

1936

# The 'Nazi Olympics'

Adolf Hitler tried to turn the Berlin Games into a showcase for 'Aryan superiority.' But a black American track-and-field star spoiled his party.

BY COURTNEY POTTS

**T**o go or not to go? That was the dilemma facing the United States in 1936, when German Chancellor Adolf Hitler hosted the Olympic Games in Berlin.

There were plenty of reasons to stay home. Hitler's theories about the genetic superiority of blue-eyed, blond-haired "Aryans" were well known. German Jews were being persecuted in nearly every aspect of German life, and had, in effect, been banned from competing at the Games.

In short, Hitler's racist rhetoric and anti-Semitic policies flew in the face of the spirit of the Games. Would participating implicitly condone those ideas?

Reasoning that the Games should first and foremost be about athletics, the U.S. decided to attend—even though it was clear that Hitler's agenda had little to do with sports.

Hitler wanted to prove his theories of Aryan supremacy to the world. But by turning the Olympics into a two-week propaganda spectacle, he set the stage for one of the most famous moments in Olympic history: the brilliant performance of black track-and-field star Jesse Owens, who became the first American to win four gold medals in a single Olympiad—and

shattered Hitler's Aryan dreams for the Games in the process.

Seventy-five years later, the "Nazi Olympics" are remembered for Owens's remarkable feat against the backdrop of the racial and political tension surrounding the Games, just three years before Germany invaded Poland to start World War II. The 1936 Games are also considered the start of the politicization of the modern Olympics.

"From the standpoint of the Games as a propaganda venue, it starts big-time in 1936," says Olympic historian John Hoberman.

## Hitler's Rise

Germany had been selected to host the 1936 Olympics in 1931. At the time, it had a democratic government known as the Weimar (*VY-mahr*) Republic, which had been in power since Germany's defeat in World War I in 1918.

But when Hitler, the charismatic and anti-Semitic leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, came to power, he turned Germany into a police state. Hitler had built his political movement from the ground up, starting in the 1920s. Germany and its economy were in ruins after the war, and Hitler, a persuasive speaker, promised a return to the

powerful, militaristic Germany of the past, blaming the nation's ills, especially its ailing economy, on the Jews.

Through careful maneuvering, Hitler was appointed chancellor (similar to prime minister) in January 1933. Two months later, he forced through legislation that effectively made him dictator.

Once in power, Hitler wasted no time in remilitarizing Germany and carrying out his anti-Semitic program. In April 1933, the Nazis called for a boycott of Jewish businesses. Less than a week later, the Reichstag (parliament) passed a law requiring the removal of Jews and other non-Aryans from government jobs.

In 1935, the Nuremberg Race Laws stripped German Jews of their citizenship and prohibited them from marrying non-Jews. Hundreds of similar laws were passed, all with the goal of excluding Jews from German society.

Fearing that Jewish athletes would not be treated fairly in Berlin, the International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) considered moving the 1936 Games to Rome or Tokyo. But committee members were persuaded by

