

“SHOOTING HOOPS WITH FOREIGN TEAMS:” BASKETBALL AMBASSADORS ON US MILITARY BASES IN FRANCE, 1916-1961

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In the early years of twentieth century military history, the status of physical activities in the armed forces moved from necessary distraction to valuable operant conditioning. Athletic excellence brought not only fitness skills, much welcome and serviceable on the battlefield but, as historian Steven W. Pope demonstrated, also conveyed moral or normative values, which contributed to the building of America as a nation.¹ In 1905, Lieutenant-Colonel William W. Wotherspoon of the US Army insisted that each soldier receive both “physical training, to develop his body so that it may meet the unusual and exceptional strains of warfare, and mental training that he may apply the lessons of experience and bring to bear upon the affairs of war every resource which science can give.”² At that time, sports became increasingly popular with military leaders; they recognized its potential as a useful instrument of socialization in the armed forces, raising soldiers’ awareness of the necessity to be fit to fight, both physically and mentally, for conflict resolution and global security.

As the Great War in Europe put increasing pressure on domestic issues, many civilians took upon themselves to organize the “Americanization” of the ever-growing number of “hyphenated-Americans,” who had been arriving in the country since the 1870s.³ As a result of the growing concerns with public health and patriotism, physical exercise entered military training camps in a major way: it was designed to train draftees and soldiers with both combat and civilian skills. Military intelligence officers believed that festivities were instrumental in keeping up army morale and maintaining fitness in the ranks, but also, as historian William J.

¹ Pope, Steven W. *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997): 121-78.

² Wotherspoon, William W., “The Training of the Efficient Soldier,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 26 (July 1905): 151.

³ The aim of “Americanization” was to allow for a better assimilation of the largely pauperized immigrant working-class population in the labor workforce, at a time when modernization was under way. Private organizations, such as the National Americanization Committee (NAC), or individuals, such as John Foster Carr, a long-time member of the American Library Association (ALA), took part in this process.

Baker noted, promoting a strong level of patriotism.⁴ In 1917, these civilian officers crossed the Atlantic alongside the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), lending their expertise in domestic surveillance and psychological warfare abroad. As the US military was making more regular incursions beyond its own borders, Paul Hensler writes that civilian officers, on their part, observed “the sport’s commitment to the war effort and direct support of the troop abroad.”⁵ On the same note, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) helped the army establish valuable contacts with foreign populations overseas through sporting events after the war. As Brett A. Berliner explained, baseball games were organized “under the direction of competent American athletic directors provided by the Department of sports of *Les Foyers du Soldat*,”⁶ the same was true for basketball games. These initiatives intensified in peacetime, lending themselves to the promotion of American forces on French soil.

However, the development of a more durable US military presence in France after the Second World War revived the interest for the promotion of American sports overseas. Little by little, sport became a tool for the nascent Cold War public diplomacy network, serving both civilian and military purposes.⁷ Public diplomacy, which historian Brian A. McKenzie defines as an expression of American interests abroad, aiming to showcase the national culture through any available medium, is a practice shaped by the trends and interests of the military and political circles to protect US national security.⁸ Indeed, historian Walter Lafeber states that US public diplomacy is entrusted with a prominent domestic function, pursuing “a strategy that is workable abroad and developing a political explanation that creates and maintains sufficient consensus at home.”⁹ During the Cold War, public diplomacy officers organized promotional events promoting the US armed forces to the local population. On the other hand, the military promoted a more direct approach to public diplomacy in order to assist with national security issues and bolster transatlantic commitment, sending some of its best-rated basketball teams to play against local, European and even rival teams from beyond the Iron Curtain. As this paper aims to demonstrate, based on oral interviews and US archival records from the State and Defense Departments, while the recurrent tensions between military and civilian offices drove

⁴ Baker, William J. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007): 123-28.

⁵ Hensler, Paul. “‘Patriotic Industry’: Baseball’s Reluctant Sacrifice in World War I,” *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* Vol. 21 No. 2 (Spring 2013): 100.

⁶ Berliner, Brett A. “‘Chasing the Elusive Pill’: YMCA Men, the Paris Baseball League and Making Baseball French, 1919–1925,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* Vol. 28 No. 13 (2011): 1777.

⁷ For US public diplomacy, see: Cull, Nicholas J. *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mor, Ben D, “Public Diplomacy in Grand Strategy”, *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 2, No. 2 (April 2006): 157-76. For sport diplomacy, see: Gyax Jérôme. « Diplomatie culturelle et sportive américaine: Persuasion et propagande durant la Guerre froide », *Relations internationales* Vol. 3 No. 123 (2005): 87-106; Verschuuren Pim. “Les multiples visages du ‘sport power’”, *Revue internationale et stratégique*, Vol. 1 No. 89 (2013): 131-136; Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns. *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft and International Relations since 1945* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

⁸ McKenzie, Brian. *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2008): 2-4.

⁹ Cited in: Andrew L. Johns. “Hail to the Salesman in Chief: Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, and the Presidency” in Osgood, Kenneth and Andrew K. Frank (Ed.), *Selling War in a Media Age: The Presidency and Public Opinion in the American Century* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010): 2. Ricaud, Raphaël. “La ‘Public Diplomacy’ des Etats-Unis: Théories, pratiques, effets (1948 - 2008)” (Dissertation: Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre, 2012): 281-305.

public diplomacy practitioners to a dead-end, a few army sportsmen willingly assumed the role as “basketball ambassadors” during the Cold War.

First, we will observe how sport – and especially basketball – participated in the necessary construction of a public diplomacy program to promote the military in France. Then, we are going to see how such a program contributed to the security of US armed forces, stationed in the most remote areas of France during the Cold War. Finally, we will explain how military and civilian public diplomacy officers jointly organized the work of “basketball ambassadors” in France during this time period, and how this process played an essential role in the safeguarding of the United States’ national security from abroad.

