

# Reflections on Diamonds: American Baseball and American Culture

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(*John R. Betts Address*)

In this first annual John R. Betts address, Professor David Quentin Voigt of Albright College urged students of sport to cast off the restraints of snobbish scholarly opposition and to boldly and imaginatively press on with the task of linking sport with society. In defense, the examples of pioneer social historians like McMaster and Nevins were cited. Included was Nevins's injunction that historians ought to write in "God's plenty of variety" and that they narrate the past "in terms of living men and women."

In accepting Nevins's challenge and applying it to the study of American sports, baseball history was employed as a vehicle for inquiry into the structure and operations of the "American national character." Three aspects of American national character were discussed — American nationalism, American internationalism, and American choices of heroes. Of this trio, American nationalism received the greatest attention.

Using Professor Hayes's *Historical Evolution of Modern Nationalism* as a guide, American liberal nationalism was delineated and its post-Civil War shape was described. American baseball's claim to being the nation's "national game" was linked to a great nationalistic surging in the post-Civil War era. The role of Albert G. Spalding and Henry Chadwick in propagating baseball's claim and their success in implanting the myth in American sports history was traced. While the game gained wide publicity, baseball's claim to being the national game carried negative burdens, including manipulation by politicians, vociferous patriots and their short term goals. The tentative conclusion put forth was that American baseball suffered more than it gained by serving as a major symbol of American nationalism. In today's pluralistic society it seems better to avoid nationalistic claims for such a burden obliges its bearer to exhaust himself in defending his claim.

As "America's National Game," baseball was caught up in the internationalist cause of converting the world to the American way of life. As described by Ralph Gabriel, "The Mission of America" myth continues to affect our foreign policies. In a sporting variation on this theme, baseball owners sought with slight success to export baseball to Europe. In other areas, notably in Japan and Latin-America, baseball was transplanted. But anthropological insights show that such transplantings are unique variants of baseball and do not reveal any trend toward American cultural dominance through a sport like baseball.

Finally, American choices of public heroes bear witness to the dynamics of American nationalism. A trend toward the democratization of heroes resulted partly in the public adulation of baseball heroes. Revolutions in mass media complicated the process of hero-making and present a fragmented and bewildering pattern which is characteristic of much of American norms and values of today. In baseball a trend toward episodic heroes, anti-heroes and varied heroes is apparent, illustrating again the pluralism of

our society and the lack of consensus which are characteristics of our present day national character.