

# Ideology on the Sportspage: Newspapers, Baseball, and Ideological Conflict in the Gilded Age

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The portly man looked out the hotel window onto the busy scene below. A steady stream of horse-drawn cabs moved along 42nd Street, to and from Grand Central Station. He knew that no sound could penetrate the thick walls of the hotel, but fancied he could somehow feel the energy and progress embodied in the activity outside. Normally, he might have taken a moment to savor the scene, the way other men would stop to smell a flower, but business called. He drew the curtain to block out any distractions, then locked the door, explaining to the men seated around the heavy conference table that he wished “simply to prevent any intrusions from without, and incidentally to make it impossible for any of you to go out until I have finished what I have to say to you.”<sup>1</sup> The man, William Hulbert, majority owner of the Chicago White Stockings, then proceeded to outline to the owners of the other major clubs how they could sever baseball’s links with its fraternal past and turn the game into a business from which they could profit.

The meeting taking place at New York’s Grand Central Hotel on February 2, 1876, was prompted by the frustration men such as Hulbert felt at their clubs’ continual losses when the potential for profit was so obvious. A growing urban population was creating a demand for commercially produced leisure, fueled by the culture of consumption promoted in newspapers. Baseball was ideally positioned to satisfy this demand. The sport was popular with a broad cross-section of society, and the mass transit networks that were increasingly a feature of Gilded Age cities enabled people to congregate cheaply and easily at centrally located ballparks.<sup>2</sup> The problem, from the owners’ point of view, was that baseball was not organized to take advantage of these commercial possibilities. Harking back to the 1850s, when baseball clubs such as the Knickerbockers and Eckfords were controlled by club members, most of whom actually played, clubs were still operated by player-managers whose first aim was to win games, with the balance sheet an afterthought.<sup>3</sup> “The business management of the sport was defective,” explained Hulbert’s partner Albert Spalding.<sup>4</sup>

Hulbert put it to the men gathered in the locked hotel room that it was time that they took over the running of the clubs they owned, relegating players to the status of employees who would play the game for “commensurate pay.”<sup>5</sup> As it turned out, he need not have bothered with the melodrama of the locked door. None of the owners disagreed in the slightest with his proposition. “A Quaker prayer meeting could not have been any more decorous than the proceedings from that time,” recalled Spalding later.<sup>6</sup> Before the meeting had ended the owners also agreed to form their clubs into a cartel to be known as the National League. Again, they needed little persuasion from Hulbert. This was a time of business mergers and takeovers, a time when the move to an economy dominated by massive “trusts” such as Standard Oil was beginning to pick up momentum.<sup>7</sup> It made sense for the owners to agree to a constitution that gave the League the power to act on behalf of all eight clubs, securing for each the bonanza of monopoly profits.

This essay will follow the course of events set in motion by Hulbert’s meeting, focusing on the way these events were reported in the press. It will become apparent that nineteenth-century newspapers were subtly, but emphatically, different than those of today. Businessmen today are often wary of the press. It can be commercially advantageous that news of a project not break too early. If there is malpractice involved, the last thing the perpetrator needs is the scrutiny of a crusading journalist. However, today’s businessman can at least be sure that the press will not challenge his dealings on the basis that he is a capitalist aiming to make a profit. In the nineteenth century, however, there was no such assurance. Even as they resolved to form the National League, Hulbert and the other club owners involved agreed that the news of their cartel would have to be managed so as to minimize criticism. They continued to regard the media with a suspicion that reached outright hostility in 1890, when the players issued a fundamental challenge to the monopoly capitalism the National League embodied. As this story unfolds it will become clear that the club owners’ hostility was not misplaced. They had every right to feel uneasy as they struggled in an openly skeptical press to legitimize their control over baseball to a society as yet unconvinced of the virtues of capitalism.

Media scholars have recently begun to understand that the news media today works as an agent of social cohesion, promoting acceptance of the status quo. Noam Chomsky and Ed Herman have done extensive work to show how capitalist advertisers, by giving their business only to publications that put forward a view of the world favorable to them, create an “ideological monopoly.”<sup>8</sup> Other studies have demonstrated how the news as a style diminishes the possibility of anger developing into dissent. Peter Golding has shown that because the news must conform to strict “news values”—it must be brief and refer only to recent events—it presents a fragmented view of the world in which events have no apparent relationship to one another.<sup>9</sup> A businessman defrauds his creditors, the next day a company closes a factory, the day after a bank raises interest rates. The events are all reported, but remain unconnected. Power is invisible. The news, therefore, allows criticism of individuals or of single companies, but deadens the potential of events to lead to criticism of capitalism itself.

The modern notion of the news as a source of social cohesion fits well with a view of the Gilded Age as a time when industrial capitalism was embraced readily, if with a touch of nostalgia. In this view, newspapers would have reconciled workers to the changes wrought by capitalism, and in particular to their new role as wage labor. However, as Alan Trachtenberg has shown, nineteenth-century newspapers were not yet fully subject to the constraints of advertising and style that determine how their twentieth-century descendants operate. Mass circulation newspapers were relatively new, a creation of the industrial city made necessary as the intimacy of the small town was lost in the rush and scale of the urban life. But while city dwellers needed newspapers “for a sense of the world,” the importance of the press as an opinion shaper preceded its relationship with advertisers coming into focus. Department stores, the chief buyers of advertising, were themselves a new development, as were the advertising agencies who came to mediate between the stores and newspapers.<sup>10</sup> The parties involved understood that they were joined in a business relationship, but took time to appreciate the implication in terms of advertisers’ influence over editorial content. Editors and writers were just as unaware of restrictions on how they could write. Trachtenberg has dated the emergence of the “new styles of journalism,” which is to say the style used today, to the 1880s and 1890s, and it was only years later that this style became entrenched as journalistic canon.<sup>11</sup> The point is that neither advertising nor new journalism had been in effect long enough to dictate the message newspapers could disseminate.

At the heart of this essay is this notion of the Gilded Age as a liminal period when the desirability of industrial capitalism was questioned and often seriously challenged. Herbert Gutman, perhaps the most respected proponent of such a view, focused on working-class resistance to the new order. Significantly, Gutman did not mean by this that workers were alone in their struggle, at odds with the rest of society. He asserted that “Industrialism was still new to most Gilded Age Americans, new as a way of work, and new as a way of life. Its norms were not yet internalized, institutionalized or legitimized.” Accordingly, intellectuals, newspaper editors, and even some employers remained wary of industrial capitalism, and lent workers support. Gutman relished telling how the people of Paterson, New Jersey, united behind working-class radical Joseph P. McDonnell when he was imprisoned for criticizing working conditions in a local brickyard. Apart from workers, a newspaper editor and “others of local prominence” sided with McDonnell against industrialists. Not all newspapers supported the rebel, creating tension, but as Gutman stressed, “McDonnell’s survival, much less his success, depended on such tension and conflict.”<sup>12</sup>

J.P. McDonnell was a beneficiary of newspapers not yet being fully committed to industrial capitalism. They allowed a space in which his dissent survived, supported by a broad cross-section of Paterson society. Of course, McDonnell was a charismatic figure and Paterson just one town. Baseball provides another window into the Gilded Age, a window with a view of the entire country—baseball was America’s “national game.” When they formed the National League, Hulbert and his fellow club owners reorganized that game to be run as a business,

in the manner of a Paterson mill. An examination of the events that followed the formation of the League sheds light on whether the latent antagonism to capitalism Gutman found in Paterson was widespread and if such opposition could be sustained over time, and on the role newspapers played in promoting or dampening dissent.

The owners who agreed to Hulbert's cartel implicitly shared his faith that the "reforms" they were implementing were part of the progress that was sweeping the nation, making it a better place. They were not quite so sure, however, that the press would report it that way, which is why when they emerged from the Grand Central Hotel they were not met by the throng of reporters that would be in attendance if a similar meeting were to be held today. There was such apprehension that Hulbert and Spalding had taken the precaution of keeping proceedings secret from the press—that is, except for their friend and associate, Lewis Meacham, an editor with the *Chicago Tribune*. The one reporter at the Grand Central that day was a *Tribune* man. As soon as the meeting broke up, he raced away to send a wire to Meacham, who was waiting expectantly in Chicago. Meacham did not need details of the League constitution; a simple confirmation that the other owners had signed was enough. As historian David Voigt put it, he had been "in on the plot from the start."<sup>13</sup> In fact, some four months earlier he had begun to lay the groundwork for the League by questioning the ability of player-managers to run clubs properly. The centerpiece in this campaign was an article that appeared in the *Tribune* on October 24, 1875, entitled "What Is Wrong With Base Ball." Player-managers, Meacham asserted, could just not control the wont of players to drink, fight, and gamble.<sup>14</sup>