1) SPORT AND THE MILITARIZATION OF THE US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY NETWORK IN FRANCE

Sport played a pivotal role in the construction of the public diplomacy program of the United States, which were initially designed to counteract the increasing number of acts of espionage during the First World War. But in the interwar years and during Second World War, foreign countries continued to spy on the US, targeting military facilities and collecting information, a trend which continued well into the Cold War. Public diplomacy programmes started during the First World War, as a project to inform the American people about US participation in the conflict, but gave rise to considerable distrust and a deep sense of alienation felt by many. In times of war, it seemed only natural to mobilize the powers and means necessary to form a unified front against the Central powers, whose positions were directly threatening the United States. Sport in general, and basketball in particular, played a crucial role in allaying the concerns raised by the launching of a full-scale propaganda machine, both at home and abroad. From the onset of Woodrow Wilson’s internationalist doctrine,¹⁰ questions about US public diplomacy have been inseparable from those of national security.¹¹ In the mid-1910s, the US Navy and War Departments struggled in their fight against recurrent acts of espionage on military premises in the United States. A few senators in the legislative branch worried that such leaks might put domestic security in jeopardy. In 1916, they supported a bill, which targeted employees “on contracts for the government,” to punish “any one communicating to any foreign government any defence secret of the United States.”¹² Any civilian or press agency that publicized pieces of information could be suspected of intelligence with the enemy.

When the Espionage bill was introduced a year later, press organizations and civil society groups voiced their concerns about the safeguarding of their freedom of speech. Indeed, Executive Order 2604 granted full control over the main means of communication to the

¹⁰ Tournès, Ludovic. *Les Etats-Unis et la Société des Nations (1914-1946)* (Genève: Peter Lang, 2015): 31-4.

¹¹ Nau, Henry R. *Conservative Internationalism: Armed Diplomacy under Jefferson, Polk, Truman, and Reagan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015): 48-50.

¹² “To Guard Defense Secrets: Senate Committee Acts Favorably on Bill Introduced by Tillmann,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1916.

military.¹³ One week later, Wilson received “a communication recommending the creation of a Committee on Public Information (CPI), combining the two functions of censorship and publicity.”¹⁴ The CPI, well-known among historians of US public diplomacy, would be chaired by George E. Creel, a civilian. Although the protection of defense secrets is a necessary condition in times of war, manipulative opinion-making processes never played well with American audiences; the American democratic model, which demands citizens to trust public judgment, is not fit for “grey areas,” where information can be subject to secrecy. But news and advertising corporations, which had first voiced concerns over censorship, cooperated nonetheless: they started to hammer home the message that the United States had to fight a battle against an enemy abroad, at the same time as it had to counteract the manipulations of an enemy within its own borders. Public diplomacy worked in the interest of national security.

From 1917 to 1919, the effectiveness of ongoing efforts to disseminate war information abroad rested on a formal but improvised network of diplomatic outposts called “United States Information Services” (USIS); this acronym would be used well into the Cold War.¹⁵ But military intelligence officers, who were more comfortable with backroom negotiations, quickly identified the limits of public diplomacy.¹⁶ Indeed, the American Forces in France (AEF) was “pulling out for home as fast as the nature of its duties allowed,” while some Doughboys, as they were nicknamed, remained exposed to changing ideologies on French soil.¹⁷ In order to counteract adverse effects of the military intervention in France, such as the import of bolshevism in the United States, the two main intelligence offices in the War Department – the Military Intelligence Division (MID) and the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) – assisted private organizations in the establishment of soldier-education programs overseas.¹⁸ Soldiers were also invited to practice sports, such as basketball, in operations placed under the auspices of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). On the one hand, basketball games and tournaments served to keep up army morale after the Great War; on the other hand, they were instrumental in creating conditions for social interaction between soldiers and civilians of both countries. According to historian Fabien Archambault, political elites considered basketball was crucial for enhancing national prestige abroad.¹⁹ In the small city of Chaumont, in the northeast corner of France, for example, soldiers could find both the US army General Headquarters and the YMCA entertainment division.²⁰

¹³ Executive Order 2604: “Censorship of Submarine Cables, Telegraph and Telephone Lines,” April 28, 1917.

¹⁴ “Censorship and Publicity,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1916.

¹⁵ Arndt, Richard T., *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (Washington D.C: Potomac Books, 2005): 30-1.

¹⁶ At the end of the war, the military was faced with the duty to repatriate 4 million soldiers, not only to their homeland but also to civilian life, and more specifically to their jobs.

¹⁷ Marquis, James, “The Last Squad Carries On: Remnant of America’s Overseas Army is but a Shadow of the Greatest Expeditionary Force,” *The American Legion Weekly* 1 No. 19 (November 7, 1919): 10.

¹⁸ The most notable achievement to-date remains the Library War Service of the American Library Association (ALA), launched the American Library in Paris in 1919.

¹⁹ Archambault, Fabien and L. Artiaga. “Les soldats du stade: une armée de champions?” *Revue de la Société des Amis du Musée de l’Armée* No. 145 (June 2014): 27-57.

