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“That’s Right John, You Never Did Play”: Images of Masculinity and the Cold War Consensus in Baseball Cinema (1947-1957)

In the 1952 anti-communist film classic *My Son John*, Helen Hays portrays a distraught mother whose Ivy League-educated son has joined the Communist Party and is using his government position to spy on behalf of the Soviet Union. Confronting John, played by Robert Walker, Hays gazes upon a photograph of her other son who was killed at Guadalcanal. The photograph shows a young man in a football uniform, and is if to explain John’s political orientation, she exclaims, “That’s right, John, you never did play football.” The scene establishes a connection between manhood and susceptibility to communist propaganda that was also apparent in the vitriolic speeches of Joseph McCarthy and his supporters who evoked imagery of liberals as communist sympathizers who were “soft” on communism. Surely, those “soft” on communism lacked the attributes of American manhood as defined on the competitive plain of the football field.

This paper seeks to explore American definitions of manhood and nationalism as exemplified in Hollywood films of the Cold War era from 1947 to 1957, focusing on America’s self-proclaimed national pastime, baseball. For the most part, baseball films have not been among Hollywood’s most artistic, but that has never prevented the film community from attempting to depict the sport as a mirror of Americanism. And during the Cold War era, both baseball and Hollywood were institutions seeking to promote Americanism on the world stage.

Baseball biographies were a popular Hollywood staple that ranged considerably in quality. Most championed American individualism with heroic ballplayers overcoming lack of education, alcoholism, physical disability, and mental breakdowns to achieve their versions of the American dream. Although women continued to play baseball in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League until 1954, women in baseball films assumed the role of family helpmates similar to the feminine mystique described in the work of Betty Friedan. Some baseball films did seek to enlarge the American consensus beyond white male individualism. For example, in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949), Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly compete for the attention of baseball club owner Esther Williams

in a depiction of turn-of-the-century America. In *The Jackie Robinson Story*, the famed athlete portrays himself and gives testimony before Congress reaffirming the allegiance of Afro-Americans during the Cold War.

But perhaps baseball's place in the Cold War consensus was developed best in *Strategic Air Command* (1955). St. Louis Cardinals' star Dutch Holland (James Stewart) is recalled to active duty with the Strategic Air Command. At first resentful, Holland, with the support of his faithful wife (June Allyson), learns the importance of defense against a Soviet attack. He even re-enlists, forfeiting a promising baseball career. The competitive skills learned on the baseball field serve Holland and his country well in the more important contest of the Cold War. Clearly, even baseball would have to make sacrifices, but placed in proper perspective there would also be a place in the Cold War consensus for the sport to teach American masculinity. This is most apparent in *12 Angry Men*, a film in which Henry Fonda is the architect of a jury consensus involving immigrants, workers, small businessmen, and corporate figures. In this consensus, there is plenty of room for baseball as a male-bonding activity-as long as it does not interfere with, but reinforces the consensus.

This survey of baseball cinema of the early Cold War years is the beginning of a larger study of sport and American cinema in the post-World War II period. It is based on an in-depth reading of each film in historical context and of popular and critical readings of those films.