

# Reflections On Diamonds: American Baseball and American Culture\*

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Sporting history comes into its own as part of the burgeoning social history movement in historiography. The growing recognition of sports, along with other ignored areas of human behavior, is ending a long era of snobbery characterised by a fallacious attitude on the part of those historians who held politics, economics, and intellectual pursuits to be the only proper avenues for historical inquiry. So long as such snobbery persisted, the record of history resembled present day concepts of the universe-filled with awesome black holes with unknown functions that becloud our understanding of our origins and our future. For other reasons, to be sure, that great historian Henry Adams regarded such gaps in the historical record as justification for his personal decision to quit the writing of history because he perceived such study to be inadequate in the pursuit of truth, thus causing historiography to lose one of its finest pens. But if few of us are driven by Adams' perfectionism, at least we now feel free to do our honest best to expand the record to include the full behavior of millions of Americans whose interests and pursuits were so long dismissed as trivial by academic historians.

As recently as 1960 the comprehensive bibliographical *Guide to the Study of the United States of America* recorded the observation that "it has been found impossible to represent the sports strictly in proportion to their importance." While conceding the importance of sports, the editor spoke condescendingly of their available sources, deriding them as childish, uncritically written, over statistical, full of fables, and addicted to chronicling the "fame and glory of the moment."<sup>1</sup>

To read such words even now is to persuade faint-hearted students

\*This paper was presented as the J. R. Betts Memorial Lecture at the 1st. Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History, held at Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, May 25-26, 1973. The objective, therefore, was to present it orally. However it was considered to be of such calibre that it warranted publication in its written form. The object of the paper, oral presentation, accounts for more personal style than is usually encountered in scholarly articles. (Editor)

<sup>1</sup>Roy P. Bask, et al., eds., *A Guide to the Study of the United States of America* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1960), p. 686.

of the wisdom of folding one's tent and stealing away silently to labor at one of the "proper" subjects of history. But I am persuaded, as I know many of you are, that the primary and secondary materials on sports like baseball offer a rich vein for exploitation by students that point to excellent insights into American culture. And happily one finds solid support in this demurrer in the works of pioneers in the social history movement.

The late, great historian, Allan Nevins, was one such pioneer, whose personal encouragement heightened my morale and can keep all of us going. Reviewing early efforts by pioneer social historians like John B. McMaster, Ellis P. Oberholtzer, and the authors of many of the volumes of *The History of American Life* series, Nevins called for a new leap forward. For fresher points of view he urged historians to use concepts from sociology and anthropology to get "a more valid synthesis of social factors."<sup>2</sup> And in his 1959 Presidential Address before the American Historical Association, Nevins urged historians to write in "God's plenty of variety" to meet every "need, taste and mood"; that they meet the needs of our society including giving a goodly supply of escapism; and finally, that they humanize their subject by narrating the past "in terms of living men and women."<sup>3</sup> Such advice should thrill students of sports history who also must delight at Nevins' thrust at historical pedants whom he called more dangerous than popularizers. As Nevins put it; "the cobweb is a far greater menace than the pulpwood," because the pedant is "responsible for the present crippled gait of history in America. His touch is death. He destroys the public for history... He does his best to warp and destroy young talent. . . ."<sup>4</sup> How many of us can mutter a grim "Amen" to that! Speaking personally I still put up with insipid smiles and remarks from those who ask, among other gibes, when am I going to do football. Of course, such remarks can be fended off with a tired smile, but before I had Nevins' devastating riposte, I often resorted to a quote from a W. C. Fields biography, in which the great comic, while striking for more money, fended off a studio representative by telling an aide to, "Give him an evasive answer. Tell him to go fuck himself."

<sup>2</sup>Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938), p. 316-317.

<sup>3</sup>Allan Nevins, "Not Capulets, Not Montagus," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2, p. 258-259.

<sup>4</sup>C. Vann Woodward, Review of Vols. VII and VIII of Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, N. Y. *Times Book Review*, Dec. 26, 1971.

Perhaps now the time for evasive answers is past. Now is the time to emulate the Star Trekkers, “to boldly go where no man has gone before.” To earthbound sports researchers this means choosing a subject because you think it important, and if it carries one beyond historical methods into allied fields of social science, biology, fiction, poetry or whatever--so be it, and so much the better. Stiffen your resolve with Sherman Kent’s counsel--whose six points for a perfect topic for research demanded that it interest you, that it suit your ability, that it impinge on the life of man, that it has abundant source material available, that it can be completed in a reasonable length of time.<sup>5</sup>

For those needing extra courage let them try David Riesman’s flinty advice that lonely individualists manifest “nerve of failure,” defined as the courage to be self conscious, to trust one’s own imagination in judging social reality, and thus to lose some of the guilt burden that conformist colleagues would put upon one.<sup>6</sup>

## **I. Nationalism.**

Employing my personal “nerve of failure” style, I have become increasingly fascinated by the ability of baseball research to reveal fresh insights into American culture and our national character. In doing so, I have come to regard my narrative history of baseball as a mere beginning. It seems that once one grasps the broad historical outline of a sport like major league baseball, one’s imagination turns up endless leads for exploring the connections between stages of baseball history and their counterparts in American life, particularly insights into that will o’ the wisp we call our national character. Hence, my reflections on diamonds has led me to pursue such links, hoping thereby to gain better understanding of what being an American has meant, now means, and may come to mean. I should like to share with you three such observations which are the result of my probes. They are the growth of American nationalism, its internationalist consequences, and nationalism’s impact on American perception, particularly the images held by Americans with regard to heroes and national celebrities.