²⁰ Hanson, Joseph M. (ed.). *The Inter-Allied Games, 22nd June to 6th July 1919* (Published by the Inter-Allied Committee, 1919): 90. Basketball exhibits resulted in the participation of a French and an American national team of soldiers in the Inter-Allied games in the summer of 1919. The American team won the competition against Italy, while France finished third in the series. Needless to say, the French team received only little training: “The team was entered not for the purpose of winning laurels for the French but because of the desire to

On the other hand, intelligence officers were less open to publicity stunts organized by the few diplomats of the CPI. As a matter of fact, the army had shaped its own understanding of the nature and value of public diplomacy: as historian Peter Marquis explains, the Inter-Allied Games of 1919, which stood at the apex of military diplomacy after World War One, served to enhance the physical superiority of US soldiers in regard to their European counterparts.²¹ But in the interwar period, civilian organisations kept the upper hand. Indeed, in June of 1920, Congress signed an update to the National Defense act of 1916, allowing for the development of the National Guard and the Army Reserve, but limiting the growth of the Regular Army in – and of – the United States. The purpose was not merely to meet popular hopes for the signs of a long-lasting peace; it was rather to cut down expenses, at a time when the federal government did not yet have to provide an answer to a national economic crisis. The 1929 stock-market crash would ultimately allow for less leverage than in any prior negotiations over the questions of appropriations and staff expansion. As a consequence, the interwar political paradigm undermined the competitiveness of sport as a core component of the army's public diplomacy and never fostered the development of what has been called an "army of athletes" after World War I.²² As historian Barbara Keys writes, "as the approach of war became ever more apparent, international sport competitions took on a distinctly militarist flavor and athletes became increasingly indistinguishable from soldiers."²³

But in the United States, sport practices remained locked in the dormant power struggle between military and civilian offices. After a decade of decisions solely driven by domestic issues and national security interests, President Franklin D. Roosevelt started preparing America for war. In fact, World War Two manifested the gap between "the Anglo-American brand of sport, as a form of culture steeped in an ethos of individualism, competition, and achievement that reflected its origins as an offshoot of capitalism" and the Soviet Union's attempt "to build an alternative international system based on a distinctly 'proletarian' brand of sport and physical culture that eschewed individualism and record-seeking."²⁴ In March 1941, the War Department activated the Morale Branch of the army to conduct operations on military bases on US soil only.²⁵ Sport was instrumental in organizing the free-time soldiers had on their hands: "In thirty-seven of the larger camps, wrote Major General Frederick H. Osborn in 1942, there have been built large field houses, capable of seating four thousand men, ideal for basketball, mass athletics, boxing and even drill in bad weather."²⁶ Basketball became a wartime favorite among higher-ranked military officers, in spite of the predominance of

have competitors in as many events as possible and also in order to acquire a further knowledge of the new sport."

²¹ Marquis, Peter. "La grenade, la batte et le modèle américain. Baseball et acculturation sportive dans la France de la Première Guerre mondiale," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* n°251 (2013): 55.

²² "How Uncle Sam Has Created an Army of Athletes," *Scientific American* 120 no. 6 (February 8, 1919): 114-5.

²³ Keys, Barbara J. *Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006): 186-7.

²⁴ Keys. *Globalizing Sport*: 159.

²⁵ The US Army Morale Branch was created on the order of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, on March 8, 1941. It was composed of six complementary services: The Exchange Service, the Motion Pictures Service, the Welfare and Recreation Division, the Services Division, the Information Division and the Morale Research Division.

²⁶ Osborn, Frederick H., "Recreation, Welfare, and Morale of the American Soldier," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 220 (1942): 52.

baseball as the quintessential American sport.²⁷ The latter was seen as an essential means for domestic propaganda, while basketball was regarded as an efficient instrument for physical fitness and mental sharpness. It was the sport Lieutenant-Commander Frank H. Wickhorst favored:

Besides its use as a general body conditioner and a builder of physical stamina, basketball develops precise optical, muscular and mental coordination, body balance, deft touch and quick perceptions – factors which are benefit of to pilots. It improves the cadets' alertness and aids them in making instantaneous judgments and decisions.²⁸

In times of war, service basketball fit the traditional pattern of socialization in the armed forces: it helped maintain the soldiers' fitness and army morale.

The end of the Second World War shows that sport played an increasing role in international relations. The Liberation of France was rich in sporting events, which took place mainly within US army camps. Indeed, due to the manipulation of sport by totalitarian States in Europe in the interwar years, and in order to not hurt French national pride, the US military took a stance against postwar policies enforced in other defeated European countries – such as Germany. The army therefore did not stimulate the acculturation process as they had done after the First World War, and limited the use of sports – including basketball – in their effort to improve organized community relations after World War II in France.²⁹ Four factors can explain this anomaly. Firstly, the mandate of the Office of War Information (OWI), the wartime joint civilian and military propaganda bureau of the United States, was somewhat limited. OWI officers were mostly public diplomats in military outfits, and performed as such. As civilians, they demonstrated their inability to understand the standards attached to basketball exhibits in post-conflict situations. They showed more interest in monitoring the army's public image – through large-scale exhibitions – than in developing contacts with the local populations. Secondly, the public diplomacy network moved into a new phase of its development, and was almost inactive from 1945 to the end of 1947. With the advent of the Cold War, the ongoing threat against the US national interest could be sensed both within and outside the borders of the United States. The military took definite control over most of the public diplomacy network and activities, from the last days of the OWI in 1945 to the creation of the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1953. Only the Smith-Mundt act of 1948³⁰, which forbade public disclosure of broadcast material on the domestic front, acted as a as a bulwark against

²⁷ In his famous “Green Light Letter” of January 1942, Roosevelt told Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who sought advice on whether the professional baseball league should “continue to operate” in time of war, that he “honestly [felt] that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going.”

²⁸ Quoted in *Wartime Basketball: The Emergence of a National Sport during World War II* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2016): 132.

²⁹ For a comparison with Germany, see: Bolz, Daphné. “Sports Policy, the Press and the Origins of the Cold War in Occupied Germany, 1945–51,” *Sport in History* Vol. 35 Issue 2 (June 2016): 195-216; Dichter, Heather L. “Sporting Democracy: The Western Allies' Reconstruction of Germany through Sport, 1944–1952” (Dissertation: University of Toronto, 2008), 340 p.