*Additional reporting by Patricia Smith.*



**At the start of the Games** (top left), the Olympic torch arrives in a Berlin square draped with Nazi flags.

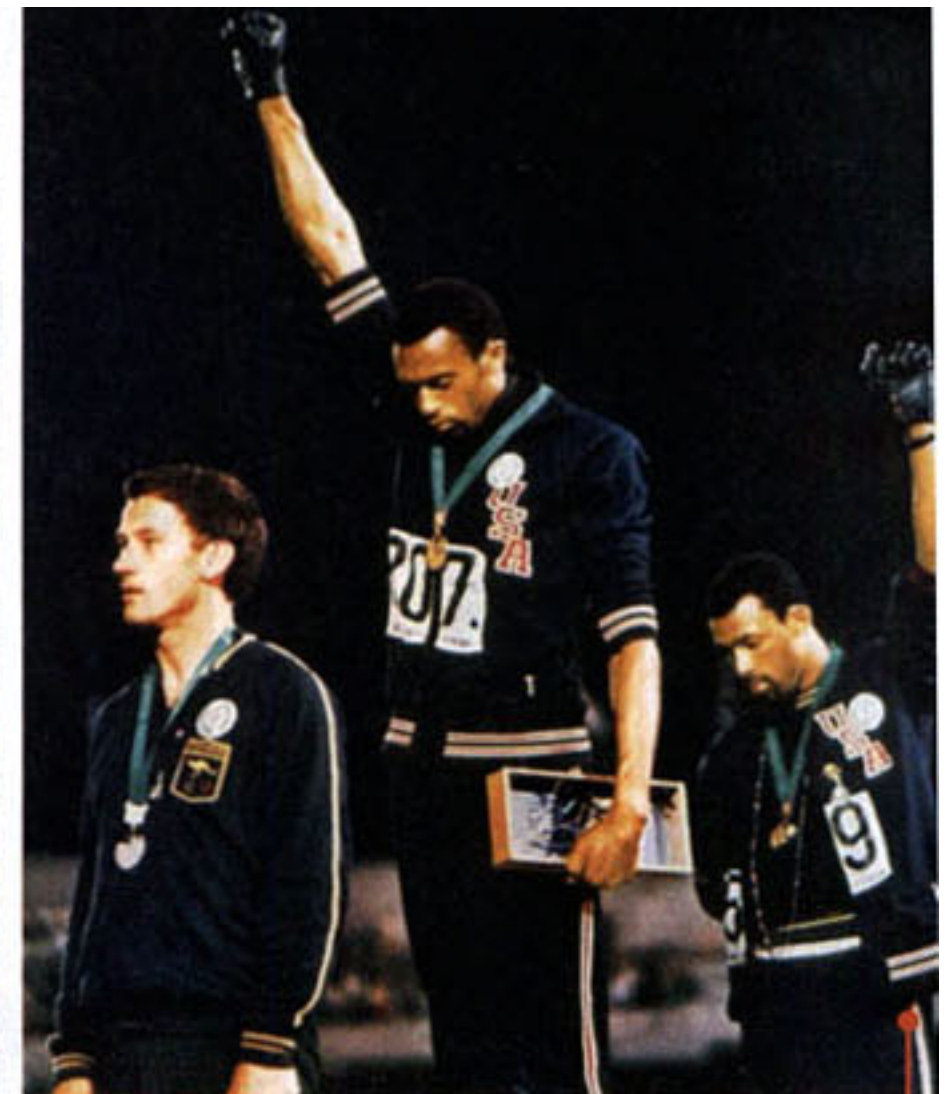
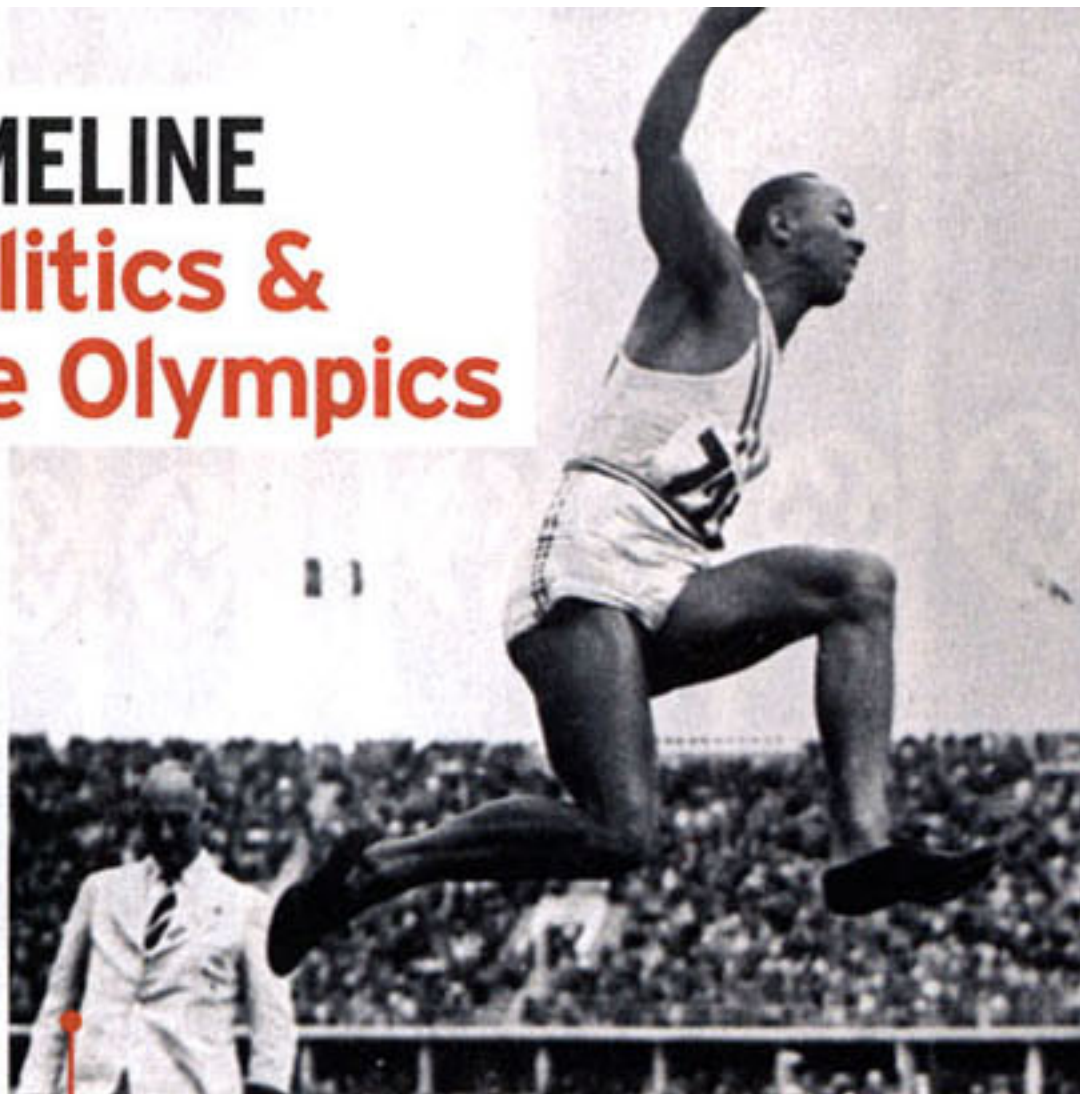
**Adolf Hitler** (top right) and other German officials salute the teams from Hitler's private box at the Olympic Stadium.