As soon as he received the wire from his man in New York, Meacham put the next stage of the plan into action. On February 4, a day ahead of the Eastern press, and a week ahead of the leading baseball journal of the 1870s, the *New York Clipper*, Meacham's version of events appeared in the *Tribune*.<sup>15</sup> The article, entitled "The Diamond Squared," seemed to announce solutions to every one of the problems Meacham had pointed out back in October, which of course was hardly a coincidence. Meacham predicted that with the owners in charge there would be an end to "drunken behavior" and a new era of "honest play." Restricting the League to eight "productive" clubs was a similarly positive step. Players, although they lost authority, would nevertheless gain materially under the new system, which "assures them lucrative employment as long as they are honest and work hard." Finally, just in case writers from other newspapers had not been convinced to follow the *Tribune's* line, the article ended with an attempt to discredit the most influential baseball writer of the day, the *Clipper's* Henry Chadwick. "The Old Man of the Sea" was painted as having been bypassed by progress, "a dead weight on the neck of the game."<sup>16</sup>

Chadwick was an easy target for the lampooning in the *Chicago Tribune*. Self-consciously a gentleman, he advocated that baseball be played according to the English tradition of good sportsmanship, an ideal sadly out of step with the win-at-all-costs ethos Americans had embraced. Nevertheless, Chadwick was highly respected in baseball circles, and his weekly column in the *New York Clipper*

carried great weight. He was also a determined character, and although the *Tribune* had landed the first punch, he hit back in a strongly worded article on February 12. Chadwick had no quarrel with anything that would “put a stop to the growing abuses connected with the baseball fraternity.” He had waged his own campaign against “hippodroming,” calling it a “cancer” that could kill the professional game.<sup>17</sup> However, Chadwick had no faith in the club owners as reformers, announcing in the *Clipper* that “it is requisite that the operation be placed in experienced hands.” Few of the owners had ever played baseball, and their way of doing business made Chadwick doubt if their management techniques were enough to compensate for their lack of knowledge of the game. He asked, if their desire was to make the game more honest, why use “this secret meeting with closed doors and a star-chamber method of attaining the ostensible objects in view?” The answer, of course, was that the formation of the National League was first and foremost a power play, designed to put control of the game into the hands of just eight club owners. Chadwick labeled the exclusion of everyone else in the baseball world an “anti-American method of doing business.”<sup>18</sup>

Chadwick’s charge that the League was “anti-American” was exactly the sort of language the owners wanted to keep out of public discussion. Meacham attempted to marginalize such criticism by claiming in the *Tribune* that there was “general approval” of the National League, but it was obvious that the League had not been well received. Chadwick was able to list support for his anti-League position from the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, the *New Haven Register*, and the *Hartford Times*, where the “gross injustice” of making all but the players at eight clubs unemployed was denounced.<sup>19</sup> According to Voigt there was “bitter criticism” of the National League throughout the East, and even the *Chicago Union* labeled the new League “nothing but a monopoly.”<sup>20</sup> Meacham kept defending the League, on February 13 proclaiming it “the most important reform since the history of the game,” but he and Spalding were beginning to realize that the *Tribune* alone could not counter general criticism from the media. They decided that the answer lay in Spalding publishing his own journal, which he could target directly at baseball fans and promote the League “free from the amazing and bewildering comments” that were found in the news media at large.<sup>21</sup>

Within two months the “official League book” appeared on the newsstands, closely followed by an annual, which, as Spalding’s biographer Peter Levine noted, the magnate “modestly entitled” *Spalding’s Official Base Ball Guide*.<sup>22</sup> The owners were unable to influence the wider media, but in the *Guide* Spalding was able to present the League exactly as he wanted. In introducing the League constitution, for instance, *Guide* readers were told that the purpose of the League was “to enact and enforce proper rules for the exhibition and conduct of the game, and to make base ball playing respectable and honorable.” There was no mention of profit or monopolies, only the sense of duty impelling the owners to manage a game that the players, by their behavior, had shown they could not manage themselves.<sup>23</sup> However, the limitation on any single publication, even one that was privately controlled, was that it still had to operate within the prevailing news discourse. Even in the *Guide* the owners were on the defensive, trying to

justify their authority. Reflective comment in the news media at large, where baseball clubs' cooperative origins were recalled, demanded the owners' presentation of their own version of baseball history. They put themselves forward as saving the game with their paternal discipline and astute management, an interpretation that was to prove difficult to support. After two years the owners did not emerge as financial wizards. At the end of the 1876 season only the Chicago club showed a profit, and the 1877 season was even worse, with all clubs incurring heavy losses.<sup>24</sup>

From the owners' point of view, the problem was that their reforms had not gone far enough. Their 1876 coup had given them control of clubs at board-room level, relegating the players to paid employees. This arrangement had a certain symmetry, with the owners using their skills as financiers to manage the game from the front office, while the players did what they knew best, which was to play the game. Nevertheless, clubs continued to lose money. The owners realized that they had ceded control of what amounted to the baseball workplace, and that decisions taken at that level were affecting the balance sheet. They partially addressed this oversight at their 1879 annual meeting by awarding themselves the right to "reserve" players' services for as long as they desired. The Reserve Rule, as it was known, restricted the freedom of players who were out of contract to move to a new club in search of higher pay. That pleased the owners greatly, but there remained the even trickier problem of how to control the players on a day-to-day basis, when the players alone knew how the game worked and were adamant that they would not relinquish control to men lacking that knowledge. John Montgomery Ward, then a pitcher with the Providence Grays, stated the players' position. "The distinction between the spheres of manager and captain should be as clearly drawn as is that between the manager of a theater and the stage director," he declared. "If [the manager] is a clever financier let him be confined to that work, but under no circumstances should he be permitted to interfere in any way in the playing department."<sup>25</sup>

When Ward employed the term "manager," he was as often as not referring to the owner, who would himself manage the club. However, even when the manager was an appointee such as James Mutrie, who managed the New York Giants on behalf of John Day, there was no doubt that Day was the ultimate authority. As the economist J.K. Galbraith has explained, in the nineteenth century "the corporation was the instrument of its owners and a projection of their personalities."<sup>26</sup> But in spite of the owners' control at the administrative level, their ambition to take control of the team itself was thwarted by the players' superior knowledge of the game. Most of the usual tactics used by capitalists to take control of a workplace were unavailable to them. They could not de-skill the players, and with the concept of coaching not yet developed, the sporting equivalent of the foreman was not an option. Baseball being a game devised in pre-industrial days and measured by innings rather than the clock, set working hours could not even be imposed.

Almost as a last resort, the League invoked once more the need to curb the players' bad behavior, announcing in the *Guide* a "new and very severe penalty for

drunkenness.”<sup>27</sup> The emphasis on drinking was astute. The players did drink, some quite heavily. That was how baseball players had always behaved, right from the time of the first clubs in the 1840s, when baseball was as much about friends drinking and eating together as it was about playing the game. Thus by attacking drinking, the owners were attacking the players’ knowledge of how the game was traditionally played at a potentially vulnerable point. Indeed, this was a tactic widely used by Gilded Age employers to break down traditional work practices. As John Rumbarger explained in *Profits, Power and Prohibition*, “capitalists regarded temperance reform as integral and necessary to establishing a capitalist, industrial social order”<sup>28</sup>

The owners were initially successful in keeping opposition to their bid for workplace control out of the public arena. The players were unhappy, but drew little support in the press. Although the Reserve Rule was described quite unambiguously in the *Clipper* as being intended to “secure good players at small salaries,” players were paid well above the average wage and gained little sympathy on that score.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the players themselves rebelled more against the anti-drinking rules than they did against the Reserve Rule. Two years later, at the end of the 1881 season, the owners announced in the *Guide* that “revolving,” the term used to describe players shifting from club to club, had become “an impossibility under existing League rules.” Drinking, on the other hand, “had come to be an evil of increased growth.” The owners’ response was to inflict still stricter discipline and harsher punishment on drinking players in 1882. This involved “blacklisting” any player who by “gross acts of insubordination or intemperance” had incurred a suspension. The blacklist, a favorite tactic of Gilded Age employers, denied employment to a man throughout an entire industry. The size of fines were also dramatically increased on the basis that “the best plan to cure drunken players is to lower their salary status. The Blacklist is good enough for a period of suspension, but the moment you begin to lower a player’s salary value you hurt him where he is most tender.”<sup>30</sup>

Until this point the owners’ tactics had been working well. Their anti-drinking rules were imposing a form of control on the baseball workplace, and they had at least gained the tacit consent of the media to implement those rules. However, the move to a more extreme position in 1882 marked a serious miscalculation of the players’ motives and resolve that would end in a dispute destined to attract exactly the sort of media attention the owners had tried so hard to avoid. The threat of fines and blacklisting forced players to take their drinking out of the clubhouse and into pubs and taverns, where they drank at night, after the game. At first the owners took this as a victory, but soon they began to realize that the “insubordination” they associated with drinking in the clubhouse had merely been transferred to another venue. As Roy Rosenzweig explained in *Eight Hours For What We Will*, “the saloon served as a communications center, a place where workers picked up their mail, heard the local political gossip, or learned of openings in their trade.”<sup>31</sup> By 1885 the owners announced in a *Guide* article that “there is but one remedy for this evil, and that is total abstinence from the first day of the season to the last.”<sup>32</sup> The Chicago, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh clubs went so

far as to hire detectives to follow players at night and catch them in “the great elbow act.”<sup>33</sup> In Chicago the conflict was particularly bitter, with the players retaliating by beating up an undercover Pinkerton they discovered spying on them, and from there the owners lost control of the situation.<sup>34</sup>

