

Baseball and the American Character: Exploring the Influence of the National Pastime on the Origins of the Contemporary American Identity

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Abstract

This paper will examine how American political thought has been affected by the early history and mythology of baseball, rich with images of both individualism and communitarianism that were cultivated into an American cultural ideal by sporting goods magnate Albert Goodwill Spalding. The origins of this vision will be traced to Upstate New York and the creation of “The Doubleday Myth,” which effectively (and falsely) established Cooperstown, New York as the baseball capital of the world, and claimed the game of baseball for the American people outright, regardless of class, ethnicity, or political orientation. This paper will scrutinize the political maneuvering behind the birth of this myth and argue that Spalding essentially took the old “Alger Myth” and updated it to fit a modern vision of Americanism. Capitalizing in part on a wave of patriotic sentiment at the turn of the 20th century, Spalding's narrative surrounding the game was able to capture the cultural nuances and realities of the nation, and establish baseball as the centerpiece of a uniquely "American" way of life characterized by the distinctive promises of hope, renewal, and infinite opportunity. Today, however, this vision may no longer be compatible with the contemporary world. This paper will seek to explain how and why the Doubleday Myth still endures, and whether its foundation has contributed to its longevity. In addition, this paper will directly address two key findings of this research effort. First, the boom of technological advances in the nineteenth century legislative reforms of the Progressive Era were instrumental to the development of baseball as an urban public spectacle, and its eventual establishment as an American cultural universal. Second, the direct connection between American exceptionalism and baseball—carefully cultivated by the efforts of Albert Goodwill Spalding—allowed the game to develop a “constitutional soul” in the twentieth century, intertwining traditional American values with the rules and presentation of the game. As a result, politicians have looked to the game as a source of rhetorical universality, employing baseball as a tool of “dogmatic formalism” in which history is restated in more idealistic, patriotic, nationalist terms. This paper will also reflect more broadly on the effects of the Alger and Doubleday myths on the development of American civic identities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Keywords: Baseball, American, Identity

1. Introduction: Baseball and the Establishment of an American Archetype:

“I claim that baseball owes its prestige as our national game to the fact that as no other form of sport it is the exponent of American Courage, Confidence, Combativeness...American Vim, Vigor, Virility. Baseball is the American game par excellence because it demands Brain and Brawn, and American manhood supplies these ingredients in quantity sufficient to spread over the entire continent.”-Albert Goodwill Spalding¹

At the dawn of the 20th century, the game of baseball had solidified its place as an American cultural universal. No matter one's income, ethnicity, or religious views, the ballpark was a sacred ground where, if just for an afternoon, all were welcome to take in a spectacle of "American Vim, Vigor, [and] Virility". The game had managed to do what no other entity in American culture has really ever been able to so holistically: promote a culture of unity and collectivism, with a *healthy* dose of both patriotic pride, and competitive spirit. But baseball would not develop into an American icon on its own. It would take decades of dedicated marketing by a brilliant pitcher-turned-entrepreneur and a perfect storm of nationalism, technological innovation, and progressive politics to create *America's Game*.

Baseball emerged as a truly national game during a wave of imperialist spirit and belief in American Exceptionalism. Albert Goodwill Spalding, one of baseball's earliest stars and later one of the most influential founding members of the National League, published an unapologetically imperialist book in 1911, *America's National Game* in which he compared the game to war, arguing that the sport could transform and Americanize foreign cultures just as effectively as any military effort.² Spalding was among the earliest and most effective promoters of the game as a wholly American enterprise. In the eyes of Albert Spalding, the American ballplayer was an athlete, a businessman, and above all else, a soldier in the game he would characterize as "an Athletic Turmoil, played and applauded in an unconventional, enthusiastic and American manner."³ For him, the essence of the game was its principles, as was the case of the United States, and he readily compared the two. "The genius of our institutions is democratic; baseball is a democratic game," he wrote in *America's National Game*. "The spirit of our national life is combative; baseball is a combative game."⁴ Caught in a wave of nationalist spirit following the reunification of the nation and the emergence of the age of imperialism, Americans were inclined to agree.