³⁰ US Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948 (Pub. L. No. 95–352 § 204, 1948).

propaganda. Meanwhile, in France, the higher-ranking military staff monitored part of the strategy of USIS outposts.³¹

A close look at the militarization process of the networks of information shows that basketball has played the role of a multifaceted instrument in US public diplomacy. The postwar period was marked by social unrest and demands to end racial segregation in the United States, which tarnished the reputation of America as a suitable democratic nation. And in 1951, State Department officials counted on the showmanship of the Harlem Globetrotters, an all African-American team, to improve perceptions – however false – of equal opportunity in the United States.³² By the 1950s, basketball was already well known to the French, so much so that they had started appropriating what they had first encountered in several YMCA huts in the 1920s. In fact, the interwar years saw the birth of “a French sport by essence,” known as *ripopo*.³³ Considered an improvised and more fluid type of basketball, almost exempt of dribbling, *ripopo* called for an opposition of Ancients against Moderns to be solved in future confrontations of French and American sport traditions in times of peace.

2) A SMALL-SCALE SPORT MODEL SUITABLE FOR MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PURPOSES

The militarization process of the American public diplomacy network, which started in the mid-1910s, reached its zenith with the advent of the Cold War. For the several intelligence offices of the War Department – which was renamed Department of Defense in the late 1940s –, it seemed clear that sports would play a role in the military strategy. The interest in sports grew with the installation of US military bases in France, under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).³⁴ In the early 1950s, thousands of young American soldiers settled in rural parts of the country. Military and civilian public information officers had an unusual balancing act to perform: to ensure the stability of Western Europe to guarantee the security of the United States in return, and to press forward with the transition of the French economy to a free-market economy, with the Marshall Plan, for example. In 1954, despite a staunch effort by the United States to further the cause of a continental defence system, the French voted against the creation of a European Defence Community (EDC). Despite a heightened sense of urgency, most US government officials felt that European dislocation could

³¹ As Heather L. Dichter writes, the United States developed their public diplomacy programs, especially in sport, because “they came out of World War II with a renewed economy and, unlike its European Allies, did not have to rebuild its infrastructure resulting from the destructiveness of war.” Postwar reconstruction in France “demanded a greater allocation of finances” on the latter’s behalf, allowing civilian officers to carry out an all-out public diplomacy effort. Dichter, Heather L. “Sporting Democracy,” *op. cit.*: 84.

³² Thomas, Damion L. *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012): 70-4. In France, the Globetrotters played several games over 33 days, sometimes on simple tennis courts; also, an eponymous film was screened in USIS outposts across the country.

³³ Claverie, Eric. “Le ripopo ou la naissance d’un style français” in *Double jeu: Histoire du basketball entre France et Amériques* (Paris: Vuibert, 2007): 155-166.

³⁴ On April 4, 1949, Harry S. Truman signed the North Atlantic treaty, which led the way to the creation of a military alliance of Western countries. Following the Berlin blockade of 1948, and as the Soviet Union exploded its first atom bomb, NATO was designed to protect American interests in a developing and escalating Cold War, in countries such as France where the Communist Party was prominent.

partly be countered by better planning of public information events organized on and outside the bases, especially regarding France’s position toward the rearmament of Germany – the main reason for the failure of the EDC.³⁵ They were convinced of the necessity to disconnect wartime practices from public diplomacy procedures in peacetime, in order to convince the French, “after the start of the Cold War, [that] Germany was no longer an enemy to punish but a new ally in urgent need of help if it was to recover,”³⁶ writes Victor Gavin. But only a proven record could persuade the military establishment to loosen – let alone relinquish – its grip on the public diplomacy programs.

Indeed, General Alfred M. Gruenther, a high-ranking military official of the US Army in France, felt frustrated by the lack of efficiency of civilian public diplomacy practices. He believed military methods of psychological warfare were far more efficient than civilian ones. Give the French an afternoon with a few servicemen on a base, he once told NATO ministers in Paris, “and they will depart as crusaders.”³⁷ New public diplomacy practices emerged from the debates, triggered by the anticipation of the failure of the EDC. At the request of the United States Information Agency (USIA) director Theodore C. Streibert, USIS-France created a bureau in charge of military affairs, which reported directly to Leslie S. Brady, the newly appointed Chief Public Affairs Officer (CPAO) in Paris.³⁸ Together, they offered a streamlined approach to public diplomacy, which eventually took the needs and concerns of the military into consideration.³⁹ A report forwarded by Brady to the USIA in Washington shows how civilian agencies designed a method to shape the image of the United States in France. The public image of the military fell under the theme of “European integration.”⁴⁰ But Brady insisted that “approaches must be oblique or through indigenous groups.” Furthermore, “because the European Army and the European Political Community are totally European concepts, the approach must in most cases be indirect.” Most importantly, they considered that “top-level assertions from Washington” had to be excluded from this approach, therefore prioritizing military information officers over civilian ones when it came to local matters.⁴¹

Just as was the case after the First World War, sports were used to keep up army morale and allow soldiers to engage in social interactions with fellow servicemen or civilians. At this point, it seems important to underline the fact that the Selective Service Act of 1948, as well as the Executive Order 9981, establishing equality of treatment and opportunity in the Armed Services and signed the same year, had modified the social fabric of the armed forces. The army understood that, more than even before, the task to create social cohesion in its ranks was crucial, and was to be carried out by the military intelligence officers on site. As expected, the

³⁵ See: Creswell, Michael. *A question of balance: how France and the United States created Cold War Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³⁶ Gavin, Victor. “Power through Europe? The case of the European Defence Community in France (1950–1954),” *French History* Vol. 23 No. 1 (2009): 71.

³⁷ “NATO Conference on Information Policy: Statement by General Gruenther at NATO Ministerial Meeting,” 17 December 1954, NATO Archives, AC/87-D/6: 14.