After the 1886 season Spalding sold Mike Kelly and Jim McCormick, the two players involved in the fight with the Pinkerton, to other clubs.<sup>35</sup> The press were outraged. “The general public should have a great deal of respect for Kelly and McCormick, the base ball players,” *Chicago Evening News* readers were told. “They are the only members of the Chicago nine who have had the pluck to stand out against the petty tyrant managers of that organization.” Spalding and his associates were described as using “Russian methods” in order to “reduce [players] to the level of serfs.” The *Evening News* writer went so far as to urge all players “to throw off the yoke,” as Kelly and McCormick had tried to do, and “vindicate their privileges as American citizens.”<sup>36</sup> By that time Meacham had died, leaving Spalding no special influence at the *Chicago Tribune*, which mirrored the *Evening News* position, criticizing “the rapacity of stockholders who interfere with [players’] rights to earn their living wherever they choose and demand for their labor whatever price they contend it is worth.”<sup>37</sup> These articles had reframed relations between players and owners. The owners had taken no criticism for controlling the players’ drinking, even when their version of temperance was unusually strict, but now the focus had shifted from Kelly and McCormick’s drinking to Spalding’s control over their labor.

Spalding’s associates urged him to “take some action that would stop the abuse,” one even suggesting that he kill the editor of the *News*.<sup>38</sup> Spalding ignored his hot-headed adviser, but realized that he did need to defend his position publicly, and that to do so he would have to leave the comfort of *Spalding’s Guide*. He told a *Sporting Life* reporter, “I cannot bring myself to believe that the Chicago papers intended to do injustice to the Chicago base ball management, and therefore I will state our side of the matter and let the public decide.” He tried to put the focus back on the morality of drinking. The Chicago management, he explained, had simply reacted to public concern about the “dissipation of some of the players.” By Spalding’s account he “talked with the players at fault as kindly as [he] knew how,” but the players kept drinking and in the end he sold them “for their own good as well as our own.” It was a brave try, but this was not *Spalding’s Guide*, and the subject turned from drinking to the morality of selling players. “These men are congratulated upon having ‘thrown off the yoke,’” said Spalding. “Let us see. While I have secured a good bonus for the release of [Kelly and McCormick] they have been put in positions where they have increased their salaries very materially.”<sup>39</sup> Spalding’s argument had its own logic, but it missed the fundamental point that even though Kelly and McCormick gained financially from being sold, they had done so at the expense of losing control of their labor.<sup>40</sup>

Two months after Spalding ventured into the public media by making his case in the *Sporting Life*, the baseball debate widened still further when New York Giants captain John Montgomery Ward wrote an article entitled “Is the Base Ball Player a Chattel?” A Columbia University educated lawyer, Ward was

no ordinary player, and even by nineteenth-century standards this was no ordinary baseball article. The article appeared in the August 1887 edition of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, "a popular journal of general literature, science, and politics." *Lippincott's* readership was generally drawn from the educated elite, the strata of society to which the nouveau riche baseball owners could only aspire. Ward set out in the article "to describe the relations which exist between base ball clubs and players," with his focus "the action of the reserve rule." "The rule itself was an inherent wrong, for by it one set of men seized absolute control over the labor of another," he insisted. "Clubs have seemed to think that players had no rights, and the blacklist was waiting for any man who dared to assert the contrary." Included in the examples he gave of players losing their freedom was Kelly, who "received his salary from Chicago (or such part as was not taken out in fines), and earned every dollar several times over, and yet the Chicago club takes ten thousand dollars for releasing him from a claim for which it never paid him a dollar, but which it acquired by seizure some years ago." Ward likened this to slavery, a powerful image with the Civil War just two decades past. He accused that "in the eye of the baseball magnate the player has become a mere chattel. He goes where he is sent, takes what is given him, and thanks the Lord for life."<sup>41</sup>

*Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* was not a working-class journal. Nevertheless, it allowed a critique of the National League on the basis that the League rules had "given one set of men a life-estate in the labor of another." What is more, having established that in their "avarice" the club owners had compromised the republican ideal of free labor, Ward took the opportunity to suggest to the *Lippincott's* readership that it was fair and reasonable that the players unite to defend their freedom. "Is it surprising," he asked, "that players begin to protest, and think it necessary to combine for mutual protection?"<sup>42</sup> In fact, the players had already joined together in an organization known as the Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players, and Ward, who was president of the fledgling organization, knew that its effectiveness would depend on having enough public support to override the inevitable opposition of the owners. The significance of the *Lippincott's* article was that Ward obviously felt that support for the Brotherhood could come from sectors of society other than workers, and the *Lippincott's* editor agreed sufficiently to print the article.

The initial reaction of the owners to the Brotherhood, which National League secretary Nick Young called "the recently formed Base Ball Union," was to refuse to recognize it.<sup>43</sup> It was the typical response of a Gilded Age employer. John Garraty has explained that while most employers gave lip service to the right of workers to organize, few would actually enter into negotiations with unions. Collective bargaining, they argued, struck at the freedom of workers to negotiate their own contracts as individuals.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, when the Brotherhood asked to be present during contract negotiations at the end of the 1887 season, Young told the *Chicago Tribune* he was "willing to meet with a committee of players, but not any Brotherhood."<sup>45</sup> Debate raged in the press, where, as a *Sporting Life* writer put it, Ward and Young were "engaged in epistolary sparring on the question of official recognition of the Brotherhood by the League." Ward was quoted as

saying that he was confident the Brotherhood would “receive the moral support of the public and the assistance of all fair-minded newspaper men.”<sup>46</sup> Two weeks later, on October 5, the *Sporting Life* took heed, giving Ward the opportunity to “define the issue from the Brotherhood standpoint.” Referring to the League position that only individual players could propose amendments to the annual contract, Ward asked, “From what individual players would you expect these proposals to emanate? How would you know that these individual players fairly represented the views of the players at large?” In the judgment of a *Sporting Life* writer, it was “a logical and clever reply to Young on the question of recognition.”<sup>47</sup>

The cooperative philosophy Ward hinted at in the *Sporting Life* was a throwback to baseball’s early days, when clubs were run democratically by their player-members. The suggestion that this should in any way be revived was a direct challenge to the structure of the National League, which was based on exclusive ownership and management. It was understandable, then, that the owners tried resolutely to keep the Brotherhood out of all contract negotiations. However, they became increasingly isolated from public opinion, and were finally reduced to holding their annual meeting barricaded in an upstairs room of New York’s Fifth Avenue Hotel, while the Brotherhood delegation waited in the lobby in the company of the gathered reporters. The owners were looking more and more ridiculous. Young sent down a message advising the players that “owing to press of business” the League could not see them that day, but he “hoped for tomorrow.” As a *Chicago Tribune* reporter wryly noted, the most pressing business the owners had was “the question of recognition or nonrecognition of the Brotherhood.”<sup>48</sup> Eventually, the owners had no choice. They met with the Brotherhood men, and even gave ground on a range of issues, agreeing, for instance, that fines could only be imposed after giving the player written notice of the grounds for punishment, and that a \$2,000 salary ceiling introduced in 1885 would be abandoned.

The owners had been forced to give up their absolute authority over the management of the game. It seemed they had accepted the situation gracefully, but privately they seethed, and plotted all year to win back the control they had lost. They arrived at a Machiavellian scheme that began with Spalding leading his White Stockings and a hand-picked All-American nine on an exhibition tour to foreign lands. Even before the tour departed Spalding was winning kudos for promoting American culture overseas, and for having the entrepreneurial skills to mount such a venture. The cynical view was that the tour was just a public relations exercise, but as soon as it had departed people began to realize it was much more. The National League moved quickly to enact a series of harsh rules, including a reinstated salary ceiling. The players who remained at home suddenly realized that the touring players had been “hand-picked” to include virtually all of the Brotherhood’s elected officials, including Ward.<sup>49</sup> Brotherhood secretary Tim Keefe, left in charge, could only promise action “after the return of the tourists,” some of whom, he added in a masterpiece of understatement, “may have some grievances to settle.”<sup>50</sup>

The tactic of luring the Brotherhood officials overseas, then in their absence

enacting a range of particularly harsh rules, was so crude that it could only succeed if the public relations benefits of the tour could outweigh or distract from any criticism. It helped that Ward, the players' most articulate spokesman, was on the other side of the world, but Spalding was taking no chances. Revealing how uncertain the owners were about the news media, he had earlier taken the precaution of engaging the services of the *Clipper's* Henry Chadwick to edit *Spalding's Guide*. Chadwick, whose initial opposition to the League had been mollified by making him part of it, heaped praise on Spalding in the *Clipper* for organizing the "best handled, best equipped and most important [tour] ever gotten up and taken so far from home in the interest of our national game."<sup>51</sup> *Sporting Life* writer Harry Palmer, who was traveling with the teams, also obliged with a story about "the triumphant tour of Australia."<sup>52</sup> Whether Spalding was subsidizing Palmer's traveling expenses is unknown, but it was important to Spalding that Palmer's stories showed the tour in a good light, as they were also being run in the *Chicago Times*, *Boston Herald*, *New York Press*, *Chicago Evening News*, and *Outing*.<sup>53</sup>