Spalding's efforts to Americanize baseball were widely successful in the long run, and as the game grew in popularity, its bonds to American politics grew stronger. As the industrial age and the Progressive Movement took hold, a new middle class emerged, priorities realigned, and before long, baseball became an essential piece of the modern cannon of Americanism. The power of that vision was shaped by opportunistic politicians, who would often look to draw rhetorical implications from the game's noticeably constitutional structure, democratic principles, and wholly "American" qualities. Altogether, it was an ideal vision of the nation, the same one that maintained the promise of the middle class dream, reinforced by a steady stream of nostalgic rhetoric with America's Game at its core. Spalding's trek across the globe in the late 1880s undoubtedly succeeded in introducing legions of international fans to the game, and his Mills Commission *did* claim the game for Americans, outright. But the solidification of baseball's popularity and significance would require a series of political actors, decades after Spalding's death. Presidents from Hoover to Obama have done everything from directly involving themselves in the game to simply commenting on its power. In triumph and turmoil, baseball was a constant that promised to endure.

Just as the nation began to stabilize socio-politically near the end of the 19th century, a more universal sense of American cultural awareness began to emerge. Spalding capitalized on this wave of patriotism and good sentiments to develop a truly "American" pastime that would become a universally enjoyed and appreciated American creation. Today, the game of baseball—with both aesthetic and constitutional elements that queue a sense of patriotic pride—is engrained in the psyche of the American people as a symbol of national unity and exceptionalism. Ultimately, the emergence of baseball as a national pastime and unifying force would prove instrumental to the perpetuation of certain "American" cultural values well into the modern era. In recent years, politicians have looked to the game as a source of rhetorical universality, affirming the place of baseball as a game synonymous with the distinctive promises of hope, renewal, and infinite opportunity of the United States. That vision's inconsistencies with America's day-to-day realities remain central to the identities of both baseball and its proud parent nation.

2. The Dawn of a New American Age:

"I see America, not in the setting sun of a black night of despair ahead of us, I see America in the crimson light of a rising sun fresh from the burning, creative hand of God." – Carl Sandburg⁵

Between 1860 and 1890, patents were issued for 440,000 new products and ideas. While many of these would spark the creation of new industries to design, manufacture, and market new products, other inventions would drive a rapid increase in productivity in the nation's largest industries. The advent of the telegraph in 1844, the telephone in 1876, and Thomas Edison's first power plant in 1881 would ease communication and expand the scope of industrial production across the country. In the last two decades of the 19th century, the annual value of manufactured goods produced in the country more than doubled, as did the number of Americans working in industry.⁶ America's growing urban, middle-class society "needed some form of mass entertainment, and an ever-improving rail network provided

the groundwork for a baseball league with teams dispersed in large cities across the country.”⁷ As baseball grew in popularity, teams began to travel greater distances to play games, cultivating a wider fan base for the sport. Politically, this was also a time of social policy change which “dramatically redefined the relationship between the citizen and the state, laying the groundwork for Progressive Era that followed.”⁸ Driven by a new brand of journalists known as “muckrakers” who sought to expose corruption and preachers of the “Social Gospel,” which advocated Christian solutions to society’s struggles, the Progressive Movement gave way to an overhaul of American moral values, an era that valued temperance, efficiency, and public education.⁹

Chief among progressive goals was the desire to create as perfect and efficient a society as possible. Many reformers of the era believed that the family was the cornerstone of American society, and as such, believed that government at all levels had a duty to strengthen and enhance the family unit.¹⁰ Progressives’ high value on efficiency in industry and society also led, predictably, to a number of improvements in manufacturing during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, expediting a process of urbanization that had begun with the onset of the industrial revolution. As technology and efficiency improved, “factory output grew, small businesses flourished, and incomes rose. As the promise of jobs and higher wages attracted more and more people into the cities, the U. S. began to shift to a nation of city dwellers. By 1900, 30 million people, or 30 percent of the total population, lived in cities.”¹¹ As millions flocked to these booming urban centers, the need arose to provide leisure and entertainment to the masses. In an effort to promote the health and well-being of the American family, reformers began to push for the establishment of public parks in numerous cities offering children a place to practice and play the game of baseball, growing ever more familiar as its main franchises expanded and moved to build stadiums in urban centers.

By 1920, the nation was beginning to embrace a new identity, and had finally established its own collective culture, which placed a high value on education, family, and efficiency. But while the Progressive Movement was largely responsible for this shift in domestic cultural values, the solidification of the new American identity would not have been complete without baseball, and more specifically, Albert Spalding’s efforts to Americanize the game. America in the early 20th century was home to a booming middle class *and* a struggling group of impoverished city dwellers. Many cities had yet to establish social welfare programs, and as a result, “the working class lived daily with overcrowding, inadequate water facilities, unpaved streets, and disease...working class wages provided little more than subsistence living and few, if any, opportunities for movement out of the city slums.”¹² Baseball was, and continues to be, a point of unification for a nation divided. The game began to weave itself into the nation’s “civil religion,” a collective set of beliefs held in near-religious reverence by much of the nation, with few exceptions. “There are few places where the entire body politic is welcome,” wrote scholar Joshua Fleer in 2007. “But the ballpark brings together people from all walks of life. In American culture, ballparks function as gathering places for ‘we the people,’ where cherished public values—the nation’s moral glue—are celebrated.”¹³