**'Admission of Jews Forbidden'**  
A sign (above) posted in 1935 at one of the Berlin Olympic venues. A year later, anti-Jewish signs like this were removed for the Games.

**Jesse Owens** (left) on the podium to receive his gold medal in the long jump; German long jumper "Luz" Long (right), who won a silver medal and befriended Owens, gives the Nazi salute.

# TIMELINE

## Politics & the Olympics



### ANCIENT OLYMPICS

#### Alexander the Great

Alexander uses the 324 B.C. Olympics, held in Olympia, to announce that political exiles could return to their native cities in Greece.

### 1936 BERLIN

#### Owens & Hitler

Black track-and-field star Jesse Owens wins four gold medals for the U.S. in Germany, where Nazi ideology proclaims the racial superiority of non-Jewish white "Aryans."

### 1948 LONDON

#### Cold War Games

Three years after the end of World War II, Japan and Germany are excluded. A woman from Communist Czechoslovakia defects from her country during the Games.

### 1956 MELBOURNE

#### China vs. Taiwan

China boycotts the Games because Taiwan, which it considers part of China, is allowed to compete independently.

### 1964 TOKYO

#### Apartheid

South Africa is banned from the Games because of apartheid, its system of racial segregation. It's not invited back until 1991, when apartheid ends.

German promises of fair competition for all athletes.

In the U.S., President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was up for re-election in 1936, never weighed in on the issue. After much debate, the American Olympic Committee and the Amateur Athletic Union voted to go to Berlin.

The Games themselves became "the greatest publicity stunt in history," in the words of one *New York Times* reporter. Hitler spared no expense to impress the 150,000 foreign visitors who attended. He ordered all anti-Semitic signs—like those proclaiming *Juden sind hier unerwünscht* ("Jews are unwanted here")—to be removed during the Games.

#### Kept Off the Team

His efforts were, by most accounts, successful. Visitors left with the impression that Germany was prosperous, well run, and hospitable. But in a report to Washington, the American ambassador to Germany wrote that Germany's Jews awaited the end of the Olympics with "fear and trembling."