To begin is to explore the idea of nationalism, that driving theme

<sup>5</sup>Sherman Kent, *Writing History* (New York: Crofts, 1946), p. 30-31

<sup>6</sup>David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (Glencoe Press. 1954), p. 38-39.

which over the past century has altered the institutions of our society. Because American nationalism is linked with the rise of our great national sports and vice versa, the sports historian need not fear to probe this domain of intellectual history. An excellent guide is Arthur O. Lovejoy's *Essays in the History of Ideas*, a powerful stimulant to one's historical imagination by its bold examples, including one that traces basic Marxist ideas back to St. Ambrose of Padua. Lovejoy invites anyone to play this game by his assurance that ideas, after all, are man-made catch words that change over time, but are seldom new; that historians of ideas are not geniuses, but rather bold individualists who dislike teams; and by noting that an idea usually presents itself in diverse provinces of thought.<sup>7</sup>

As a powerful, motivating idea, modern nationalism arose out of that bubbling cauldron of the restive 18th century when percolating ideologies of the Enlightenment were wisping away the old church and sovereignty models of control. As kings lost power and were swept aside, so too went the power of churchmen as Enlightenment political philosophy held up the secular nation state as a proper unit of social organization. By the end of that century live new varieties of nationalism were operating. As described by the late Carleton J.H. Hayes, they included the *humanitarian* form with its emphasis on the potential goodness of man to be brought out by the diffusion of reason and science. Opposing this gradualist model of reform was *Jacobin* nationalism. Inspired by the French Revolution, it offered violence, extremism, terrorism, and militarism as means for the speedy reshaping of social orders. By advocating the overthrow of traditional institutions and by its elevating of men like Robespierre and Napoleon, this style stiffened the resistance of another style -- *traditional* nationalism. Imbedded in this form was the image of a state as a continuing union of past, present and future generations. Bitterly opposed to rapid social change, its adherents outlawed all revolution except for rare cases of "legitimate" revolutions against a regime which departed from a traditional commitment. But most appealing to Americans has been the *liberal* nationalist style with its emphasis on the free individual, on limited government, and on *laissez faire* economics and individuality. So broad has been the appeal of this style, that American politicians long dreamed of exporting it everywhere so as to usher in a global millenium of peace and economic prosperity. That so far this has been a forlorn hope

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (New York: G. P. Pumam's Sons, 1960), xi-xv, 1-13

may be due to the system itself which in its competition engenders rivalry and envy. Thus, as nations lost out in the competitive races for riches, their leaders held out a fifth style of nationalism, that of *integral* nationalism. An outstanding model of the style was Adolph Hitler who repressed liberal nationalism in Germany and appealed to Germans to put national self interest and tribal egoism first.<sup>8</sup> As World War II demonstrated the confrontation between two nationalist styles was bloody indeed; nor are its byproducts of brutality, racism and bloodshed diminished.

That Americans are not immune to the unifying promise of integral nationalism is a sober and chilling thought that becomes even more frightening when one reads of public opinion polls that show a blase public attitude about the meaning of Watergate. Indeed, some writers like Max Lerner see the threat of integral nationalism in our love for spectator sports which he thinks shows us to be a nation of passive onlookers who are easily led.<sup>9</sup>

Be that as may, as the first new nation, the nationalistic history of America shows situations in which all five styles present themselves. But mainly it was liberal nationalism that dominated. Emerging in 1789, our new nation was legitimized by the personal charisma of Washington, while the Constitution afforded a basis for symbolic unity. But not until the Civil War was the Constitution accepted without challenge; prior to the end of that conflict many states and factions tried at various times to destroy the Constitutional union. But the decisive outcome of that war, followed by the conciliatory compromise of 1876, and by the great strides in industrialization--all those forces combined to rally the country around liberal nationalism. And the new style was reflected in the shared values of the people. To be economically independent became a driving quest for Americans. And if hard work, frugality and initiative could advance an individual, the same ideas were embraced by groups as formulas for growth. Thus, economic growth and territorial expansion became twin measurements for individual and social success. To foster both values spelled success--hence, the values of autonomy and free choice became national and transcended local and subcultural values. True, the future would show how the successful pursuit of such values

<sup>8</sup>Carleton J. H. Hayes, *Historical Evolution of Modern Nationalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) p.-162-163.

<sup>9</sup>Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 818-819.Redmond 82

raised up large scale organizations which reduced individuals to corporate workers or other directed conformists; yet, in the main the values of autonomy and free choice remain strong.<sup>10</sup>

This driving theme of American post-Civil War culture caught the attention of a generation of American historians who tried in ways various to explain its meaning. Writing in the years following the Civil War this school of nationalist historians included men like James Ford Rhodes who narrated the military and political thrust of American nationalism, while others like Charles Beard and Matthew Josephson considered its economic impact, and men like John B. McMaster opened up the realm of social history as a reflector of nationalist social sentiments.