3. Albert Spalding, the Entrepreneurial Spirit, and the Creation of a National Game:

“Unless a man enters upon the vocation intended for him by nature, and best suited to his peculiar genius, he cannot succeed.” –Phineas T. Barnum¹⁴

For a man like Albert Goodwill Spalding, failure in any endeavor of the mind, body, and soul was equally unfamiliar and unacceptable. Spalding was a prolific and highly ambitious figure, and “at thirty-eight years of age [was] already an American icon and master of the sporting goods empire that still bears his name.”¹⁵ Born September 2, 1850 in Byron, Illinois, Spalding was said to be a shy, stammering child, whose mother, Harriet, “had ambition for her children, a hope that they might drink from the gushing fountain of American prosperity.” Albert was sent to live with relatives in nearby Rockford at the age of 12, where he learned the game of baseball from the local boys. The scrawny young man joined the Boston team of the National Association of Professional Ball Players in 1871, where he would remain until 1875, compiling an excellent pitching record and batting .320 before moving on to the Chicago White Stockings of the National League. He would remain in Chicago until his retirement in 1878.

Impressive though it was, Spalding’s baseball career would not define him. While his mother’s belief in the future of her son and the opportunity offered by their country would heavily influence Spalding, it has often been suggested that P.T. Barnum’s lecture “The Art of Money Getting” was what really inspired Spalding to pursue the business that now perpetuates his legacy. Lamster’s view of Spalding rests heavily on Spalding’s respect and admiration for Barnum, noting that “absent his own father, Spalding was naturally drawn to figures of male authority, and would be throughout his life. Indeed, Spalding would follow Barnum’s pan for the accumulation of wealth with almost eerie precision.” Spalding embodied the qualities he valued, consistently “meticulous, if not always forthright, in his

business affairs...bold, but never foolish. He did not drink to excess, and forbade those who worked for him from doing so...his employees were expected to be men of upstanding character...He knew how to delegate, but when matters were pressing, there was no question as to just exactly who was in command.”¹⁶

3.1 Baseball Becomes a Business:

Spalding’s business endeavors, while often self-serving, had the unique ability to benefit baseball. In one notoriously shrewd decision, Spalding used his relationship with Chicago White Stockings President and “aggressive Chicago coal merchant” William Hulbert to create “a series of wildly favorable endorsement contracts that made his company all but synonymous with the National League.” In exchange for a fee of a single dollar, Spalding produced what he would bill as “the official league ball,” which he provided to each team. Spalding also took it upon himself to publish “not only the league’s official yearbook but also an annual of his own, *Spalding’s Official Baseball Guide*, which despite his claims to the contrary was in no way ‘official.’” While many of Spalding’s less truthful endeavors undoubtedly channeled P.T. Barnum, “the guile and aggression Spalding used to build his company into an empire” also included the unpublicized purchasing of his greatest competitors. The acquisition of Reach Company, Wright & Ditson, and Peck & Snyder would eventually “place [Spalding] in the company of such Gilded Age industrial barons as Phillip Armour, Marshall Field, George Pullman, and Gustavus Swift—Chicago men about whom he read virtually every day in the press.”¹⁷ Much of Spalding’s life may be characterized by his uncanny ability to set, plan, and realize his personal and professional goals with nearly unbridled, if often indirect, success. On his international tour in 1888, Spalding, confident in his team’s ability to draw the interest of any crowd, still saw potential for improvement of his business plan. In an effort to diversify the presentation, Spalding “acquired the services of a sideshow attraction to boost attendance.” Before each game, “a one-eyed ‘aerialist,’ the self-styled ‘Professor’ C. Bartholomew would ascend to an impressive height while suspended beneath a small hot-air balloon.”¹⁸ Perhaps most valuable to the establishment of the game was Spalding’s “relentless advertising,” and knack for alterations of the truth surrounding the game’s inception. Indeed, Spalding’s twists, fibs, and deceptions “would dramatically alter baseball’s history, and then shroud it in a false mythology that lives on to this day.”¹⁹