Spalding must have considered his efforts to manipulate the news to have been prudent when he saw some of the coverage in other publications. The *Sporting News* contained particularly strident criticism. In a story entitled "The Grand Laugh—That Is What Spalding and His Fakirs Are Getting," *Sporting News* readers learned that the tourists departed Australia "downcast" after lackluster games before spectators who thought of baseball as a "game of rounders."<sup>54</sup> An even more explicit assault on Spalding's image-making appeared in another *Sporting News* article in the same edition, where, to the magnate's certain dismay, the connection was made to the right of club owners to control baseball. "In denouncing the confidence game played by Spalding and his henchmen on the good people of Australia," the article began, "the *Sporting News* has been met with the singular argument that Spalding is the father of base ball in the west and that nothing can be said against one who planted the game in the Windy City." Indeed, the tour was undertaken to promote Spalding and his fellow owners in just such a fashion. "As a matter of fact and as a matter of history," the *Sporting News* writer countered, "Spalding had no more to do with building up the game in Chicago than the man in the moon." He pointed out that "the game of base ball was played in Chicago over thirty years ago," before clubs had fallen under the control of capitalists.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of the attacks in the *Sporting News* and dailies including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the balance of media comment on the tour was favorable, enhancing the reputation of the owners. They were quick to use the situation to their advantage. The 1889 season was the most profitable on record, with *Sporting Life* editor Francis Richter attributing the prosperity "to the eclat of the Spalding tour around the world."<sup>56</sup> People came out in record numbers to see the game that had earned America notice overseas, and the owners were emboldened to take a hard line in their dealings with players. In the afterglow of the tour, they actually drew praise in the press for the harsh "Classification Rule" enacted during Ward's absence. The rule gave the owners the power to determine players' salaries

according to their play and their behavior both on and off the field. In terms of controlling their employees' private lives, it went beyond anything Pullman attempted, yet all that was written about it in the *Sporting Life* was that it would save the game from "the salary evil." The players, meanwhile, saw their self-image as craftsmen struggling to preserve the republican ideal of free labor reversed in the press, where they appeared as grasping "aristocrats" concerned only that their salaries were being "reduced to the level of lawyers and doctors."<sup>57</sup> Such coverage disempowered the players. According to historian Harold Seymour, they considered striking but believed they lacked sufficient public support.<sup>58</sup> In turn, the owners grew ever more confident and resumed their old policy of refusing even to talk with the Brotherhood.

As the 1889 season progressed, it seemed that the owners were in total control.<sup>59</sup> The players were desperately unhappy with the conditions of their employment, but they could neither negotiate nor strike. Many indicated to Ward that they "were ready to quit entirely rather than longer submit to such unfair treatment." Ward asked them to bide their time, hinting that he and the other Brotherhood officials were working on a scheme to break the shackles. He finally unveiled his plan at a Brotherhood meeting held at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, New York, on July 14, 1889. Ward put it to the meeting that the players should leave the National League and set up their own league run on a cooperative basis, with every player having a share of the profits and a say in how the league was run. The reception was joyful, enthusiastic approval, not at all tempered by the knowledge that the utopian venture would require outside capital backing for ballparks, uniforms, bats, and all the other accoutrements of baseball. The players simply agreed that a representative from each of the Brotherhood chapters would "look up the feasibility of securing capital in his own city, and report at an early date."<sup>60</sup>

It never occurred to the players that capitalists might not want to invest money in a worker-run cooperative—and indeed, they had gauged the situation correctly. Vindicating Gutman's thoughts on the general antagonism toward large-scale, monopoly capitalism, a label easily attached to the National League, the cooperative venture found ready support. An interview with one of the players' backers, Cleveland traction-engine magnate Al Johnson, revealed that this support was given with full awareness of the ideology contained in the venture. According to Johnson, Pittsburgh's Ed Hanlon approached him asking for capital so that the players could "liberate themselves from the tyrannical rule of the League." Hanlon promised Johnson "a fair percentage for his risk," while "the players would receive a portion of the profits of the thing that they themselves were the real cause of making." It could have come from the mouth of Terrence Powderly, yet Johnson, a successful businessman, informed *Sporting Life* readers that he agreed to give the players "all the assistance within [his] power to help them achieve their aim."<sup>61</sup> Hanlon's success was repeated in other cities, and the Brotherhood men reported back to Ward that they had found backers "willing to advance the necessary money to start a new league and upon terms most liberal to the players."<sup>62</sup>

After months of behind the scenes preparation, the existence of the players' venture became public in November. "A Revolt Sure," read the *Sporting Life*

headline. "The Players Determined to Go It Alone."<sup>63</sup> Recognizing the importance of winning public support, the Brotherhood released "a card to the public" explaining their stand. Their essential point was that they were no longer prepared to play as employees of men who "have come into the business for no other motive than to exploit it for every dollar in sight." The card ended with a powerful statement of the players' republican ideals that almost demanded public sympathy:

We believe that it is possible to conduct our National game upon lines which will not infringe upon individual or natural rights. We ask to be judged solely by our work, and believing that the game can be played more fairly and its business conducted more intelligently under a plan which excludes everything arbitrary and un-American, we look forward to the support of the public and the future of the National Game.<sup>64</sup>

The owners had no option but to reply in kind. On November 21, they issued their own "address to the public," which was published in full in the *New York Clipper* on November 30. The delay between the issue of the address and its publication is a reminder that nineteenth-century news values were very different than those in force today, and the address itself centered on a version of baseball history, which again is at odds with today's definition of news. It began with an assertion that "The National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs has no apology to make for its existence or for its untarnished record of fourteen years." Far from being concerned with money, the owners contended that they "rescued the National Game from destruction threatened by the dishonesty and dissipation of the players." The owners maintained that they made little profit from acting as the moral guardians of baseball, while, thanks to the Reserve Rule, "the salaries of players have more than trebled." The address ended with a plea to the public to reject the scheme of "certain overpaid players to again control [baseball] for their own aggrandizement, but to [baseball's] ultimate dishonor and disintegration."<sup>65</sup>

The nine-day delay between the statement's issue and publication worked against the owners, as the *New York Clipper* had taken the opportunity to seek out players' responses, which were published alongside the statement. Chicago player Fred Pfeffer told a *Clipper* reporter, "Well, I must say those self-glorified magnates throw bouquets at themselves in great style. But they tell us too much." Pfeffer used the logic of Henry George to argue that the owners "say they have rescued the game from an awful slough, and in the same breath acknowledge they have done it with the very men who are now starting in for themselves." His message was that labor alone created wealth. Pfeffer finally made the point that "if the poor League magnates are making such puny profits, why are they making such desperate efforts to continue at the game?" The *Clipper* also published a response from the Brotherhood, which asserted that "If anything further were necessary to show the desperate state of mind into which the old League magnates have fallen, this last appeal to the public has furnished it." Spiced with further denunciations of the owners' "un-American" actions, whereby they "attempted to make money at the sacrifice of the dignity of the game and at the expense of the players' rights as men," the Brotherhood response negated the effectiveness of the owners' statement.<sup>66</sup>

In *Spalding's Guide* the owners complained bitterly about “prejudiced abuse of the National League.” The *Spalding's Guide* writer—it may well have been Spalding himself—blamed “the class of young base ball journalists, new to base ball matters as they existed over a decade ago.” The owners believed that these writers, “entirely ignorant of the true position,” were distorting history. “These young writers should bear in mind the fact that a decade ago professional base ball had reached its lowest point,” the *Guide* chided. Such criticism betrayed a superficial understanding of how the media worked. The culprits were not individual journalists, but rather a journalistic practice that allowed reflection and analysis to appear on the sports page. Even the owners’ own version of baseball history had a defensive quality about it, justifying “strong coercive and even arbitrary methods” on the pretext that the players’ drinking and general bad behavior demanded such action.<sup>67</sup> From the owners’ point of view it would have been far better if the entire issue had not appeared in the news in the first place, as it framed baseball not as a game but as a battleground where the rights of labor and capital were contested.