Certainly liberal nationalism as an integrating social force is reflected in the rising sporting institutions of America. It is a theme writ large in the history of major league baseball, a sport that grew to impressive proportions during the Civil War era. Moving speedily from an eastern regional sport played by snobbish gentlemen and their muscular mercenaries, the war helped to diffuse the sport and popularize it among Americans of all classes. Part of the fruit of this rapid growth process was an immediate postwar baseball boom which commercialists quickly exploited. In 1871 a group of opportunistic promoters organized the first commercialized major league to cash in on the boom. In doing so, they made every effort to press baseball's claim to being America's National Game.<sup>11</sup>

It was no accident that the leading proponent of baseball as our national game also was first to become a millionaire from its successful exploitation. This was Albert Goodwill Spalding, the young pitcher who, as a teenager in 1865, organized and captained the Rockford, Ill., Forest City Team, before moving to Boston where he performed as star pitcher for the Red Stocking champions of 1872-1875 in the first major league. To popularize the game, to make it pay were Spalding's twin goals. While at Boston, he hatched the idea of sending a baseball mission to Britain to hopefully spread the American game. And in 1875 it was Spalding who determined that the National Association, with its player control, was counterproductive and must be scuttled. That year he hatched the coup that produced

<sup>10</sup>Seymour M. Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 21, 38, 65 - 67, 101-111, 145, 162-163, 288-232.

<sup>11</sup>*Harper's Magazine*, Oct. 15, 1859, Nov. 5, 1869, Aug. 31, 1861. Carries debates on whether baseball or free for all football should be our national game.



Photo courtesy of  
Baseball Hall of Fame

Albert G. Spalding

A vintage advertisement for Spalding baseballs. The top half features the headline "The ball Hank and The Babe hit." in a large, bold, serif font. Below the headline is a block of text: "Since Major League Baseball began, our ball has been in every play of every inning of every game. Spalding." followed by "The same Spalding quality goes into every baseball product we make: bats, gloves, bats and protective equipment for Little League on up through the Majors." and "Baseball is how we got started. We're glad to be a part of it. Way to go, Hank. Thank you, Babe." Below this text is the Spalding logo. The bottom half of the advertisement shows three baseballs resting on a surface with an American flag in the background. The Spalding logo is repeated at the bottom of the image. At the very bottom, there is a small line of text: "Spalding has been the official baseball of the National League since it began in 1876. Ruth, a registered trademark of Spalding ball, was the official ball of the American League when it was founded in 1902."

Baseball, “the National Game,” has often been tied to nationalistic themes and to the flag. Albert G. Spalding, outstanding pitcher, president of the Chicago White Stockings, and founder of the Spalding Company, tried to promote baseball worldwide in the late 1800’s.

the National League, giving power to the clubowners, and then in 1877 he retired from active play to manufacture sports equipment and serve as owner of the Chicago White Stockings. An architect of a baseball equipment trust he drove out all competitors in building a varied, multi-million dollar sporting goods empire. And as owner and National League policy maker, he hatched the plots that fended off all attempts by players or rivals to gain power.

That Spalding succeeded owed much to his shrewd exploitation of baseball's claim to being America's National game. Through his subsidiary, the American Sports Publishing Company, Spalding turned out official guides for nearly every professional league in America, as well as abroad. Throughout the nineteenth century he employed, as chief editor, the influential Henry Chadwick, who proclaimed baseball to be "in every way. . . suited to the American character." This Chadwick faithfully did for two score years constantly persuading lesser writers, a cliché-ridden lot who looked to Chadwick as their dean, to pick up the theme. Thus, baseball as



**Henry Chadwick**

**Photo courtesy of  
Baseball Hall of Fame**

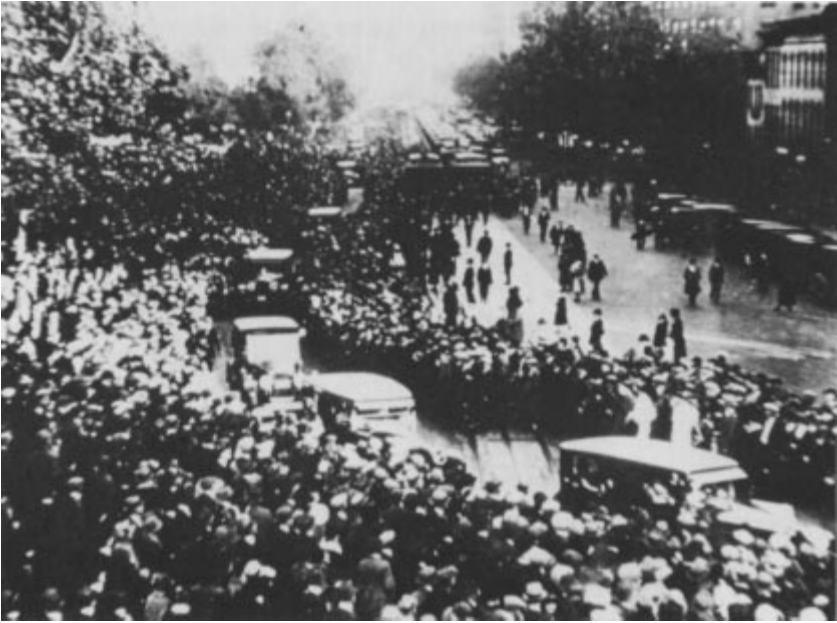
America's national game--our invention or immaculate conception-- became one of the most hackneyed phrases of that age. That writers and fans came to believe the myth owed much to Spalding's efforts. Tirelessly he plugged the game as "our national game", and in 1905 he financed the historical commission that found Cooperstown to be the baseball Bethlehem where baseball's immaculate conception took place. Thus, came the Abner Doubleday myth with its magic date of 1839. And it was Spalding who in 1911, three years after Chadwick's

death, drew upon that faithful servant's notes and records and published *America's National Game*, at the time the most complete and also the most chauvinistic history of American baseball. The book oozes nationalist rhetoric and myth; included is an unforgettable alliteration piece that proclaims baseball to the American people as "the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combatism; American Dash, Discipline, Determinism; American Energy, Eagerness, Enthusiasm; American Pluck, Persistency, Performance; American Spirit, Sagacity, Success; American Vim, Vigor, Virility." Also included was Spalding's acceptance of that tired coaching myth which our age is just beginning to disentrall itself from; as Spalding put it, "baseball gives...a growing boy self-poise and self reliance...Baseball is a man maker."<sup>12</sup>

By such zealous promotion the myth of American baseball as our national sport found its way into the mainstream of American folklore. Yet those who dance nationalist tunes must pay the piper. Thus, promoters who manipulated American nationalist sentiments to serve their interests found themselves manipulated by the driving force of nationalism; which brought home to them the truth of the adage that he who sows the wind reaps the whirlwind. And for openers baseball found itself buffeted by national political winds.