Spalding had already amassed enough fame to generate a steady stream of support for his World Tour, but it helped to have friends in high places. When it came to spreading the news about his plan to build an All-America team, Spalding employed the services of Henry Chadwick, at the time “baseball’s most distinguished journalist,” who had been editing Spalding’s *Official Baseball Guide* since 1881. Chadwick was initially “an enthusiastic advocate of the trip, and spoke with enough authority to quash [editor Al] Spink’s attacks in the *Sporting News*.”²⁰

It has to be said here that Albert G. Spalding is the only baseball magnate in the country who has had the pluck and spirit of enterprise in him to undertake the task of extending the popularity of base ball outside of the American continent. No one but him would have run the financial risk that he has done in this spirited venture of his...The more I write of this Australian trip the more anxious I am to go.²¹

Spalding also employed Harry Palmer, “his mouthpiece at *Sporting Life*,” to lead a smear campaign against Al Spink, whose *Sporting News* labeled Spalding as “The Chicago Fake,” and listed a number of players once said to be signed to the All-America team who were then rumored to have backed out. Taking their attack a step further, the paper asserted that “Spalding is signing a lot of fourth rate men who will make the trip to keep themselves from starving through the winter.”²² Spalding swiftly led a counter-campaign to punish those involved in the publication of the story, and moved on to the completion of his immediate goal of finishing the team selection. Harry Palmer, implicated in the campaign to smear Spalding’s image, published syndicated coverage of the tour for the Chicago Tribune, the New York Herald, the Boston Herald, and *Sporting Life*.²³ When the tour faltered in its early stages near San Francisco, the press was quick to doubt Spalding’s men, as one story posited, “Can the tourists play ball?” suggesting that before Spalding “attempt to introduce base ball in a foreign land with the All-Americas [he] should introduce the game to them first.”²⁴ Before long, however, the team began to congeal and media support returned; the San Francisco Chronicle declared “‘Cap’ and His Fellow-Travelers Play a Good Game of Ball.”²⁵ In a fittingly grandiose sendoff from the press that flanked him for decades, Spalding’s death received an enigmatic tribute in the New York Times, eulogized as “the father of baseball” under the headline, “Spalding Enters Games Valhalla.”²⁶

In his later years, having successfully cemented his place among the great pioneers of baseball as both player and front office figure, established a monopolistic sporting goods empire, and traveled the globe to bring the game of baseball to the international community, Spalding’s sole remaining goal in life was to “establish once and for all the American patrimony of the national game.” Henry Chadwick, an English sportswriter, baseball statistician, and historian disputed Spalding’s wholly American claim to the game early and often, postulating that the game derived

from the English game of “rounders,” and that baseball was not, as Spalding claimed, “evolved from a series of bat-and-ball games developed on native soil and that it was American through and through.” To reassert his own narrative, Spalding, in 1904, “established a committee to determine, once and for all, the origins of the game.”²⁷

3.1.1 *The Mills Commission Rewrites History:*

Two years after its inception, in 1906, the Mills Commission—named for its leader A.G. Mills, the fourth President of the National League and a known associate of Spalding—received a pair of letters from a man named Abner Graves. His story detailed a single afternoon in Cooperstown, New York, just outside a tailor shop in 1839. Graves claimed that he watched as a man named Abner Doubleday sketched the very first baseball diamond, and described the rules of the game. In 1906, Doubleday himself was still a well-known national figure, having achieved notoriety as a Union general in the Civil War, responsible for firing the first shots at Fort Sumter. Spalding was ecstatic, and rushed to spread the news that his committee received indisputable proof of the game’s American origins, and that those origins could be traced to a real American hero. The Mills Commission famously published its findings under the headline, “Abner Doubleday Invented Baseball,”²⁸ but ignored that Graves had been institutionalized several times, was known to be a frequent teller of tall tales, and that the only evidence of Doubleday’s involvement with baseball was his single request of baseball equipment for recreational use by his troops during the war.²⁹ Nonetheless, Spalding had achieved his goal, “the Doubleday story suited his needs, and he had the stature and power to make it law.”³⁰ Although he died too early to see the fruits of his deceitful labor, Spalding effectively created a persona for baseball, and recognizable character for the village he had claimed for it. The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was founded in Cooperstown in 1939, the date of the game’s alleged centennial.