³⁸ “Establishment of USIA Area Offices,” *Department of State Bulletin* 29 no. 743, September 21, 1953: 390.

³⁹ “New Country Plan for USIS/F,” March 1, 1954, US National Archives, RG 84 UD 2462, box 40.

⁴⁰ This new approach revolves around four “cardinal points of US foreign policy in France:” to forge a political alliance with countries defending Western civilization; to support a military structure to strengthen an integrated Europe; to push forward the idea that France and the United States share a common heritage; to promote free-market economy.

⁴¹ “Country Action Plan for USIS/F (draft),” February 2, 1954. US National Archives, RG 84 UD 2462, box 40.

bulk of interpersonal exchanges was conducted within the army base. In the first years upon its return, the army was faced with issues regarding the soldiers' austere living conditions, for mud, ruts and isolation were part of day-to-day camp life. But to cope with the situation, the soldiers – who were also called GIs since 1941 – enjoyed inexpensive recreational activities. Baseball and basketball became the men's favourite sports, played cohesively around camp. But on certain bases, such as the Chambley-Bussières Air Force base (USAFE), located in the Meurthe-and-Moselle region in the Northeastern part of France, GIs also formed teams to practice football, softball, golf, soccer, and even skiing. Together, they formed a new army of athletes, and worked hard to defend the colours of the 21st Fighter Bomber Wing.

As Chambley veteran Charles R. Timms recalls in his account of his years on the air base in the 1950s, support for sport “was avid from top-down.”⁴² The commanders of the base saw sport as a cohesion marker, or in other words a tool for voluntary subordination. This process, which stems from the progressive professionalization of the military during the Cold War, aimed ultimately to guarantee the national security of the United States. Organizing sport and physical activities became a matter of extreme urgency for all service branches, and each base soon had a dedicated team.⁴³ In Chambley, the base sports team was known as the Desert Rats, and was formed in the summer of 1955.⁴⁴ It was put together under the initiative of Colonel H. C. Hartwig, “an athlete of the first water himself [...] and an ex-pro with the New York Giants.”⁴⁵ One has also to keep in mind the importance of sport to military elites, especially commanders, who saw in base teams an illustrious and noble way of demonstrating the prestige of the unit and the armed forces in general. For this reason, base commanders often pulled promising athletes off regular duties and made sure they dedicated enough of their time to athletic training or to complete adequate fitness workouts. In various fields of sporting competitions, winning games was essential, almost as much as winning a war.

Needless to say, most of the time, the quest for prestige was none of the GIs' business: sport came mostly as a welcome initiative for a change of pace, once servicemen were off-duty. In Chambley, all servicemen trained and played ball in their free time, in the 416th Fighter Bomber Squadron maintenance hangar, half of which had been transformed into a basketball court. The Desert Rats team was composed of players with, for some of them, a good amount of experience in basketball and new ideas of the role of the United States in the world: fighter pilot Lief Carlson and First Lieutenant Jerry Kincheloe had played collegiately – for the Universities of Minnesota and California, respectively –, while airman Jim Fields had been a shooting guard for the Harlem Globetrotters. All these men came to France with no prior

⁴² Timms, Charles M. *Chambley Air Base, France (1954–1967): The Best and the Worst Place We Ever Lived* (assembled documents, 1993): 100.

⁴³ In 1948, the creation of the Inter-Service Sports Council (ISSC), rallying the Navy, the Army and the Air Force, allowed the military to consider a better organization of sports. In 1951, the United States joined the International Military Sports Council (IMSC), but it is only after 1954, when sport practices were regulated by the Department of Defense instruction 1330.4 authorizing servicemen's “participation in armed forces, national and international sports activities,” that army teams were allowed to travel across Europe to play against foreign military and civilian teams.

⁴⁴ The Desert Rats were born at the initiative of Colonel Hartwig, former player for the NY Giants, then the only professional football team in New York. The team was named after the location of their base – George Air Force Base – located in the city of Victorville, California

⁴⁵ “Colonel Hartwig to Coach All-Stars,” *Chambley Sabre* (December 9, 1955): 4.

experience of the war, but saw the Air Force as a way to be employed and avoid being sent to fight in Southeast Asia. Also, airmen Robert Sisk and Earl Redman had tried out for the University of Ohio in Cincinnati and the University of Texas respectively, but dropped out to enrol in the US armed forces. The players' profiles were versatile and the team's ambitions very modest. The opposing teams originated mostly from fellow NATO bases in the nearby area. As Sisk recalled, "we played the Canadians in Marville [...], and we always beat them in the first half; but they always had a case of Löwenbräu at half-time for us, and by the time we had that case of beer they beat us."⁴⁶ Such rather unconventional method to bring up army morale was bound to change with the creation of a European Air Force basketball league.

In 1956, the Desert Rats entered the European Air Force basketball competition – a league steeped in the sporting tradition of the armed forces – with the clear objective of playing more than just surrounding army casern teams and to fight the Cold War on a different ground. The army league was divided into four conferences – France, England, Germany and the Mediterranean, which included Spain, Italy, Morocco, Crete, Greece, and Turkey – covering the entire NATO area. Eight teams competed in the French conference. But instead of fighting its war against the enemy – anyone sensitive to influence from Moscow –, base teams fought a turf war, which resulted in a diversion of the initial objectives of this initiative. For example, a game against Chateauroux-Déols USAFE air base, with whom the Desert Rats had a stormy competitive and sibling rivalry, was solved as follows:

The Desert Rats travelled to Chateauroux AB, France, south of Paris, for a conference game. A fiercely fought contest and bad referee calls ignited a heated exchange of words between the Desert Rats Commander, Colonel Baker and the Chateauroux Commander. It was reported by team members on the bench that Colonel Baker asked the Chateauroux Commander what was his date-of-rank. Colonel Baker outranked the latter and the issue was settled – no blood shed.⁴⁷

Military pride took over the competition, and commanders often used "their date of rank to silence the opposing commander." The development of a competitive spirit in inter-regiment sport games resulted in affirming a base identity, ultimately conveyed through the base newspaper, an essential by-product of military public diplomacy.