By pandering to the political forces that gave shaky organization to the driving sentiment of American nationalism, major league baseball found itself in thrall to political manipulators. This became clear as soon as baseball leaders sought recognition of their sport from American Presidents, which came as early as 1869 when President Grant met with the members of the Cincinnati Red Stocking team and complimented them on their fine play; or when Cap Anson's Chicago White Stockings got to shake hands with President Cleveland at which time each player sought to outdo another by squeezing Cleveland's hand as hard as he could; to the time of President Taft who agreed to throw out the first ball of the Washington Senators' opening game, thus launching an annual Washington affair which guaranteed the lowly Senators at least one paying crowd a year. Each such incident confirmed baseball's status; yet each exacted its cost. Today baseball's payoff includes affording an image-conscious President like Nixon a chance to boost his political stock by showing up on dramatic occasions such as the

<sup>12</sup>Arthur Bartlett. *Baseball and Mr. Spalding: The History and Romance of Baseball* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 2, 11, 27, 37, 289-290.



**Players of the 1924 Washington Senators Champion baseball team were cheered as National Heroes on their way to be welcomed by President Calvin Coolidge.**

World Series to be photographed in the company of winners. It also means baseball must vote Republican or Democratic according to the direction of political winds. Also if a Nixon chooses to enhance his jock image by naming a personal baseball all-star team, and by lacing his rhetoric with “sportspeak,” baseball men must stand helplessly by leaving criticism of Nixon to prickly reporters like Red Smith, who, sniffing at Nixon’s 2800 cliché-worded essay on baseball immortals (that Smith said should have been done in 800), and welcomed the President as “the new slow boy on the baseball beat.”<sup>13</sup>

Nor are the participants of other political institutions shy about using baseball. When the Supreme Court granted baseball immunity from anti-trust prosecution (an interesting nationalist concession in itself), subject to Congressional decision-making, baseball officials found themselves thrice obliged to turn over their secret files to the scrutiny of Emmanuel Celler’s investigative subcommittee; each time the result delighted baseball historians hungry for inside data.

<sup>13</sup>Red Smith column, “New Slow Boy on Baseball Beat”, *N.Y. Times*, July 3, 1972; “Spoken Like a True Son of Old Whittier”, *ibid.*, April 30, 1973.

In other ways national politics has bent baseball to its purposes. For example, an important element in American nationalism is our pride in our military prowess, a sentiment backed by pressure groups to do honor to those who wield the arms. Over the years this has been a repetitive and continuous obligation, as evidenced by sociological studies comparing our society with other modern states in years spent at war. It was found that America ranks near the top for having spent more time at war since 1860. Not surprisingly, it has become baseball's ongoing task to support every war, from that imperialist struggle with Spain that John Hay called, "a splendid little war," through two World Wars, and most recently two peace-keeping involvements-- all expressing a missionary aspect of American nationalism. For its part, baseball gained chauvinistic recognition for its morale boosting which certainly enhanced the claim to being the National Game. But in return baseball men felt obliged to supply military camps with bats and balls, to admit servicemen free to games, to broadcast war news over loudspeaker systems, and on occasion to have their players derided as slackers. Moreover, on two occasions, in 1918 and in 1945, the game narrowly missed being closed down by zealous war secretaries who toyed with the idea of using ballparks as military storage depots. Meanwhile the period between the two great wars saw the rise of a potent veterans group, the American Legion. As a pressure group the Legion kept Congresses and Presidents alert to military and patriotic needs, as defined by the group. And because the Legion also promoted a youth baseball program which soon became an important talent source for major league baseball, the games' leaders felt it prudent to conform to the Legion's patriotic models.

Fresh in all our minds is the long Viet Nam involvement, pronounced recently to be closed with "peace with honor." While many Americans felt free to oppose this struggle, baseball men could not join the peace movements, and when a player like Tug McGraw did speak up at a dinner, he felt the chill of official disapproval. Also, to help foster the peace with honor image, this year's opening day ceremonies, at Nixon's behest, featured freed POW's throwing out first balls: another reminder of the game's obligation to support the litany of peace with honor while ignoring the hard won lessons that Viet Nam may have held.

From an esthetic point of view the highest price baseball may have paid to secure its image as America's national game may be that of having to play our national anthem at each game. The custom has a curious history. Owing to sectional bickering no national anthem

existed until at the outbreak of the first World War President Wilson decreed that the “Star Spangled Banner” should serve. Major league clubs fell into line that year, and while lacking public address systems, hired bands to play the unsingable tune. After the War the custom remained, although the tune was heard only at World Series times or other key dates like patriotic holidays. Then in 1931, Congress finally voted to institutionalize the “Star Spangled Banner” as our national anthem and Hoover signed it into law in March. From then on, using newly acquired loudspeaker systems, the tune was heard on opening days and at World Series matches. Only with the advent of World War II did the custom of playing and singing the tune at every game take hold. That it only seems longer, owes to the unsingable, chanting, quality of the tune. Yet Americans, including baseball fans, seem to love their ugly duckling. When José Feliciano, the blind guitarist, essayed a Puerto-Rican soul version at Detroit at a ballgame in 1968, his revitalization effort drew hot criticism and accusations of subversion. Thus, does American baseball serve the cause of patriotism by retarding musical virtuosity. Perhaps a glimmer of hope for improvement lies in the presence of the Montreal Expos of the National League. When in the States playing on the road, protocol has the host club playing both the “Star Spangled Banner” and “O, Canada.” Perhaps seeing and hearing how much we suffer by comparison just might persuade ballfans to lead a movement for a better anthem.<sup>14</sup> But don’t bet on it.