The players themselves did not initially comprehend the opportunity the press gave them to express their opinions, and they quickly established their own publication to counter *Spalding's Guide*. However, it soon became clear that newspapers, while not necessarily prejudiced against the owners, certainly did not exclude the players’ views. In fact, excerpts from the *Players League Guide* were later printed in the *New York World*.<sup>68</sup> In addition to these collective expressions, players were heard individually. When the owners claimed that players were having second thoughts about the Players League and many were signing with their old clubs, *Sporting News* editor Al Spink, “with a view to finding the truth,” interviewed more than 50 players. He concluded that support for the cooperative venture was “firm as a rock.” The only “backslider” was the Indianapolis player Glasscock, and in Spink’s judgment his defection was “very good riddance to bad rubbish.” The interviews indeed showed support for the Players League across the broad spectrum of players, regardless of the salaries they were leaving behind—or the problems. Mike Kelly, who always had both in large measure, said, “I am with the gang, my boy. I have signed a Brotherhood contract and will manage and captain the Boston Brotherhood club next year.” Lesser lights were just as enthusiastic. Ed Morris of Pittsburgh was “proud to say” he had signed a Brotherhood contract, John Stricker of Philadelphia signed “with [his] eyes open and will stick,” and so the list went on, player after player proclaiming allegiance to the ideals embodied in the Players League. “My motto,” said Al Myers of Philadelphia, “is no surrender.”<sup>69</sup>

In addition to putting forward the players’ views, newspapers and the sporting press revealed broad support for the Players League from other workers, and financial and legal support from a range of wealthy and prominent men who would seem to have been natural allies of the National League. When the National League threatened to have the courts uphold the Reserve Rule, forcing the players to return to their clubs, the *New York Clipper* announced that in a test case Ward and Buck Ewing would be represented by Judge Henry E. Howland, assisted by

Judge Bacon.<sup>70</sup> Every mention of one of the Players League's financial backers was a similar statement that not all wealthy men automatically sided with big business. Such backing from judges and businessmen for a worker-controlled venture is even more significant in the light of the support given to the players by organized labor, who saw the issue as a battle against capitalism. In fact, by reporting each labor pledge as it happened, a sense of worker solidarity was created in the newspapers that makes the support given by Al Johnson, postmaster Van Cott, of New York, Judge Howland, and others a ringing endorsement of Gutman's contention that people from all walks of life remained hostile to industrial capitalism throughout the Gilded Age.<sup>71</sup>

Reports of union solidarity with the Players League began even before the venture had a name and continued unabated. On December 21, 1889, the *Clipper* reported that at a Boston meeting of the American Federation of Labor [AFL] it was resolved "to condemn the buying and selling of players by the National League" and to support "the Brotherhood's contemplated organization."<sup>72</sup> In Philadelphia the Players League club members were "agreeably surprised" when AFL leader Samuel Gompers called on them to offer support. According to a *Clipper* story, Gompers said that "laboring men all over the country are in sympathy with the players in this fight," and he promised that the players would have the union's "moral and financial support."<sup>73</sup> The message was never stronger than in Pulitzer's *New York World*, where it was reported on March 3, 1890, that "The voice of organized labor has been heard on the base ball question." Specifically, the Central Labor Union [CLU] resolved that "whereas the Players League is a labor organization," the union "heartily endorses [the players] in breaking the chain of bondage riveted on them by the National League monopolists." The union called on all its members to patronize Players League games over National League ones, and as the *World* writer pointed out, the union was "over one hundred thousand strong, all New Yorkers, and among them may be found the most sincere patrons of the National game." According to the *World*, other unions were giving similar pledges to the players, and this reflected *general* support for the stand the players were taking. "Fair play is what the American wants," asserted the *World* writer, "whether he is a millionaire or a workingman."<sup>74</sup>

Labor historians will recognize the significance of the AFL and the CLU both offering the Players League support. Organized labor was not an ideologically cohesive movement, and the AFL and CLU represented two very different positions. According to Gerald Grob, by the mid-1880s the CLU had "come under the domination of the Knights of Labor."<sup>75</sup> The Knights began as a collective, artisan's response to the growth of industrial capitalism, and one of their ideals was to promote cooperative enterprises such as the Players League.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the CLU was at the radical edge of the Knights, with five of their leaders jailed in 1886 for boycotting an employer, and then entering the political arena by backing Henry George for mayor of New York City. Taking a strident public position was very much the New York union's style. Gompers and the AFL, by contrast, are generally seen as having given up such Jeffersonian ideals in favor of the pragmatic goal of quietly winning wage increases from capitalist

employers, yet Gompers was loud in the press with his support for the players. Support from the AFL for the Players League is just as strong an indicator of general antagonism to capitalism as support from judges and businessmen.

The owners' attempts to retain the services of the players through the courts failed in separate cases in New York and Philadelphia. They complained bitterly of the consequences, but Judges Thayer and Arnold, who presided over the Philadelphia court, responded that "It is their own fault . . . if they demanded more than they had a right to demand."<sup>76</sup> It was a resounding victory for the right of the players to control their own labor, and paved the way for the Players League to proceed. The players were jubilant, but not gloating. "We are not going into the movement to antagonize the old National League," explained a Brotherhood supporter in New York.<sup>78</sup> But while the Brotherhood was happy to "live and let live," the owners could not see it in those terms.

In the first place, another major league threatened profits. It is true that there already was another major league in existence, that being the American Association, but far from being a competitor, the Association was an ally of the National League. The American Association had been formed in 1881, but after a brief period of competition entered in 1883 into an oligopolistic arrangement with the National League and the minor Northwestern League "in consideration of the mutual advantages to be derived therefrom."<sup>79</sup> The two major leagues forged still closer links in 1885 under the terms of a new contract known as the "National Agreement." Respecting one another's territorial monopolies, enforcing a common reserve rule, and even joining together in a postseason "World Series," the National League and American Association were all but partners. According to Levine, by 1887 Spalding was beginning to consider a merger of the two circuits, it being "in the natural order of things that the two leading organizations should eventually consolidate."<sup>80</sup> The Players League represented a challenge to this cozy arrangement, and on that score alone it was hardly surprising that the players' accommodating rhetoric met a cold response.

Fear of competition, however, falls short of explaining the vehemence with which club owners opposed the Players League. Back in 1881 the American Association, which similarly threatened the National League with new competition, had been greeted with what historian Robert Burk has described as a "combative attitude."<sup>81</sup> By this Burk meant that the National League owners fought as hard as they could to hold the best playing talent. In other words, they were combative in a business sense. However, apart from dubbing the American Association the "Beer Barrel Circuit," a reference to four of the Association owners having brewery interests and the Association policy of selling beer at games, there was none of the vitriol hurled at the Players League—as Levine has recorded, Spalding described the players involved as "hotheaded anarchists out to overthrow the established business of baseball."<sup>82</sup> The only satisfactory explanation for the strength of opposition to the Players League was that unlike the American Association it was not a commercial competitor with whom an alliance could eventually be formed. The whole point of the Players League was that it was different than the National League. It was run by players, not capitalists, and

that frightened the owners. The very existence of a cooperative, worker-controlled enterprise was a challenge to the legitimacy of their authority to run clubs and to their right to extract profits from a game they did not play. As Chomsky has explained, the capitalist's greatest fear is "the threat of the good example."<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, the owners formed a "war committee," headed by Spalding, who vowed that the battle with the Brotherhood would be "a fight to the death."<sup>84</sup>

Spalding was acutely aware that the battle with the players would be fought in the newspapers. "In place of powder and shell," he explained, "printers' ink and bluff formed the ammunition used by both sides."<sup>85</sup> This awareness of the power of the press was quite sophisticated, but as the battle to win public support was to show, no such sophistication extended to knowing how the press functioned. Amongst all the rhetoric and claims of public support, attendances seemed the only precise measure of the popularity of the respective leagues, and right from the beginning it was clear that the players had the edge. When Ward's Brooklyn team first clashed with Kelly's Boston outfit, the *New York World* headline read "Brotherhood Park Too Small for the Rush of People." According to the *World*, 20,000 watched the Players League game, with another 10,000 turned away at the gate. By contrast, "The National League club drew 3,500, and possibly 1,500 of these went only after seeing it was impossible to get admittance to the Brotherhood Park." The message was clear, but the *World* spelled it out all the same, explaining that the figures showed "the desire of the public to testify its appreciation of the Players League, for today was to test here the relative popularity of the new and old organizations."<sup>86</sup>

National League clubs tried giving away tickets. According to the *Sporting Life*, tickets to White Stockings games were left in barbershops and saloons, and were "as free as air."<sup>87</sup> The ploy failed. It seemed no amount of "paper" could bring the size of crowds at National League games up to the level of the Players League. Spalding tried a different approach after he noticed that attendances were given to the closest hundred. "Round figures are always suspicious," he explained, "and the constant reiteration of these attracted my attention." He immediately had "inspectors" stationed at Brotherhood grounds to count the crowds. Then, "securing the services of a bright young Chicago reporter who had a string of influential newspapers for which he syndicated Chicago specials," he "placed in his hands the statistical information which had been procured as to faked attendance at Brotherhood games." The publication of the figures had "exactly the result" Spalding expected, namely, "impeaching the integrity" of the Brotherhood's reports and putting the players "on the defensive."<sup>88</sup>

For some time the "inspectors'" figures were taken as correct, until in August a *Sporting Life* reporter discovered "that the men who kept tabs on the attendance on the Chicago Brotherhood Park were in Spalding's employ." The fact that the men were "hirelings," the *Sporting Life* pointed out, "is not calculated to lend their statements weight or place the figures they furnish above suspicion." The writer then confronted Spalding, who admitted that "We have been doing some lying ourselves, but nowhere near as strong as the other fellows." A Brotherhood spokesman said that Spalding's charge that he had only lied in self-defense, was