As always, the Games started with the lighting of the Olympic Flame. And for the first time, in what has since become an Olympic tradition, the flame was lit in Olympia, Greece,



**The Holocaust:** Hungarian Jews arrive at Auschwitz, a concentration camp in German-occupied Poland, in June 1944.

and carried to the site of the Games by torch.

True to their promise, the German team had allowed Jewish athletes to try out, but only one—Helene Mayer, a half-Jewish fencer with blond hair—actually competed. Others were kept off the team on technicalities.

The biggest star of the Games turned out to be Owens, the son of a sharecropper and the grandson of a slave. He was born in Alabama in 1913; when he was 9, his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio.

By the time Owens graduated from East

Technical High School in Cleveland, he had tied the world record in the 100-yard dash. As a sophomore at Ohio State University, he tied that record again and broke three more—the broad jump, the 220-yard dash, and the 220-yard low hurdles—on the same day.

The first day the 22-year-old Owens competed in Berlin, he won the 100-meter sprint. The next day, he picked up the gold medal in the long jump—after getting advice on how to improve his jump from Carl Ludwig "Luz" Long, a German athlete who ended up placing second to Owens. The day after that, Owens won the gold in the 200-meter dash. A few days later, Owens won his fourth gold, in the 400-meter relay.

The crowd greeted each of his four gold-medal wins with thunderous applause, and Owens's victories discredited Hitler's belief that Aryans would triumph in competition against "inferior" races.

For Owens, the trip to Germany was not his first experience with racism. Because of segregation in the U.S., he later wrote in his autobiography, Owens couldn't always sleep in the same hotels as his Ohio State teammates during road trips. And as for his reception at the Olympics, he wrote:



## 1968 MEXICO CITY

### Black Power

Two black sprinters on the U.S. team, gold and bronze winners in the 200-meter race, give the "black power" salute during the playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

## 1972 MUNICH

### Terrorism

Eleven Israeli athletes are taken hostage and murdered by Palestinian terrorists in the Olympic Village during Germany's first time hosting the Games since World War II and the Holocaust.

## 1980 MOSCOW

### U.S. Boycott

President Jimmy Carter announces a U.S. boycott of the Moscow Games in response to the Soviet Union's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviets then boycott the Los Angeles Games in 1984.

## 1988 SEOUL

### Regime Change

In June 1987, South Koreans stage massive pro-democracy protests against their government. After threats to move the Games if calm isn't restored, the regime makes concessions that later lead to democratization.

## 2008 BEIJING

### Power & Protest

China showcases its economic rise through elaborate pageantry, as thousands of people worldwide protest its human rights abuses.

"I wasn't invited to shake hands with Hitler, but I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the president either."

The Berlin Olympics were "widely considered to have been a foreign policy success," says Hoberman, the Olympic historian. "I think that they did fool a lot of people into thinking the Nazis were less interested in war-making in Europe than they actually were."

During the closing ceremonies in Berlin, Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, president of the I.O.C., invited everyone to reassemble in Tokyo, Japan, four years later—but the 1940 Olympics never took place.

Nazi rule became increasingly harsh: "Undesirables"—including Jews, Gypsies, and homosexuals—were sent to concentration camps, where millions would perish. In September 1939, World War II began with Germany's invasion of Poland. Two years later, Japan attacked the United States, bringing America into the war.

### The Beijing Games

Taking place 40 years after the birth of the modern Games, the 1936 Olympics marked the first major collision of athletics



President Gerald R. Ford presented Jesse Owens with the Presidential Medal of Freedom at the White House in 1976, 40 years after his Olympic wins.

and politics at the Games. But it was hardly the last (*see timeline, above*).

For the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, the Chinese government spent a record \$40 billion to showcase the country's meteoric economic rise and emergence as a world power.

While there was criticism of the I.O.C. for awarding the Olympic Games to an authoritarian state like China, human rights advocates saw the Olympics as a chance to focus the world's attention on China's

human rights abuses, including its occupation of Tibet and its restrictions on freedom of expression.

"The line from the I.O.C. on China was that giving the Olympics to Beijing was a form of constructive engagement that would help open the country up politically," Hoberman says. He notes that it hasn't worked out that way, with China even more politically repressive today.

