

# **SPORTS STUDIES**

## **Baseball and America in 1969: A Traditional Institution Responds to Changing Times**

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1969! The year in which America put a man on the moon and the New York Mets won the World Series, but despite these seemingly impossible accomplishments, the Vietnam War continued to rage as did the cultural clashes within the nation. In the world of baseball, the focus was on the late season slump of the Chicago Cubs who were caught by the Mets. After defeating Atlanta in the league championship series, the Miracle Mets shocked the heavily favored Baltimore Orioles in the World Series. While the season and Series were exciting, the baseball establishment was troubled in responding to the changing times of assertive players, long hair, racial consciousness, and union organization.

In 1968, the American people narrowly elected a conservative politician Richard Nixon in response to the challenges of the period. Baseball followed suit in 1969, when the owners selected corporation attorney Bowie Kuhn as Commissioner of Baseball. Kuhn espoused traditional values but was perceived as a tool of the baseball owners, and proved to be little match for the players' representative Marvin Miller. However, much like Nixon in his own memoirs, Kuhn admitted to few mistakes in his management and confrontations with Miller.

This paper concentrates upon the response of baseball management and Kuhn to growing assertiveness on the part of players, culminating in Curt Flood's 1970 challenge of the reserve clause and paving the way for free agency. In 1969, these negotiations and confrontations were influenced by a cultural climate in which baseball as well as the nation seemed to be re-examining its sense of values. While management officials such as Paul Richards called for the return of the spirit of the deceased Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, many young fans lauded Joe Pepitone and Ken Harrelson for espousing counter-cultural lifestyles. And the Bible of baseball, the *Sporting News* ran editorials on topics such as long hair, hippies, violence, strikes, and race. While Jackie Robinson called on more management positions for Blacks in baseball, the sport was celebrating the Houston Astros for instituting the first inter-racial roommates on a regular basis. On the field, baseball remained traditional, even with new champions, but off the field change was in the air.