The seamy side of the American nationalist system is also mirrored in American baseball history. Nationalist historians agree that one of the essential compromises of our post-Civil War spirit of national unity came in 1876, when the Republican party accepted a disputed Presidency in return for permitting the South and the rest of the nation to handle problems of black Americans locally. In the repression of blacks under Jim Crow systems that followed we glimpse the dark aspect of our nationalism a reminder of the truth of Professor Hayes’ point that America too has its examples of integral nationalism with its themes of group superiority. For its part American baseball followed the siren call of social-Darwinism slavishly. In 1882 the Walker brothers were barred from the major leagues followed later by Lou Nava and a scattering of others. Captain Adrian Anson in his autobiography confessed to being a leader in the whitewashing of major league baseball. His influence

<sup>14</sup>Phone conversation, April 30, 1973 with Jack Redding, librarian of Baseball Library, Cooperstown, N. Y. See also, *The Sporting News*, April 19, 1917, Oct. 19, 1968.

hastening the drawing of a Jim Crow curtain lasting until Americans shifted their views by World War II. During that war, the rhetoric of liberty and equality forced changes in our norms and American baseball found itself obliged to catch up with more progressive sports in advancing new sentiments of integration. This was done grudgingly and with much deceptive puffery and inconsistency as sociological students of this aspect of baseball have pointed out. And baseball's foot-dragging mirrors similar patterns in other institutions. Today black and white tension continues, along with other racist tensions involving the acceptance of Latin Americans in the game. These and other examples testify to the continuation of group superiority themes as a part of our nationalist beliefs. As Jerry Farber has put it, niggerization continues as an American belief and practice, oppressing both blacks and whites.

To fully cover so broad an idea as American nationalism is a monumental undertaking which can only be begun here, but it remains a challenge worthy of the scholarly imaginations of sports historians. But the very choice of the topic generates stimulating leads. For example in his book *The First New Nation*, Professor Lipset found two essential elements of our style of nationalism to be the shared values of industrial growth and of territorial expansion. According to Lipset these two values transcend all subcultural differences in their unanimous acceptance. As such they prod individuals and groups to act.<sup>15</sup> Simply put, the life of an individual or group is a success when its policies lead to increased wealth or territory. And in American baseball the pursuit of these twin themes looms large. Over the past century baseball leaders never failed to celebrate rising profits, whirring turnstiles, increasing exposure through multi-media exposure, and expanding territory as measured by the incorporation of new franchises in profitable areas. Beginning in the 1950's and continuing to the present day baseball leaders boldly pursued a horsehide version of manifest destiny culminating in a coast-to-coast empire, and with the acquisition of Montreal baseball could claim the status of a multi-national corporation. Today, notwithstanding alarmist critics of the excesses of the growth ethic, the same expansionism prevails. It can be fairly said that the future as envisioned by baseball leaders sees franchises in Mexico, Latin America, Japan and Taiwan as part of a dream of Christmas-yet-to-come.

<sup>15</sup>Lipset, *loc. cit.*, p. 65-67.

That accepting nationalist ideology so uncritically may have dysfunctional implications seems not to have, troubled baseball leaders, who apparently believe in their own propaganda. Yet it would seem that in mounting the steed of nationalism, American baseball has been run away with! To undertake the task of pointing out the dangers in a policy of running with nationalism is a duty of sports historians, who most certainly will not be thanked for their efforts. On the whole the result may show that the costs of embracing nationalism uncritically outweighs the benefits. Certainly, baseball leaders have been forced into a garrison mentality--forever defending their claim to being the American sport against challenges like those posed by rival sports spectaculars like football and basketball. Indeed, aside from fending off unionist activity among players, this seems to be Commissioner Bowie Kuhn's chief occupation. Nor is it an easy task as poll after recent poll shows rival sports to be more appealing to fans than baseball.<sup>16</sup>

If being America's national sport requires baseball officials to stand by while clever politicians exploit the game for image advantage, or for support of military policies, surely this must alienate from baseball those fans who view this posture as pandering to super patriots and war lovers. Also, what does a true believer in American baseball as the nation's national game do towards rationalizing the potent presence of so many Black and Latin American superstars in major league uniforms? What does this do to their notions of white supremacy? Certainly it raises the question of how the game can sustain a claim of being the national game when its best players are alienated from the mainstream of national participation. Beyond these is a larger question--can a pluralistic society like ours have a national anything? I submit that trying to be national in such a cultural clime is a millstone about the neck of one who tries. Once worn about the neck millstones only tend to drag one down. Thus, baseball today seems forever defending, rather than advancing or attacking. This might well be the hour for baseball men to decide to abdicate its nationalist claim before the absurdity of the claim becomes too far gone.