The narrative that the Mills Commission put forth was bound to succeed, as it was wrought with the same inspiring “rags to riches” storylines that had characterized American popular culture throughout the 19th century. The stories of Horatio Alger, featuring heroes who were “obviously American, fierce democrats independent, eager to work hard, educate themselves, and make their way to success,”³¹ served as the basis for the idea now known as the American Dream. Spalding latched onto this narrative as a means of securing baseball’s place in the historical canon of America itself. Baseball, he argued so effectively, was the vehicle through which this notion of infinite equality and the promise of opportunity could be realized, observed, and practiced for sport. Connie Mack, longtime manager of the Philadelphia Athletics, famously began his autobiography with the words, “baseball is democracy in action: in it all men are ‘free and equal,’ regardless of race, nationality, or creed. Every man is given the rightful opportunity to rise to the top on his own merits.”³² The fact that all but three years of Mack’s entire career in baseball had come *before* the league’s integration in 1947 is illustrative of the paradox that haunt both the game and the exceptional notions of Americanism that it promotes. The notions of *equality* heralded by fans and rhetoricians is limited in terms of its applications, and was “never meant to serve as an actual assessment of the inclusion of the disenfranchised and underrepresented”—either in baseball, or within public institutions.

Declarations of the greatness of the game and its nation are little more than declarations. In theory, they may be acknowledgements that, for patriotic Americans, “primacy of merit was yet another reason to embrace baseball as the national game.”³³ In practice, however, “such pronouncements served as symbolic rallying cries to the greatest achievement of liberal democracy; that is, they celebrated the mythology of American exceptionalism.”³⁴ It was the belief in that exceptionalism enabled the anointment of Doubleday as the father of the game, and Cooperstown as its birthplace. The Doubleday Myth became fact so quickly and readily because it “conflated pastoral imagery, patriotism, and baseball as the essence of being American,”³⁵ a recipe stamped with official approval by the Mills Commission itself. As the game’s “golden age” took hold in the early 20th century, and the game continued to grow, baseball came to be perceived in a nostalgic light, embodying the symbolic greatness of the nation that Spalding had sought to instill. By the time that baseball would be integrated in the post-9/11 healing process in 2001, “baseball had been fully reinvented as a symbol of renewal and innocence...a powerful trope in the ritual of purification.”³⁶

4. Civil Religion and Constitutional Order—The Unique American Appeal of Baseball:

“Next to religion, baseball has furnished a greater impact on American life than any other institution.” — President Herbert Hoover³⁷

Spalding and his contemporaries recognized the patriotic potential of baseball before it would ever reach a national audience. But the game has some inherent qualities that uniquely positioned it to become the American symbol that

Spalding envisioned. Countless elements of the game are uniquely American in nature; baseball is a rhetorical *and* visual link between America's past, present, and even future. Beyond the game's egalitarian principles and inherent promise of renewable opportunity, baseball's broad appeal in the late 19th century "was surely related to its ability to offer a visual tie with a rural past to new urban audiences, to assure them that order prevailed even in 'the turmoil of the modern city' and to demonstrate that traditional American values could be incorporated into the new demands of a complex society."³⁸ There is also a certain immortal comfort found in understanding that baseball "is not played against a clock, but creates its own time frame; its base lines stretch out, seemingly to infinity." Because time is measured only in outs, "all you have to do ... is keep hitting, keep the rally alive, and you have defeated time. You remain young forever."³⁹ Throughout the game, the goal is ultimately to "go home," a phrase which lends itself to a host of anecdotes. "Even though [baseball] is obsessed with records and statistics, makes allowances for, even anticipates, human weakness and fallibility" with errors counted as a common line item, one could argue that the draw of baseball as a rhetorical device stems from its naturally *human* characteristics, as much as its *American* ones. The game has exhibited a unique ability to "blend relaxation and intensity. This is as true in the stands as it is on the field. The baseball stadium may be one of the last refuges in America for relaxed talk among friends."

The rules of the game are such that baseball has come to "prize certain human values such as accuracy, the quick mind, the steady eye, and the ability to respond to the unexpected. Yet it acknowledges violence as part of human behavior and causes such drives to be acted out (usually) in a civilized fashion."⁴⁰ Other aspects of the game which reflect the nature of religion—the ceremony and community surrounding the game—offer universal human appeal through consistency and familiarity. The game has developed its own sacraments—"trading cards ('holy cards'), caps, jerseys and autographs (which are the most frequently sought 'relics' of the game)." Baseball also "fosters loyalty, not only to a team, but to a city or metropolitan region... [and] (despite its notorious exclusion of blacks until 1947) has functioned as an integrating factor in American life." Even players who came from the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder—Spalding included—were able to leave "their own mark and a place of pride for their people through the game: e.g., Irish in the late 19th century; Hispanics in the last generation."⁴¹