The base paper of Chambley, launched in 1955, was called the *Sabre*, in reference to the flagship jetfighter aircrafts used by the 416th and 531st bomber squadrons operating on site. Base papers were published under the authority of the Public Information Division (PID). It presented local events in a biweekly information platform composed of four to eight pages, while official news and instructions were disseminated by the Department of Defense in the famous *Stars and Stripes*. In the *Sabre*, information about sports were mostly relegated to the back pages, even if the base teams' good results in several competitions often brought them up to the front page. By 1956, the Desert Rats had become one of the most prominent basketball teams in the French conference, so much so that the American Forces Network (AFN) – the entertainment radio broadcasting to US military bases from Germany – "tape-recorded [several]

⁴⁶ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, April 21, 2016.

⁴⁷ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, November 3, 2014.

games for re-broadcast at a later date.”⁴⁸ Sport helped to project the image of the military as a body of dynamic nationals, united in the core values of dedication and athleticism, and instilled a sense of pride in all servicemen and dependents. In January of the same year, after the Desert Rats had a run of twelve undefeated matches, the *Sabre* ran a headline that reinforced the sense of unity between players and spectators, using the motto of the United States seal, “E Pluribus Unum.”⁴⁹ The public image of the Desert Rats, amplified by the circulation of the base newspaper, gave proof of the strength of the Atlantic Alliance. It also spread the image that Americans formed a vibrant and dynamic people, committed to supporting the creation of an integrated defence system in Europe. Ultimately, basketball played a pivotal role in forging links with the French population.

3) PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AS THE LINCHPIN OF THE POLITICIZATION OF BASKETBALL

Since the 1920s, basketball has been one of the many sports that allowed for contacts between the French and Americans, and the Cold War is no exception to this observation. As stated by historian Donna Alvah, US servicemen who were stationed overseas, sometimes with their families, were not all removed from their local host communities.⁵⁰ To the mind of military intelligence officers, bridging cultural gaps between the French and Americans seemed the safest way to carry out their duty to ensure both the security of the American people and the pursuit of its national interest. At this early stage of the settlement of US armed forces in French provincial regions, when screening measures for foreign employees on a Department of Defense payroll were not always enforced consistently, informal contacts allowed for foreign ideologies to permeate military camps and bases. Naturally, this raised security issues, but most importantly it circumvented the prerogatives of public information officers, who were prompt to react. As it is recalled in a 1955 information brochure issued by the public information office of the US European Command (EUCOM), published with the support of USIS-France, informal contacts within the borders of the base allowed for cross-cultural negotiations over general sporting traditions. Indeed, “after the working day,” we can read in the brochure, GIs took delight in “a small recreation: a football game in the field;” then, they “freshened up and had a drink at the mobile bar, while taking French lessons with the workers employed at the camp.”⁵¹ The proximity with French locals working for the Americans brought the GIs to develop friendly cross-cultural relationships in the course of various sporting activities. The alleged apolitical nature of sports made them active agents of public diplomacy.

Yet, in spite of the thaw in international relations and before Sputnik “hit” America in 1957, US public diplomats encouraged Cold War confrontations, probably to overcome a gap

⁴⁸ “AFN to Tape Game,” *Chambley Sabre* (January 13, 1956): 4.

⁴⁹ “Desert Rats Winning Skein Broken at Twelve Straight as Chambley Splits at CAMA,” *Chambley Sabre* (January 27, 1956): 4.

⁵⁰ Alvah, Donna. *Unofficial Ambassadors: American Military Families Overseas and the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 7.

⁵¹ *Un Américain en France, 1955*, US National Archives, RG 306 P 46, box 128: 19.

in awareness about the US military presence in the field. The military seized some opportunities to engage citizens and servicemen directly in a cross-cultural experience. In the spring of 1956, Chambley-Bussières air base observed its first Armed Forces Day; for safety purposes, the gathering took place inside the base. For the most part, it consisted of an open-base operation, allowing French locals to attend military parades and to take a closer look at the American way of life. It is, however, important to note that this operation had an ambivalent purpose. On the one hand, it helped attract Frenchmen and women into a “bastion of Americana” and increase their understanding of the US military presence in the French countryside. On the other hand, it proved instrumental in benchmarking the expectations and needs of both French locals and US servicemen. Base commander Robert R. Rowland struggled to get soldiers involved in the promotion of the American military presence in Meurthe-and-Moselle: the May 18th edition of the Chambley base newspaper features a message from President Dwight D. Eisenhower, which states that “in the present world situation, it is most important that our own people and others throughout the world who believe as we do should be cognizant of all aspects of our national strength – the spiritual and the moral, as well as the material and the military – and be reminded of our continuing efforts for peace.”⁵² And in the case of the Chambley-Bussières air base, only the Desert Rats basketball team would really manage to fulfil this mandate.