<sup>16</sup>*N. Y. Times*, November 22, 1967; July 23, 1969. A *Times* poll of April 22, 1973 shows baseball outstripped by horse racing, football, with basketball and hockey also challenging. Also, Joseph Durso, "What's Happened to Baseball," *Saturday Review*, Sept. 14, 1968; David Halberstam "Baseball and the National Mythology", *Harper's*, Sept. 1970.

## II. Internationalism. The Mission of America theme.

The internationalist thrust of American nationalism is likewise reflected in the century old history of major league baseball. In probing baseball for reflections of this side of our national character one finds solid support for historian Ralph Gabriel's contention that "the mission of America" has been, and continues to be a major theme of our character. Briefly defined it expresses our act of faith that holds our cultural design to be so perfect that its major elements ought to be exported so that all peoples of the world might gain by conforming to our mold. Tracing our missionary pursuit of this anthropologically hopeless dream shows our many efforts to redeem the world by our example. In a violent form it shows up in our manifest destiny operations of 1846 and 1898, and some might say of the 1960's. Otherwise this zeal has us seeking to export constitutional democracy, mixed capitalism, and pan-Christian morals to the world.<sup>17</sup> That the myth still holds power may be evidenced in such present day projects as NATO, the Vietnam War, the Peace Corps, the multi-national corporations, and the Hilton Hotels in so many world capitals--all testifying to the lingering myth which has US aiming to make the world like us.

An athletic expression of this myth is reflected in the history of major league baseball. Three times in the years 1874-1914 baseball leaders launched major missionary efforts aimed at planting our game on other soils. The first of these missions came soon after the first major league was launched as baseball promoters, ever pursuing cash and glory, elected to try to export baseball to Britain. The idea was a brainchild of Harry Wright, the father of professional baseball, whose pioneering in league organization, rules, strategy and tactics and in club management successfully set the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players as a major league and made his Boston Red Stockings its most powerful club. A British born son of a cricket professional, Wright was converted from cricket to baseball in America, and was impressed by the ease with which baseball replaced cricket over here. It led him to think that English sportsmen would, if they saw baseball played at its best, make the same switch. Using young Albert Spalding as an emissary, Wright in 1874 arranged a six week tour of British cricket clubs with his Boston Red Stockings and

<sup>17</sup>Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought: An Intellectual History Since 1815* (New York: Ronald Press, 1941, *passim.*); Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 3-4, 261-266.

with the Philadelphia Athletics for the purpose of exhibiting baseball. Arriving in England in July, the first American baseball mission, with its retinue of players and sportswriters, soon learned that their hosts were more interested in the seven cricket exhibitions that Spalding had been forced to accept. Indeed, the baseball games returned a total of less than \$2000 in receipts from puzzled gatherings. Although the cricket matches attracted more attention, this hardly helped the cause of American baseball. Upon discovering our lack of cricket experience, the British elevens patronizingly allowed the Americans to play 18 men. Although this allowed the Americans “to win” all seven games, our lack of style branded us as athletic barbarians. As for baseball, the British sporting press compared it with rounders, conceding it to be fast and scientific, but dubbing it “the cricket of the American continent.” This was far from a conversion and the teams returned home to bask in a whirl of favorable publicity which recouped some of the losses. Although puffed as a success, the mission most certainly was not.



**Chicago and All-America world tour teams of 1888—89. Back row (left to right) -- Burns, Daley, Pettit, Sullivan, Baldwin, Tener, Healy, Carroll, Wood, Brown, Manning. Middle row--Williamson, Pfeffer, Anson, Spalding, Ward, Fogarty, Simpson. Seated in front--mascot, G. Wright, Hanlon, Earl.**

**Picture courtesy of Baseball Hall of Fame**

After this episode, for 14 years the missionary spirit of baseball promoters slowly revived as the fortunes of major league baseball rose. Once again it was Spalding who rekindled the spirit. Having successfully engineered the National League coup of 1876, Spalding quit to become a wealthy sporting goods entrepreneur. As owner of the popular Chicago White Stockings, he was by 1888 the most powerful voice in National League council. Always alert to new markets for sporting equipment sales, Spalding in 1888 decided to combine his business enterprise with his sense of baseball mission. Recruiting a team of stars called the "All Americans" to compete with his Chicago White Stockings, Spalding arranged an itinerary that would show the colors of American baseball in Hawaii, Australia, Egypt, Italy, France and England. A well planned mission, it began in the Orient and finished in the Occident. But only in Australia did the American game stir a ripple of local interest. Elsewhere the games were greeted with mild curiosity often mixed with contempt. In Egypt, jeers greeted Spalding's stunt of playing a game near the pyramids, and in Rome an attempt to play a game in the Colosseum appalled working archeologists who succeeded in banning the game. Elsewhere continental reaction was dull, and in England the nine games stirred only slightly more interest than did Wright's tour. Once again British critics dismissed the game as a formal version of rounders, a children's game. Returning home, the usual welcoming propaganda banquets were overshadowed by the threat of a players' strike which burst in 1890. Thus ended baseball's second mission--another failure.

Not for a quarter of a century did a promoter try again and when it was done, the major league game was again thriving under a new equilibrium, that of a two league system highlighted by World Series competition. Impetus for a third mission was stirred by foreign interest in the game, notably in Canada and Mexico, but with promising flurries in South Africa, Australia and Japan. Imbued with a zeal for westernization, Japan was targeted as a key point of the third mission which was promoted by John McGraw, the manager of the N.Y. Giants, and Charles Comiskey, the owner of the Chicago White Sox. With financial support from the Spalding company, the entourage left Vancouver for stops at Tokyo, Shanghai, Manila, Melbourne, Cairo, and London as chief ports of call. As hoped, Japan was interested and large crowds attended the games, but elsewhere polite and puzzled receptions were the rule. In England, King George V attended a match, more as a friendly political gesture

for a potential ally. But the king's presence failed to muzzle a British press which again patronized the game as "rounders played with . . . a bigger stick." Except for the Japanese success, the mission, like its predecessors, was a failure, although official baseball histories argue otherwise.