Baseball's longevity may also be attributed to its constitutional nature and focus on the game's history, records, and monumental events. Baseball violates "the dangerous democratic tendency to forget the past and celebrate the new." The game "has a constitutional soul that secures the future by preserving the past... paradoxically or not, it turns out that conservative virtues are needed to sustain the democratic experiment. Baseball shows the way."⁴² The qualities *shared* by baseball and a constitutional democracy are also essential to understanding the game's place in the American sociopolitical memory. Hope and the promise of renewal remain central to the cycle of baseball, as they do in the American political process. While each game, season, or series ends with a defined winner and loser, *all* may hold the upcoming season in view as the promise of another chance at glory. That opportunity is defended with a "constitutional vigilance" that refuses to tolerate infractions—gambling and steroid abuse chief among them. The culture surrounding the game hinges itself on that sense of renewal which "speaks in a salutary way to our hope that 'government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.' Baseball is a game of surprises, extra innings, and, should all else fail, the promise of spring. Baseball is a hopeful game."⁴³

5. The Presidents Play Ball—Fandom and Freedom Go Hand in Hand:

"May the sun never set on American baseball"—President Harry S Truman⁴⁴

Perhaps it was President Cleveland's endorsement of Spalding and his men in 1888 that first offered baseball a place in the political forum. Perhaps it was the game's simple construction, reminiscent of a religious structure that first illustrated the universal appeal of baseball. Perhaps it was Spalding's tireless effort to Americanize the game that first exposed the potential uses of such a broadly appealing form of mass entertainment. Perhaps it was the nature of the game, to be democratic, human, and above all else, enduring, that began to draw so many speakers to call upon baseball on the grandest of oratory platforms. No matter the cause—likely a summation of all of these factors—the effect—that baseball would become its own political appeal—was inevitable. Baseball is a unique entity "saturated with narrative, anecdote and history as means of fostering identity and a community of continuity and memory. It holds up leaders of the past, both saints and sinners, as models and cautions to each new generation."⁴⁵

5.1 From Taft to Tricky Dick—Fans and Fanatics:

Beginning in the late 19th century, U.S. Presidents began to assert their love for the game of baseball. William Howard Taft became the first President to throw out the ceremonial first pitch, on opening day for the Washington Senators at Griffith Stadium in 1910. For the past century, every President has continued the tradition. Baseball in particular provided a rhetorical platform to reaffirm commitments to the sort of American values that Spalding had touted for years. President Herbert Hoover was approached by the Cincinnati Reds long after he left office, in 1956, when the club requested “his permission to paint on the walls of Crosley Field a billboard-sized inspirational quote from the former president regarding baseball.” Hoover provided a list of options, from which the Red chose his proclamation that “the rigid volunteer rules of right and wrong in sport are second only to religious faith in moral training...and Baseball is the greatest of American sports.”⁴⁶ Hoover’s successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was well-known for his “Green Light Letter,” which encouraged Commissioner Judge Landis to move forward as planned with the 1942 season. Roosevelt’s view was that “it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before. And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before.”⁴⁷

Twenty years later, on July 18, 1962, die-hard Red Sox fan John F. Kennedy would also seek to draw the attention of that nation to baseball, and more specifically to Jackie Robinson. In the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, Kennedy, at the urging of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., penned a short address to be read before the crowd at a dinner honoring Robinson’s induction into the Hall of Fame. Kennedy seized the opportunity not only to commend Robinson’s strength and courage in breaking down racial barriers, but to remind the public that the struggle to “achieve equality of opportunity for all people,” was yet ongoing.⁴⁸ By 1967, Kennedy had become immortalized as a symbol of progressivism and liberalism, a development due in large part to the continuation and expansion of his policies under Lyndon Johnson. The first President to dedicate an indoor baseball stadium, Johnson remarked in 1965 that the Houston Astrodome was “massive, beautiful, and it will be a great asset.” Johnson had appointed Hall of Famer Stan Musial to chair his President’s Council on Physical Fitness in 1964, and was fond of employing baseball analogies to describe his own policies. “They booed Ted Williams too, remember?” Johnson remarked in 1967. “They’ll say about me I knocked the ball over the fence, but they don’t like the way he stands at the plate.”⁴⁹

