand.

Following the iconic moment Smith and Carlos were thrust to the forefront and spotlight of being spokesmen for the Civil Rights Era. Although the two were politically oriented, they had previously thought of themselves as black athletes as opposed to black politicians.

They faced numerous threats and violent outbursts from angry establishment figures. Smith notes of the change, " Here I was an Olympic gold medalist, and I was even fired from my job washing cars" (McRae).

Tommie Smith is the only man in track-and-field history to hold 11 world records simultaneously, and the first person in Olympic history to win a gold medal in record-breaking time in the 200-meter, both accomplishments that speak to his athletic prowess as well as to his commitment to excellence.

Despite the mounting criticisms and threats following the protest, Smith and Carlos continued to fight for equality and Civil Rights for African-Americans. They both established their progressive political identities and began touring and giving speeches promoting Civil Rights. Tommie Smith eventually  
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became the athletic director and a professor of sports sociology at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio.

#### Works Cited

McRae, Erica. (2008). Tommie Smith Recalls His 1968 Olympic Protest. The Black College Wire. Retrieved January 18, 2009, from <http://www.blackcollegewire.org/index.php?option=com>