### 'Inherently Political'

Derrick Hulme, author of *The Political Olympics*, says that in selecting China for 2008—and Brazil as the host of the 2016 Games—the I.O.C. is indeed making a statement, but of a slightly different sort: It's simply recognizing both nations as emerging global powers.

In fact, Hulme says, the Olympics in their modern form were intended to be political.

"The 1936 Games were simply a particularly dramatic moment in which the world recognized the incredibly close relationship between politics and sports," he says.

"The Games don't allow individuals to participate," Hulme adds. "Athletes participate on behalf of a country, so in that sense the Olympics are inherently political." ●

# WRONG MAN ON THE GALLOWS?

**Wrong Man on the Gallows?**  
Despite being spared by President Lincoln, a Dakota Indian was executed during the Civil War for attacking settlers. Some say it's not the tale for justice.

**LESSON PLAN 3**

**CRITICAL THINKING**  
As the nation expanded westward during the 19th century, a series of Indian Wars pitted settlers and the U.S. Army against Native American tribes.  
→ Why were they fighting, and what were the results of those confrontations?  
→ Do you think white

settlers were justified in settling on Native American lands? Why or why not?  
→ Do you think anything could have been done to avert all the bloodshed?

**WRITING PROMPT**  
Write a letter to President Lincoln from the perspective of a Dakota Indian or a

Minnesota settler. Explain the conflict and its effects from your point of view and advise the President on what might be done to stop it.

**DEBATE**  
Support or refute: Chaska's execution was just an unfortunate mistake.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
What is a presidential pardon? Why do Presidents have the power to pardon people?

**WEB WATCH**

[www.lib.washington.edu/subject/history/tm/native.html](http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/history/tm/native.html)

Links to websites dedicated to Native American history and culture, with an emphasis on primary-source documents and photographs, from the University of Washington.

What would be the purpose of a post-humous pardon for Chaska? Who might favor a pardon? Who might oppose it?

How did the Civil War exacerbate tensions between settlers and the Dakota in Minnesota?

Why do you think Lincoln spared so many of the Dakota warriors who were sentenced to death?

Which of the conflicts listed in the "Indian Wars" box were you familiar with? Which Indian leaders were you familiar with?

What is your overall view of what happened to Native Americans during the nation's expansion? Explain.

**FAST FACT**  
"Dakota" roughly translates to mean "the allies." The name "Sioux" is an Ojibwe word for "little snakes." ●

TIMES PAST

# 1936: THE 'NAZI OLYMPICS'

**1936**  
**The 'Nazi Olympics'**  
Adolf Hitler tried to turn the Berlin Games into a show case for Aryan superiority. But a black American track star got in his way.

**LESSON PLAN 4**

**CRITICAL THINKING**  
When Germany hosted the Summer Olympics in 1936, countries and athletes were faced with deciding whether or not to compete. Ultimately, more countries participated than in any previous Olympic Games.  
→ Why do you think so many countries competed even though

Hitler's anti-Semitic policies were by then well-known?  
→ What are the pros and cons of sending athletes to an Olympics hosted by a country with a poor human rights record?

**WRITING PROMPT**  
Compare and contrast the laws imposed on Jews in Nazi Germany

and the Jim Crow laws in the South.

**DEBATE**  
Should the U.S. have sent athletes to Berlin in 1936? to Beijing in 2008?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
How did the German government use the Games as propaganda? What was Hitler trying to convey to the rest of the world? How successful was he?

What rights did Hitler take away from Jews

**WEB WATCH**

[ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics](http://ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/olympics)

An online exhibition about Germany before, during, and after the 1936 Summer Olympics, from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

before the Olympics? How did he attempt to mask his anti-Semitic policies during the Games?

What was significant about the wins that Jesse Owens—a black American competing in Nazi Germany—earned? What irony involving his Olympic triumph did Owens later write about?

What did author David Hulme mean when he said the Olympics are "inherently political."

How might hosting the Olympics affect a country politically, economically, and socially?

Why did so many people protest China hosting the 2008 Summer Games?