“the harangue of an individual sick at heart.”<sup>89</sup> It then came to light that the New York Giants’ method of calculating attendances was to first ascertain the figure from the neighboring Brotherhood game, then simply invent a larger figure.<sup>90</sup> From that point on no credence was given to the National League’s figures, but the damage was done. As Spalding explained later, “attention was diverted from the pitifully small number of patrons who through all the struggle remained loyal to the [National] League.”<sup>91</sup>

The most revealing aspect of the whole shabby attendances episode is that Spalding did not just produce his false figures, hand them to an impartial reporter, and let the press do its work. He felt it necessary to also “secure the services” of a reporter to ensure that his figures found their way into print. The owner of the Cincinnati club had the same difficulty in relying on the press to present a fair account, and also resorted to bribery. His problem was that, as in Chicago, the scheme was uncovered. In fact, so constant was the ridicule heaped on the Players League by writers in Cincinnati that the only wonder is that bribery was not suspected sooner. Eventually, the *Sporting News* discovered the truth. “These are the same fellows who laughed last fall at the suggestion of a Brotherhood,” a *News* writer explained. “Well, you cannot blame them. They are paid to laugh the way they are laughing now just as they were paid to laugh anti-Brotherhood last fall.”<sup>92</sup> The owners simply did not feel they could trust the press to defend them and the capitalist system against the challenge issued by their former employees.

The owners’ half-formed understanding of how the press worked was again demonstrated when it came to advertising. By that time they were aware that advertising revenue was crucial to any publication’s financial well-being. In 1887 a Pittsburgh sporting paper known as the *Sportsman’s Referee* had folded because “circulation dwindled away, while the advertising also fell off to such an extent that receipts from that source were scarce and far between.”<sup>93</sup> But while they made the connection between the circumstances of the *Sportsman’s Referee’s* demise and their power as advertisers, club owners did not quite know how to use that power. Rather than using subtle, implied pressure, they adopted a heavy-handed approach that invariably failed. The most blatant case was in St. Louis. The St. Louis Browns played in the American Association, and were allied with the National League both formally, through the National Agreement, and informally, by a common interest in retaining baseball as a purely capitalist enterprise. Caught up in the war, the Browns were suffering. The club lost its captain when Charles Comiskey left to manage the Chicago Brotherhood club, and attendances at Browns games were low. Owner Chris Von der Ahe was feeling the pressure, and he reacted angrily when the St. Louis-based *Sporting News* included stories favorable to the Players League.

The *Sporting News* reported that “just because this paper had espoused the Brotherhood cause, Mr. Von der Ahe became imbued with the idea that we intended to ruin his business, and he was loud in his threats to wipe th *Sporting News* and the men it championed out of existence.” *News* editor Al Spink tried to be placatory, but Von der Ahe was in a belligerent mood. Spink discovered

that "in a certain low dive in this city" Von der Ahe and his associates concocted a campaign whereby "postal cards were sent out to our advertisers and they were worded to injure as much as possible the business of the *Sporting News*." <sup>94</sup> This attempt to influence the News was just too crude to succeed. Spink's reply was that "the editor of this paper is supreme in his position." In other words, although he realized that losing advertising revenue would harm the paper, he would not compromise his editorial independence. However, even if Von der Ahe had been subtle enough not to force Spink into a corner, the relationship between advertising and the media lacked the discipline it has today, when advertisers uniformly support the interests of their fellow capitalists. Von der Ahe's campaign, far from deterring advertisers, "created sympathy" for the News, and in the following month the paper's advertising revenue actually increased.<sup>95</sup>

As the 1890 season progressed, the outlook for the National League became increasingly grim. In their determination to "fight to the death," the owners scheduled their games to clash with Brotherhood games at every opportunity. With the public preferring the Players League, receipts to National League clubs fell dramatically. At the same time, the owners' expenditures rose as they desperately sought to attract players by offering larger and larger salaries. According to the *Clipper*, the owners were "offering double the salaries which in 1889 they declared were ruinous."<sup>96</sup> Spalding went so far as to offer his old nemesis, Kelly, \$10,000 just to sign with the White Stockings. It was a phenomenal sum, but to Spalding's consternation, Kelly turned him down. "What?" said Spalding. "You don't want \$10,000?" "Aw, I want the \$10,000 bad enough," admitted Kelly, "but I've thought the matter over and I can't go back on the boys."<sup>97</sup> The situation for the National League was worst in New York, where, as a *Sporting News* writer noted, "the *New York World* is driving the League people crazy. The *World* is with the Brotherhood head over heels."<sup>98</sup> Indeed, the *World* took great delight in telling of the financial demise of Giants owner John "Busted" Day, and eventually Spalding had to step in with funds to keep the New York club running. The one bright spot for the National League was Cincinnati, where there was no competing Brotherhood team. Then, in early October, came a bombshell that truly rocked the National League, when news broke that the Cincinnati club was selling out to the Players League.

According to the *Sporting Life*, the acquisition of Cincinnati by the Players League left the National League in a sorry state and strengthened the Players League, "rounding out its circuit nicely." With the Players League now in a "commanding position," it made "the continuation of the war another season altogether unlikely." To the owners, that spelled defeat. Their original feeling that the very existence of a cooperative league was intolerable for the good example it provided had been strengthened by the discovery that the public preferred to watch Players League games. Any compromise was simply agreeing to a slow death. Now it seemed they had no choice, and all that remained was to decide the terms of the peace. Not surprisingly, the players were looking forward to the prospect with more relish. When a *Sporting Life* reporter asked Ward to comment, he found the Brotherhood president in "a pacific mood." Ward was confident about the

future of his organization and “heartily in favor of a compromise with the League people.” When pressed as to what form the compromise would take, he answered that he wanted to end the clashing fixtures “and indeed any number of things that would prove for the benefit of players and capitalists.”<sup>99</sup> The owners gnashed their teeth, and realized better than Ward that pleasing both players and capitalists was impossible.

A Players League meeting was scheduled for early November to discuss the compromise, but before the meeting could be held the naivety of Ward and the players was exposed. On October 14, in New York, the owners of the National League Giants and the capitalist backers of the Players League New York club met and agreed to a merger. According to the *Clipper*, they agreed to incorporate a new club “with each part taking \$100,000 of a capital stock of \$200,000.” The news caught the players and the other Players League backers by surprise. No one could quite believe it. The Wagner brothers, butchers who had invested in the Philadelphia Players club, told a *Clipper* reporter that “if the news was correct” it would harm their club a great deal. Ward read the reports “with amazement.”<sup>100</sup> Worse was to come. On October 21, three representatives each from the National League and the American Association, and three backers of the Players League met in New York for “peace negotiations.” At their own quickly convened meeting, the players “expressed forcibly” their anger at “capitalists of the Players League clubs conducting negotiations without the aid of the players.”<sup>101</sup>

It is heartrending to read of the bewilderment and anger of the players in the days that followed. On October 29, the owner of the Brooklyn National League club and the backers of the Brooklyn Players League club met privately “regarding a plan of consolidation.” Keefe said, “I don’t know what to think about it all. The capitalists have all along professed to have our interests at heart, and yet it seems as though they are doing something underhanded.” Ward was more blunt. “I don’t like the way certain capitalists of the Players League have been acting,” he said. “They are not treating the players in good faith.” When the players had agreed to compromise, they did not have in mind consolidating clubs, which amounted to accepting the National League’s employer-employee structure. The players told Ward that after having “put their all into the Players League” they were “willing to play for almost nothing next season to continue the fight.”<sup>102</sup> The question was, would such resolve be enough. Events were moving at a frightening pace. On November 11 at the Players League meeting, its original agenda now sadly obsolete, the players’ Pittsburgh backers walked out, joining New York and Brooklyn in consolidating with the National League. Other delegates “expressed their contempt” for the defectors, then racked their brains to come up with some way to right the situation. In desperation, they decided to put their faith in the media, where they had learned to expect a fair hearing. As the meeting broke up, Players League secretary Frank Brunell was “directed to give out any information he had to the press.”<sup>103</sup> The hope was that by exposing the true state of affairs in the press, the public would react and save the players’ utopian enterprise.<sup>104</sup>

Brunell did as he was asked, but so quickly did other Players League backers

desert that his tale read more as obituary than a rallying cry. In the *Sporting Life* on November 29, the headline read “Brunell Tells More About the Great “Throw-Down.””<sup>105</sup> The grim reality was that although the players could go on for another season without regard for money, their capitalist backers could not—money was all they had. The backers had agreed to split profits with the players. They had not reckoned on losses, and even though those losses were only one-fifth as large as those of the National League, they were enough to make the backers lose their nerve.<sup>106</sup> As a *Sporting Life* writer explained, the backers were “not willing to continue in base ball on the old footing if suitable terms could be made with the [National] League.”<sup>107</sup> With each defection the remaining Players League backers grew more and more nervous that they would be left with a club belonging to a defunct league, in which case their investment would be rendered worthless. Two days after the Players League meeting it was revealed in the *World* under the headline “Players League Capitalists Sell Out Their Partners” that the Players Chicago club had also consolidated.<sup>108</sup> All that remained of the Players League were the Boston, Philadelphia, and Cleveland clubs, with the newly acquired Cincinnati now looking distinctly unlikely ever to play a game.

