

Neil J. Sullivan, *The Dodgers Move West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. x, 252pp. Notes, index, illustrations. \$17.95

Thirty years ago, the Brooklyn Dodgers moved west in “perhaps the most controversial franchise shift in sport history” (p. vii). Given the passage of time, Neil J. Sullivan, a professor of public administration, attempts to provide a more dispassionate analysis of the social and political factors that led to the Dodgers move to Los Angeles and to reassess the motives and actions of their owner, Walter F. O’Malley.

In this revisionist work, Sullivan challenges the popular image of O’Malley as a ruthless Machiavelli concerned solely with profit, and that he manipulated public officials in both New York and Los Angeles in order to achieve the best financial arrangement. He asserts that the portrayal of O’Malley as Judas severing the Dodgers from their beloved Brooklyn community for more money simplifies and distorts a complex process. Sullivan argues that O’Malley was “but one actor in two distinct political games played in New York and Los Angeles” (p. viii), and his book explores how political structures and government officials in the two cities impacted on O’Malley’s decision. While the desire of the Dodgers president to abandon obsolete Ebbets Field and construct his own stadium set events in motion, Sullivan asserts that O’Malley was as much manipulated by political forces as their creator. He further contends that O’Malley’s move was a bold gamble given the problems of minor league

baseball on the West Coast during the 1950s and that this action along with the club's subsequent success merits O'Malley a place in Cooperstown.

Sullivan maintains that despite the tremendous success of the Dodgers, both financially and on the playing fields, in the decade following World War II, O'Malley correctly foresaw that future problems would emerge from playing in outdated and small Ebbets Field, and from the changing social composition of Brooklyn and the flight to the suburbs. O'Malley believed that the construction of his own privately financed stadium was the solution to his team's problems, but he required governmental assistance to purchase the needed land. This could have been forthcoming by broadly defining Title 1 of the Federal Housing Act of 1949 which was designed to eliminate urban slums "by providing a local agency with federal funds to purchase property in desolate areas and either construct a public project or else sell the land to a private developer whose construction would conform to a larger 'public purpose,' a phrase that eventually became crucial for the Dodgers" (p. 48). However, the structure of New York government, with its interborough conflicts and rivalries, and the constant opposition of powerbroker Robert Moses, who replaces O'Malley as the villain in the Dodgers move, thwarted the plans of the Dodgers president.

While Sullivan maintains that O'Malley preferred to remain in Brooklyn, he acknowledges that the political climate in Los Angeles was more favorable for political officials of that city to use Title I to grant O'Malley 300 acres in the Chavez Ravine area. He recognizes that boosterism contributed to the varying behavior public officials adopted in the two cities—"In the end it was far more important to Los Angeles politicians to attract the Dodgers than it was for New York politicians to keep the team" (p. 4)—but he never fully explicates this theme. Sullivan is more effective in demonstrating how strong opposition in Southern California to public housing, identifying this program with socialism, facilitated the City of Angels being able to provide O'Malley with the needed land. For several years prior to the Dodgers move, the Chavez Ravine area had been a "red herring," and the efforts of Los Angeles mayor, Norris Poulson, to get some public group interested in this region met with constant failure. Rather than being a simple give away, the relocation of the Dodgers solved Los Angeles's problem of what to do with this land.

Sullivan further asserts that O'Malley's behavior rather than revealing the supreme manipulator was often by marked by naivete. He points out that the westward move hardly went smoothly. He investigates the public referendum held on granting the Dodgers the Chavez Ravine area and the court cases challenging the city's action. Sullivan concludes the study with a chapter entitled "Was the Move Justified?" He argues that from a business, romantic and civic perspective the answer is unequivocally yes. He also explores in this chapter different models local governments can employ when a team alleges a need for a new stadium and threatens relocation if the need is not met. Not surprisingly, the most viable approach is the one O'Malley and Los Angeles officials adopted. He argues that the benefit of a privately constructed stadium,

aided by favorable government policy, is that it binds the team “to the community in a way that would preclude frivolous shifts from city to city” (p. 215).

Sullivan’s study is an interesting and important work, but one which is significantly flawed. He does a more than admirable job in demonstrating how political structures, decisions and actions of political officials influenced the Dodgers move. The benefit of the work is not simply that it describes the diversity of forces that contributed to the relocation or that it challenges the more virulent strain of what he calls the “O’Malley Devil Theory.” Rather its value derives from the way it illustrates the utility of focusing on the internal decision-making process in constructing a more comprehensive analysis of sporting developments.