**FAST FACT**  
The American team was the second largest in the 1936 Berlin Games, with 312 athletes. Germany's team was the largest, with 348. ●

## 1936: THE 'NAZI OLYMPICS' (P. 16)

- 1** Germany's hosting of the 1936 Olympics posed a dilemma for many countries because of
- a the loss of many athletes in World War II.
  - b Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric and policies.
  - c rising anti-Communist sentiments worldwide.
  - d rising fuel costs that made it expensive to send teams to Berlin.
- 2** Germany was selected to host the 1936 Games
- a several years earlier, when it had a democratic government.
  - b without the consent of the International Olympic Committee.
  - c to showcase the booming economy under the Nazi regime.
  - d after Tokyo turned down a bid to host.
- 3** To leave a good impression on foreign visitors, Hitler
- a featured many Jewish athletes on the German team.
  - b shook hands with every winning athlete.
  - c reinstated the right of Jews to own businesses.
  - d ordered all anti-Semitic signs removed for the Games.
- 4** Ironically, the star of the Berlin Olympics was African-American \_\_\_\_\_ star Jesse Owens.
- a track-and-field
  - b swimming
  - c soccer
  - d baseball
- 5** The 2008 Olympics in China were controversial because of China's
- a failing economy.
  - b failure to file all the official paperwork with the International Olympic Committee.
  - c criticism of the United States and other Western nations.
  - d human rights abuses.

### IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS

- 1** Why do you think President Franklin Delano Roosevelt never publicly weighed in on whether the U.S. should participate in the 1936 Olympics?
- 2** What is propaganda? What forms can it take? Why was the use of propaganda so important for the Nazi regime?
- 3** Why do sports often become entangled with politics? Is it possible to separate international sports from politics? Explain.

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**USE** with articles identified.

The statements are answers to questions (modeled after the TV show *Jeopardy!*). Students must answer in the form of questions.

**DIVIDE** the class into teams.

**READ** the statements.

**CALL** on the first team with a hand raised.

CORRECT ANSWER = 10 points  
WRONG ANSWER = -10 points  
(And another team may respond for the same chance to gain or lose 10 points.)

## THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

1 Americans in these places are less likely to have access to high-speed Internet service.	What are rural areas?
2 Around the world, this many people regularly use the Internet.	What is 2 billion?
3 In 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created this agency to bring electricity to sparsely populated areas.	What is the Rural Electrification Administration?
4 This country has the world's fastest Internet connections.	What is South Korea?
5 The governor of this state pledged to bring high-speed Internet to all residents by 2013.	What is Vermont?

## NEWS TO WATCH

1 This country faces massive reconstruction and following a devastating earthquake and tsunami in March.	What is Japan?
2 Rebels have been battling this longtime dictator of Libya.	Who is Muammar el-Qaddafi?
3 President Obama has pledged to begin withdrawing U.S. troops from this country by the summer.	What is Afghanistan?
4 Also by this summer, this election campaign in the U.S. should be in full swing.	What is the 2012 presidential election?
5 The Obama administration is hopeful that this will continue to improve in the lead-up to the election.	What is the economy?

### ANSWER KEY

#### QUIZ 1 ► PAGE TE 5

- 1 [d] the gap between those with high-speed Internet access and those without.
- 2 [b] has allocated funds to improve Internet access for
- 3 [a] bring electricity to
- 4 [c] Internet access is critical for most Americans.
- 5 [d] ten

#### QUIZ 2 ► PAGE TE 5

- 1 [c] massacring nearly 500 Minnesota settlers.
- 2 [b] His death sentence had been commuted by President Lincoln days earlier.
- 3 [a] Indian Wars
- 4 [d] broken treaties with the U.S. that left them with severe food and supply shortages.
- 5 [a] He found the evidence at most of the tribunals to be lacking.

#### QUIZ 3 ► PAGE TE 6

- 1 [b] Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric and policies.
- 2 [a] several years earlier, when it had a democratic government.
- 3 [d] ordered that all anti-Semitic signs be removed during the Games.
- 4 [a] track-and-field
- 5 [d] human-rights abuses.

#### GRAPH ► PAGE TE 4

- 1 [b] 4
- 2 [c] 10
- 3 [d] 180 seconds
- 4 [a] the U.S., France
- 5 [c] Hungary

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