By 1956, the Desert Rats’ acclaimed participation in the European Air Force basketball competitions granted them the authorization to compete with non-military teams. Indeed, military high-command was supportive of any initiative to “create a deeper awareness of the general role of the military in American life.”⁵³ The Desert Rats carried out an unofficial mandate to reach out to local populations and offer a hands-on taste of American culture. For instance, during the 1956 open-base on the occasion of the Armed Forces Day, after visiting a “static display of USAF aircrafts and equipment,”⁵⁴ French locals were invited to attend a game between the Desert Rats and the defending French Cup champions, the *Club Sportif Municipal* (CSM) in Auboué. On paper, both teams had achieved significant sporting victories during the previous season, so the game was supposed to be balanced. However, the image conveyed by the *Sabre* offered a different perspective on the game. Indeed, in a short article published in the French edition, which was intended to be distributed to and read by the visitors, the journalist introduces the two opposing teams. The reader learns that the CSM Auboué “was formed in 1945 and owes its technique in large part to the contact with US teams stationed in our area after the Liberation.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, “the composition of the Chambley team dates back to last fall only; it rose quite dramatically to the French base champion, having lost two games only.”⁵⁶ In the end, the fact that the Desert Rats defeated Auboué didn’t matter much: basketball helped provide French spectators with vivid images of modernity and offered a demonstration of strong friendship and cooperation.

However, public participation in basketball games also had a critical political significance. Indeed, as servicemen on duty were busy promoting American culture to the local

⁵² “Armed Forces Day Messages,” *Chambley Sabre* (May 18, 1956): 1, 4.

⁵³ “An Important Reminder,” *Chambley Sabre* (May 17, 1957): 4.

⁵⁴ “Seventh Armed Forces Day to be Observed Tomorrow with Open-House Program,” *Chambley Sabre* (May 18, 1956): 1.

⁵⁵ “Le match des champions Auboué-Chambley,” *Chambley Sabre* (May 19, 1956): 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

population, base commander Rowland worked on developing relations with local elected officials and industrialists. The objective was not only to legitimize the presence of American servicemen in provincial Meurthe-and-Moselle – for which purpose the military needed to exert a larger influence on local, national and foreign investments –, but also ensure the US global security interests. Moreover, two years after the French assembly rejected the European Defence Community, the United States experienced some difficulty in containing the public debate over the military presence overseas in general. For this purpose, public diplomacy operations granted the military an opportunity to trigger supportive relationships with the French, pushing the army’s social role beyond its traditional coercive function. On the other hand, the convergence of economic partners and their isolation from the local population sheds light on the social fabric of the military, and demonstrates how hierarchical relationships revolved around class interests and not individual profitability. The 1956 open-base operation in Chambley is a good example to illustrate this statement. Colonel Rowland carefully avoided establishing contact between the local population and elected officials. The prefect of the Meurthe-and-Moselle region, Jacques Samama, was invited, together with the representatives of French army generals René Cogny and Maurice Challe, to meet with the base commander as the game between the Desert Rats and the CSM Auboué was being played in the 416th maintenance hangar.⁵⁷ Despite the visitors being aware of these meetings – they were publicly announced in the French edition of the base newspaper – the two worlds never converged.

As a matter of fact, Chambley-Bussières air base provided the military high command with the proper conditions to operate a fragmented public diplomacy. Only a few days after the open-base exhibition game, the Desert Rats played against the Syracuse Nationals, a team that had won the 1955 NBA championship. According to the *Sabre*, “it was the Nats’ final game of a State Department sponsored tour that had stretched 24,000 miles – from Iceland to Egypt.”⁵⁸ Airman Robert Sisk recalls:

We played against the Nationals with Dolph Schayes on our home court at Chambley, when they were on a United Service Organizations (USO) tour of military bases in Europe. Jim Fields, the Rats play-maker and hot shot scored 30 points to big Dolph Schayes 29. Yes, they beat us by 30 points. Just too big for the Rats to handle but a good game to watch. Again, our bleachers in the hangar were filled to capacity.⁵⁹

Commander Rowland seized the opportunity given by the USO and the State Department to provide servicemen and their dependents with a unique entertainment experience.⁶⁰ And for him, there was much to rejoice about: the Nationals were closing a 26-exhibition round across Europe, and “Chambley was the only American team encountered during the tour.”⁶¹ In the end, despite the valiant resistance displayed by the Desert Rats, “Syracuse put a team on the

⁵⁷ “Edition Spéciale du *Chambley Sabre* pour les Français,” *Chambley Sabre* (May 19, 1956): 1.

⁵⁸ “Professional Height Stymies Desert Rats,” *Chambley Sabre* (June 8, 1956): 4.

⁵⁹ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, November 3, 2014.

⁶⁰ The USO is a non-profit, privately-owned organization that was created in 1941. It reunites several welfare entities, such as the Young Men’s and Women’s Christian Association, the Salvation Army, the National Catholic Community Services, the National Travelers Aid Association and the National Jewish Welfare Board. Source: uso.org/about (access date: June 20, 2016).

⁶¹ “Professional Height Stymies Desert Rats,” *Ibid.*

floor that averaged 6’7” and Coach Hartwig’s little guys didn’t have a chance.”⁶² The Syracuse Nationals eventually defeated the Desert Rats by the wide margin of 112 to 72.

Against all odds, the traditional distrust for civilian control over military activities was temporarily set aside, as all travel expenses for this exhibition game were covered by the USO. But that evening, despite the rising popularity of basketball in Europe, the gates of the Chambley air base remained closed to the French public. Rowland addressed the joint State Department and USO proposition with the firm intention of exploiting the game for political purposes. There were three different facets to his strategy. First, as mentioned above, civilian and military public information officers catered to specific target audiences. A photograph of the crowd cheering for the Desert Rats shows a few lieutenants and officers in military uniform, alongside their wives dressed in rich and festive clothing. One woman, wearing a white dress, stands out from the crowd: Marie-Thérèse Barre was the winner of the 1956 city of Metz beauty pageant, a contest sponsored annually by the local Chamber of Commerce. Second, AFN commentators travelled to Chambley with *Stars and Stripes* journalists. Together, they recorded the game live and wrote articles that would later be dispatched to other military or base newspapers. AFN eventually broadcast the game at a later date, after all commentaries had been edited and the message deemed suitable for public delivery. Third, this game served as an instrument for the military establishment to prove to both the spectators in the hangar and the listeners of AFN network that sport was still an instrument for physical fitness and mental sharpness, proving the quality of the physical and military preparedness of the United States army. Base commander Rowland used public participation in sports events to convince his fellow American citizens that the military was strong enough to guarantee the national security of the United States and safeguard its territorial integrity. Therefore, public participation was a decisive factor in the politicization of basketball. In this case, public diplomacy proves how active it had been on the home front, despite the boycott imposed by the Smith-Mundt act on the active dissemination of information.