Richard Nixon was perhaps the biggest baseball fan of the 20th century presidents. Nixon had “the sharpest baseball mind of any President,” attending 11 complete games while in office. “This isn’t a guy that shows up at season openers to take bows and get his picture taken in the paper and has to have his secretary of state tell him where first base is,” according to sportswriter Dick Young. “This man knows baseball.”⁵⁰ In 1965, Nixon was offered two positions within Major League Baseball—the Players’ Association representative, and League Commissioner. He turned down both offers to continue pursuing his political ambitions, but in 1985, Nixon was hired by the league to act as an arbitrator during an umpire salary dispute. Nixon proved instrumental in settling the case, deciding that “because the championship series [had] been expanded by a factor of 40 percent, the working umpires [were] entitled to receive a 40 percent increase in compensation...\$4,000 per umpire.”⁵¹ The often-quoted, “I don’t know a lot about politics, but I do know a lot about baseball,” is attributed to Tricky Dick himself.

5.2 Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet—Reagan leads a reimagining of history:

Ronald Reagan was born in 1911, the very same year that Albert Spalding published *America’s National Game*. Though his youth was the heyday of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig, the nearsighted boy would never play baseball, but still spent his early years as a multi-sport athlete. After college, Reagan found a job as a radio announcer for baseball and football games. He spent four years as “the voice of the Chicago Cubs” on WHO in Des Moines, Iowa, a position that required he reenact games from telegraphs that had been sent from the stadium to the radio station. This early experience would have a profound effect on “The Gipper,” who would go on to preside over an American history described by some as the “memory crisis” of the 1980s and 90s. During the Reagan era, “amnesia was diagnosed as a pervasive ailment in American life and was set within a discourse of cultural crisis”⁵² which emerged in the form of religious fundamentalism and conservative policies, “thus constituting a particular type of nostalgic discourse.”⁵³ The policies and rhetoric of the Reagan administration called for a return to the giddy patriotism of the Roaring 20s and the stable reliability of the rigid 1950s social order. Reagan noted that he was always fond of football because it had given him “inner confidence because you’ve met your fellow man in that kind of physical combat.”⁵⁴ On baseball, he even went as far as to explicitly affirm the Doubleday myth, long after it was disproven, musing to Gaylord Perry that “I just know it’s an ugly rumor that you and I are the only two people left alive who saw Abner Doubleday throw out the first pitch.”⁵⁵ “Nostalgia bubbles within me,” he remarked at White House’s 1981 Hall of Famers’ Luncheon, “and

I might have to be dragged away.”⁵⁶ His years in office marked the beginning of a cultural explosion of nostalgia, part of an experience of the end of the 1900s which provoked “intense and hyperbolic nostalgia and, among the soon-to-be-less-enfranchised, invokes images of ‘the good old days’... archaic, pastoral, and idyllic in tone and location.”⁵⁷

The end of the 20th century faced a “memory crisis” that was fed directly by a unique capability of developing media and sports (and sports media, for that matter) to redefine or re-contextualize a long series of events as a moment encapsulated by a single, powerful image. This is a simplification process that often omits key details of the full story and contributes to a revisionist view of history that relies on a “dogmatic formalism,”⁵⁸ a means of restating the past in more idealistic, patriotic, nationalistic terms. The result is a skewed sense of memory—Ronald Reagan single-handedly ended the Cold War with his demand for “Mr. Gorbachev [to] tear down this wall” in the same manner that Jackie Robinson taking the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 “broke the color barrier” for the MLB, or the nation. The way the nation remembers these moments reinforces those abridged versions of history. President Clinton’s 1995 comments commemorating the return of the World Series illustrate this very principle. Clinton first iterated the game’s importance, declaring “baseball is a part of our common heritage. Its simple virtues, teamwork, playing by the rules, dedication, and optimism, demonstrate basic American values.” Glossing over the game’s history of discriminatory policies, Clinton continued: “We can look out at the green grass of the outfield or feel the worn leather of an old glove or watch a Latino shortstop scoop the ball to a black second-baseman, who then throws it to a white first-baseman in a perfect double play, and say, yes, this sure is America. This is who we are.”⁵⁹

Baseball endured as a harbor for this idealized reimagining of history, contributing to the development of a national, “imagined community” built around the game that is “as close a liturgical enactment of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant myth as the nation has.”⁶⁰ Baseball’s mythology and history differ widely, to such a degree that the game is evocative of “another mythological tenet of national exceptionalism: America as an innocent nation in a wicked world.” This narrative celebrates a spectacle featuring “young men engage[d] in a supremely rational, civilized, gentle, and moral battle played out within the context of a simple, grassy mise-en-scène as an emotional drama that disavows the implications of advertising and Astroturf.” These traits, no matter how real or imagined they may be, have allowed the game to “mythologized as an American ‘field of dreams’—the utopian and unreal (but therapeutically effective) site upon which to situate an equally mythological and utopian national character.”⁶¹