**King George of Great Britain greets Arlie Latham, Giants' coach (right), during 1924 White Sox-Giant trip to England, Ireland and France. Photo was taken at Stamford Bridge, London.**

**Photo courtesy of Baseball Hall of Fame**

The obvious failure of the three formal baseball missions hardly dampened the missionary zeal of nationalistic baseball promoters. Over the years since 1920, small scale barnstorming tours and spring training forays showed major league ball to Latin America and Japan where the game grew lustily. The rising popularity of the game in Japan and Latin America kept alive this sense of mission among American baseball leaders. In the 1960's the late Commissioner "Spike" Eckert declared baseball to be a potent tool of American foreign policy, and was prompted to appoint the ebullient Roberto Maduro as co-ordinator of inter-American baseball. Maduro, for his part, never flagged in crediting American baseball for cooling "anti-Yankee" feelings. More recently Commissioner Bowie Kuhn spoke

prophetically of expanding major league baseball franchises to Latin America and Japan to be followed by European plantations.<sup>18</sup>

In evaluating such grandiose dreams students of sports need to bring tough anthropological insights to bear. Most obvious is the question of what sport or sports do most civilized peoples of the world prefer? The answer - probably soccer. True, transplanted baseball has grown sturdily and popularly in Japan and Latin America, but the game as played and promoted there carries the unique cultural markings of the peoples who live there. Although resembling American baseball, Japanese or Latin-American baseball in fact is different in form and function. Not surprising to the anthropologically minded, the game reflects the culture of the people who play it. Thus, major league baseball cannot seriously expect to mold foreign fans and players to our model. It would seem that any merger of international baseball interests must be negotiated among equals. Moreover, given the fact of greater public enthusiasm for the game both in Japan and Latin America, might not control of an international baseball association pass out of the hands of Americans, as in the case of auto production? To the internationalist-minded, this might be a godsend, but how does this grab the American chauvinist?

While awaiting the future realization of an international baseball concordat, one daily observes the towering presence of so many Latin-American stars in major league uniforms. In the brilliant play of the late Roberto Clemente, or Manny Sanguillen, Luis Tiant, Juan Marichal and others, what lessons are to be learned? If such men were to join together in major league teams representing their own countries, could Americans hope to win? And what if black Americans were to be grouped homogeneously into major league teams -- how would white Americans fare? Obviously these are divisive questions, but they prod the serious student to question prevailing myths like that one assuming the superiority of American culture. It may well be time for baseball leaders to lay aside the mission of America myth in favor of more realistic cosmopolitan understanding.

### **III. American national character--hero worship.**

That reticulate web of thought which leads from a consideration of American nationalism to an internationalist outreach also traces back

<sup>18</sup>David Q. Voigt, "American Baseball and the 'Mission of America,'" (Paper read before Third International Symposium on the Sociology of Sport, University of Waterloo, August, 1970).

to the character of the American people and that of the men who played major league baseball over the past century. To follow its thread is to see the sport's potential for revealing the changing norms and values of American culture. Especially is this reflected in sports heroes and hero worship, a subject that bears witness to the changing sentiments and lifestyles of Americans. For such a study the sports historian has as his road map some superb studies in American hero worship.

In the changing face of American nationalism the popular choices of sports heroes reflect changing popular tastes for heroes. According to historian Dixon Wecter, as the Civil War fused us into a nation, the accompanying industrial system that destroyed our sense of community as *place* moved Americans to embrace *collective symbols* like the flag, the Constitution, and Declaration of Independence, along with popular heroes to satisfy feelings of national identity. Under the force of external change popular images of heroes also changed. The passing of kings and aristocrats was followed by the glorification of the self-made man of the Industrial Revolution, and more recently by the glorification of the little man rising to the top which seemingly confirms a deep felt hope that the people really do rule.

The trend toward democratization of heroes suggests that changes in the social environment produce opportunities which an aspiring hero must fit himself to. That blacks like Hank Aaron fail to arouse enthusiasm in his mighty efforts suggests that the American social environment is not ready to accommodate a black as Babe Ruth's successor. Aside from a need to lit into a changing social climate the hero must conform to changing value demands. According to Wecter this used to mean being unselfish, having a nickname for the common touch, being strong without being a bully, failing now and then--so as not to be too successful, and to really score as a hero, being dead; since living heroes are seldom taken seriously. In short, he must be human and be patriotic--love his country, be manly and be salty in speech -- or earthy.<sup>19</sup> Of course, some of these expectations which conform to the period up to 1940 have changed.

Wecter's trailblazing in the history of American heroes has recently been advanced by the work of Daniel Boorstin whose brilliant analysis sheds light on the state of American heroes in our time. Boorstin's book, *The Image*, shows how the communication

<sup>19</sup> Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero Worship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1963), pp. 1-16, 485-487.

revolution, by speeding up the production and consumption of news, and by making us a nation of television viewers, has given us an *ad hoc* feel for events and personalities. Thus, we find ourselves in a world of pseudo events. A bewildering world of illusion, our consumption of pseudo events has us devouring news so voraciously that we are being fed an *ersatz* diet of manufactured news which is planned, planted and ambiguous. Reflecting a world view of extravagant consumption, it has us persuaded that we can partake of whatever the world holds, and that we can shape that world into whatever form we wish. Such a view kills our sense of history and teaches us to expect a flood of new heroes each season. So the heroes we now get are manufactured celebrities, here today- -gone tomorrow, perhaps well summed up in the TV jingle, “Once around life, once around living.”