By the Spring of 1957, the Desert Rats had eventually become “basketball ambassadors for Chambley,”⁶³ said Sisk. This statement is certainly true, and first and foremost they were ambassadors on their home base. On March 9, Chambley hosted the first basketball All-Star Game of the 12th Air Force, the first of its kind in Europe. There, “twelve players from the US French conference [played] against twelve players from the US German conference; selectees from Chambley included Fields, Carlson, Redman, Kincheloe and Sisk,”⁶⁴ the latter recalls. But building on its experience, the Chambley public information office also called upon its network to attend the event. The All-Star Game was indeed a matter of pride for the base commander: the sporting qualities of Chambley’s players mattered less than the quality of entertainment and number of local officials and elites – such as the deputy prefect of Briey –, as well as some of its representatives who had come see the game. In its report, the *Sabre* reads:

Halftime will be highlighted by the attendance of Monique Lambert, who won the Miss France title in 1955 and finished third in the Miss Europe contest of 1955. Also attending will be Marie-

⁶² “Nats Dump Chambley, 112-72, in Exhibition Tilt,” *Chambley Sabre* (June 8, 1956): 4.

⁶³ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, April 21, 2016.

⁶⁴ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, November 3, 2014.

Thérèse Barre, Miss Metz and Queen of the Mirabelle of 1956. General Gerhart will crown Miss Lambert and her court during the half-time intermission. Miss Lambert will be crowned “All-Star Queen.”⁶⁵

Moreover, “the game will be broadcast by the Armed Forces Network, French National Radio and TV and also by *Télévision Luxembourg*; also attending will be representatives from French and American newspapers.”⁶⁶ In the end, information broadcasts targeted both French and American citizens.

Ultimately, in the eyes of the military high command, the success of the 1957 All-Star Game gave enough credit to the Desert Rats to authorize a tour around Europe. They competed in international tournaments in Alfortville, Lyon, Dijon or Montbrison and, by the time the air base closed in 1961, had played multiple exhibition games. Sometimes, basketball even allowed for unexpected situations:

Competition was against national, and to some extent, semi-pro talent. The Rats were the first Americans to play against a Russian communist bloc country, Poland. The Cold War in the 1950s was a real concern. Air Force Command was concerned about the possibility of an international incident playing against Poland. After tournament play was concluded, and prior to the awards and banquet dinner, three American officers on the team were sent back to Chambley due to safety concerns, and the expendables (the airmen) and Coach (Colonel) Hartwig were left to enjoy the banquet festivities that followed. Everything went smoothly.⁶⁷

Tracked by AFN radio and French and American newspapers, the Desert Rats had enough passion for basketball and enough motivation to break the monotony of army life to turn, more or less unknowingly, into agents of US public diplomacy. In Chambley, basketball was subject to a strategy of politicization by civilian and military offices. But for the 22 year-old players from the West of the United States, at a time when regular American citizens were drafted and sent to Vietnam, it provided enough support to trust the military establishment and subsequently follow a military career. And Sisk to conclude: “Chambley was not an American All Star team, just a group of talented players from all walks of life across America who just happened to be assigned to the 21st Fighter Bomber Wing stationed in France.”⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

This investigation questioned the practices of US public diplomacy throughout almost half of the twentieth century. In the American tradition, sports provided the US armed forces with a tool for civic, but also educational and physical well-being. During the Cold War, civilian officers such as Leslie S. Brady, Chief Public Affairs Officer of the US Information Services in Paris, opened a breach in the possibility to use sports as a form of diplomacy, especially on

⁶⁵ “All Star Game Here Tomorrow,” *Chambley Sabre*, March 8, 1957.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, April 21, 2016.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

the field, after the failure of the European Defence Community. If sports are hardly ever considered in equal terms to other forms of diplomacy – whether cultural, citizen or economic diplomacy – to promote American democratic values to the French, this paper revealed the work of “basketball ambassadors” and demonstrated its efficiency, both in achieving public diplomacy objectives and in complying with national security legislation. But it is most undoubtedly during the NATO era that basketball, unlike the cage players – ordinary men from all walks of life across America, who remain mostly apolitical today – became increasingly politicized.

However, the framework provided for the implementation and the promotion of American sports abroad also brought its share of challenges, leaving both civilian and military offices somewhat helpless. Indeed, many observers and practitioners saw in the precepts of public diplomacy a set of tacit and unspoken understandings, which had become increasingly coercive. And yet, thirty-one years of casual acculturation through sports reveal, on two accounts, how unusual the trajectory of the Chambley *Desert Rats* was for a team of young American servicemen stationed in Cold War France. First, each base was functioning as a “little America,” so their jurisdiction was entirely subject to the laws of the United States. Consequently, the players’ morale depended on the legal status regimenting all US military premises established overseas. The enforcement of the Smith-Mundt act of 1948 constituted therefore a domestic political boycott on sports practices. Second, caught between doctrinaire policymakers in Washington, the *Desert Rats* overcame the pressure of the implicit military boycott abroad, induced by the Cold War foreign policy of the Western alliance. Allowing for a game against a team from the other side of the Iron Curtain must have been unheard of in the 1950s. But in both cases, while basketball bowed to political pressure, the *Desert Rats* enjoyed the publicity and continued “shooting hoops with foreign teams.”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Interview with Robert E. Sisk, April 21, 2016.