

REMEMBERING THE OLYMPIC PARK BOMBING

Eric Rudolph has confessed to being the Olympic Park bomber, as well as to bombing a gay nightclub in Atlanta and an abortion clinic in Birmingham. For this he will receive four life sentences with no chance for parole and will spend the rest of his sorry life in a federal prison, courtesy of the taxpayers. May he rot in hell. For anyone who hid him in North Carolina mountains thinking they were making some self-righteous statement of protest against the federal government, may they spend eternity with Jane Fonda on a gun turret in North Vietnam.

As managing director of communications and government relations for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, I saw Rudolph's handiwork up close and personal. It wasn't pretty. What had been one of the most festive venues during the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta was reduced to an eerie silence by a pipe bomb that was responsible for the death of two people (one by heart attack) and injuries to at least 100 spectators gathered in Centennial Park in the early morning hours of July 27.

Planning and executing any Olympic Games is chaotic. In Atlanta, this was especially true. Our Games were funded privately, which meant the committee had to raise \$1.7 billion. We walked a financial tightrope every day. In addition, we were dealing with one of the most incompetent and race-obsessed public officials on God's earth, Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell, who had the grand vision of a turnip. All he and his lackeys cared about was making a buck off the Games, no matter how tacky and dysfunctional the city looked. That approach to a potentially world-class event gave rise to the abominable sidewalk vendors program, which was a financial failure for the vendors and an international embarrassment. The only thing effective about the program was its ability to clog Atlanta's streets.

To make matters worse, the Atlanta Games were subjected to sophomoric coverage by the Atlanta newspapers, more interested in catching our CEO Billy Payne in a "gotcha" than in putting pressure on the city government to get its poo-poo together and make Atlanta look like the top-flight city it claimed to be. Sadly, the timid business community was too afraid of incurring Campbell's wrath to be of much help.

In spite of this, the Games were going along splendidly. Technical glitches and transportation issues plagued us, but most of those had been fixed. The athletes and the numbers of people watching the Games in person and on television were setting records. By the end of the first week, we were beginning to exhale. Then came the bombing.

To quote Charles Dickens, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." The worst, of course, was the loss of life and the injuries. The best was the response to the bombing on the part of athletes, spectators and volunteers. The decision had been made immediately after the explosion that the Games would go on. No one wanted a deranged act to intimidate us into stopping the Olympic Games, yet no one knew for sure if anyone would show up later that day.

We got our answer when crowds streamed into the venues for Saturday morning's events, fewer than 12 hours after the bombing. By the time the day was over, we had held 21 competitions, with our stadiums at 95 percent capacity and more than 85 percent of our volunteers on hand. To put an exclamation point on the day, 27,000 tickets were sold to future events.

In the weeks and months to follow, there would be a media feeding frenzy that saw security guard Richard Jewell accused — and later exonerated — of any role in the bombing. There would be a long and futile search for Eric Rudolph, culminating in his capture in a garbage dump (how fitting!) by a rookie police officer in a small town in North Carolina, and later a confession. Today, for those of us who put our hearts and souls into the Centennial Olympic Games, there is finally closure. After all these years, though, it still hurts.