Instead of the 1900 style of consensus hero, a self made person who came from the arena of politics, business or the professions, heroes of our time come from the world of entertainment, including, of course, the world of big time sports so dominated by the media. This is the world of the pseudo event, dominated by its illusory images. In this new world, events are *made*, as are the celebrities involved in the events. Indeed, God is the ultimate image in such a world because He is presumed to be the greatest of all celebrities! In sports many events are pseudo although Boorstin thought that baseball remains linear and factual, but then he wrote before the re-organization of the major leagues into four divisions and the device of anti-climactic division playoffs which so effectively erase the course of a long regular season campaign. Nevertheless, Boorstin saw a craving for the old linear sense of history which is why he thought Americans read the sporting pages more than the rest of a newspaper, and why sports fans react so angrily when a sport even smacks of manufactured phoneyess.<sup>20</sup>

Complementing the social history of Wecter and Boorstin is the work of sociologist Orrin Klapp whose book *Symbolic Leaders* attempts to explain the process by which celebrities are made. It is a process which he likens to a tennis match with the would-be celebrity on one end and the consuming public on the other. In serving his image and deeds to the public, the celebrity becomes what a fickle public wants him to be. Yet, even when victorious, his is a momentary victory because he soon finds himself alone on the sidelines as another celebrity delivers his serves.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: Or What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962) p. 3-19, 59-61, 183, 254-255.

In an earlier work, *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, Klapp shows how a changing American culture has admitted a confusing variety of values and lifestyles that make it impossible to get consensus on a hero, a villain, or a fool. Indeed, Klapp found 15 different categories of heroes, villains and fools and his study shows how a single person may be hero, villain and fool at the same time, in the eyes of different segments of the public. Moreover, heroes have feet of clay and villains and fools are likely to be treated as heroes. This may make it easier for a modern hero to be himself and to live a normal life, but it makes national consensus on a person as hero difficult to get. This ambiguity has led serious writers to ponder the anomic effect of the loss of universal standards in our culture.<sup>21</sup>

For the sports historian such works offer fascinating leads. Certainly American Baseball reflects this trend toward situational heroes. Such towering heroes of national consensus as King Kelly (who if unrecognized bears witness to one's loss of his sense of history), Ty Cobb and Babe Ruth have been replaced by heroes-of-a-moment like Smokey Burgess, Dale Long and Gene Tenace (remember them?) And the history of the game is filled with heroic fools like Babe Herman and Marv Throneberry, also situational; and with reconsidered villains like the Black Sox or Carl Mays, or the Damn Yankees of the 'fifties (remember them?).

And if self-righteous baseball leaders from William Hulbert to Judge Landis to Bowie Kuhn labored hard to fit players into a neat mold of decorum, the *institutionalization of individualism* as a theme of our culture prompts many players to break out of imposed puritanic straitjackets. Obvious examples leap to mind. A general one shows up in the acceptance of long-haired players; single individuals like Joe Pepitone, Dick Allen, or Fritz Peterson-Mike Kekich abound. Their free-wheeling demands to be themselves have been backed by the rhetoric of the Athletic Revolution whose spokesmen now challenge the dogmas of coaches, managers and owners and have led directly to the institutionalization of the tough-minded Players Association as a players veto group in baseball. Perhaps more persuasive is the studied logic of the baseball intellectual Jim Brosnan who argues that all a player now wants is to be treated as a

<sup>21</sup> Orrin E. Klapp, *Symbolic Leaders: Public Dramas and Public Men* (Chicago: Aldine, 1964), p. 7-8, 13-25; Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains and Fools*.

Also, David Halberstam, "Baseball and the National Mythology," *Harper's*, September, 1970; and Bill Gilbert, "Gleanings From a Troubled Time," *Sports Illustrated*, Dec. 25, 1972.

human being with a little extra athletic talent. This is a profound expression of that social phenomenon that sociologists call the flight from status. Now widely rooted in American culture, its athletic expression in the writings of Jim Bouton or Curt Flood tells us much about our changing American character. That baseball players can be helped as individuals by such a demythologizing process is perhaps the most important message in the book like Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer*. The book vividly dramatizes the two lives of a baseball player, by contrasting the heights of his first life as a publicly worshipped hero with the desolate impact of trying to live a second life, to find a new identity, after being cast adrift from a career while yet young.

I could go on, and shall myself go on, pursuing the theme of baseball heroes in an age of cultural pluralism and institutionalized individualism. But for now, in closing, I find that same force of institutionalized individualism to be the greatest boon to the sports historian. Join the individualist trend with gusto. Be yourselves and in going about your work, give rein to your scholarly imagination--be it historical, sociological, anthropological, or literary and hopefully let it be all of these together. Let your inspiration be Socrates whose bold injunction to *examine everything* never was more possible.

If the going gets tough as indeed it will, take heart from historian Charles A. Beard's reflections on being a historian. Writing history, he once said, "is like dragging a tom cat across a rug." And from his long career of yanking at tom cats, Beard offered four epigrammatic riddles for each of us to ponder:

1. The mills of the gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.
2. He whom the Gods would destroy, they first make mad.
3. The bee fertilizes the flower whose nectar it robs.
4. And lastly, When it gets dark enough, you can see the stars.