By late November the most optimistic appraisal of the Players League was the *Sporting Life's* “still hanging on to life by a thread,” with even that judgment tempered by admitting that “the probability is that within a week it will be a thing of the past.”<sup>109</sup> Attention in the press turned to reflecting on the players’ venture and its consequences. In particular, the press raised the issue of how the Brotherhood players would be treated when they reverted to the status of employees of the “consolidated” clubs. It was a very real concern. As it was pointed out in the *Sporting Life*, the rebellion had cost the National League “a big pile of money,” and many people expected the magnates to “want to get even.” The specialist sporting papers were themselves having to contemplate a future where the National League was dominant. Spalding had quickly moved to renegotiate the National agreement with an American Association wounded by the “Brotherhood War,” an action that, in Levine’s words, “reaffirmed his continual desire to have monopolistic control of professional baseball.”<sup>110</sup> The prospect of having to deal with a baseball monopoly must have inhibited the specialist sporting papers’ freedom to criticize, but, at least for a time, they did act as a check against any excessive retribution by the owners. Recalling that the public had favored the Players League, the *Sporting Life* warned that if the National League was to resurrect its fortunes it had to win back the patronage of the “friends and supporters of the overthrown Players League” by “settling the base ball war on broad and equitable lines.”<sup>111</sup>

Typically, the *World* was most uninhibited in demanding fair treatment for the players. Of course, with a daily circulation in excess of 300,000, and massive advertising revenue from retailing giants Macy’s and Gimbel’s, the *World* could afford to forgo whatever advertising dollars Spalding’s sporting goods company or the cash-strapped Giants could offer. In any case, Pulitzer’s sportswriters would not let the issues, which had led to the formation of the Players League, quietly die away. The most strident article appeared on November 19, when the editor

of the *World* responded to a plea from Brotherhood supporters to “use your powerful influence to bring about a fair and just settlement for all concerned.” Like the *Sporting Life*, the *World* reminded the owners that they would need to be fair if they were to win back the patronage of the many people who had supported the Players League. However, the *World* article went further, explaining that people had watched Brotherhood games because of their ideological preference, whereby they “sympathized with the men in their efforts to be freed from an employment which savored [sic] of bondage.” Furthermore, the *World* article suggested that the National League’s “dictatorial conduct towards its employees” alienated players from their work, resulting in “half-hearted and time serving service.” In other words, baseball performed by wage laborers was inferior to that played by free men. That led to an explanation of the Players League that at once summed up its wonderful appeal and why it just could not succeed.

The Players League started out to do away, if possible, with the antagonism between capital and labor by making the success of good baseball playing of interest to players as well as capitalists. Being interested, however small, as stockholders in the clubs was a matter of pride to [players] and the assurance that their rights as men would be protected lent earnestness to their efforts.<sup>112</sup> By having a share in the ownership and running of baseball, players were elevated from being mere employees. They played for the pleasure of playing well, with money a secondary concern, their financial stake in the Players League notwithstanding. Pfeffer, who had “subscribed and paid for as much stock as his means would allow,” was typical. He played brilliantly all season, and “drew but \$1,600 of his salary [of \$4,000].”<sup>113</sup> The problem was that the players had to augment their own investment with outside backing, which left them vulnerable. They had hoped to “do away with the antagonism between capital and labor,” but they found that capital had its own logic, its own instinct for survival. As soon as the players’ New York backers sold out, the others followed suit to protect their own investments. The strength of the capitalist system was, therefore, that the economy had reached a stage where any enterprise needed capital, a phenomenon economists know as the “barrier to entry.” When farmers joined together in cooperative Granges they tried to stand outside the system. Like the Players League, they had to cope with underhanded tactics, with railway companies using bribery and political manipulation, but according to Thomas Cochran and William Miller, in the final analysis their failure was due to “want of sufficient working capital.”<sup>114</sup> The players’ approach fared no better. The inevitable early losses, when competition was most fierce, made backers nervous. They soon pressed for a return to normal business practice, and in the end the enterprise was drawn into the capitalist system, regardless of the ideals with which it was begun.

The Gilded Age was a time when capitalism tightened its grip on America, but the idea that this was “progress” did not go unchallenged. Competing visions of America were given equal billing on the public stage. The press, including both specialist sports publications and mass circulation dailies, possessed enough stylistic and financial freedom to give the Players League a fair hearing, allowing

this essentially pre-industrial challenge to capitalism to win broad support from different unions, the legal profession, and businessmen—from “workingmen and millionaires,” as a *World* writer put it. However, media and public support proved not enough for the players’ utopian venture to survive. Although no one involved in the “Brotherhood War” realized it, the capitalist system had attained an inherent strength, whereby it dealt with challenges automatically—the “invisible hand” was at work. The club owners resorted to every dirty trick imaginable to defeat an opponent who could not win. The deceit and treachery certainly brought matters to a head more quickly than would otherwise have been the case, but in the end the players’ reliance on capital was their undoing. Spalding learned from the experience, later writing of “the irrepressible conflict between Labor and Capital,” and concluding that the Brotherhood War “settled forever the theory that ball players can at the same time direct both the business and playing ends of the game.”<sup>115</sup>

Newspapers were themselves being drawn into the capitalist system, and were slowly losing their ability to promote dissent. The public debate newspapers had fueled around the issue of J.P. McDonnell’s trial and imprisonment in Paterson in the years 1878 to 1880 was missing in later years. When Paterson silk workers struck in 1913, union leader Big Bill Haywood complained of “the silence of the metropolitan press,” prompting Greenwich Village intellectuals to stage “The Pageant of the Paterson Strike” at Madison Square Garden in an attempt to fill the void. The pageant was well attended by sympathetic workers, but professionals and the well-to-do were conspicuous by their absence.<sup>116</sup> In other words, the strike had been marginalized. The sporting press went down a similar path following the demise of the Players League. After 1890 the sporting papers entered into a working relationship with the National League that Voigt has described as “intellectual prostitution.”<sup>117</sup> This is not to say that reporters were bribed or editors threatened with having their papers shut down. The strength of the system was that threats and bribes were no longer necessary—sportswriters already knew what to print. Never again would the sporting press question capitalism, and never again would players be able to challenge owners as they did with the Players League.

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1. Albert G. Spalding, *America’s National Game: Historic Facts Concerning the Beginning, Evolution, Development and Popularity of Base Ball* (New York: American Sports Publishing, 1911), 210. Throughout the essay, books are footnoted as they are used. Some baseball literature not cited that may, nevertheless, be of value to the reader is as follows: Lee Lowenfish and Tony Lupien, *The Imperfect Diamond: The Story of Baseball Reserve System and the Men Who Fought to Change It* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980). Gerald Scully, *The Business of Major League Baseball* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). James Dworkin, *Owners Versus Players: Baseball and Collective Bargaining* (Boston: Auburn House, 1981). Ted Vincent, *Mudville’s Revenge: The Rise and Fall of American Sport* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). Robert Smith, *Baseball* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947). Melvin Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-70* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press,

- 1986).
2. See Steven Riess, "Spectator Sport and Semipublic Space," in *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 203-230.
  3. For the development of baseball clubs out of informal, working-class leisure, see Warren Goldstein, *Playing For Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), and George Kirsch, *The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-72* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
  4. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 193.
  5. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 194.
  6. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 210.
  7. See Richard Duboff, *Accumulation & Power: An Economic History of the United States* (London: Sharpe, 1989), 43-65.
  8. Noam Chomsky, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 285. More generally, see Ed Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
  9. Peter Golding, "The Missing Dimensions — News Media and the Management of Social Change," in *Mass Media and Social Change*, eds. E. Katz and T. Szecko (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1981), 75. See also Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
  10. It is difficult to be exact when it comes to dates for the first department store or advertising agency. As was the case with newspapers, they were gradually being refined into the concepts we know today. For instance, A.T. Stewart's Cast-Iron Palace, which was operating in New York by 1862, can in retrospect be nominated as the first department store, but stores such as Macy's and Wanamaker's were not trading until well after the Civil War, and the term "department store" was not used until 1893. See Bill Bryson, *Made In America* (London: BCA, 1994). It is similarly difficult to fix an exact beginning to the advertising industry, but by the late 1880s agencies as we now recognize them were in business. See Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York: Pantheon, 1989). The essential point is that this was a time of change.
  11. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 122-130.
  12. Herbert Gutman, "Joseph P. McDonnell and the Workers' Struggle in Paterson, New Jersey," chapter 2 in *Power & Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 1987).
  13. David Voigt, *American Baseball: From Gentleman's Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press), 67.
  14. *Chicago Tribune*, October 24, 1875.
  15. According to David Pietrusza, "In the Eastern Press no notice [of the National League] appeared for three days, and even then it was buried in one morning paper along with items on horse racing and pigeon shooting, the pigeon shooting, by the way, receiving more space." David Pietrusza, *Major Leagues: The Formation, Sometimes Absorption, and Mostly Inevitable Demise of 18 Professional Baseball Organizations, 1871 to Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991), 31. A note of explanation is perhaps in order with regards to the *New York Clipper*. The *Clipper's* masthead announced it as "the oldest American and theatrical journal." This merging of theater and sport points to the *Clipper's* predated organized sport and subsequent specialist sporting papers such as the *Sporting News* and *Sporting Life*. In 1876, devoid of this competition, the *Clipper's* influence in baseball circles was vast.
  16. *Chicago Tribune*, February 4, 1876.

