Rhetoric and Reality in the Defense Department's Use of Sport, 1945-1950

by
DONALD J. MROZEK
Kansas State University

During the period from 1945 to 1950, the U.S. defense establishment altered its objectives in its use of sport. In the 1930s and during World War II. civilian and military authorities regarded sport as a tool for the preparation of young men for service in the military. This was possible only because the officials had slackened their own sense of American uniqueness and had surrendered older, turn-of-the-century convictions about virtues — moral or ethical — inherent in sport itself. The defense officials adopted a comparative perspective, establishing the U.S. program to use sport largely in accordance with foreign states' activities. The pertinent question was not "what does the United States need?" but rather "what are the Nazis doing?"

This effort to make an effective "functionalist" use of sport continued during World War II, but it began to decline. Gene Tunney still advised under Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. Jack Kelly still protested to Franklin Roosevelt's assistant "Pop" Watson. Roosevelt's aide Marvin McIntyre supported "a national physical culture program," which Kelly thought could be based largely on intramural athletics. Yet the role of sport in reshaping values seemed to have been broken. The "survival war," as Franklin Roosevelt chose to call World War II, had resolved the problem of the 1930s — that of restoring commitment to a troubled nation through cultural devices.

Consequently, the postwar effort of then Navy Secretary Forrestal to boost sport as a source of values was anachronistic. From 1945, with many practical challenges dissipated, defense planners also found in sport less a tool for the achievement of health or agility useful in a military operation and increasingly a device to win political support for their military policies by using analogies from mass spectator sports. Even Forrestal, who still believed deeply that sport must be used to build physically and politically sound servicemen, began to exploit its metaphoric value. He favored Universal Military Training, arguing that sending troops to battle without it would be a "good deal like putting a lad in a boxing match or a big league football game without adequate preparation." He later defended it saying: "No coach will put his men into a hard competitive football game without serious and careful training." The purpose of "sport" in such circumstances was obvious.

Similar metaphoric constructions were expected to sell much more elaborate defense ideas, such as the concept of deterrence through fear of massive retaliation and the reorganization of the U.S. military establishment. In 1949, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson referred to a mutual nuclear strike as an "exchange of bombing punts." The Army was a "backfield" to be mobilized so that the Navy and Air Force might gradually assume only "blocking jobs." In the same year, to win support for Administration policy on military organization, Army Chief of Staff Omar Bradley asserted: "Each player on this team — whether he shines in the spotlight of the backfield or eats dirt in the line — must be an All-American." Johnson referred to Bradley as "that brilliant quarterback."

The two streams of conceptualization about the application of sport to defense — the functionalist and the rhetorical — were not antithetical. Nor were they altogether temporally exclusive of one another. Rather, in the 1930s and through the years of World War II, the functionalist perspective enjoyed a greater prominence and priority. Through a variety of cultural sources, such as: mass advertising, war photography and painting, school poster programs, and popular commercial films, one can detect the emergence to prominence of the rhetorical tradition. The deterioration of the common sense of using sport to make healthier and more dependable troops paralleled the recreation of heroic images of the American fighting man. The development of model-man or model-soldier — that is, a symbolic type suitable for a specific era — underscored that identification with shared cultural symbols was more significant than the practical applicability of the kind of training that the symbols theoretically embodied. Thus, while Forrestal and his colleagues continued to support athletic programs because they would be useful in improving sailors' physical readiness for war and because they would serve as devices for maintaining order on board ship or in camps, they increasingly discovered the value of sport rhetoric in explaining themselves to the civilian world. After World War II, it was less true that sport would stand as a component of the American system of political concerns. But it became more true that it would serve as a rhetorical vehicle transmitting those concerns to an increasingly accessible public.

Participants at one of the 1974 convention sessions