

# **LEAGUE AND INSTITUTIONAL STUDIES**

## **For God, the Gipper, and the Green: The Making of the Notre Dame Mystique**

William J. Baker  
University of Maine

In the 1920s a little midwestern Catholic college, Notre Dame, emerged as a football powerhouse under the keen eye of Knute Rockne. The Rock and his comrades mixed religious faith, legend, and myth with quite tangible economic ambitions, consumerist tactics and ethnic needs to produce a sense of invulnerability. This presentation explores the several strands of values and interests that went into the making of the Notre Dame mystique in the 1920s only to enlarge itself ever since.

I tackle this issue by focusing on (1) the personal and institutional economic goals that propelled Notre Dame into limelight; (2) their consumerish mania for advertisement (e.g., ArchWard's work as Rockne's personal public relations man) and gate receipts; and (3) the Irish/Catholic need for heroes and publicly recognized strength in the face of the Ku Klux Klan that seemed to go on a rampage in the 1920s.

Yet I also show how the entire emergence of Notre Dame is bathed in death yams and incidents. Death dominates the beginning and the end of the Rockne era: George Gipp's death at the outset, and Rockne's own terrible death in a plane crash in 1931. Between those boundaries, Rockne flirts with death from phlebitis by showing up daily at the practice field in a hearse that seems to mock the Grim Reaper. Finally, his famous yam about his son near death inspiring the team to beat the foe--only to find the boy hale and hearty at the train station when the team arrives home.