17. Hippodroming was the term given to fixing the result of a game for gambling purposes.
18. *New York Clipper*, February 12, 1876.
19. *New York Clipper*, February 12, 1876.
20. Voigt, *American Baseball*, 67. *Chicago Union* cited in Pietrusza, *Major Leagues*, 31.
21. *Chicago Tribune*, February 13, 1876.
22. See Peter Levine, *A.G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 75-77. According to Levine, the *Guide* gave "editorial opinion consistent with Spalding's views on organized baseball and his role in its development." Also, "In case a potential buyer was unsure who Spalding was, each *Guide* included a full-page picture of the handsome, robust, mustachioed fellow, complete with his autograph."
23. *Spalding's Base Ball Guide and Official League Book for 1876*. Part Second [sic] p. 1.
24. Harold Seymour has estimated that in 1877 the St. Louis club lost \$8,000, Chicago \$6,000, Hartford \$2,500, Louisville \$2,000, and Boston \$1,500. In Seymour, *Baseball, The Early Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 86.
25. John Montgomery Ward, *Base Ball: How to Become a Player With the Origin, History and Explanation of the Game* (Philadelphia: Penn Publishing, 1890), 144.
26. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, third ed., revised, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 2.
27. *Spalding's Official Base Ball Guide for 1880*, 88.
28. John Rumbarger, *Profits, Power and Prohibition: Alcohol Reform and the Industrializing of America, 1800-1930* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1989), xix. Rumbarger's book disputes the view promoted by earlier historians such as Richard Hofstadter and Joseph Gusfield, who attributed temperance to religious, ethnic, and gender considerations. His book is helpful in explaining how and why employers such as club owners used temperance to attack pre-industrial work practices.
29. *New York Clipper*, October 25, 1879.
30. *Spalding's Official Base Ball Guide for 1882*, 26, 27.
31. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 222.
32. *Spalding's Official Base Ball Guide for 1885*, 96. Even if the owners had been successful in enforcing prohibition during the season, there remained the off-season, when according to Benjamin Rader, a fifth of all players worked in saloons. That number suggests that virtually all players would have frequented saloons, and been exposed to the fraternity that was so at odds with the owners' management style. See Benjamin Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 55.
33. Seymour, *Baseball, The Early Years*, 129.
34. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 526.
35. Technically, Spalding sold the players' reserves, but the result was that the players now had to move on to the clubs who now owned those reserves.
36. *Chicago Evening News*, April 22, 1887.
37. *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1887.
38. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 527.
39. *Sporting Life*, April 27, 1887.
40. As historian James McPherson has explained, workers confronted with the new industrial order objected "not so much to the level of wages as to the very concept of wages itself." *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (London: Penguin, 1988), 23.
41. John Montgomery Ward, "Is the Base Ball Player a Chattel?" *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, August 1887.
42. Ward, *Lippincott's*, August 1887.

43. *Chicago Tribune*, August 13, 1886.
44. John Garraty, *The American Nation: A History of the United States Since 1865*, 3rd ed., vol. 2, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 530.
45. *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 1887.
46. *Sporting Life*, September 21, 1887.
47. *Sporting Life*, October 5, 1887.
48. *Chicago Tribune*, November 17, 1887.
49. Glenn Moore, "The Great Baseball Tour of 1888-89," *International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 11, No. 3, December 1994, 431-456.
50. *Sporting Life*, December 26, 1888.
51. *New York Clipper*, December 29, 1888.
52. *Sporting Life*, January 2, 1889.
53. Moore, "The Great Baseball Tour," 445.
54. *Sporting News*, February 2, 1889.
55. *Sporting News*, February 2, 1889.
56. Francis Richter, *A Brief History of Base Ball* (Philadelphia: Sporting Life Publishing, 1909), 10.
57. *Sporting Life*, December 5, 1888.
58. Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years*, 224, 225.
59. For a detailed account of the 1889 season see Daniel Pearson, *Base-Ball in 1889: Players vs Owners* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993).
60. *Players National League Guide for 1890*, 7.
61. *Sporting Life*, November 6, 1889.
62. *Players National League Guide for 1890*, 7.
63. *Sporting Life*, November 6, 1889.
64. *Sporting Life*, November 13, 1889.
65. *New York Clipper*, November 30, 1889.
66. *New York Clipper*, November 30, 1889.
67. *Spalding's Official Base Ball Guide for 1890*, 24.
68. *New York World*, March 30, 1890.
69. *Sporting News*, November 30, 1889.
70. *New York Clipper*, December 14, 1889.
71. Van Cott was the major financial backer of the players' New York club. See the *Sporting Life*, August 30, 1890.
72. *New York Clipper*, December 21, 1889.
73. *New York Clipper*, January 25, 1890.
74. *New York World*, March 3, 1890.
75. Gerald Grob, *Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865-1900* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), 172.
76. Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights Of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1983), preface, xii.
77. *New York World*, March 16, 1890.
78. *New York Clipper*, March 14, 1890.
79. Dean Sullivan, ed., *Early Innings: A Documentary History of Baseball 1825-1908* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 128. The contract was known as "The Tripartite Agreement."

80. Levine, A. G. *Spalding and the Rise of Baseball*, 56.
81. Robert Burk, *Never Just a Game: Players, Owners, and American Baseball to 1920* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 70.
82. Levine, A.G. *Spalding and the Rise of Baseball*, 60.
83. Noam Chomsky, *What Uncle Sam Really Wants* (Berkeley: Odonian Press, 1992), 22.
84. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 285.
85. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 285.
86. *New York World*, April 4, 1890.
87. *Sporting Life*, August 9, 1890.
88. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 286, 287.
89. *Sporting Life*, August 9, 1890.
90. *Sporting Life*, August 30, 1890.
91. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 287.
92. *Sporting News*, May 10, 1890.
93. *Sporting Life*, July 13, 1887.
94. *Sporting News*, May 10, 1890.
95. *Sporting News*, May 10, 1890.
96. *New York Clipper*, March 8, 1890.
97. Spalding, *American National Game*, 297.
98. *Sporting News*, May 10, 1890.
99. *Sporting Life*, October 4, 1890.
100. *New York Clipper*, October 25, 1890.
101. *New York Clipper*, November 1, 1890.
102. *New York Clipper*, November 8, 1890.
103. *New York Clipper*, November 22, 1890.
104. Based on his own experience playing pro ball, professor Ronald Smith, of the Pennsylvania State University, has raised doubts as to whether "baseball players are utopian about much of anything." It must be remembered, however, that there were different levels at which the Players League was conceptualized. While most players might not have been able to explain their actions in the same lucid prose used by Ward, and might not have drawn on the republican rhetoric he employed in his *Lippincott's* article, they nevertheless supported the Players League. Each player who rejected a bribe from an owner, or offered to forgo pay to keep the Players League alive was, in his own way, saying that the venture was utopian.
105. *Sporting Life*, November 29, 1890.
106. Comparative losses were reported in the *New York World*, November 13, 1890.
107. *Sporting Life*, November 22, 1890.
108. *New York World*, November 13, 1890.
109. *Sporting Life*, November 22, 1890.
110. Levine, A.G. *Spalding and the Rise of Baseball*, 65. In fact, one year later Spalding achieved his ambition. After a brief struggle in 1891, the American Association was no more. By the 1892 season the National League had incorporated the surviving Association clubs into a 12-team circuit. See Rader, *Baseball*, 62.
111. *Sporting Life*, November 29, 1890.
112. *New York World*, November 19, 1890.
113. *Sporting Life*, November 29, 1890.

114. Thomas Cochran and William Miller, *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 220. The conclusions reached by Cochran and Miller were not new. In his 1913 book *The Granger Movement*, Solon Buck similarly attributed the failure of the Ganges to farmers' poverty and the credit system (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913) 276. This explanation for the failure of early workers cooperatives continues to be repeated in more recent works. For example, see Ronald Filippelli, *Labor in the USA: A History* (New York Alfred Knopf, 1984), 64.
115. Spalding, *America's National Game*, 198, 281.
116. Bertram D. Wolfe, introduction to John Reed, *Ten Days That Shook the World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), xxiii.
117. Voigt, *American Baseball*, 197.