Unfortunately, the positive characteristics of the book do not outweigh the numerous problems and contradictions that exist; the author’s unfamiliarity with the recent scholarship in sport studies and urban-community history; and, his heavy dependence on only three newspapers, of which the *Los Angeles Times* was one, even though he admits that it was a strong booster of the city’s efforts to obtain the Dodgers. Sullivan also provides far too few insights into O’Malley. He offers the perfunctory paragraph on his background and repeats the well-known view that he saw baseball as a business, but what motivated and drove him is generally unexplored. Sullivan also never rectifies his perception of Q’Malley as a shrewd entrepreneur, who had the foresight to see future problems at a time of tremendous prosperity, with his contention that he was caught in a web of political intrigue over which he had little control. Nor does he clarify why political officials in both cities consistently believed that O’Malley held all the trump cards and constantly wanted all that he could get.

Sullivan is also far from convincing in his assertion that O’Malley preferred to remain in Brooklyn and left only after New York officials continually demonstrated an unwillingness to provide the necessary assistance. His position is based essentially on a willingness to accept O’Malley’s public statements and that the move otherwise appears illogical given the huge profits the club made, the best in major league baseball. The problem is not merely the absence of any definitive evidence or that he concedes that O’Malley’s position on issues was never consistent. Rather it is his failure to explain how the construction of a new stadium in Brooklyn would have overcome what he acknowledged was one of the major problems confronting the franchise, the changing demographics of the borough and the flight to the suburbs. He also never clarifies why Q’Malley rejected the Flushing Meadows area in the nearby borough of Queens where the New York Mets currently play. He simply repeats O’Malley’s statement that once the Dodgers left Brooklyn, they would cease to be the Brooklyn Dodgers. Whether O’Malley actually felt that there was no difference between playing in Queens or 3000 miles away is impossible to say, but even Sullivan concedes that he might have accepted this location had not Los Angeles made an offer. What is more disturbing is that Sullivan accepts the logic of this argument, and his view that community is limited to “place,” shapes much of his analysis. Thomas

Bender's insightful historical examination of the American community shows the fallacy of this simple approach, as does the ongoing willingness of New Yorkers to support the football Giants even though the team moved across the river to New Jersey.

The work also would have profited from Sullivan paying more attention to how baseball officials felt and responded to O'Malley leaving the lucrative Brooklyn market, and less attention to the club's involvement in baseball's pennant races. The simultaneous move of the New York Giants to San Francisco also should have also been examined in greater depth since it is highly unlikely that they would have relocated to the West Coast if the Dodgers were not also moving there, and this neglect leaves open to question Sullivan's claim that O'Malley had not committed his team to Los Angeles by the Spring of 1957.

Sullivan's assertion that the move west was a bold gamble also is problematic. Some risk obviously exists in relocating in virgin territory, but the tremendous success of the Milwaukee Braves had already demonstrated that a major league team could succeed in an area where minor league baseball had failed. The example of the Los Angeles Rams also illustrated that the city could support professional sport. In fact, was the hastiness of O'Malley's action, given the club's current lucrative condition, precipitated by his fear that another team might beat him there, and were National League officials willing to go along with him because they were concerned that an American League club might initially exploit this market? Sullivan never examines these possibilities.

What is ironic about Sullivan's work is that he offers evidence which facilitates a different, or at least an expanded, interpretation from the one he offers. While there is no question that O'Malley always desired his own stadium, it was part and parcel of a large concern for control and his fear of competition from other teams. In Brooklyn, O'Malley not only faced competition from National League rivals, but from two teams in his own city. Sullivan correctly notes that except for the Dodgers last decade in Brooklyn, the club usually took a back seat to the Giants or Yankees, and frequently was bathed in red ink. The tripartite division made autonomous decisions difficult, especially when it came to the critical issue of broadcast revenues, which were vital to O'Malley's profits. Sullivan notes that one explanation of why Chicago Cub owner, P. K. Wrigley, swapped his minor league franchise in Los Angeles for O'Malley's one in Fort Worth, was that they both desired to have only one team play in a city to enhance television revenue. While Sullivan doesn't fully accept this view, he does admit that it is not necessarily inaccurate. However, he does readily concede that in Los Angeles where O'Malley "enjoyed a monopoly," (p. 143), he could pursue his long-time interest in pay TV without regard for competition from the Giants or Yankees. The attraction of Los Angeles was that it offered O'Malley autonomy and the ability to establish, as he is quoted in Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer* (p. 430), "a monument to the O'Malley's [sic]." Neither of these were possible if he had remained in New York.

The *Dodgers Move West* clearly expands our understanding of this significant sporting development, and Sullivan should be praised for his courageous

attempt to swim against the currents of popular sentiment. However, as a vindication of O'Malley's actions, the book is far from conclusive and leaves too many unanswered questions.

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