No matter its accuracy, the *strength* of that character has proven itself time and again. That “therapeutic” boost was most readily on display in the aftermath of September 11. President Bush threw out the first pitch at Yankee Stadium to kick off the World Series in 2001, and later invoked baseball as a critical “part of the healing process” in the “return to normalcy,” noting that people had returned to “working and shopping and playing, worshipping at churches and synagogues and mosques, going to movies and baseball games.” The overwhelming, unanimously patriotic response to these actions, defined by proud chants of “USA, USA!” and soaring approval ratings was in effect an affirmation of President Clinton’s assertions that “Baseball does something more. It helps to hold us together, it helps us to come together.”⁶² More critically, it was “an acknowledgement that baseball could perform rhetorically a political affirmation of the president’s foreign policy.”⁶³ Much like the nation’s foray into the War on Terror, the Yankees win was hailed as a story of triumph in the face of adversity, ignoring that the Yankees had won four of the previous five World Series. Similarly, Americans were asked to dismiss their hegemonic influence, and reject any notion that the nation “had any role in creating the conditions that might enable terrorism.” The safety and sanctity of that idealized remembrance drove the nation to neglect its own shortcomings once again. “To the extent that ballpark rituals allowed fans to embrace their exceptionalism, they further denied the global repercussions of American policies and actions.” That functional universality has allowed baseball to endure as a powerful American symbol—it continues to offer nostalgic comfort, cultural familiarity, and when necessary, a shelter of deniability.

6. Conclusion—A Rhetorical Synthesis of Politics, Ambition, and Memory:

*“As much as anything else, baseball is the style of Willie Mays, or the determination of Hank Aaron, or the endurance of a Mickey Mantle, the discipline of Carl Yastrzemski...the grace of a [Joe] DiMaggio...the class of Stan Musial, the courage of a Jackie Robinson, or the heroism of Lou Gehrig. My hope for the game is that these qualities will never be lost.”*⁶⁴ – President George W. Bush

By the beginning of the 21st century, baseball had solidified its place as a powerful symbol of Americanism. The game that had drawn so much from its national patrimony was finally able to *reshape* the nation in its own image, one that reflected an idealized version of an America long extinct. President Bush’s words above are not significant solely because they echo Albert Spalding’s sentiments in *America’s National Game*, but rather, because they symbolize a

direct connection to the same manner of thinking that drove American political and cultural expression over a century ago. To some degree, this is still the nation that Spalding envisioned, an America characterized by its variety, consistency, hope, renewal, and the promise of spring (training)—his nation defined his game. The agrarian, communitarian origins of America and its individualist spirit were both embodied in baseball itself, offering a powerful means uniting the nation on the basis of its founding principles through sport.

Now, those foundations have begun to erode. Mistakes and missteps along the way have removed that pleasant exceptionalist glow from Spalding and Alger’s versions of America; its people can now see clearly through the façade. Yet for all its flaws, that false image endures just as baseball continues to do, ever-weakening but ubiquitous in the American consciousness all the same. But neither the country’s political or athletic leaders will ever admit to a decline. In this age of re-remembrance, that would only serve to muddy the nation’s perceptions of itself with an *honest* analysis of its own past, unobscured by mythological or rhetorical inflation. Baseball continues to offer an escape, rhetorically and culturally, to an idealized, egalitarian, version of America that has never existed beyond the confines of the national psyche. Thanks in no small part to Albert Spalding, the game of baseball presents a unique opportunity to synthesize the whole American cultural cannon—communitarian teamwork underscored by individual achievement, professional ambition enabled by cultural exceptionalism, and democracy defined by the context of athletic competition—with the utterance of a single word. Now, baseball has become a tool of revisionist perceptions of history, enabling the collective public memory to bask in the comforting glow of a more idealized past. Baseball has been a central piece of that narrative for decades, and continues to be, albeit to a lesser degree. Perhaps the comfort that the nation continues to find in its references to the game are not derivative of the actual “American” images or principles that baseball embodies, but rather, a reminder that the game’s persona was forged in a time when the public at least *believed* in those principles. Baseball comes from a time when Americans still *believed* their nation could be exceptional, egalitarian, democratic, and dominant on the international stage. Today, the public knows too much; that version of America only exists as an idealized archetype, culturally engrained. Spalding, of course, would likely prefer that version; the reality today is not what he would call *American*.

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